

To: MSEA

From: GBAO

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MSEA Special Educator Focus Groups: Key Findings

Recent focus groups¹ among Maryland State Education Association members who work in special education reveal that they are facing an overwhelming level of stress due to staffing shortages, concerns with student behavior, excessive amounts of paperwork, and an IEP system that is not user friendly. Members are looking for solutions to ease their workload so that they can meet their students' needs.

Key Findings

- **Most special education members feel “overwhelmed” or “sad” with how things are going at their job.** Members are stressed about the amount of work and paperwork they have and the lack of staff to help ease the load. They are concerned about student behavior and how to keep students (and themselves) safe. A few members also said they feel there is a push to move their students to general education when they aren't ready. A few paraeducators mentioned how they often find themselves taking on teacher duties. It's worth noting that the one person who felt positive (“excited”) about how things are going works as a case manager whose job is to only manage cases and does not have to balance caseloads and teaching.

*“I just feel bad for new teachers who have been starting. We keep losing new teachers. The students I work with, I'm trying to keep them safe. They've been injuring themselves, I've been injured...we're chronically short staffed. Behavior specialists can only help so much. **Is something terrible going to happen on my watch?**”*

*“So much paperwork, so much extra stuff, so many meetings...out of the 5 special ed instructors at my school only 2 are returning next year. **Everyone is running away.**”*

*“I see **special ed teachers being spread thin.** In my county there are special ed teachers where education was not their first choice. Because of the shortage, **they're filling positions with people who aren't passionate or qualified.**”*

*“The **paperwork is insurmountable, the data collection is intense, and the needs of the kids are very significant.** There are not systems in place to appropriately support kids with significant needs. Not enough people, resources, programs, all of it really.”*

¹ We conducted three online focus groups of MSEA members who work in special education or primarily with students with special needs. The groups took place on May 23 and May 25 with members who work in Prince George's, Charles, Montgomery, Howard, Anne Arundel, and Baltimore counties, and counties in Chesapeake Bay and Western MD.



- **Members prioritize addressing staff shortages.** Members overwhelmingly said addressing the staff shortage will make their jobs easier. If they had more staff, they'd have lighter caseloads, less paperwork, and the ability to focus more on their students. Members also mentioned the importance of hiring staff that are qualified to work in special education. Some said they wished their schools had specific positions, like IEP clerks to help with data entry. Members also mentioned creating programs or positions that are specific to students with certain needs rather than a one-size fits all approach. Having additional planning days (SPED days) that they can actually use and be available for would also help ease workloads.
- **Members don't feel that anyone is advocating for them.** Several members could not give an answer when asked who is advocating or supporting them the most. They feel they are the ones who need to advocate for themselves. Some members feel supported by other staff and some have good relationships with parents, while others do not. A few members also mentioned they feel supported by their union.
- **Members don't feel like they are being listened to.** Several members said that they don't receive follow-up or solutions when they voice concerns to their school. Members were mixed in feeling supported by school administration. Those who felt supported said they heard and saw their administration "on the ground" and administration had "open door policies." Most members felt distant from their central office and central office staff don't seem to come by often enough to understand what they're going through.
- **Despite their frustrations, special educators are passionate about the work they do helping children.** Members share a variety of reasons for why they first went into education and special education. Some members said that they always knew they wanted to work in education, while others said it wasn't their first career choice, but ended up being something they love doing. A few members had previous experience with children with special needs, or had their own struggles, and wanted to help kids like them. But they share a love for the children they work with and satisfaction when they see their students grow.

*"I was going to go to law school, but ended up getting a teaching job and loved it. **My job has to be meaningful beyond just making money.**"*

*"Teaching wasn't my dream job but I wanted to have something to fall back on. I ended up teaching English as a general educator. Years later I ended up being an assistant teacher at a private school with basically all autistic kids. I loved it and ended up getting my masters in special ed. I love the population that I teach. **When they finally trust you and open up to you, I mean they love you, they really love you.**"*

*"I was that kid that was extremely ADHD, but it was an undiagnosed thing. I struggled in school, was not the one who got all the good grades, **so I wanted to work with the kids who were like me.**"*

*"My mom got me a job as a dedicated aide and I loved it. I started in first grade and **loved seeing my students grow. They keep me young and they teach me things as well.**"*

- **In order to recruit and retain special educators, members say they need to be paid more, treated with respect, and have manageable caseloads, which would be greatly aided by administrative support on IEP paperwork.** While most members we spoke with said they will remain in education, several said colleagues have left education due to lack of respect and support or because they were burned out from caseloads. Members said an increase in pay, more respect, less paperwork, and additional training to help members grow professionally would help retain educators.

*“**Seeing staff treated with more respect.** My instructional assistants especially are treated like numbers. They talk to me about it and I know it makes them feel horrible. When we as teachers go to voice our opinions, no one is listening to us. Everyone is burned out. It’s not good for the kids. Listening to the staff members, but also respecting them.”*

*“The state **needs to find an easier way to do paperwork.** The paperwork we do is very repetitive and not useful at all.”*

*“My **school has a secretary that sets all the IEPs and collects all the teacher level data** and it’s very helpful.”*

*“Special educators that are on **the front line definitely need to get paid more** than the gym teacher. More training, CPI training, how to deal with students when they get violent, someone to lighten their work load.”*

*“I like the idea of **having someone specific to deal with certain administrative things.** If we just had one or two people that could take care of Medicaid that would take care of a lot.”*

- **Members feel the electronic case management system to oversee IEPs requires more work than it should.** Members feel entering data into the case management system is tedious because it requires a lot of manual input. One member described that even when a student has the same IEP goal as another student or when there is overlap between a student’s IEP goals from one year to the next, they have to manually enter it in for each student instead of copying it over. Someone also mentioned the repetitiveness of entering in start and end dates for each goal rather than an apply all approach. Members said it’s not necessarily hard to figure out, but “overwhelming” and “time consuming.” A few members also mentioned issues with entering information for Medicaid. While it is easy to understand why the state has concerns generated from a small number of educators who copy and paste without giving the task the proper attention, there must be a way to monitor and address these cases without requiring all special educators to waste their time re-typing.

Members in the Howard, Anne Arundel, and Baltimore county group said they use a different management system called Tienet, which doesn’t communicate with Maryland Online IEP. This means that members have to take a pdf from Maryland Online IEP and re-type it into Tienet. Members in the Chesapeake Bay and West areas also mentioned issues when a student moves from a different county and having to enter their IEP into Maryland IEP.

- **Members are somewhat interested in professional development, but it needs to be something new and more hands-on.** Some members feel the trainings they've received in the last year rehashed things they've learned about before and would only be helpful for newer educators. Members said that they like professional development when they can implement the strategies they learned about and get feedback. A few members also liked when professional development was paid. Members said that trainings would be better if they were created by teachers (rather than "higher ups who don't set foot in the buildings") and related to what they're going through, like behavioral strategies.

Next Steps

- We recommend testing findings from the groups quantitatively in the next member survey and gauging support for solutions that would help make special educators' jobs easier. Solutions could include:
 - ❖ Hiring data/IEP clerks or case management positions
 - ❖ Providing more SPED days or planning time for special educators
 - ❖ Making the IEP case management system more user friendly (*we may want to follow-up and specify how it could be improved*)
 - ❖ Provide more training/professional development for special educators
 - Paid professional development versus unpaid professional development
 - Teacher-created professional development
 - New student behavior techniques
 - ❖ Moving more IEP meetings to online to make scheduling easier
 - ❖ Requiring (central office/administration?) to make in-person visits to special educator classrooms