2022

Special Education Teacher Working Conditions in Utah:

Results from the UEPC's 2022 Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce

Prepared by the
Utah Education Policy Center
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THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
UTAH EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Bridging Research, Policy, and Practice

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We also thank **more than 2,000 special education teachers** across the state of Utah who shared their experiences. Without their contributions, this work would not be possible!

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Introduction

Special education teachers face significant demands (e.g., increased responsibilities and caseloads; legal requirements, limited resources, insufficient support from leadership and paraprofessionals, isolation) in their roles. These demands, which have become increasingly challenging in recent years due to phenomena such as accountability policies and the COVID-19 pandemic, often create working conditions that are more complex than those of other educators (e.g., Billingsley et al., 2019; Drame & Pugach, 2010; McCray et al., 2014; Sindelar et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2019). As a result, special education teachers face particularly high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover (Brunsting et al, 2014), which in part contributes to the persistent shortage of special education teachers (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

This brief is part of the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) series on the education workforce (Auletto et al., 2020; Ni et al., 2017a; Ni et al., 2017b; Ni & Rorrer, 2018; Rorrer et al., 2019). Previously, the UEPC has considered the early career pathways of special education teachers (Auletto et al., 2022a) and the special education workforce and career trajectories of Utah special education teachers (Auletto et al., 2022b). This study extends this line of inquiry. Recognizing the unique experiences of this population of educators, the UEPC developed and administered a statewide survey of special education teachers (i.e., UEPC's 2022 Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce Survey) in partnership with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) to better understand special education teachers' working conditions and associated outcomes.

The results from this survey are presented in this report. Findings are organized around three central research questions:

1. What are the working conditions (i.e., teaching demands, school culture and climate, administrative support, collegial support and collaboration, other supports and resources) of special education teachers in Utah?
2. What are the outcomes (i.e., wellbeing, satisfaction, and career intentions) of special education teachers in Utah?
3. Do special education teachers who report more positive working conditions have better outcomes?

Survey Overview

The development of the UEPC's 2022 Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce Survey was informed by Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) review of literature on special education teacher retention and supported by other literature on this topic (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017; Drame & Pugach, 2010; Jones & Youngs, 2012; Kaff, 2004; McCray et al., 2014). Given our review of current research in this area, we focused the survey on the following aspects of special education teachers' working conditions during the 2021-22 school year:

- Teaching demands
- School culture and climate

- Administrative support
- Collegial support and collaboration
- Other supports and resources

We also measured special education teachers' outcomes in the following areas:

- Wellbeing
- Satisfaction
- Career intentions

Collectively, these topics allowed us to provide a rich description of the working conditions of special education teachers in Utah and explore associations among working conditions and teacher outcomes. For each of the five working conditions and three outcome areas noted above, we asked participants to respond to a series of Likert-style items. Throughout the survey, respondents were also invited to provide open feedback on the topics noted above. Identified through inductive and deductive coding (Saldaña, 2015), illustrative quotes from these responses organized by theme are integrated throughout the report to illustrate and support key findings. The specific methodological approach taken to analyze the relationship between working conditions and outcomes is further describe in the section titled *Are More Positive Working Conditions Associated with Better Outcomes for Special Education Teachers?* All other findings were generated through descriptive statistics.

Participants

Utilizing records from Comprehensive Administration of Credentials for Teachers in Utah Schools (CACTUS), 3,942 educators who spent at least some portion of the 2021-22 school year in a special education teaching position were eligible to participate in the study.[1] Of those 3,942 individuals, 3,919 educators were invited to participate due to having a valid email address available. In Spring 2022, the UEPC invited these 3,919 individuals via email to participate in the UEPC's 2022 Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce. USBE supported recruitment efforts by contacting educators to notify them of the opportunity to participate in the survey.

The UEPC received responses from 2,057 teachers, resulting in a 52% response rate. Table 1 illustrates that respondents largely mirrored the population of special education teachers who taught special education in Utah in 2021-22.

[1] The UEPC maintains a Data Share Agreement with the Utah State Board of Education.

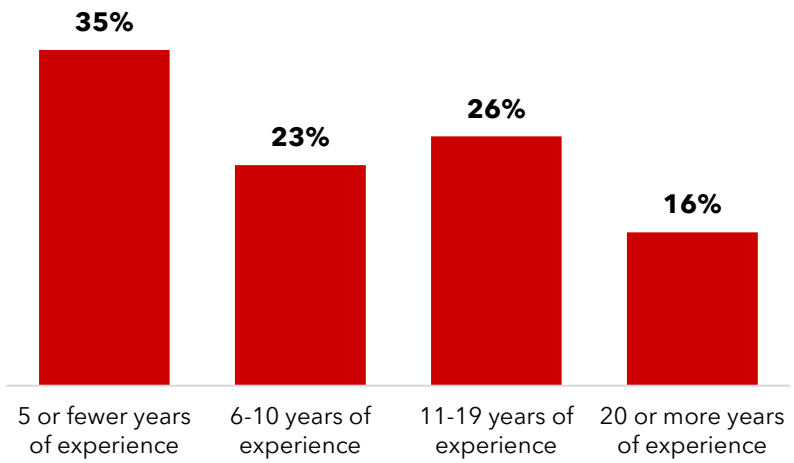
Table 1. Special Education Teacher Characteristics

Special Education Teacher Characteristics	Survey Respondents (n=2,057)	All Utah Special Education Teachers (n=3,942)
Female	87%	85%
Male	13%	15%
Asian	1%	1%
Black/African American	1%	1%
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	3%	3%
Other race/ethnicity or missing	5%	6%
White	90%	90%
Graduate degree	41%	39%
No graduate degree	59%	61%

Note: Due to rounding, values may not sum to 100%.

Figure 1 depicts the reported experience levels of survey respondents. More than one-third of respondents had been teaching special education for five or fewer years, while 16% had 20 or more years of experience. About two-thirds of respondents also had additional teaching or professional education experience outside of special education.

Figure 1. Years of Special Education Teaching Experience



65% of participants had professional education experience outside of special education. Those with experience outside of special education had an average of 5 additional years of experience in other education roles.

Teaching Demands

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Survey respondents most commonly taught in elementary school settings.
- ✓ The most common student population taught by respondents was individuals with mild/moderate disabilities, with an average caseload of 25 students.
- ✓ Over half of respondents taught in more than one setting. Most commonly, respondents provided pullout support in a special education classroom or resource room.
- ✓ Slightly less than half of respondents agreed that their duties and responsibilities as a special education teacher were manageable.
- ✓ Just 17% of respondents felt that administrative duties and paperwork did not interfere with teaching.

Who do special education teachers teach?

More than half of respondents reported working with elementary students in their roles (Table 2). One third of respondents worked with high school students and 25% worked with middle school students. Just over one quarter of respondents worked with more than one age/grade level group. Percentages in Table 2 do not sum to 100% because participants were permitted to select more than one age/grade level.

Table 2. Ages/Grade Levels of Respondents' Students

Age/Grade Level	Percentage of Participants Working with Age/Grade Level
Birth-5	9%
Elementary School	53%
Middle School	25%
High School	33%
Adult Learners	6%

27% of participants reported working with more than one age/grade level group.

As shown in Table 3, respondents most commonly reported worked with students who had mild/moderate disabilities (75%), followed by autism (52%) and severe disabilities (33%). The majority of respondents served more than one student population. Percentages in Table 3 do not sum to 100% because participants were permitted to select more than one age/grade level.

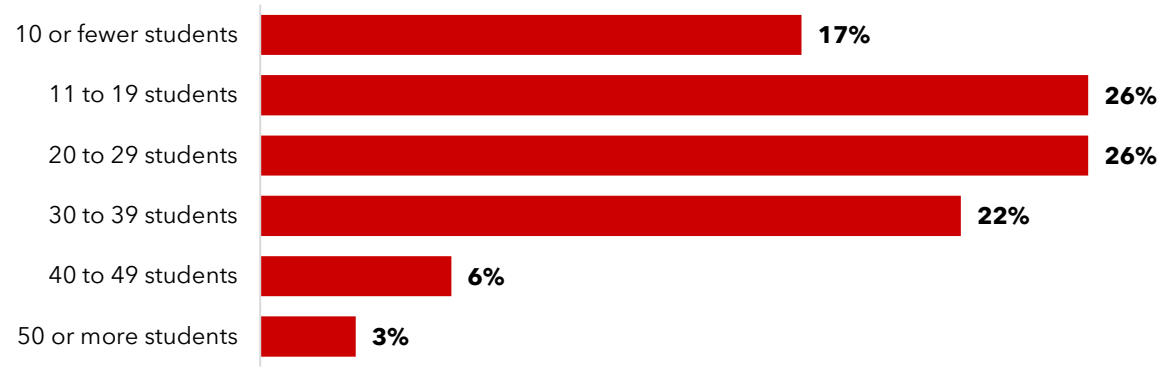
Table 3. Special Education Populations Taught by Respondents

Student Population	Percentage of Participants Working with Student Population
Mild/Moderate Disabilities	75%
Autism	52%
Severe Disabilities	33%
Secondary Special Education Mathematics	15%
Visual Impairments	15%
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	13%
Other	9%
Young Children Listening and Spoken Language	5%
Adapted Physical Education	4%
Deafblind	4%

Two-thirds of participants reported working with more than one student population.

A caseload is generally understood to be the number of students with an IEP (individualized education program) for which a teacher is responsible. According to Hogue and Taylor (2020), Utah is one of eight states that does not define acceptable caseload sizes. On average, respondents reported a caseload size of 25 students. However, as shown in Figure 2, caseloads varied from fewer than 10 students to more than 50 students, although 48% of respondents indicated having caseloads between 20 and 39 students.

Figure 2. Respondents' Caseload Sizes



Where do special education teachers teach?

Most teachers (91%) taught in one building. 4% taught in two buildings and 5% taught in three or more buildings.

Although most respondents taught in only one building, it was common to work with students in more than one setting (e.g., special education classroom, general education classroom, special education school) . As Figure 3 shows, more than half of respondents taught in two or more settings. Figure 4 further describes the settings that respondents reported working in. Respondents most often reported pulling students out to work with them in a special education classroom or resource room (57%). Other common settings included instruction in a self-contained special education classroom (41%) and pushing in to a general education classroom (33%).

Figure 3. Number of Settings Taught in by Respondents

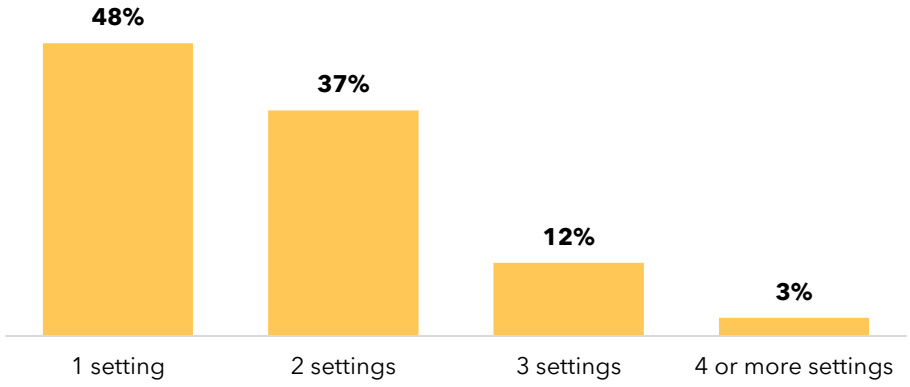
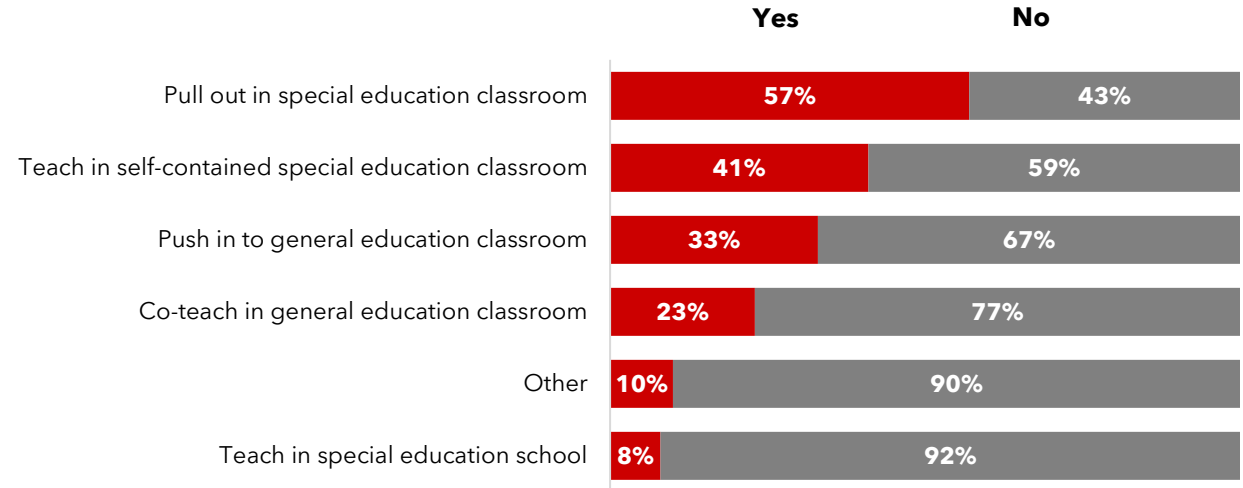


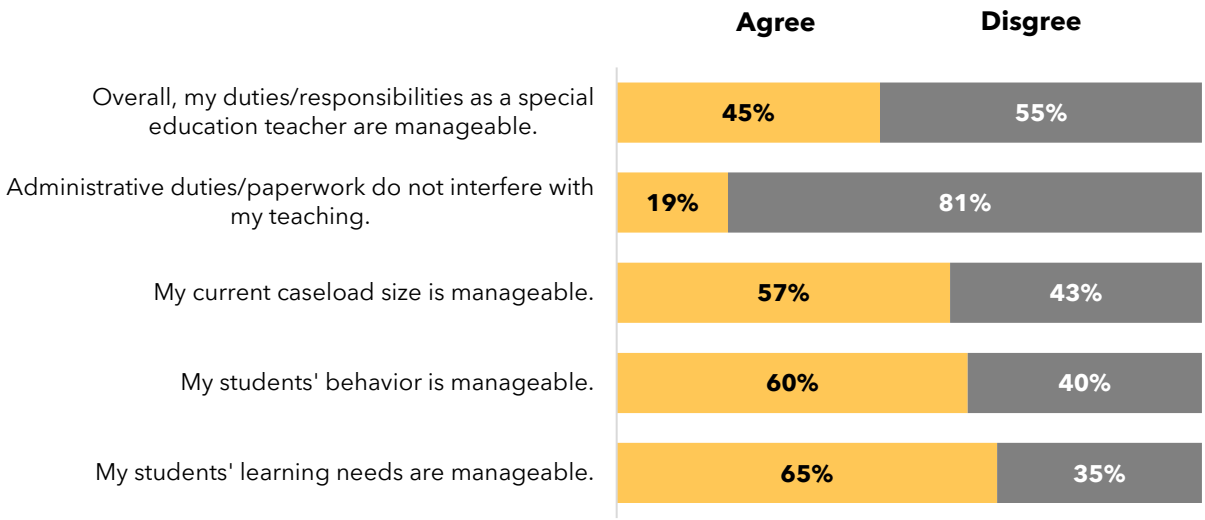
Figure 4. Settings Taught in by Respondents



How do special education teachers perceive the demands of their positions?

Just under half of respondents agreed that their duties and responsibilities as a special education teacher were manageable (Figure 5). Most notably, fewer than one in five teachers felt that paperwork and administrative duties did not interfere with their teaching. More than half of respondents agreed that caseload sizes, student behavior, and student learning needs were manageable.

Figure 5. Respondents' Perceptions of the Demands of Their Positions



These findings were supported by open-ended responses provided by special education teachers. The following, which illustrate the spectrum of responses from respondents, are some examples of how respondents reflected on their challenges related to paperwork, student behavior, and caseload sizes:

Paperwork

- If I only needed to focus on teaching and none of the paperwork, then I feel everything is manageable. The paperwork takes at least 10 extra hours each week to keep updated.
- My duties/responsibilities are only manageable because I work several hours a week outside my contract time. duties and paperwork are most of what I do outside of contract time because I do not want to take away from student instruction in order to complete paperwork.

Student Behavior

- Students have become more aggressive and volatile. There are no protections for teachers.
- Student behavior is manageable, however their apathy towards anything school related is a daily battle. Even with scaffolds and supports provided for each concept, motivation is the key behavior.

Caseload Sizes

- My caseload is such that my group sizes are too big. Anything more than 4 students in a group causes difficulty in being able to address student goals in their IEP.
- This has been my best year ever in terms of caseload size, manageable paperwork, and preps. However, I have had years where my caseload is as big as 39 and I taught 4 different subjects/preps. When this occurs the workload is not manageable and it results in ineffective working conditions that are not good for students or teachers.

Special education teachers also reflected more broadly on the demands of their work. For example, a number of respondents described feeling of having more than one job:

- It is like we have 3 full time jobs. We need more time to be able to do all that is asked of us. Behaviors are out of control, parent expectations are out of control, and job expectations are out of control. I am always taking work home.
- It feels like two full-time jobs for one person. I must go well past contract time if I aim to even do the minimum.

Lastly, one respondent captured the feelings of many by simply stating, "I'm overwhelmed."

School Culture and Climate

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Perceptions of school culture and climate were generally high.
- ✓ 90% of respondents agreed that their colleagues held high expectations for students' academic work.
- ✓ Approximately one in five respondents did not feel that staff members at their school trust each other.
- ✓ Two-thirds of respondents agreed that staff members support one another with behavioral expectations for students.

To better understand special education teachers' perceptions of school culture and climate, survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements about conditions in their school among staff members. As shown in Figure 6, perceptions of school culture and climate were generally high. For example, 90% of respondents agreed that their colleagues held high expectations for students' academic work. Agreement with other aspects of school culture and climate were somewhat lower. For example, only 79% of respondents agreed that staff members at their school trust each other and take responsibility for helping one another do well. The lowest level of agreement was related to supporting one another with behavioral expectations for students (66%). As indicated in the open-ended responses, respondents indicated varied experiences, including how their school culture and climate created conditions of support.

This finding related to student behavior was substantiated by open responses related to school culture and climate. Respondents expressed frustration related to student behavior expectations:

- Our school is very inclusive but lacks consistent behavioral expectations for students which can lead to challenging interactions.
- Sadly many teachers including myself feel there are no consequences for behavior and attendance. Dress code is never followed and girls are literally wearing bras in school. Cellphones - no enforcement by admin and teachers are left managing this highly disruptive students and cellphone use. Students roam the halls and no consequences. Attendance is ridiculous.

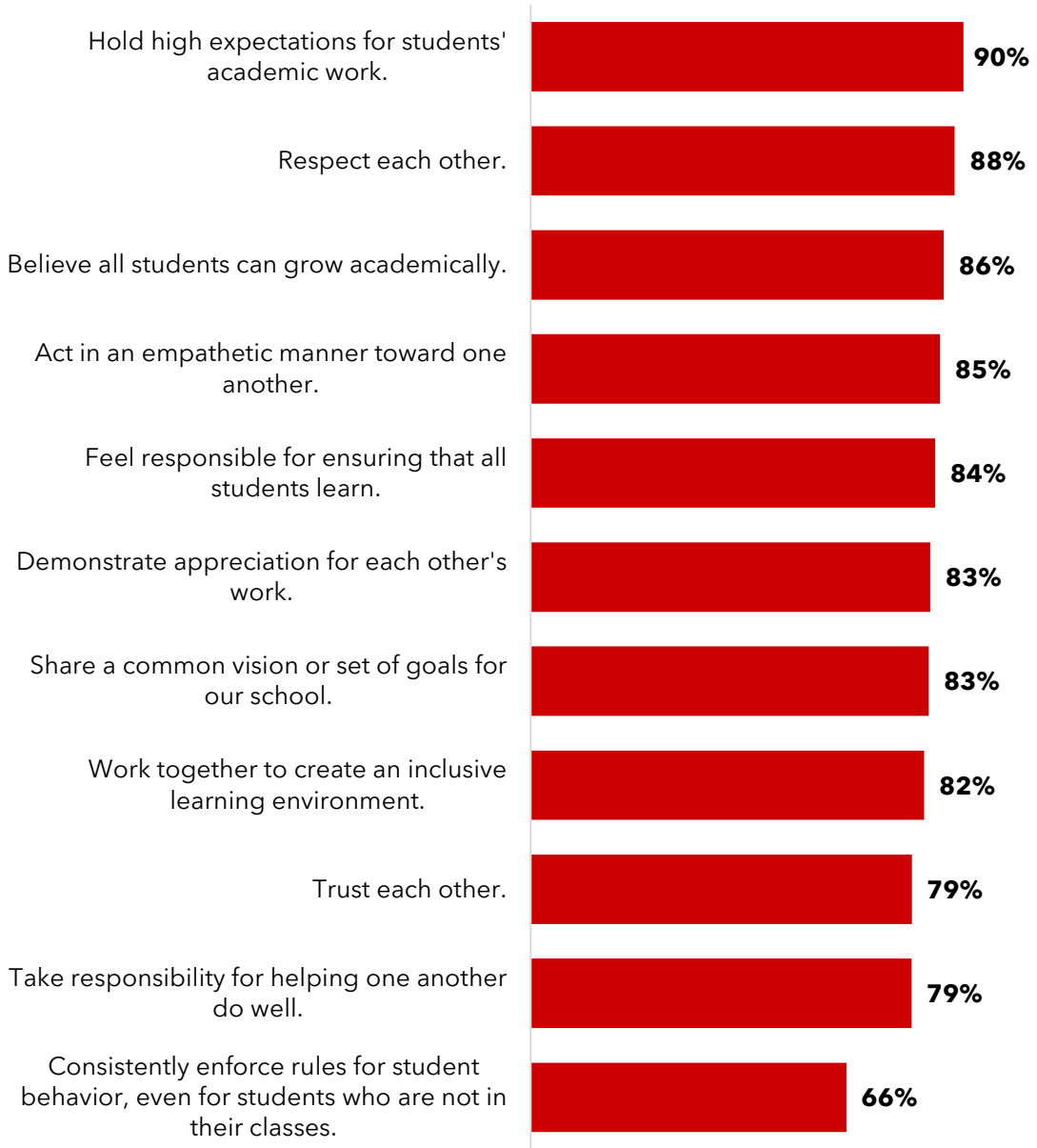
Some respondents reflected on the disconnect between special education and general education teachers in their building:

- General education teachers (some not all) do not put as much effort into special education kids.
- My school seems to think that once a student qualifies for Special Education, they are only the special Educators problem and other teachers and administrators do not need to worry or help.
- We have had a lot of issues here at our school. Our Special Education team is AWESOME, however it really lacks in support for our students and our team members by the rest of the school. Especially from Admin. We are really left on our own to do what needs to be done. We feel like a second thought!

Yet others offered positive reflections about their school's culture and climate:

- We recently had a situation where an angry parent was yelling at a teacher in the hallway and two teachers stepped in to stop it. It made me feel safe and proud that we are family and look out for one another.
- We have a wonderful school that truly collaborates on many aspects-school environment, student learning-struggling students and excelling students, and staff appreciation.
- Personally, I think our school has a great working climate. All teachers want to help students be successful and we celebrate each other's success as well.

Figure 6. Respondents' Perceptions of School Culture and Climate



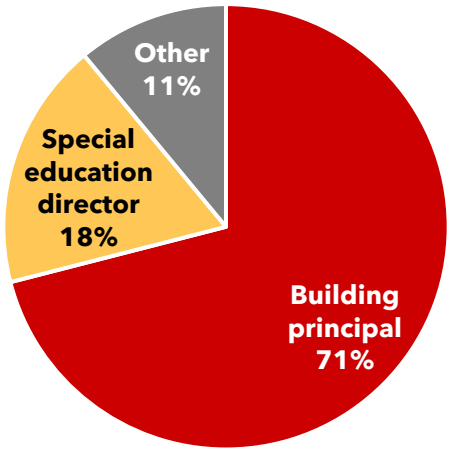
Administrative Support

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Most respondents were directly supervised by their building principal.
- ✓ Perceptions of supervisors were generally positive. For example, 90% of individuals agreed that their supervisor gave them autonomy.
- ✓ Perceptions of supervisor support were slightly higher among those who were supervised by their building principal rather than a special education director, assistant principal, or another staff member.

When asked who their direct supervisor was, most respondents (71%) indicated that their building principal served in this role (Figure 7). For 18% of respondents, this individual was a special education director. Eleven percent of respondents indicated that it was someone else, typically an assistant principal or someone serving in a special education coordinator role.

Figure 7. Roles of Special Education Teachers' Supervisors

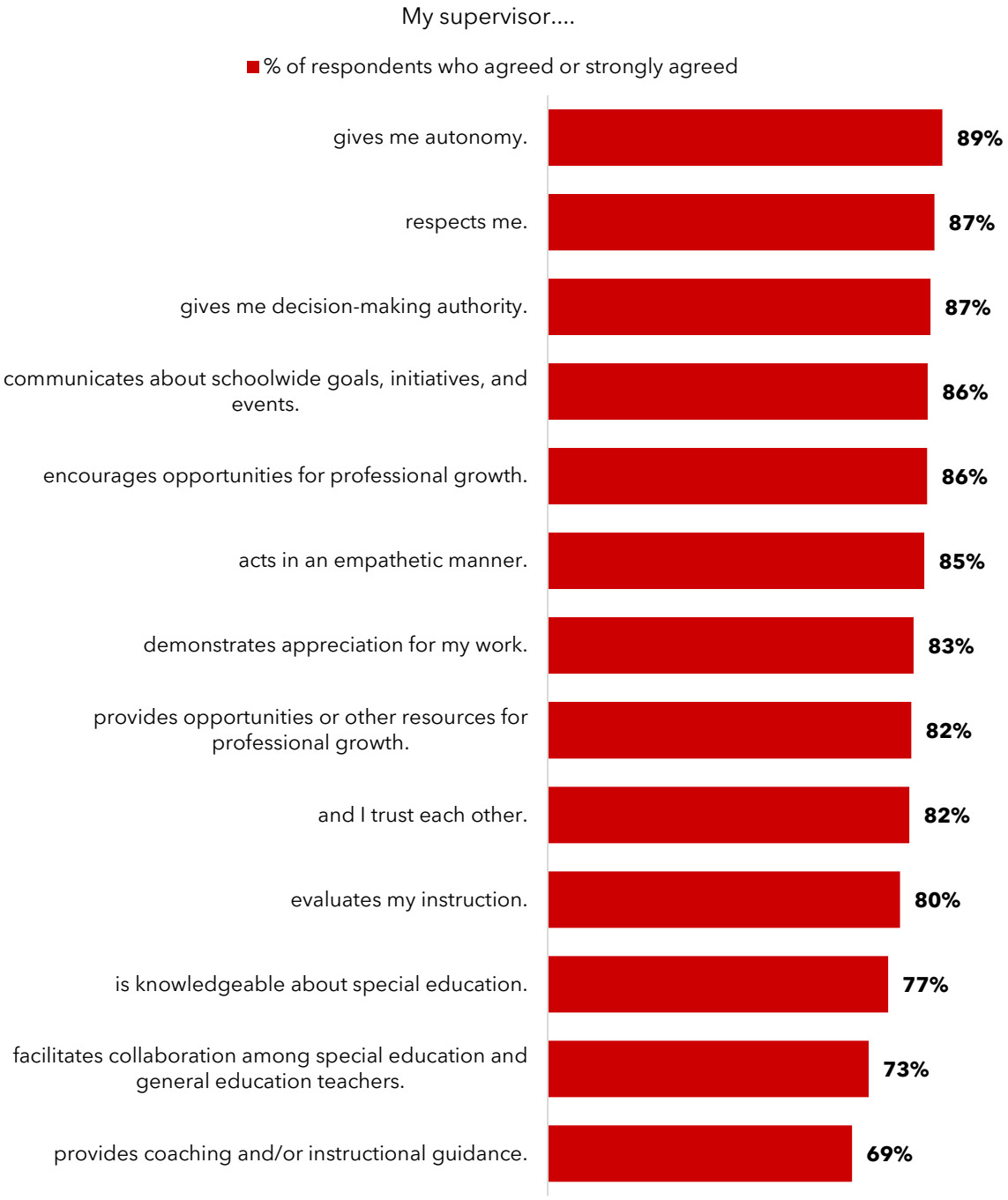


Special education teachers were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with various statements about their supervisor. On average, respondents agreed with 82% of the statements displayed in Figure 8. The highest levels of agreement were related to feeling a sense of autonomy (89% in agreement), while 69% of respondents agreed that their supervisor provides coaching and/or instructional guidance.

While this report focuses on overall perceptions of supervisor support regardless of whether this individual was the building principal or served in another role, some variation in responses was found across respondents based on their direct supervisor's role. Among individuals whose supervisor was not the building principal, questions about administrative support were asked twice – once for the building principal and once for the supervisor. Individuals whose building principal served as their direct supervisor had slightly more positive perceptions than those who did not (agreement with 84% vs. 78% of items on average). Responses were slightly higher for individuals whose supervisor was the building

principal in every case except one: "My supervisor is knowledgeable about special education." For this survey item, perceptions of supervisors were higher when an individual other than the building principal served as the respondent's supervisor (88% vs. 73% agreement).

Figure 8. Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Their Supervisor



While many open responses about administrators were positive, feedback from respondents also demonstrated ways in which administrative support was lacking for some special education teachers. For example, some individuals reported feeling well supported by administrators while also recognizing that they may not be particularly knowledgeable about special education:

- My principal is FANTASTIC. He does not have expertise with my job, but he is incredibly supportive in hiring staff and advocating for our needs as self-contained teachers. He is responsive to questions and lets me make appropriate adaptations of school-wide initiatives for my special education setting.
- We have a fairly new principal. He is wonderful to come and ask the Special Ed. Team questions and get our opinions on some matters. He is learning quickly about Special Education.

Yet others expressed a sense of disconnect with administrators:

- My principal does not feel comfortable around my students. She will greet them but does not know how to interact with them. In an emergency I would not ask her for help unless there wasn't anyone else.
- My administrator rarely attends IEP meetings. He doesn't come to team meeting. I don't see him very often. I don't feel like I can go to him about challenges I am having in my classroom.

Lastly, some respondents reflected on administrators' effort, or lack of effort, to strengthen relationships among special education and general education teachers:

- I would love for him to help facilitate more opportunities to collaborate with the general education teacher and have consistency in expectations, especially with kids with BIPs.
- My principal supports collaboration between special education and general education teachers, but there isn't enough time!
- My building principal does the best he can while trying to facilitate collaboration with regular education teachers that do not exactly want students with mild/moderate disabilities and behavioral issues in their classroom and communicate complaints in a passive aggressive way.

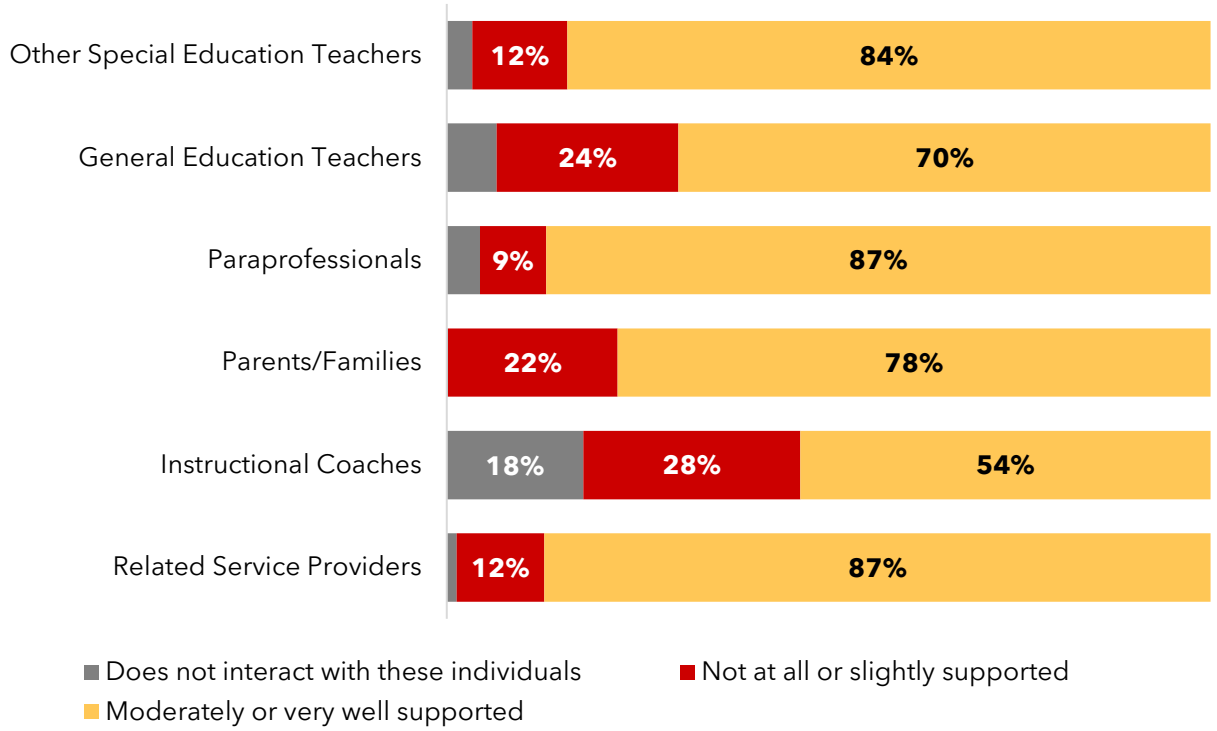
Collegial Support and Collaboration

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Although 84% of respondents felt well supported by special education teachers, only 70% felt this way about general education teachers.
- ✓ The lowest levels of reported support came from instructional coaches.
- ✓ Only 9% of participants reported that general education teachers understood their role as a special education teacher "very well."
- ✓ Special education teachers generally reported more frequent collaboration with other special education teachers than general education teachers.

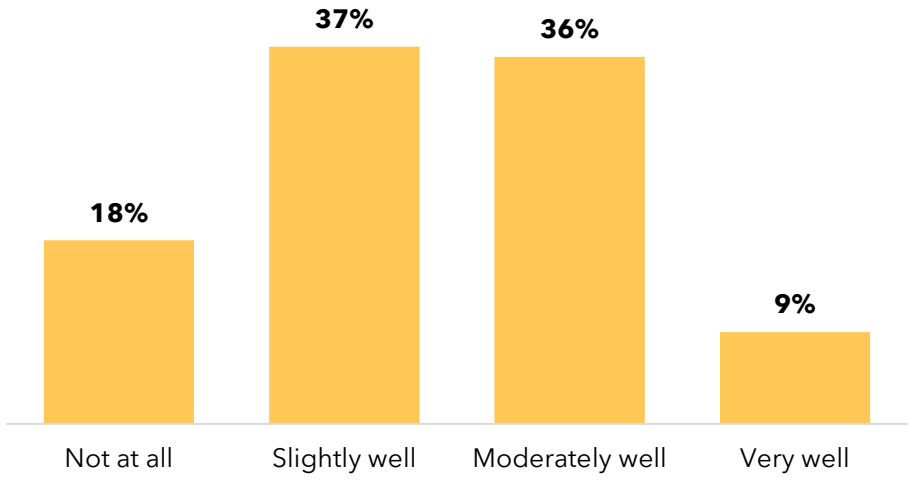
Special education teachers generally reported feeling well supported by the individuals with whom they interact. As shown in Figure 9, for example, 84% of respondents felt "moderately" or "very" well supported by other special education teachers and 87% felt supported by paraprofessionals, and related service providers. Rates were somewhat lower for perceptions of support from general education teachers and parents/families. Only 70% of respondents felt "moderately" or "very" well supported by general education teachers. The lowest levels of support came from instructional coaches. Eighteen percent of respondents reported that they did not have the opportunity to interact with instructional coaches and another 28% reported feeling "not at all" or "slightly" supported by them. Collectively, these results show that while the majority of respondents felt well supported, there was variation across sources of support.

Figure 9. Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Support



Given the importance of collaboration among special education and general education teachers in many educational settings, we asked respondents how well they felt general education teachers in their school understood their role as a special education teacher. Only 9% of individuals responded with "very well" and most notably, 18% reported "not at all" (Figure 10).

Figure 10. General Education Teachers' Understanding of Special Education Teachers' Roles



Only 9% of participants reported that general education teachers understood their role as a special education teacher "very well."

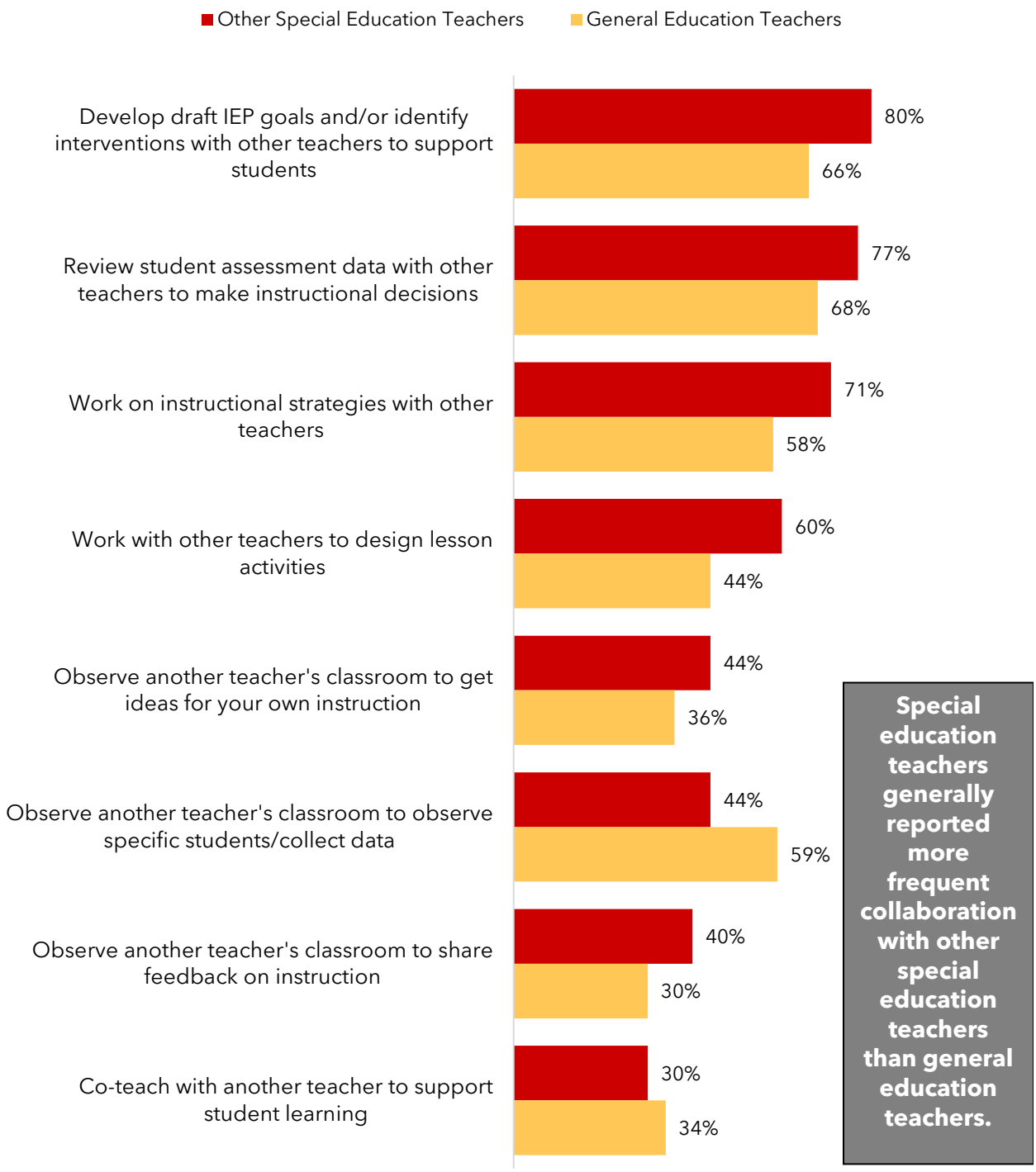
Survey respondents reported the frequency with which they engaged in various collaborative activities with other special education teachers and general education teachers. Response options included: almost never, sometimes, often, and almost always. Figure 11 shows the proportion of respondents who reported engaging in various activities at least "sometimes." For example, 80% of respondents reported developing draft IEP goals and/or identifying interventions with other special education teachers at least sometimes and 66% reported doing so with general education teachers.

With the exception of two activities, respondents reported more frequent collaboration with other special education teachers than general education teachers: Special education teachers more commonly observed a general education teacher's classroom to observe specific students and collect data and co-taught with a general education teacher to support student learning.

Open-ended survey responses about collaboration indicated that, in many cases, special education teachers desired more time to collaborate:

- I wish I had more time to do some of these unfortunately more often than not we end up in survival mode and collaboration is the first to go.
- I would love to be able to do all of the above with the general education teachers at my school and be able to better support my students through collaboration. However there is simply not enough time in the day. This is one of my biggest complaints because it is a disservice to my students, we would be better supporting them if we were able to collaborate for instructional strategies, coteach, observe throughout different settings, etc.

Figure 11. Frequency of Collaboration with Other Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers



Some respondents reflected on the effort it has taken to establish collaborative relationships with their colleagues, especially general education teachers:

- I have had to work hard to develop relationships with our general education teachers. Because of that we have a very good working relationship as well. We meet monthly to review data and discuss students that are struggling.
- There is a huge lack in the area of support and collaboration. In my building we have worked for years to build relationships. Many are good. However still there are individuals who are not supportive.

Yet others reflected on how poorly their colleagues understand their role or are willing to work with them:

- Most of the faculty think I am a babysitter.
- Some teachers are very willing to collaborate with sped. Others refuse to collaborate with sped.
- General education teachers at our school are, mostly, not concerned with SpEd services, as they consider their SpEd students to be "ours" instead of "theirs". Teachers, mostly, don't use many forms of data to guide instruction, avoid progress monitoring. This makes it difficult for them to judge and really understand the path their students must take in order to demonstrate learning growth.

Other Supports and Resources

Summary of Findings

- ✓ About half of respondents were satisfied with professional learning opportunities, technical assistance, and other forms of support such as onboarding and mentoring/coaching.
- ✓ Satisfaction levels with professional learning opportunities and technical assistance provided by schools/districts were higher than state-provided opportunities.

When asked about satisfaction with professional learning opportunities and technical assistance provided by their school/district and the state, special education teachers' perceptions varied depending on the source. As shown in Figure 12, while 56% of respondents were "moderately" or "very" satisfied with professional learning opportunities provided by their school/district, only 47% were satisfied with opportunities provided by the state. Similar gaps were found in satisfaction with technical assistance (59% vs. 38%)

Figure 12. Satisfaction with Professional Learning Opportunities and Technical Assistance

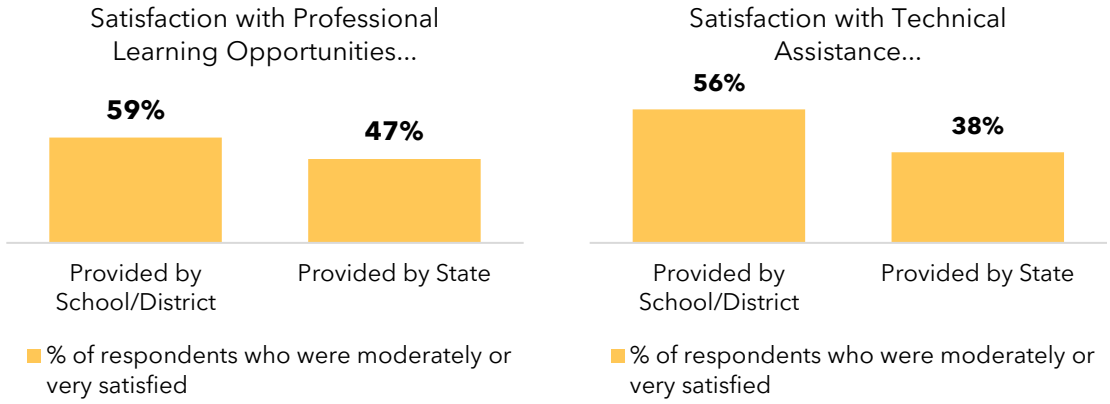
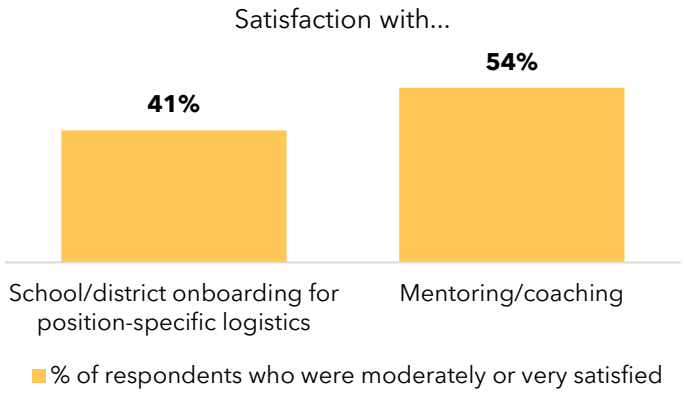


Figure 13 summarizes special education teachers' levels of satisfaction with onboarding and mentoring/coaching. Forty-one percent of respondents were "moderately" or "very" satisfied with onboarding, and 54% were "moderately" or "very" satisfied with mentoring/coaching.

Figure 13. Satisfaction with Other Supports



In open responses related to these topics, special education teachers' feedback largely mirrored the split nature of satisfaction levels found in Figure 12 and Figure 13. For example, some individuals expressed a desire for additional professional learning opportunities:

- I wish that there were more opportunities for professional development for teachers as well as paraprofessionals. I understand it is hard now with a shortage of subs, but it would be nice if there were more offered even after school.
- It would be nice to have models and examples from the state on possible goals for students, especially in behavior. Maybe there is a resource such as this and I am not aware of it.

Others were overwhelmed by too many professional learning opportunities:

- Honestly, the district and state overwhelm teachers with so many professional developments, and courses (LETRS), and requirements, that often times profession development is overkill, and the expectations need to be dialed back a little bit.

Some individuals indicated that while professional learning was available, they did not find value in it:

- Professional learning and development is a giant waste of time that we all have to endure. Some teachers do seem to like it, but for the most part teachers are aware that its just another time-consuming box we have to check. I'm not sure the last time I left one of those feeling like I learned something helpful, particularly with the trainings mandated by our district.

Yet others were quite satisfied with the resources available to them. For example, numerous respondents mentioned LETRS training in their responses:

- LETRS training has been provided by the state and that has been valuable!
- The state has provided LETRS training for this and next year and it has been incredibly beneficial to learn. I feel much more competent as a teacher.
- I feel good professional development is lacking for sped. They usually lump us in with regular ed, which often isn't great. The LETRS class has been the exception to that, it has been very good for everyone.

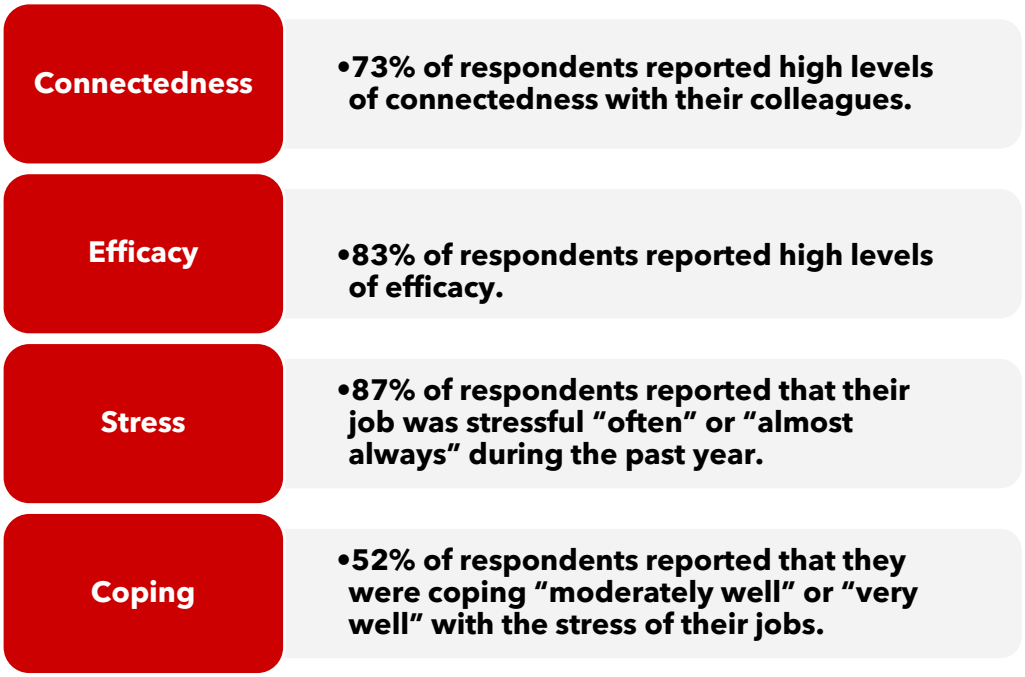
Wellbeing

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Approximately three in four respondents reported feeling well connected to their colleagues.
- ✓ Just over 80% of respondents reported high levels of efficacy.
- ✓ Nearly all teachers reported high stress levels associated with their work, yet only around half reported they were coping well with this stress.

To better understand special education teachers' levels of wellbeing, respondents reported on how well connected they felt to their colleagues, their sense of efficacy, stress levels, and ability to cope. While a majority of respondents reported that they felt high levels of connectedness with their colleagues and high levels of efficacy, reported stress levels were high and only about half of respondents reported that they were coping well with the stress associated with their jobs. Key findings are summarized in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Wellbeing of Special Education Teachers



Satisfaction

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Approximately three in four respondents reported being satisfied with their work.
- ✓ 73% of respondents were satisfied with their specific position and 78% were satisfied with the special education teaching profession more generally.

When asked whether they were satisfied with their teaching position as well as the special education teaching profession generally, the majority of respondents (73-77%) reported that they were "moderately" or "very" satisfied (Figure 15 and Figure 16).

Figure 15. Satisfaction with Teaching Position

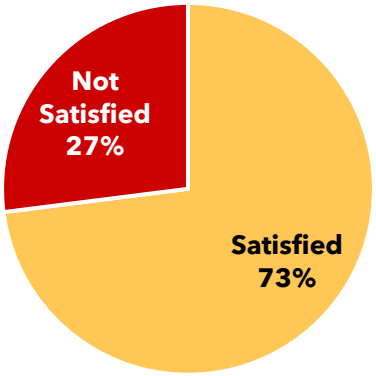
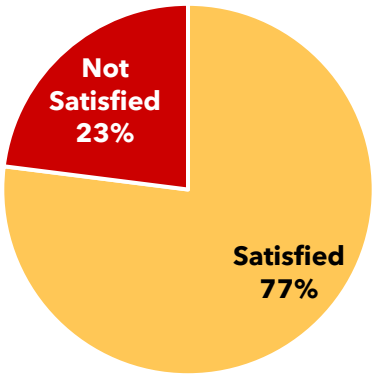


Figure 16. Satisfaction with Special Education Teaching Profession



Respondents were given the opportunity to provide any additional context related to their responses. A number of individuals indicated that their work was challenging but that students, colleagues, and other supports made their roles manageable:

- I am handling the stress well because of my special education team, if I had a different team, it would be harder.
- I feel like I'm a good teacher but I work really hard and put in a lot of overtime and am stressed out a lot because of parents, paperwork, and unrealistic expectations. I honestly wouldn't still be teaching if I didn't have a phenomenal paraeducator who helps out a ton.
- Special Education is hard. The workload is overwhelming, the paperwork is often unbearable. But, my students accomplishments and their smiles keep me there.
- My current principal is awesome and has made teaching special education as good as would be possible under impossible expectations. I really appreciate him.

Another common theme that emerged in these responses was challenges related to depression, anxiety, and other health issues. Respondents reflected on these difficulties, especially in recent years:

- I have seriously considered leaving the profession many times in the last 3-4 years. I have had a lot of anxiety and depression. There are many times I cry because I feel so overwhelmed and stressed out. My job is having a negative impact on my mental health. I have been so stressed out that I get body aches. Something needs to change in education, because I don't know how much longer I can handle teaching.
- This has been my hardest year. I have had tears, panic attacks, and not wanted to go to school. All of which I have not experienced in the past.
- I'm leaving the profession that I used to love.

Career Intentions

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Most respondents planned to return to the same position the following school year.
- ✓ Among those not planning to remain in the same position, common pathways included: taking a different special education position in the same district, leaving education entirely, or taking a non-special education position in the same district.

When asked what their plans were for the following school year, a majority of respondents (71%) reported that they would remain in the same position (Table 4). Among the 29% who had other plans, responses varied. In some cases, individuals planned to remain in the same district but take a different position (either special education or something else), and in other cases, individuals planned to leave their district or education entirely. Among the 11% of individuals who indicated that they were unsure or had other plans, some planned to retire.

Table 4. Respondents' Career Intentions for the 2022-23 School Year

Career Intentions for 2022-23 School Year	Percentage
Remain in same position	71%
Take a different special education position in the same district	6%
Leave education entirely	5%
Take a non-special education position in same district	4%
Take a special education position in a different district	2%
Take a non-special education position in a different district	1%
Unsure/other plans	11%

After indicating whether they planned to remain in the same position or do something else, responses were asked what their primary reason was for this decision. Respondents offered a range of responses, which fell into a common set of themes for what supported their decision to remain in the same position or not return. Illustrative quotes for different themes are provided below.

For individuals who planned to remain in the same position:

Students
- I love working with the students and seeing their progress.
- I like where I am, I like my students.

Work environment and colleagues
- I work in a very positive work environment, and I have never felt so supported.
- I feel supported at my school, and I feel like the gen ed teachers work well together. I have incredible admin at my school that help wherever they can.

Extrinsic factors (e.g., insurance, benefits, schedule)
- Insurance/ funds to pay necessary bills.
- I have worked here for a long time; my own kids attend this school.
- Work schedule is very cohesive with being a mom.

Too late to change paths
- I need a job and feel like it's too late to change careers.
- I have 18 years in and I don't want to start over.

Pursuing a graduate degree
- I am in the process of receiving my master's degree so that I can leave teaching.
- I am working on a Master's degree and cannot handle another big shift next year.

Sticking it out until retirement
- I only have two years left.
- I am within 5 years of retirement and would not be likely to find a job with the same compensation.

Expectations and routine are clear
- Stability. Comfort. Routine.
- I don't like change, and I know what to expect in my current position.

Among those who indicated they would not return to the same position the following school year (29%), some were seeking different settings or position types:

- Looking to take a different role at my school.
- I need a change.
- Caseload is overwhelming.
- I may move to high school.
- Career growth and opportunity.

For individuals who indicated they would not return to the same position, responses generally centered around stress of teaching special education generally or stress specific to the school in which they worked:

General stress

- The workload of the SPED teacher is not fairly compensated monetarily to that of the general education teacher. We are not treated with any respect at all and are constantly berated and under the gun to make sure every IEP is perfect on top of teaching and planning classes.
- The job is too stressful for my body at this age.
- The stress and time limitations. Bringing home work should not be a frequent occurrence. There should be time within my contract hours to achieve what is asked of me.
- Special education is too demanding. I'm in a building full of teachers where most of them at or shortly after contract hours, while I stay for another 2-4 hours. Teaching is a full time job, but I'm expected to also take on case management. I can't do both and be expected to do them well unless I sacrifice my own well-being.

School-specific stress

- I don't enjoy the work and admin doesn't seem to value any of my other licenses or endorsements. Too much stress for too little return.
- Student behaviors are getting more aggressive, I'm constantly in fight or flight mode at school.
- The lack of respect and support from the district, the number of kids added to my caseload, the amount of data collection and paperwork, and the lack of response from my admin team when I have a problem.

Are More Positive Working Conditions Associated with Better Outcomes for Special Education Teachers?

Summary of Findings

- ✓ In nearly every instance, there was a positive relationship between working conditions and outcomes.
- ✓ Respondents with better working conditions were more likely to report that they were coping well with job-related stress, satisfied with their job, and planning to return to the same position the following year.

To determine whether teachers who reported more positive working conditions (i.e. teaching demands, school culture and climate, administrative support, collegial support and collaboration, other supports and resources) also had better outcomes (wellbeing, satisfaction, career intentions) we conducted a series of statistical analyses to example the relationships.

The working conditions and outcomes included in our analyses are the following:

Working conditions:

- Teaching demands
- School culture and climate
- Administrative support
- Collegial support
- Other supports and resources

Outcomes:

- Wellbeing
- Satisfaction
- Career intentions

We accounted for teacher demographics (i.e., teacher race/ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, experience) and the districts that teachers worked in (using district fixed effects to account for similarities in experiences within districts) to better isolate the relationships among the working conditions and outcomes noted above. The values displayed below are the results of linear probability models.[2] All displayed values represent statistically significant relationships ($p<.05$). Darker shading is utilized to indicate findings that were of greater magnitude (>=20%). Specific interpretations of values precede each table.

Table 5 illustrates relationships among perceptions of teaching demands and wellbeing, satisfaction, and career intentions. For example, respondents who agreed that their overall workload was manageable were 37 percentage points more likely to report that they were coping well with the stress of their job, 31 percentage points more likely to report that they were satisfied with their position, and 18 percentage points more likely to report that they

[2] Linear probability models were used to allow for easier interpretation of results. Similar results were found using logistic regression.

would remain in the same position in 2022-23. Collectively, the values in this table suggest that respondents who perceived the demands of their positions as manageable also had more positive outcomes than respondents who did not perceive the demands of their positions as manageable.

Table 5. Teaching Demands as a Predictor of Wellbeing, Satisfaction, and Career Intentions

Agreement that…	**Coping Well with Job Stress**	**Satisfied with Position**	**Plans to Stay in Same Position**
Overall workload is manageable	+37%	+31%	+18%
Administrative and paperwork are manageable	+33%	+17%	+13%
Caseload size is manageable	+26%	+19%	+14%
Student behavior is manageable	+26%	+20%	+13%
Student learning needs are manageable	+21%	+20%	+6%

Note: All displayed values were statistically significant ($p<.05$). Darker shading represents values greater than or equal to 20%.

Table 6 illustrates the relationship between perceptions of school culture/climate and wellbeing, satisfaction, and career intentions. Individuals who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with at least 80% of survey items related to school culture and climate were 18 percentage points more likely to report that they were coping well with job-related stress, 20 percentage points more likely to indicate they were satisfied with their position, and 14 percentage points more likely to report that they plan to remain in the same position the following school year. In other words, special education teachers with more positive perceptions of school culture and climate also had more positive outcomes.

Table 6. School Culture and Climate as a Predictor of Wellbeing, Satisfaction, and Career Intentions

	Coping Well with Job Stress	**Satisfied with Position**	**Plans to Stay in Same Position**
Positive perceptions of school culture and climate (80% agreement with survey items)	+18%	+20%	+14%

Note: All displayed values were statistically significant ($p<.05$). Darker shading represents values greater than or equal to 20%. Blank cells represent relationships that were not statistically significant.

Administrative support, including perceptions of support from building principals and direct supervisors, was also associated with positive outcomes for teachers. As shown in Table 7, individuals who reported high levels of support (i.e., agreement with 80% of survey items) were significantly more likely to report that they were coping well with job-related stress, satisfied with their position, and planning to return to the same position the following year. The relationship between administrative support and satisfaction was particularly high.

Table 7. Administrative Support as a Predictor of Wellbeing, Satisfaction, and Career Intentions

	Coping Well with Job Stress	Satisfied with Position	Plans to Stay in Same Position
Supported by building principal (80% agreement with survey items)	+18%	+27%	+16%
Supported by supervisor (80% agreement with survey items)	+19%	+28%	+17%

Note: All displayed values were statistically significant (p<.05). Darker shading represents values greater than or equal to 20%.

As shown in Table 8, high levels of collegial support and collaboration were associated with positive outcomes for special education teachers. Using the first value in the top lefthand corner as an example, special education teachers who felt "moderately" or "very well" supported by other special education teachers were 14 percentage points more likely to report that they were coping well with job-related stress. As noted by the blank cells in the table, perceived support from general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and instructional coaches was not predictive of intentions to remain in the same position.

Table 8. Collegial Support and Collaboration as Predictors of Wellbeing, Satisfaction, and Career Intentions

	Coping Well with Job Stress	Satisfied with Position	Plans to Stay in Same Position
Moderately or very well supported by special education teachers	+14%	+18%	+13%
Moderately or very well supported by general education teachers	+16%	+13%	
Moderately or very well supported by paraprofessionals	+13%	+11%	
Moderately or very well supported by families	+19%	+20%	+10%
Moderately or very well supported by instructional coaches	+16%	+11%	
Moderately or very well supported by service providers	+14%	+15%	+11%
Agreement that general education teachers understand role	+15%	+10%	+6%
Frequent collaboration with special education teachers	+7%	+10%	+8%
Frequent collaboration with general education teachers	+11%	+8%	+6%

Note: All displayed values were statistically significant (p<.05). Darker shading represents values greater than or equal to 20%. Blank cells represent relationships that were not statistically significant.

Satisfaction with other resources and supports was also predictive of special education teachers' outcomes. In particular, individuals who were "moderately" or "very" satisfied with professional learning, technical assistance, and other supports were more likely to report that they were coping well with job-related stress (Table 9).

Table 9. Other Resources and Supports as Predictors of Wellbeing, Satisfaction, and Career Intentions

Moderately or very satisfied with...	**Coping Well with Job Stress**	**Satisfied with Position**	**Plans to Stay in Same Position**
PL provided by district	+22%	+22%	+10%
PL provided by state	+17%	+13%	+5%
TA provided by district	+23%	+19%	+10%
TA provided by state	+22%	+13%	+9%
Onboarding for position	+24%	+20%	+11%
Mentoring/coaching	+29%	+17%	+8%

Note: All displayed values were statistically significant ($p<.05$). Darker shading represents values greater than or equal to 20%.

In Their Own Words: What Would Improve Special Education Teachers' Working Conditions?

More than 1,500 survey respondents provided feedback on how special education teachers' working conditions could be improved. Many of these suggestions centered around the idea of providing special education teachers with sufficient resources, including time, pay, and staff to support their work. Other recommendations centered around caseload sizes, paperwork, administrative support, and broader organizational factors. The following is a summary of recommendations made by respondents.

Provide more time to complete the work.

- I need more time to do my job. Another prep period or something. I just can't do my job within contract time. I spend 10-11 hours at the school every day and I'm still drowning.
- My current working conditions would be improved if I had paid time for IEPs/planning since it is impossible to get everything done during contract hours.
- I would like more time to spend on transition with each student. It is difficult to meet their needs on helping them find resources, information, and make meaningful plans with the current workload.

Offer compensation that reflects the demands of the job.

- I get paid exactly the same wage as the general education teachers and I have significantly more duties that consume my time, well beyond my contract time.
- Salary that reflects both my education and the overwhelming amount of work I do that general education teachers are not expected to do.
- Pay has really become a concern for me. It is hard to see others make 3x as much money in private sector and not be responsible for as much.

Employ paraprofessionals and other staff members that can support the work.

- Having special ed paras that can acquire full-time positions with health and retirement benefits: our district refuses to make their positions full-time so we often lose any of the ones we do get.
- Better paraprofessionals. It has been so hard to get qualified people to even apply for a para job so we are left to hire whoever we can get. I believe one reason for this is because it is a HARD job and they don't get paid anywhere near what they're worth for the job they are expected to do. I wouldn't apply for the job either!
- Having another person case manage the files, testing, and schedule meetings. This way I could focus on teaching and working.

Reduce caseload sizes.

- Being mindful of special education caseload. Just because they don't have a documented disability doesn't mean that they don't take time to instruct. Having too many little bodies in a class makes it difficult no matter their abilities.
- My caseload is becoming too large for the hours I am given. I became a teacher to work directly with students and it frustrates me that I may not have time for that anymore. I know other special education teachers in my district that feel the same.

- Less of a caseload so that I can manage my tasks during contract hours. And the last 3 months, I have documented 96 hours beyond contract time. That will definitely lead to burn out.

Offer support with paperwork.

- The paperwork needs to be lessened. Every year another new form is added to what we already do.
- It would be nice to have help with all the paperwork. I often times feel like I spend most of my time typing and scheduling IEP's than I do teaching my students. The paperwork is ridiculous, and they change things a lot so once you get use to something it changes. It's ridiculous that it takes a whole day to upload and file paperwork. It would be nice to have some help in that area.
- Less paperwork. At least quit having the state and/or federal government add new requirements or change what is required every dang year. It's hard to keep up with all the changes. I feel like I'm not even a teacher but my own administrative assistant who just does paperwork.

Ensure administrators are knowledgeable about special education and supportive of teachers.

- My principal desperately needs training on special education laws. My administrator pulls the "I know what I'm doing and I'm the administrator" card as opposed to being a part of the team. We feel like we are not being taken seriously, are being told we are not doing what is best for the students, and are not doing enough.
- Have an administrator allow us as a SpEd department do the things that we know are correct without receiving constant pushback.
- We need administrators who are seasoned educators that have paid their dues in the classroom which gives them credibility. We need administrators who have integrity. We need administrators who are not afraid to back up teachers and stand up to parents who are being unreasonable.

Treat special education teachers with respect and provide them with autonomy.

- Less drama. More respect. MORE APPRECIATION and VALIDATION.
- More autonomy and respect as a highly trained and qualified educator.
- BE more appreciative of the teachers and their positions and don't get rid of them for no reason at all. Value the teachers, give them respect, make them feel important and valued and needed and let them know that their job is important and valued and what they're doing is a good thing, don't throw them out for no reason at all.

Address broader organizational factors impacting special education teachers.

- Each year becomes increasingly difficult with added expectations and seemingly punitive new directives from the district. Teaching no longer allows autonomy or the opportunities to be part of the larger dialogue, rather, it's a system of directives and expectations that teachers no longer have a say in.
- We need an evaluation system that is aligned with the unique purposes and structure of Resource teachers. We need an evaluation system that is less rigorous which will in turn be less stressful. The algorithms in my district have almost no margin for error. Evaluating a Career Educator every 5 years would ease stress rather than every 2 years.

- Special ed teachers have to fight for access to information that should be waiting at our fingertips. Everything in special ed is a fight. You fight for the kids, you fight for rights to access the information, you fight to hold meetings, you fight for legal rights, you fight for the classes they need, you fight discrimination from all levels. You fight the paperwork and the 20,000 more (unreasonable) expectations that are going to hit your desk in a year. You fight to not have your sped students AND teachers to not be treated as less than.

Provide support to mitigate pandemic-related challenges

- This year we were given several remote days due to COVID and I really enjoyed those few days, as I was able to do the paperwork part of this job then without bringing so much home. I am really anxious and worried about next year without these remote days to get this part of the special education job completed.
- We should receive time off to quarantine with covid-19, not expected to use our personal days.
- I could better serve my students if I had a smaller caseload. The behavior that I see most is apathy towards being in class. I realize this is a side effect of Covid and that it will take time and patience to help students understand that it really is important to go to class - on time and do their best.
- The number of referrals due to COVID learning loss has been overwhelming among most schools I have talked to and the workload has increased.

Considerations

Utah special education teachers' working conditions included both bright spots and areas of concern. Perceptions of school culture and climate and administrative support were, on average, quite high. Yet, other aspects of special education teachers' roles were not viewed as positively. Most concerning were the high levels of stress experienced by respondents. Nearly 90% of special education teachers reported that they were stressed "often" or "almost always," and only half of respondents reported that they were coping well. Fewer than half of respondents felt that their duties and responsibilities were manageable. Special education teachers were overwhelmed by administrative duties and the need to oversee large caseloads across multiple settings, leaving them with too little time to spend with students. Many special education teachers described working beyond their contract time to complete necessary paperwork.

Respondents' comments related to mental health and stress more generally were particularly striking. Many respondents described feeling like their colleagues viewed them as babysitters or that the students they worked with were viewed as special education teachers' problems and not part of the larger school community. While special education teachers seemed to find community with other special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and service providers, further support may be needed from other groups. Notably, only 54% of special education teachers reported feeling supported by instructional coaches and only 45% of respondents felt that general education teachers had a good understanding of what special education teachers do. Findings from this survey indicate that additional attention is needed to bridge relationships between special education and general education teachers. Lower levels of collaboration may contribute to feelings of isolation and stress for special education teachers.

Despite high levels of stress, a majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their teaching position and the teaching profession. Given these responses, it is unsurprising that 71% reported the intention to remain in their same position. While 11% indicated that they were unsure or had other plans for next year, only 5% indicated that they would be leaving the profession all together.

Positive associations among working conditions and outcomes are promising. When special education teachers experienced more manageable working conditions across all domains (i.e., teaching demands, school culture and climate, administrative support, collegial support and collaboration, and other supports and resources), they were more likely to report they were coping well, satisfied, and planning to remain in the same positions.

These findings provide evidence that the conditions in which special education teachers work matter. Education leaders and policymakers have the opportunity improve special education teachers' wellbeing, satisfaction, and retention by taking intentional steps to address educators' stress levels, administrative responsibilities, opportunities for collaboration, and available resources. In doing so, both Utah teachers and students will benefit.

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