



BUILDING A STRONGER SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Recommendations from Teach Plus Colorado Charter Policy Fellows

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INTRODUCTION

Across Colorado, students with disabilities and their families are counting on their schools to deliver the specialized support they need to learn and thrive. The state has taken important steps in recent years to modernize licensure and invest in educator pathways, but persistent special education vacancies, rising caseloads, and high turnover still leave too many of our students without consistent, high-quality services. Staffing gaps and shortages of paraprofessionals strain schools' capacity to meet needs day in and day out.

We are a group of Teach Plus Colorado Charter Policy Fellows who teach across grade levels and communities, committed to ensuring every Colorado student has access to high-quality instruction and the supports they deserve. Through a targeted review of Colorado statutes and state board rules, Colorado Department of Education (CDE) licensure guidance, state program documents, and recent national research on Grow-Your-Own and para-to-teacher programs, licensure reform, and retention, we identified practical strategies to grow, prepare, and keep more special educators in our schools.

We propose four recommendations to move the state from isolated initiatives to a clear, sustainable strategy:

- 1. Sustain and expand state investment in Grow-Your-Own and para-to-teacher pathways** by building strong partnerships among educator preparation programs, school systems, and charter networks, and by prioritizing funding to scale effective, community-rooted programs.
- 2. Expand and streamline special education licensure pathways** by offering competency-based, stackable credentialing options, improving navigation and transparency, and increasing awareness of available entry points into the profession.

3. **Improve retention of special educators** by embedding team-based staffing structures, targeted professional learning, and leadership development into school and system design.
4. **Strengthen charter school capacity to serve students with disabilities** by providing tailored guidance, technical assistance, and leadership development, with attention to the varied needs of diverse school models.

Turning progress into impact will require a statewide plan that puts students with disabilities at the center and builds the workforce to meet their needs. We hope that the recommendations in this brief move policymakers to act with urgency on behalf of students with disabilities, ensuring they experience consistent, high-quality teaching and the full promise of an inclusive education.

COLORADO SPECIAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

Colorado's special education workforce faces chronic shortages that make it difficult for schools to reliably meet students' needs. In 2023–24, special education roles accounted for three of the five most critical shortage areas, with special education generalists the largest single category (486 open positions).¹ Nearly one in five special education teaching roles were vacant or filled through emergency mechanisms. Turnover compounds the problem: In 2023–24, staffing turnover was 17 percent for teachers overall, 23 percent for instructional support positions, and 28 percent for paraprofessionals.²

Meanwhile, the number of students identified with disabilities is steadily increasing. Nationally, 15.2 percent of all public school students received special education services in 2022–23, the highest percentage on record. In Colorado, 13 percent of students were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that year, with the number of students receiving services growing 43.9 percent since 2000—more than double the national rate—outpacing staffing capacity and driving larger caseloads.³

Educators describe the toll this takes on students and staff. *"My current caseload feels overwhelming,"* said Denver **special education teacher Jen Holtzmann**, who lost two of the three paraprofessionals assigned to one-to-one support for her students. **Occupational therapist Merri Lintz** testified before the Denver Public Schools board that she was working at 40 percent above recommended caseloads: *"This affects the quality of my services in all areas."*⁴ As charter classroom teachers and special education leaders, we see these pressures firsthand in our own schools: persistent vacancies, rising caseloads, and administrative tasks that leave less time for instruction and student support.

While these pressures are widespread across Colorado schools, the charter context can intensify them. Charters operating within a district or larger charter management organization may access centralized special education supports, but many small, independently authorized, or rural charters must piece together recruitment, compliance, and service delivery without comparable infrastructure.⁵ Lacking economies of scale larger systems provide, these schools face capacity constraints that make it harder to attract and retain licensed special educators and related service providers.⁶

Without urgent action to strengthen the special education profession, students most in need of individualized support will continue to face service delays, inconsistent instruction, and fewer opportunities to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: Sustain and expand state investment in Grow-Your-Own and para-to-teacher pathways by building strong partnerships among educator preparation programs, school systems, and charter networks, and by prioritizing funding to scale effective, community-rooted programs.

Grow-Your-Own (GYO) and para-to-teacher programs are among the most promising strategies to address Colorado's special education teacher shortage. These community-based, inclusive pathways help recruit and retain educators with strong local ties, especially in rural, under-resourced, and high-turnover settings. Paraprofessionals, in particular, are well-positioned to transition into teaching roles because of their instructional experience, school relationships, and deep familiarity with students.

Recent state investment has helped expand access to these programs. Since 2021, Colorado's [Educator Recruitment and Retention \(ERR\) program](#) has helped paraprofessionals and teachers in shortage areas pursue licensure by providing one-time financial assistance of up to \$10,000.⁷ In 2024–25, the program supported more than 600 aspiring educators across the state. Despite budget constraints, the legislature continued to prioritize funding for the ERR program in 2025–26, signaling a sustained commitment to addressing educator shortages. Meanwhile, the [Special Education Teacher Preparation Partnerships grant](#), funded through federal IDEA dollars, has helped launch small cohorts of special education generalist candidates in rural and high-need areas.⁸ However, current programs still only reach a fraction of those needed to address persistent shortages.

In Colorado, St. Vrain Valley Schools' [P-TEACH](#) offers high school students dual credit and hands-on experiences in education; Boulder Valley School District's [TREP program](#) enables eligible students to earn up to two years of tuition-free college credit toward a degree in education; and [Pathways2Teaching](#) supports students of color in exploring education as a way to uplift their communities and improve representation in schools. Para-to-teacher programs such as CU Denver's [P-TAP](#), Denver Public Schools' [Pathways to Teaching](#), and the University of Northern Colorado's [Center for Urban Education](#) allow school-based staff to earn licensure while continuing to work in the classroom. Research shows that paraprofessionals are more likely than external hires to remain in the profession and stay in the communities where they work.⁹

To strengthen and scale GYO and para-to-teacher pathways, we recommend the following actions:

Colorado legislators should:

- + Prioritize continued funding for the ERR program, with a dedicated set-aside for special education and para-to-teacher candidates.
- + Support additional investment in concurrent enrollment and GYO programs that serve high school students, classified staff, and candidates in high-need local education agencies (LEAs).

The CDE should:

- + Expand the Special Education Teacher Preparation Partnerships grant and ensure that charter and rural LEAs are included through clear eligibility criteria and targeted outreach.
- + Publish annual data on educator pathways (including applicant demand, program enrollment, licensure completion, placement in high-need roles, and retention) disaggregated by role, pathway type, geography, and educator demographics.

Districts, BOCES (Education Services agencies), and charter networks should:

- + Partner with educator preparation programs (EPPs) to design apprenticeship-style GYO pathways that identify promising classified staff and students, align coursework with school-based roles, and create clear advancement opportunities into special education licensure.
- + Provide integrated support structures, including mentoring, scheduling flexibility, and tuition assistance, to ensure school-based candidates can complete their preparation and transition into licensed special education roles.

Recommendation #2: Expand and streamline special education licensure pathways by offering competency-based, stackable credentialing options; improving navigation and transparency; and increasing awareness of available entry points into the profession.

Colorado's licensure system has long posed steep barriers for paraprofessionals, school-based staff, and career changers, from high testing costs to inflexible coursework.¹⁰ While recent policy changes have reduced testing burdens and created multiple-measures pathways, the next step is to ensure these options are accessible, navigable, and designed to recruit and retain a strong, diverse workforce. One of the most promising approaches is to expand the use of stackable, modular credentials that break licensure into smaller, competency-aligned units that candidates can earn while employed.

The Department of Higher Education (CDHE) is currently developing two [stackable, non-degree credential pathways in education](#) as part of its implementation of [SB22-192](#), which directs CDHE and partner agencies to expand access to credentials of value in high-demand fields by 2025.¹¹ When paired with job-embedded preparation and advising, stackable credential pathways can offer a more affordable, flexible, and inclusive entry point into the profession, helping paraprofessionals and endorsement-seeking teachers enter high-need roles more quickly without compromising instructional quality.

Equally important is ensuring that potential candidates are aware of these new opportunities and can navigate them with confidence. While the CDE has improved the usability of its [Educator Licensing](#) webpages, initiatives like [Teach Colorado](#) offer a stronger, user-centered model with step-by-step guidance, advising support, and clear, engaging content.¹² Adopting similar design principles across state and district platforms would help prospective educators understand their options, plan their pathway, and complete key milestones, particularly school-based staff exploring special education as a new career path.

In the past two years, Colorado has made important changes to reduce barriers to special education licensure. In 2024, [HB24-1087](#) created a pathway for currently licensed teachers to add a special education endorsement while continuing to teach.¹³ In April 2025, the State Board of Education streamlined testing requirements for special education generalist and early childhood special education endorsements, removing exams in elementary science and social studies and replacing the broader content test with a focused math assessment. These changes reduce testing burdens while preserving essential requirements in reading, math, and special education.¹⁴ With the recent passage of [SB25-154](#), candidates can now access multiple-measure licensure pathways, demonstrating competency through coursework, portfolios, and other performance-based evidence in place of standardized exams.¹⁵

To expand and streamline licensure pathways, we recommend the following actions:

The Colorado State Board of Education should:

- + Establish clear parameters for integrating performance-based measures and stackable credentials into special education licensure.
- + Ensure these pathways are aligned with workforce needs and are portable across LEAs.

The CDE should:

- + Publish clear, user-friendly licensure guidance that reflects recent policy changes and new pathways, using step-by-step visuals, plain-language explanations, and links to advising and support.

- + Collaborate with EPPs and higher education institutions to pilot modular, job-embedded special education licensure pathways (e.g., stackable credentials or competency-based portfolios) aligned with multiple-measure licensure policies and designed to support school-based candidates.

EPPs and LEA partners should:

- + Collaborate to design flexible, modular special education pathways aligned to multiple-measure licensure policies.
- + Structure programs to support school-based candidates with embedded mentoring, credit-bearing advancement opportunities, and targeted advising so they can navigate licensure pathways and access programs aligned to their roles.

Recommendation #3: Improve retention of special educators by embedding team-based staffing structures, targeted professional learning, and leadership development into school and system design.

Colorado cannot solve its special education teacher shortage without addressing the conditions that push educators out of the profession. Unsustainable caseloads, compliance-heavy responsibilities, limited planning time, and professional isolation make it difficult for many special educators to stay, even when they enter the role with deep commitment to inclusion and student success. National data show that special educators leave the profession at nearly twice the rate of general educators, with working conditions consistently cited as a primary factor.¹⁶

Improving retention starts with how schools are designed. Schools that implement team-based teaching and shared planning structures report lower special education teacher turnover and higher rates of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goal attainment.¹⁷ Stronger collaboration between general and special educators also improves inclusive practices and reduces unnecessary special education referrals.¹⁸ Embedding special educators in instructional teams, with clearly defined roles, protected planning time, and consistent peer support, enables them to focus on delivering high-quality instruction and coordinating services for students with disabilities.

Team-based approaches such as [Opportunity Culture™](#) and [Next Education Workforce](#) integrate special educators into multi-teacher teams that share responsibility for planning, instruction, and student support.¹⁹ These models reduce isolation and clarify instructional roles, allowing special educators to concentrate on their core responsibilities. Schools adopting these models report stronger instructional quality, fewer vacancies, and improved student outcomes.²⁰ They also offer built-in mentoring, professional learning, and peer modeling: supports that are especially valuable for early-career educators, including those entering through para-to-teacher or alternative licensure pathways.

Beyond collaboration, retention depends on access to the tools and supports that make the job sustainable: High-quality instructional materials, aligned curricula, and [targeted assessments](#) help special educators plan and differentiate instruction without having to create resources from scratch. Strong induction programs and structured mentoring systems are critical support for teachers entering through alternative pathways who may not have had a traditional preparation experience. Leadership matters as well: Research shows that positive school climates, instructional leadership, and shared responsibility for inclusion are key conditions that influence long-term retention.²¹ Equity-focused leadership development, such as the CDE's [Supporting Inclusive Practices for Students with Disabilities Community of Practice](#)²² and the Colorado League of Charter Schools [SPED Leader Cohort](#),²³ builds leader capacity to design inclusive schools, strengthen instructional practice, and support special educator retention.

Schools and systems can adopt a range of evidence-based strategies, including joint professional learning for general and special educators, high-quality induction and mentoring, leadership development focused on inclusion, stronger data systems to monitor attrition and guide supports, and innovative preparation models through university-district partnerships.²⁴ Together, these supports help reduce role overload, especially for early-career educators, and improve retention across the workforce.²⁵ As charter teachers, we believe these strategies are particularly important in charter schools, where autonomy and innovation can be leveraged to pilot and scale new approaches to special educator support.

To strengthen school systems in ways that support special educator retention, we recommend the following actions:

Districts, BOCES (Education Services agencies), charter networks, and the CDE should:

- + Adopt staffing models and scheduling models that embed special educators in instructional teams with defined roles, protected planning time, and access to aligned, high-quality instructional materials and assessments that support differentiation and reduce workload.
- + Strengthen professional support for early-career and in-role special educators by providing high-quality induction and mentoring programs, and sustaining leadership networks or communities of practice that help school and system leaders implement evidence-based retention strategies.

School leaders should:

- + Engage in professional learning on inclusive leadership practices that supports collaboration between general and special educators and strengthens shared responsibility for student learning.
- + Use building-level staffing and retention data to identify high-turnover special education roles and implement targeted supports such as reduced caseloads, additional planning time, or mentoring for early-career teachers.

Recommendation #4: Strengthen charter school capacity to serve students with disabilities by providing tailored guidance, technical assistance, and leadership development, with attention to the varied needs of diverse school models.

Charter schools can be leaders in inclusive, high-quality special education when equipped with the right tools, infrastructure, and leadership supports. Yet small, independent, and rural charters often operate without the centralized resources that many districts provide, requiring school leaders to manage recruitment, licensure, budgeting, IEP oversight, and service delivery alongside complex legal obligations under IDEA, Section 504, and the Colorado Exceptional Children's Educational Act (ECEA).²⁶ Clear, charter-relevant guidance on legal obligations, service models, and staffing strategies, paired with ongoing training and technical assistance, can help leaders meet these requirements while maintaining the operational flexibility that defines the charter sector.

Although some Colorado charter networks and authorizers have developed strong special education programs, capacity remains uneven across the sector. Recent enrollment data reflect this gap: In 2022–23, students with IEPs made up 8.3 percent of charter enrollment compared to 13.1 percent in non-charter public schools.²⁷ While this is an improvement from a decade ago, the disparity suggests that families of students with disabilities may not have the full benefit of school choice.

In 2022, the Colorado State Board of Education [revised ECEA rules](#) to strengthen protections for students with disabilities in schools of choice, including prohibiting the use of disability-related information in admissions decisions and requiring that any determination about a school's ability to serve a student occur in an IEP meeting with family involvement.²⁸ That same year, [HB22-1294](#) allowed charter schools to prioritize enrollment for students with disabilities and to form or join alternative administrative units to strengthen service delivery.²⁹ To support implementation, sector partners provide targeted tools and peer learning. The Colorado Charter School Institute offers [human resources tools](#) to support special education compliance,³⁰ and the Colorado League of Charter Schools [SPED Leader Cohort](#) helps leaders interpret rule changes and align practices.³¹

National research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CPRE) finds that while many charter schools rely on traditional special education approaches, a subset are leveraging their flexibility to “operate further outside the box, to good effect,” improving both efficiency and outcomes.³² In Colorado, networks like [DSST Public Schools](#) and [Rocky Mountain Prep](#) have implemented co-teaching structures, GYO pathways, and career ladders to support paraprofessionals in becoming licensed teachers.³³ These examples show that, with targeted guidance and investment, charter schools can expand their capacity to meet high expectations for students with disabilities.

To strengthen charter school capacity to serve students with disabilities, we recommend the following actions:

The CDE and charter authorizers should:

- + Provide clear, regularly updated guidance on special education requirements, service models, and staffing strategies tailored to charter contexts, and integrate this content into training, technical assistance, and compliance supports.
- + Deliver ongoing professional learning for charter leaders on inclusive instructional leadership, equitable enrollment, and effective strategies for retaining special educators.

CONCLUSION

Delivering on the Promise for Student with Disabilities

Colorado has made real strides in reimagining how we prepare, license, and support special educators, but it's not yet enough. Students with disabilities still face uneven access to the individualized support they need, especially in schools with fewer resources or less infrastructure. For too many educators, the path into and through the profession remains unclear, financially out of reach, or unsustainable.

Meeting this challenge will take more than a single program or policy. It requires a systemwide commitment to create coherent, accessible pathways into the profession, strengthen the working conditions that keep educators in classrooms, and equip every school to serve all learners well.

We know it can be done. Across the state, educators are already showing what inclusive, innovative special education looks like when the right supports are in place. The charge now is to listen to those closest to the work and act with the urgency their students deserve.

ENDNOTES

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