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# From Compliance to Capacity:

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Strengthening Sustainable  
Special Education Systems

Recommendations from Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows



## Who We Are

We are Colorado special education and general education teachers and Teach Plus Policy Fellows working across charter public schools. We manage Individualized Education Program (IEP) caseloads, lead Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) teams, coordinate services, and partner with families every day to support students with disabilities. We have experienced firsthand the strain of balancing instruction, compliance, and collaboration within staffing models not built to support the realities of the special educator role or maintain strong special education systems within schools.

Our goal is to ensure that Colorado's leadership standards, staffing guidance, and charter oversight systems account for how special education actually operates in schools and what it takes to sustain it. Drawing on our experience in charter schools, a review of current research and policy, and examples of emerging practice from other states, we propose structural changes to strengthen special education systems across Colorado's public schools.

## The System Behind the Shortage

Colorado continues to face persistent educator shortages, particularly in special education. In response, the state has invested in educator preparation and alternative licensure pathways to expand the pipeline. Yet recruitment alone cannot solve the problem. Teaching and Learning Conditions Colorado (TLCC) survey results consistently identify administrative support and workload manageability as leading drivers of educator attrition.<sup>1</sup> Research on special educator attrition similarly points not to students themselves, but to the systems surrounding the role: unclear leadership structures, unmanageable workloads, fragmented collaboration, and insufficient support.<sup>2</sup>

***Retention challenges are often treated as a staffing problem, but they also reveal deeper structural issues in how special education systems are designed and supported.***

## Three Structural Pressures Undermining Sustainable Special Education Systems

- 1. Leadership preparation and support gaps:** In Colorado charter schools, special education services are formally overseen by the administrative unit (AU) Director of Record, but school leaders shape how programs function day to day. Some school leaders may enter the role outside traditional administrator licensure pathways, and even traditional leadership preparation programs often provide limited training in special education systems, law, and inclusive instructional practice.<sup>3,4</sup> When building leaders lack sufficient preparation in special education systems or when coordination across leadership roles is weak, schools may struggle to establish shared direction for special education services, collaboration structures, intervention systems, and instructional responsibilities in the building. This can leave teachers trying to coordinate instructional, compliance, and service systems without clear leadership support.

Research shows that limited instructional partnership with leaders and role ambiguity are major predictors of special educator burnout and intent to leave.<sup>5,6</sup> In our experience, *“when school leadership lacks preparation or perspective around special education, the systems supporting our most vulnerable students, including special education, multilingual learner services, and MTSS, are often held together by the sheer will of the teachers doing the work. Every time one of those educators burns out and leaves, the bond supporting students is strained, broken, and rebuilt.”* —**Cory Montreuil**, special education coordinator and Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellow

- 2. Misaligned role expectations and support:** Special educators are hired as instructional experts. Yet in many schools they are expected to carry responsibilities that extend far beyond instruction, including compliance management, service-coordination, documentation, and cross-team collaboration. Often, staffing models and role expectations do not reflect the full scope of these responsibilities. Special educators are asked to meet legal and instructional demands without sufficient time, staffing support, or clearly defined role structures. When this mismatch persists, workloads becomes unmanageable, making it harder to sustain consistent support for students and retain experienced educators.

Because the role of special educator differs significantly from other teaching roles, generic induction and mentoring are not enough. Strong early-career supports can improve retention and inclusive practice, but induction and mentoring are most effective when they are content-specific and grounded in the realities of special education practice.<sup>7</sup>

- 3. Isolation and limited collaborative systems:** Schools frequently lack a strong MTSS, structured collaboration time, and shared responsibility between general and special educators. Weak core instruction in the general education classroom (Tier 1 systems) can contribute to unnecessary referrals and increased demand for intensive supports, while strong MTSS implementation can help schools provide support earlier and reduce unnecessary referrals.<sup>8</sup>

Research also shows that when schools protect regular collaboration time for teachers, it strengthens instructional alignment, shared problem-solving, and support for educators.<sup>9</sup> As **Mari Peterson**, a general education teacher and Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellow, explained: *“Collaboration between special education and general education teachers is not only best practice for students, but strongly supports both sides of the teacher experience. Schools should prioritize structures that protect dedicated collaboration time so teachers can align teaching strategies and maximize student support.”*

These pressures are not isolated school-level issues. Leadership expectations, state guidance, and charter oversight shape how special education systems are designed and sustained. In Colorado charter schools, responsibility for special education often spans the authorizer, administrative unit, charter network, and school leadership team. When systems do not reinforce strong leadership preparation, manageable workloads, and structured induction, mentoring, and collaboration, schools are left to solve structural challenges on their own, often resulting in fragmented support for both educators and students.

## Recommendations

### 1. Strengthen Leadership Preparation and Support for Special Education Systems.

*The Colorado Department of Education (CDE), working with charter authorizers and educator preparation programs, should establish clear expectations that school leaders responsible for implementing special education services demonstrate foundational competence in program design, special education law, sustainable workload management, and collaborative teaching practices.*

- + Embed research-based special education systems practice into leadership preparation and licensure standards and establish a state-recognized leadership endorsement aligned with these expectations.
- + Expand leadership learning communities focused on sustainable special education design, collaborative problem-solving, and inclusive instructional leadership.
- + Ensure charter authorizer oversight and renewal processes examine whether leaders overseeing special education demonstrate these competencies.

## Emerging Approaches to Leadership Development

Several states and organizations are strengthening leadership preparation and ongoing support for special education through licensure requirements, leadership competencies, and targeted professional learning.

- + [Massachusetts](#) requires a specialized Special Education Administrator license for leaders overseeing special education staffing and budgets. The state also launched a [Special Education Inclusive Leadership Academy](#) to help school leaders build stronger inclusive systems, collaborative practices, and support structures for students with disabilities.
- + The CEEDAR Center developed [leadership learning modules](#) and an [Inclusive Principal Leadership](#) framework to help educator preparation programs strengthen school leaders' understanding of inclusive practice and special education systems.
- + Virginia's [Special Education Leadership Academy \(SELA\)](#) provides targeted professional learning for current and aspiring school leaders focused on inclusive leadership, special education law, program design, and collaborative instructional practice.

## 2. Support Sustainable Special Education Staffing and Workload Design.

**Schools, charter networks, and districts** should design special education structures with clear expectations, manageable workloads, and shared responsibility. These system-level changes reduce burnout, improve service coordination, and enable special educators to focus more fully on student learning and support rather than solely on compliance tasks.

- + Adopt [workload-based](#) and [team-based](#) staffing models that align instructional, case management, and compliance responsibilities.
- + Protect structured co-planning and shared responsibility between general and special educators.
- + Provide differentiated induction and mentoring tailored to the demands of the special education role.

## Emerging Approaches to Sustainable Staffing

- + Virginia's special education regulations include [differentiated caseload expectations based on service intensity](#) and allow for [collaborative service delivery models that distribute responsibility across educators](#).
- + The [New Teacher Center](#) developed [differentiated mentoring approaches for beginning special educators](#) that include specialized mentors, collaborative support structures, and targeted induction aligned to the instructional and compliance demands of the role.

### 3. Align State and Authorizer Processes with Sustainable Special Education Practice.

**The CDE and charter authorizers** should align professional learning, technical assistance, and data-informed guidance to support sustainable special education systems.

- + Provide targeted technical assistance and professional learning on sustainable staffing, caseload management, and collaborative practice.
- + Strengthen state support and resources for MTSS and Tier 1 instruction to prevent unnecessary referrals and caseload inflation.
- + Use retention, workload, and caseload data to inform statewide guidance and charter oversight, including renewal conversations about role clarity, collaboration time, and MTSS implementation.

#### Emerging Approaches to Special Education Oversight

Most charter authorizer oversight processes still focus primarily on procedural compliance and legal requirements. Increasingly, however, authorizers and support organizations are recognizing that staffing stability, collaboration structures, and workload conditions also shape the quality and sustainability of special education services. For example, the [National Association of Charter School Authorizers](#) and the [California Charter Authorizing Professionals](#) have developed resources that support more comprehensive consideration of special education implementation during charter reviews and renewal conversations.

## Conclusion

Colorado has an opportunity to strengthen the systems that make special education sustainable, moving beyond short-term responses to teacher shortages. Leadership preparation, staffing structures, collaboration time, and shared responsibility all shape whether special educators remain in the profession and whether students receive consistent support. Strengthening these systems is ultimately about creating support, belonging, and meaningful access to learning for our students with disabilities.

## Teach Plus 2025-26 Charter Policy Fellows

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- + **Katie Kaepplinger**, Rocky Mountain Prep Fletcher
- + **Cory Montreuil**, DSST Conservatory Green High School
- + **Samantha Palacio**, Rocky Mountain Prep SMART
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## About Teach Plus

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning for students. [teachplus.org/co](https://teachplus.org/co)



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## Endnotes

- 1 Colorado Department of Education (CDE). (2026). *Teaching and Learning Conditions Colorado (TLCC) Survey Results*. <https://ed.cde.state.co.us/tlcc>
- 2 Center for Learner Equity. (2025). *Why Special Educators Leave and How Leaders Can Keep Them: An Action Guide*. <https://www.centerforlearnerequity.org/resource/why-special-educators-leave-and-how-leaders-can-keep-them-a-guide-for-principals-and-system-leaders/>
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- 5 Bettini, E., et al. (2025). *The Composition, Distribution, and Stability of the Special Education Teacher Workforce*. SPARC Center Working Paper No. 01-1025. <https://sparccenter.org/research-findings/composition-distribution-and-stability-special-education-teacher-workforce-seven>
- 6 Bowers, N. S. (2025). *The Impact School Leaders Have on Special Education Teacher Retention*. Clemson University. [https://open.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5065&context=all\\_dissertations](https://open.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5065&context=all_dissertations)
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- 9 Education Resource Strategies. (2018). *Igniting the learning engine: How school systems accelerate teacher effectiveness and student growth through connected professional learning*. <https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/igniting-the-learning-engine/>