

A Planning Guide for

Special Education Leaders

for a Successful School Year



Getting *and Staying* Ahead

It's challenging for school leaders to predict precisely what resources they'll need as student populations and learning needs evolve. Special education directors rely on historical data and input from teachers, staff, and parents to help ensure a solid back-to-school plan for students with disabilities. By asking the right questions at critical points during the current school year, administrators and special education departments can better prepare for the year ahead.

This planning guide aims to help new and seasoned school administrators reflect on critical questions as they work together to ensure the right mix of specialists and resources to meet compliance, staffing, academic, and professional learning needs.

It also provides action items that can help your special education departments make key decisions at critical points throughout the school year.

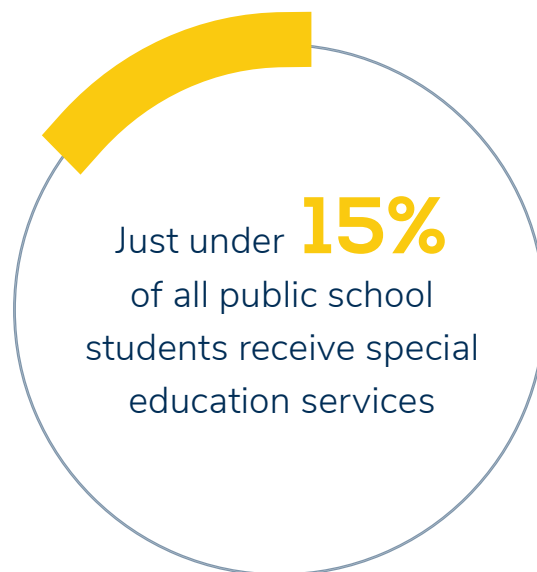
Continue reading to find questions to reflect upon and recommendations you can use to get a pulse on your current program and begin planning for a successful year ahead.



Review Compliance Objectives

The most recent National Center for Education Statistics data shows that **just under fifteen percent of all public school students receive special education services**. Ensuring compliance is necessary to meet IDEA laws and regulations and assures students with disabilities receive the services outlined in their IEPs.

By carefully reviewing your compliance data, you can help answer questions, illuminating the areas your team needs to address. This will help inform how you approach upcoming staffing, resource allocation, instruction, scheduling, and any additional professional learning needs.



Questions to Reflect Upon



Were there areas of noncompliance or improvement you need to address this year?
Do you have what you need to address them?



Have any laws or policies changed in your school, district, or state that might impact staffing or instruction this coming school year?



Did your IEP teams have difficulty making deadlines and meeting students' needs?



Are there ways you can improve student data collection and analysis?



Would your school or district benefit from outside assistance to better meet compliance goals?

Action Items

 **TIMELINE**
Summer/Fall

01



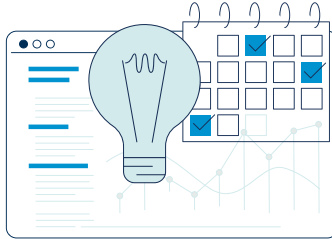
Utilize data from the previous school year to determine appropriate goals for the upcoming year. Identify key areas for improvement and select up to three target priorities to focus on.



02



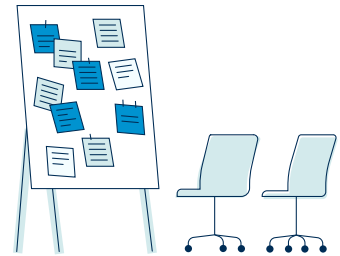
Discuss your goals with your team to ensure alignment and shared accountability. Keep communication open by providing regular updates throughout the school year.



03



Determine whether staff needs additional training, resources, or support to successfully meet identified goals. Plan and provide these supports early in the year.



 TIMELINE
Early Spring

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Recruit and Retain Special Education Staff

Staffing shortages continue to impact districts nationwide. **Forty-five percent of U.S. public schools in 2023-2024 reported feeling understaffed**, according to the NCES. Of those schools, **sixty-three percent reported that special education was understaffed**. In addition, **forty-nine percent said they lacked mental health professionals**.

While it's challenging to pinpoint how many and which students will need special services months in advance, you can look at the most recent year's data to develop a preliminary recruitment and retention plan. Talk to your staff—including case managers, teachers, and front-line paraprofessionals—to identify any challenges they've experienced and what staffing considerations would help them better meet students' needs in the future. This proactive support will also help improve staff satisfaction and retention.

If your district fails to recruit staff proactively, you could find that experienced school professionals have already committed to other opportunities. Many school systems rely on staffing agencies to place hard-to-fill roles, which can pose logistical challenges to administrators with several positions to fill. Engaging with a Managed Service Provider (MSP) ahead of the school year could better position your district to find staff to support your students.



OF THOSE SCHOOLS



Reported that special education was understaffed 100%



Said they lacked mental health professionals 100%

Questions to Reflect Upon



Did you have difficulty hiring or retaining staff last year? In which areas?



Are there any specialists planning to leave at the end of the year?



How do you currently handle gaps in staffing? What are your biggest challenges?



If you used an outside staffing agency to help fill roles in the past, how successful were your agency placements?



Did your administrative staff feel burdened keeping up with staffing agency invoices, contracts, or timesheets?



Have you begun having budget conversations with your Chief Financial Officer about next year's staffing needs?



Are there additional staff or resources needed to ensure all students are receiving appropriate and effective services?



Have recent enrollments or student schedule changes resulted in increased or redistributed caseloads that require adjustments in staffing or service delivery?

01

[illegible]

TIMELINE

Spring/Summer



An illustration of a laptop screen showing a dashboard. The dashboard includes a pie chart with a blue slice, a bar chart with five bars of varying heights, and three circular user avatars. The laptop is tilted slightly to the right.

10

[illegible]

Evaluate Academic Goals and Outcomes

Students with disabilities must receive the services they deserve with minimal impact to their core academic schedules. When students have proper support to meet rigorous IEP goals in least-restrictive settings, it sets them up for future academic success.

Teachers and staff also need enough bandwidth to focus on instruction. Providing outside resources that provide support and mentorship empowers them to concentrate more on instruction and their students.

Questions to Reflect Upon



Did students with disabilities receive classroom instruction among their peers, or were they often pulled out of class during core lessons?



Were you able to effectively group students who needed the same types of interventions?



Did your school's schedule build in time for students with disabilities who required additional academic interventions?



Are there ways in which you could use remote services to better support instruction for students with disabilities?



Does your school or district provide a welcoming learning environment for students with disabilities?

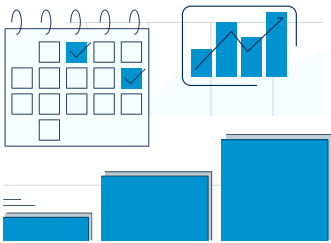
Action Items

 **TIMELINE**
Ongoing

01



Revisit your district's five-year strategic academic plan to ensure students with disabilities meet learner outcomes.



02



Consider outside resources to help teachers and specialists manage the administrative aspects of their work, such as dedicated case managers for IEP support.



03



Speak directly with affected students and guardians about their perceptions of the learning environment.



Prioritize Professional Learning Needs

Staff turnover, inexperience, and burnout can hinder your staff from providing students with the best instruction and clinical services possible. Often, specialists feel isolated and misunderstood, especially if they are the only speech-language pathologist or occupational therapist at their school.

Providing layered supports, like additional mentorship, individual and small group training and departmental professional learning, can strengthen schools and districts. It can also help identify gaps in professional learning and help new team members gain confidence.

Outside advisors can often assist school leaders as they look for ways to make their communities more inclusive by reviewing policies, talking to staff and families, and sharing proven best practices.

Questions to Reflect Upon



Are there additional professional learning opportunities your team could benefit from?



Does your current staff have the experience or professional learning they need to support next year's student population?



Could newly contracted specialists and junior staff benefit from additional mentorship?



What systems are in place to ensure feedback from professional learning is gathered and applied?

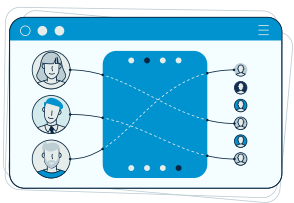
Action Items

 **TIMELINE**
Summer/Fall

01



Ensure all new staff are onboarded and equipped with the resources and support they need to begin the year.



02



Review the Professional Learning Community meeting schedule. Confirm each team understands how meetings will be structured, and set aside time to visit or observe sessions, either personally or with the help of a colleague.



03



Finalize all professional learning presentation days by confirming topics, presenters, and materials in advance. Establish a plan for gathering feedback to inform future sessions.



Action Items



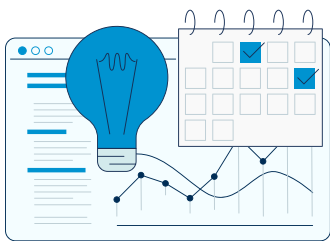
TIMELINE

Late Spring/Summer

01



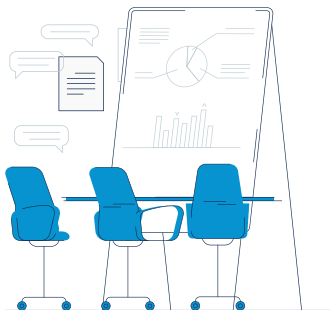
Revisit your school or district's primary schedule to ensure ample time for collaborative planning and Professional Learning Community (PLC) time.



02



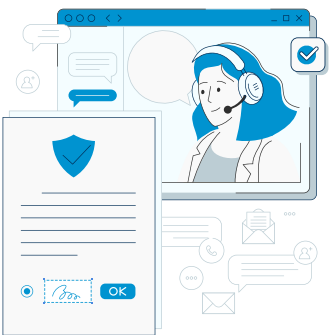
Evaluate this year's professional learning initiatives and use feedback and data as a springboard to plan next year's PD.



03



New contractors often require onboarding and support. Consider working with an outside vendor to provide mentorship and professional guidance to contracted specialists.



From Planning to a Stronger Staffing Strategy

Throughout the school year, special education leaders are balancing changing student needs, staffing gaps, compliance requirements, budgets, and long-term program goals. Effective planning means not only identifying what your district needs, but also having the workforce strategy and systems in place to respond.

For districts managing multiple staffing partners, that complexity can make it harder to maintain visibility, consistency, and control. A Managed Service Provider (MSP) offers a more strategic approach by bringing staffing operations together under one coordinated program.

As your MSP partner, BlazerWorks helps streamline recruitment, onboarding, vendor management, compliance, reporting, and other workforce processes—giving district teams greater visibility while reducing the administrative burden of managing staffing needs across multiple partners.

With a more centralized approach to staffing, your team can spend less time managing processes and more time focused on the priorities identified throughout this guide: supporting staff, meeting compliance goals, and ensuring students receive the services they need.



Turn Your Planning into Action

A successful school year starts with the right people, resources, and systems in place.

BlazerWorks helps school districts put their plans into action through a strategic Managed Service Provider (MSP) model that simplifies special education staffing, strengthens workforce oversight, and gives district teams greater visibility and support.

Ready to build a stronger staffing strategy for the year ahead?

Visit blazerworks.com or contact us at info@blazerworks.com

