The State of the Special Education Profession Survey Report

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The Council for Exceptional Children is a professional association of educators dedicated to advancing the success of children with exceptionalities. We accomplish our mission through advocacy, standards, and professional development.

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Introduction

The *State of the Special Education Profession* survey was commissioned by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Pioneers Division and supported by CEC. It provides a current snapshot of the state of the special education profession and serves as a foundation for CEC leadership and program development.

The goal of the survey is to support initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities, their families, and the professionals who serve them. This report presents the results of this survey, to which nearly 1,500 special education teachers responded in the Fall of 2018.

The last CEC-sponsored survey on the state of the profession was launched in 1998, culminating in the publication of the CEC *Bright Futures* Study (Kozleski, Mainzer & Deshler, 2000). This current report has implications for special education practice and policy as well as teacher and administrator preparation for both general and special educators.

The educational landscape has changed significantly since *Bright Futures* was published 20 years ago. Increasing diversity within student populations, fuller implementation of inclusive practices, expanded use of evidence-based practices, greater emphasis on collaborative teaching approaches, a growing emphasis on access to the general education curriculum, and accountability for the learning of students with exceptionalities are among these changes.

This new *State of the Special Education Profession* survey explored special education teachers' perceptions of the impact of these changes on the state of their profession.

The results of this survey provide a current snapshot of the state of the profession and serve as a data-driven foundation for CEC leadership activities in public policy, professional development, and development of standards.

Four thematic areas emerged in the survey results:

- Use of the Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Survey respondents' feelings of competence.
- Importance of family engagement.
- Need for systems-support for delivering special education.

A fifth area explored what respondents report they need to be successful with their students. Within these areas, respondents identified strengths in their profession as well as areas of concern.

For example, most respondents use the IEP frequently to guide instruction and to modify curriculum. Most respondents rate themselves as very competent in many recommended instructional and assessment practices. Most also indicated that family engagement is critical and adequate time and resources to partner with families is essential.

Respondents also value collaboration with general education and related service personnel and expressed concerns about levels of systems-support for deep and meaningful collaboration. Ultimately, respondents ranked the most important factors for their success in teaching students with exceptionalities.

The top three factors included:

- Adequate resources to meet IEP requirements.
- Smaller class size/caseloads.
- Administrators who support the IEP process.

Methodology

Survey Development

The CEC Pioneers Division, an organization comprised of experienced CEC members, submitted a proposal to the CEC Board of Directors in November 2016 to establish a State of the Special Education Profession Workgroup, which was charged to revisit the 1998 *Bright Futures* report. (All members of the CEC Pioneers Division have been CEC members for at least 15 years, served as an officer of a CEC division or state/provincial unit, or served as president of CEC.)

The authors – three CEC past presidents who also served as presidents of the CEC Pioneers Division – collaborated with a design team comprised of several CEC members to identify potential issues affecting the delivery of programs and services to children and youth with exceptionalities. (The authors, members of the Special Education Profession Design Team, and members of the Special Education Profession Workgroup are recognized in the Appendix to this report.)

A survey protocol was created based on the feedback from the design team to guide subsequent discussions with invited focus groups at four national CEC meetings, including annual conventions and leadership institutes. In addition, the authors secured feedback and input through two CEC Pioneer Division Annual Convention showcase sessions and through two meetings of the CEC Representative Assembly and unit and division leaders.

These processes helped to identify many issues relevant to practicing special educators. They included the use of the IEP as an instructional tool, competence in using recommended classroom practices, and engagement with families. The supports provided by schools and districts for collaboration, enhancement of instructional practice, and implementation of educator evaluation also were identified as salient. Finally, those providing input for the survey identified factors they considered most important in ensuring their success as educators of students with exceptionalities.

> **Those providing input for the survey identified factors they considered most important in ensuring their success as educators of students with exceptionalities.**

The authors drafted the survey based on these themes and invited CEC members and the design team to pilot and critique the survey during the Spring of 2018 in an iterative process to ensure the survey reflected current practices, concerns, and aspirations of special education teachers.

The final survey contained 36 questions related to the profession and 13 demographic items, with an estimated completion time between 10 to 15 minutes. The majority of questions were multiple choice and many used a 5-point Likert rating scale. The survey also provided five open-ended items so that respondents could add information, such as "identify areas in which you are not currently evaluated but believe you should be."

Survey Dissemination

The University of Illinois Institutional Research Board reviewed and approved the survey. The survey was disseminated using an online web-based application, Survey Gizmo. Unique weblinks were created for tracking purposes to ensure only one survey was completed per respondent.

CEC provided the initial list of participant email addresses, which included 9,103 individuals who self-identified as special education teachers and were current CEC members or recent members whose memberships lapsed during the past three years.

CEC promoted the survey through association emails, e-newsletters, and community forums, inviting teachers to submit their contact information to be included in the survey. An additional 1,570 individuals asked to participate in the survey, bringing the total to 10,673 potential participants. After eliminating undeliverable and duplicate emails, 10,251 individuals were eligible for inclusion.

To encourage survey completion, CEC invited respondents to enter a lottery drawing to win a registration at the CEC 2019 Convention and Expo or five CEC-published books. After the second week the survey was in the field, CEC added an additional incentive: access to a free CEC professional development webinar, which was made available to any participant upon request.

Survey Analysis

CEC contracted with the University of Illinois Survey Lab to assist with data analysis. Initial analysis consisted of descriptive statistics only. Follow-up analyses were also conducted using inferential statistics to explore possible relationships between certain findings. Grounded theory (Merriam, 2009) was used to analyze the open-ended responses to help identify themes.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

Of the 10,251 surveys disseminated, CEC received 1,467 completed surveys, yielding a response rate of 14.3%. Respondents' identifiers were removed for analysis to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The majority of respondents were female (89%) and self-reported as Caucasian. See ***Table 1*** for distribution of participant ethnicity/race.

Nearly all respondents (96%) reported they had certification and/or licensure in special education and well over half (69%) reported completing a master's degree. Most respondents (91%) reported working in schools that were publicly funded. Nearly all respondents (99%) identified as residents of the United States. Respondents included representatives from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and one territory. The remaining 20 respondents identified as Canadian or international. As indicated in ***Figure 1***, most respondents were experienced special education teachers and had been teaching for 10 years or more with only 7% of them teaching one to three years. ***Figure 1*** presents the percentage of respondents by number of years spent teaching special education.

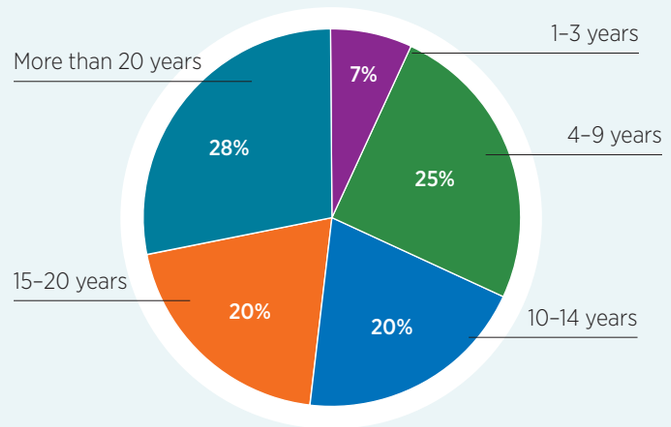
Figure 2 provides information on the types of special education settings in which the respondents provided instruction for students with exceptionalities. As shown in Figure 2, 28% reported spending more than 50% of their time in general education classes, 26% identified as working in resource rooms, and 32% identified as teaching in self-contained classrooms. The remaining 14% identified as either working in more restrictive settings (hospital or home) or as being assigned to other duties outside of direct teaching.

We asked respondents to identify all age groups of students whom they taught. As shown in ***Figure 3***, many respondents (27%) selected multiple age groups. Among those that selected only one age group, primary/elementary school was the most common at 24%.

Table 1 **Race/Ethnicity of Respondents**

Race/ethnicity	*Number*	*Percent*
Caucasian/ European American	1057	72.1%
African American	49	3.3%
Hispanic/Latino	43	2.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	21	1.4%
American Indian	7	0.5%
Multiple/Other	67	4.6%
Prefer not to respond	71	4.8%
None Selected	152	10.4%
Total	1467	100%

Figure 1. **Number of Years Employed as Special Educators**



Survey Findings

Figure 2: **Setting Where Respondents Reported Spending 50% or More Time**

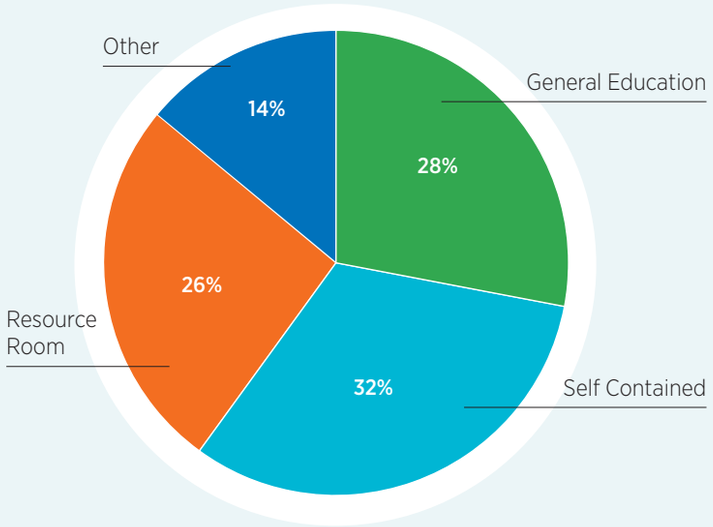
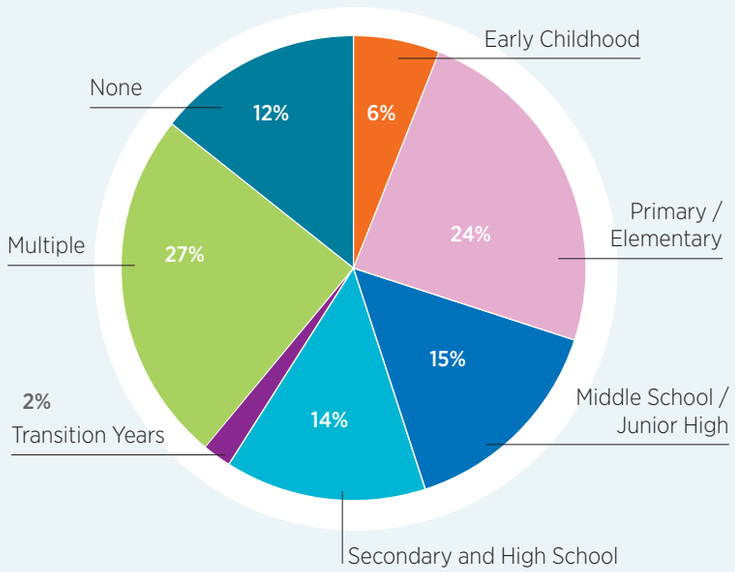


Figure 3: **Age Groups Taught by Respondents**



The results of the remaining survey responses are organized into five sections.

- **Section I** describes respondents' perceptions of how they, other special educators, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and general education colleagues' use the IEP to guide instruction for students with exceptionalities.
- **Section II** examines respondents' sense of competency in using recommended practices in the areas of assessment, instruction, classroom management, and discipline.
- **Section III** addresses respondents' perceptions of factors that influence their engagement with families and the belonging for students with exceptionalities.
- **Section IV** presents respondents' views on system supports for providing specialized instruction, including supports for collaboration and enhancing teaching practices, as well as their views on annual educator evaluations.
- **Section V** describes respondents' perceptions of the most important factors leading to their success in working with students with exceptionalities.

SECTION I

Role of the IEP in Specially Designed Instruction

Since the IEP is what defines individualized and specialized instruction, we asked respondents to consider how often they refer to it to guide instruction for students with exceptionalities. In addition, we asked respondents how well-prepared and supported they were in using the IEP.

Use of the IEP to Guide Instruction and Modify Curriculum

As evident in ***Figure 4***, nearly all respondents reported that they consulted the IEP. In fact, more than half referred to the IEP on a frequent basis (daily to weekly) and only 1% reported never looking at the IEP. Likewise, the majority (over 70%) reported modifying their curriculum to support individualization for students either most of the time or always.

To determine if the continuum of settings in which respondents taught might influence their use of the IEP, we conducted a bivariate analysis (ANOVA and Pearson chi-square) on classrooms in which respondents spent more than 50% of their instructional time. ANOVA tests revealed a significant difference in the frequency respondents in self-contained classrooms reported consulting the IEP document (p=.000); using the IEP more frequently than teachers in general education settings. Respondents in self-contained classrooms also reported that that they modified the curriculum more frequently than their colleagues in resource rooms and general education settings (p=.000).

Perceptions of Preparation to Teach Students with Exceptionalities

We asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 representing not prepared and 5 extremely well-prepared) their own and their colleagues' preparation to teach students with exceptionalities. As evident in ***Figure 5***, two-thirds of the respondents

Figure 4 **Frequency in Which Respondents Refer to IEP and Modify Curriculum**

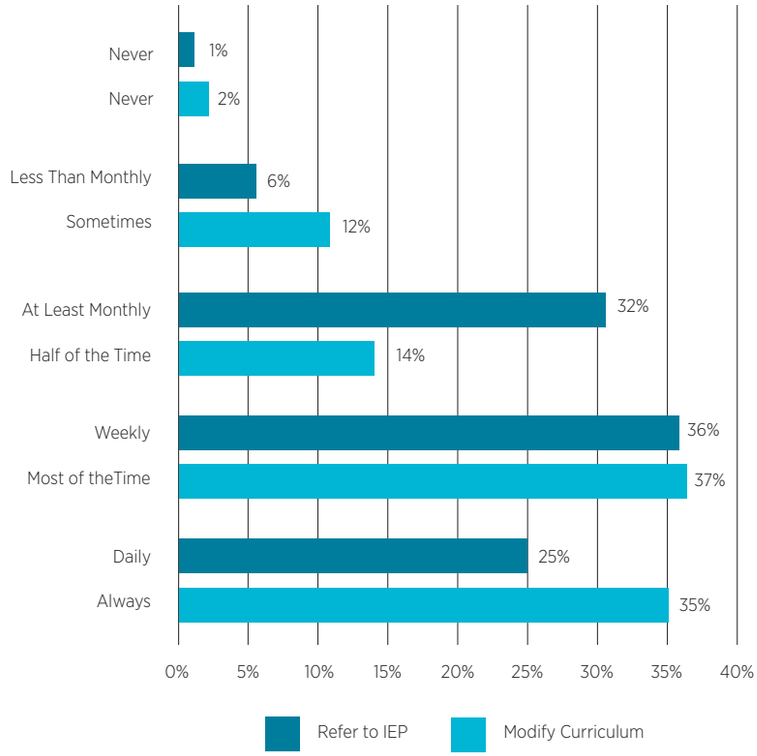
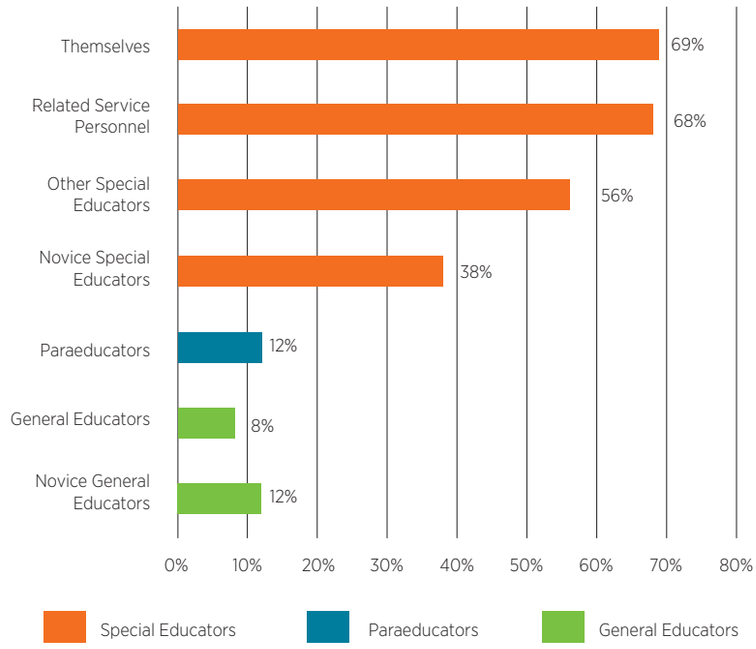


Figure 5 **Percentage of Respondents Rating Themselves and Colleagues as Well Prepared to Work with Students with Exceptionalities to Meet IEP Goals**



(69%) reported that they and related service providers (68%) were very or extremely well-prepared to help students meet IEP goals. More than half (55%) also rated their experienced special education colleagues as very or extremely well prepared, whereas far fewer (38%) rated novice special educators as extremely or well-prepared to help students meet their IEP goals. Of concern is the fact that very few respondents rated highly the preparation of general education colleagues or paraprofessionals, who often are charged with supporting special education services.

Figure 6 shows how respondents rated the time available to plan under three contexts with school colleagues: no time, insufficient time, and sufficient time. A majority (79%) noted that they had no time or insufficient time to plan lessons and work with teaching partners, while only a few (21%) rated the time as sufficient.

Nearly all respondents reported that they either had no time (41%) or insufficient time (48%) to work with IEP team members. In contrast, when asked about school or district support for engaging families in developing and implementing the IEP, teachers varied more in their report of support. Only 40% reported little to no district support while 33% reported moderate support and 27% reported a lot to a great deal of support. This will be discussed again in Section IV looking at systems-support.

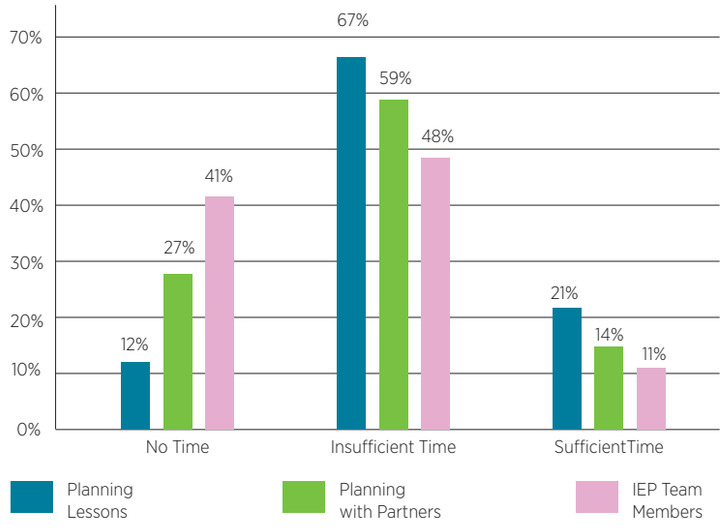
> **The findings in Section I affirm that the IEP is a living document. The majority of respondents said they used the IEP frequently to plan instruction for students with exceptionalities and that they felt well prepared to provide specialized instruction identified in the IEP.**

Section I Summary

The findings in Section I affirm that the IEP is a living document. The majority of respondents said they used the IEP frequently to plan instruction for students with exceptionalities and that they felt well prepared to provide specialized instruction identified in the IEP. They also rated most of their related services colleagues as well-prepared and over half rated their special education colleagues as well-prepared, with the exception of those in the first three years of teaching. They did not rate most paraprofessionals or general education colleagues as well-prepared.

Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents in self-contained classrooms reported using the IEP and modifying curriculum more than their colleagues in other settings. This may reflect both the intensive services required by students with more severe exceptionalities and the typically smaller caseload for which they planned, compared to special educators who provided services in the general education classes or resource settings. Most respondents, nonetheless, believed they did not have sufficient time to plan lessons based on the IEP, to plan with teaching partners, and even more to plan with IEP team members. These time findings did not vary by instructional setting.

Figure 6 **Percentage of Respondents Indicating Time Availability for Planning**



SECTION II

Perceptions of Self-Competence in the Use of Recommended Practices

Figure 7 **Percentage of Respondents Reporting High Levels of Competence with Assessments**

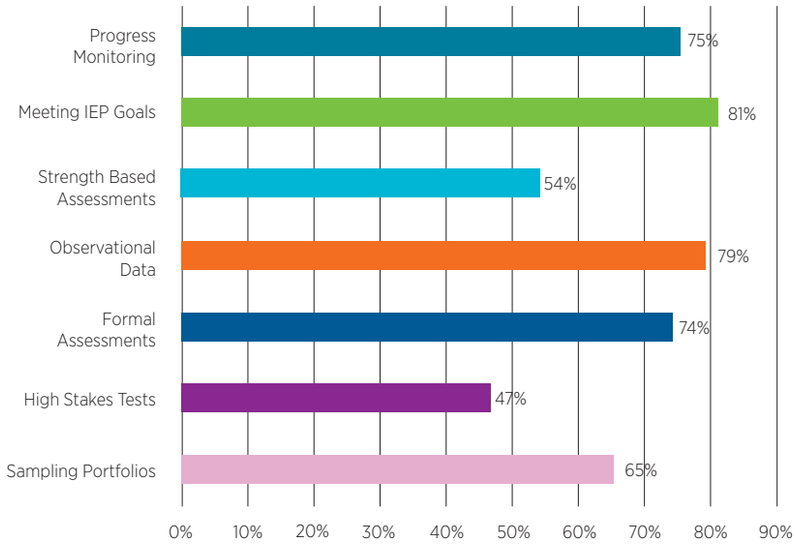
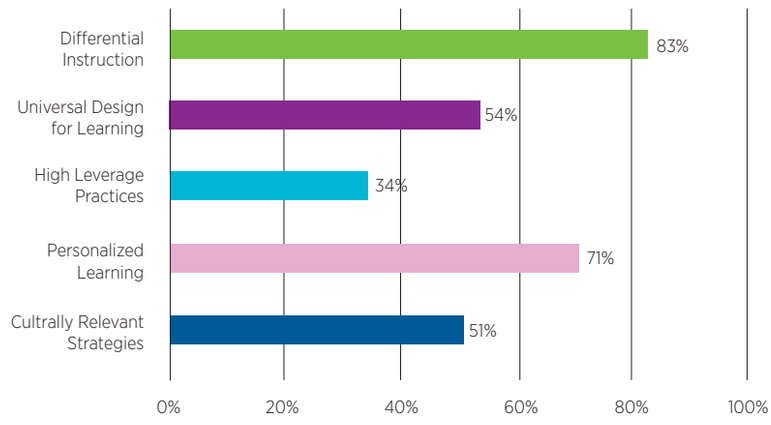


Figure 8 **Percentage of Respondents Reporting High Levels of Competence in Use of Instructional Practices**



Section II of the survey explored respondents' "perceptions of self-competence" with their roles related to classroom practices. These practices, and the participant's sense of competence with them, directly impact their work with students with exceptionalities as well as indicate areas in which respondents may need additional supports or professional development.

Assessment Practices to Inform Instruction

We asked respondents to rate their feeling of "competence" on each of seven widely used assessment practices. Respondents also had the option to add other types of assessment not listed, if they chose to do so. Respondents used a rating scale of 1 (not competent) to 5 (extremely competent). We also gave respondents the option to reply, "I do not use." For purposes of presentation, we combined ratings of 4 (very competent) and 5 (extremely competent) for ***Figures 7–10***.

Most survey respondents reported high levels of competence using assessments to inform instruction; well over half rated themselves as "very" or "extremely" competent. As can be seen in Figure 7, more than 70% of respondents rated themselves as very competent in assessing IEP goals (81%), using observational data (79%), monitoring progress (75%), and providing formal assessments (74%). Respondents' rating of competence with the use of work sampling portfolios as assessment tools (65%) was nearly as high. In contrast, fewer respondents rated themselves as being highly competent in the use of high-stakes testing (47%) and strength-based assessments (54%).

Instructional Practices

We asked respondents to rate their competence using five instructional practices that have been shown to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. Most respondents gave differentiated instruction their highest rating, with 83% reporting they felt very to extremely competent. Personalized learning was also an area where most respondents indicated high levels of competence (71%). In contrast, about half of the respondents reported high levels of competence with their use of universal design for learning (54%) and use of culturally relevant strategies (51%). Even fewer respondents (34%) reported high levels of competence with High-Leverage Practices (HLPs).

Classroom Organization and Management

As evident in ***Figure 9***, a majority of respondents rated their competence on approaches to five classroom organizational practices as very to extremely high. These practices included: coordinating with paraeducators (75%), using flexible groupings (72%), working with problem-solving teams (71%), and using learning centers (64%). Slightly more than half the respondents rated their level of competence as high with co-teaching models (54%).

Disciplinary Strategies

The next area of focus was disciplinary strategies that respondents use to support learning and reduce challenging or disruptive behaviors. ***Figure 10*** presents the percentage of respondents who rated themselves as very to extremely competent. Two-thirds or more of the respondents rated themselves as highly competent in providing students with safe breaks from instruction, use of time-out, and implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and behavioral support strategies. Of interest is that only half of respondents noted that they were very or extremely competent in culturally responsive approaches (53%) or functional behavior assessment (56%).

Respondents also were asked to identify if their school used more restrictive disciplinary practices such as expulsion, suspension, seclusion or restraint. Over two-thirds reported use of in school suspension (71%) and out of school suspension (69%) with slightly more than one-fourth reporting expulsion (28%). Again, more than one-fourth also reported the use of seclusion (28%) or restraint (31%).

Of the 1467 respondents 356 (24%) provided additional comments under "other discipline" in the survey. Most (n=223) mentioned teacher-implemented strategies intended to reduce negative behaviors, such as loss of privileges, removal from class, and time-outs. Detention (before or after school, lunch, or on Saturdays) was the most

Figure 9 **Percentage of Respondents Reporting High Levels of Competence with Classroom Organizational Practices**

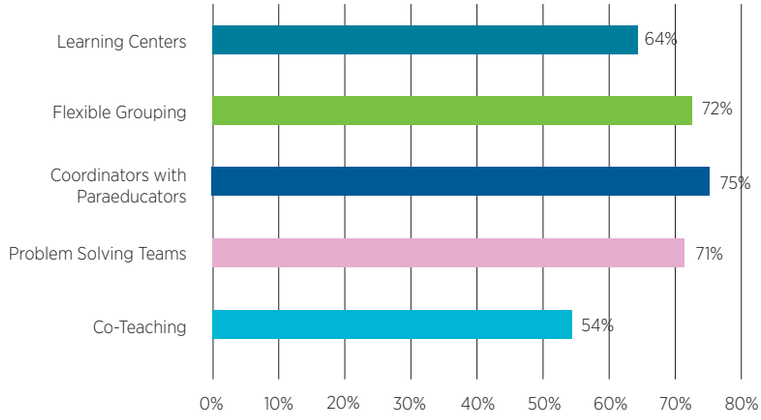
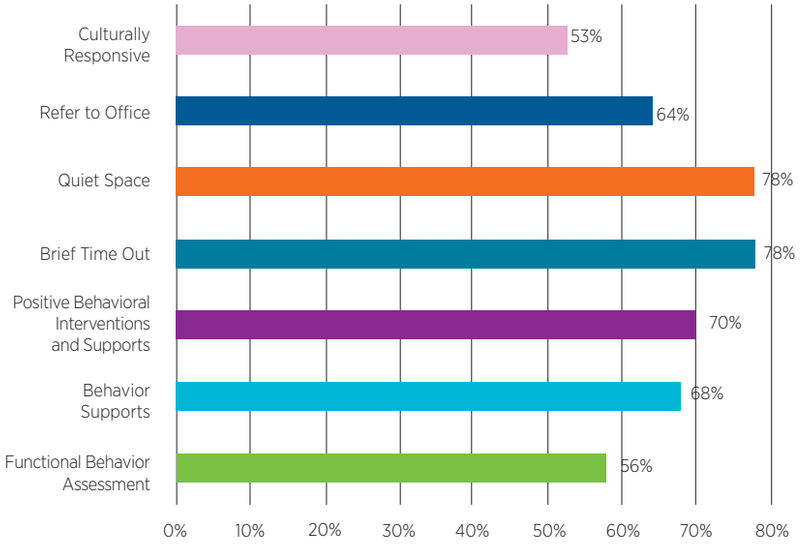


Figure 10 **Percentage of Respondents Reporting High Levels of Competence with Disciplinary Strategies**



frequently mentioned in this category (n=109). Fewer (n=29) focused on the addition of supports to the students, such as counseling (n=12), modified schedules (n=13), or paraprofessional help (n=5). Fifty-three respondents identified an alternative strategy, the use of restorative practices or restorative justice. Only 16 identified contact with the student's home to address concerns

> **Because instructional strategies often are based on building on strengths of students in addition to addressing challenges/deficits, ensuring that special educators feel very competent in supporting student strengths is another area for further attention and professional development.**

Section II Summary

Most respondents rated themselves as very to extremely competent in the use of most practices used in specialized instruction. Respondents' rating of competence with assessments, instruction, and classroom management shows solid self-efficacy for teaching students with exceptionalities. Respondents also reported high levels of competence in the use of discipline strategies, perhaps as a result of increased use of evidence-based practices and positive behavioral supports.

At the same time, many respondents also identified specific practices in which they may need additional support or training. Only half of them rated their skills in using culturally relevant strategies for assessment (51%) and culturally responsive strategies for discipline (53%) as very high.

In light of the diversity of the student population and lack of diversity among the respondents in this study, this finding requires attention and should be highlighted in ongoing professional development and in recruitment of a more diverse teaching force. A second concern is that only half of respondents (54%) rated themselves as highly competent with strengths-based assessments.

Because instructional strategies often are based on building on strengths of students in addition to addressing challenges/deficits, ensuring that special educators feel very competent in supporting student strengths is another area for further attention and professional development. Also, this area has clear implications for meeting the needs of students, identified as twice exceptional: those with gifts and disabilities.

The topic on which only one-third of respondents rated themselves as very competent was in instruction under high-leverage practices (HLPs), a new term introduced by CEC and researchers from the National Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform (CEEDAR) Project to include a broad category of teaching practices that are considered most effective in supporting learning and engagement (McLesky et al, 2017). We suspect the term is not well-recognized yet by many special educators in the field and may not represent a concern beyond emphasizing which practices are included.

SECTION III

Respondents' Engagement with Families and Perceptions of Students' Sense of Belonging in School

Families are partners in the team that develops and implements the IEP for students with exceptionalities. The extent to which respondents perceive they have opportunities to engage with families of their students is essential to forming and maintaining this partnership. The respondents' perceptions of their confidence in working with families who differ from them is also important in identifying opportunities and supports that they may need to develop the relationship. Finally, the extent to which respondents perceive that their students have a sense of belonging in school is an indication of the overall inclusiveness of the school climate regarding students with exceptionalities.

Support for Developing Partnerships with Families Through the IEP Process

When asked on a scale of 1 (not available) to 5 (extremely supportive) how much their district valued meaningful partnerships with families, fewer than half of respondents (42%) chose ratings of very to extremely supportive (4–5). When asked more specifically about how much their district supported including families in the IEP development only 27% indicated high levels of support (4–5) while 33% indicated moderate support (3) and 40% rated the support as minimal or not available (1–2).

Of the 1467 respondents, 900 respondents provided additional comments on support they had received or needed. Most comments addressed the need for more time to contact families and schedule IEP meetings and more supports for families to attend the IEP and parent-teacher conferences (e.g., flexible scheduling outside of school hours, assistance with transportation or child care). Interestingly, many respondents also noted that they wanted to be included in parent-teacher conferences with their general education colleagues when the conference included a student with an IEP. Ready access to interpreters for the IEP meetings and translators for the IEP and related documents was also a need raised by teachers for families who did not speak English.

In terms of school engagement in general, some respondents listed unmet needs (e.g., resources for family engagement, staff to support or connect families who had multiple needs including housing, food, medical care, and job training). Likewise, some commented on the need for greater administrative awareness and support for addressing family needs that if left unmet, interfered with a child's access to education. However, many also spoke about ways that they currently receive support to engage families with their school; respondents often mentioned the many ways in which they communicated with families (e.g., phone calls, texts, emails, newsletters, internet access to progress reports and homework) and the many ways in which their school offered opportunities for families to participate (e.g., ranging from support and training groups to social activities, from volunteering at school to providing referrals for families to other community agencies). They also described ways in which their school integrated activities and events to support awareness and knowledge of diverse cultures represented by families in the schools (e.g., Diversity Council, cultural liaisons, special events, English classes).

Figure 11 **Percentage of Respondents Rating High Levels of Competency in Engaging Families with Diverse Backgrounds**

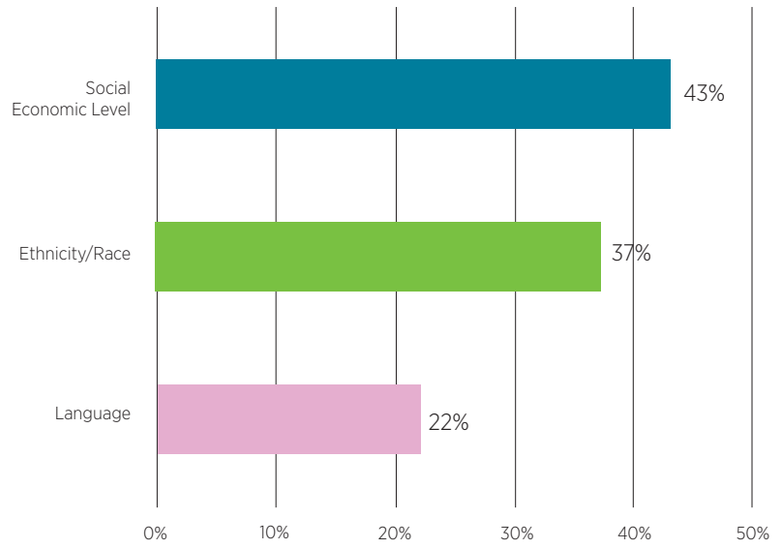
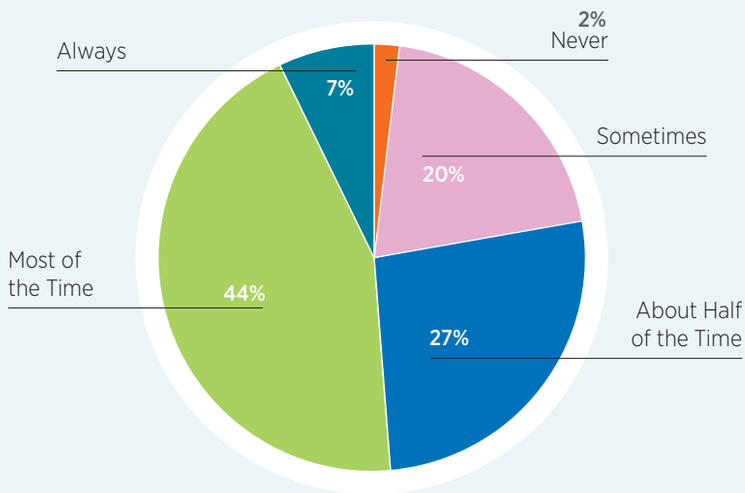


Figure 12. **Respondent Ratings of Students' Sense of Belonging**



Teacher Confidence to Engage with Diverse Families

Respondents again rated themselves on a scale of 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (extremely confident) in engaging families who differed from them by socio-economic status (SES), culture/ethnicity, and language. Across all questions in the survey, this question identified the greatest challenge in respondents' sense of confidence. In fact, only 22% of respondents rated themselves as very to extremely confident in meeting the needs of families who spoke another language, and just slightly more than one-third felt very or extremely confident to meet the needs of families who differed from them by race or ethnicity. Less than half felt confident about engaging families whose income level differed greatly from their own. ***Figure 11*** presents the findings.

Teacher Perceptions of Students' Sense of Belonging

Using a 5-point scale (1 being never, 5 being always), 52% of the respondents estimated that students felt a sense of community or belonging most of the time to always (4–5) in their school and only 2% indicated never (1). See ***Figure 12*** for the percentage of respondents' ratings across the scale. Using an ANOVA, we examined the relationship between the setting in which teachers provided instruction to students with disabilities and their perceptions of students' sense of belonging. Results indicated significant differences in respondents' ratings based on the settings where they taught ($p=.001$). Those teaching in general education ($p=.011$) and resource rooms ($p=.015$) rated students' sense of belonging significantly higher than teachers in self-contained classes.

Section III Summary

Compared to other areas of expertise addressed in the survey, respondents were less likely to rate themselves as highly confident around family engagement. These findings become even more concerning when they rated their sense of confidence in meeting the needs of families who differed from them demographically. Only one in five respondents indicated high levels of confidence in meeting the needs of families who spoke a different language and about one third rated themselves as highly confident in meeting the needs of families who differed from them in terms of ethnicity or culture.

Furthermore, few respondents rated support from their district as very high for engaging families and even fewer for involving families in the IEP process. However, in their written comments, respondents acknowledged efforts by their districts or schools to provide some family supports, even when they noted the need for more support.

The findings on students' sense of belonging confirm prior research showing that students with exceptionalities who receive services, in settings with their same-aged peers without exceptionalities, some or most of the time are seen as belonging to the school community. Students who are served the majority of the time in self-contained classrooms are less likely to be perceived as belonging.

In combination, the findings indicate that the role of families and how special educators serve and engage families may be a system-level issue rather than solely an individual teacher issue (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Praisner, 2003; Wood, 1998).

Special education teachers reported that students with exceptionalities who receive services, in settings with their same-aged peers without exceptionalities, some or most of the time are seen as belonging to the school community. Students who are served the majority of the time in self-contained classrooms are less likely to be perceived as belonging. The findings on teacher perceptions of students' sense of belonging suggests that special education teachers actually hold a more positive view regarding the acceptance of students with exceptionalities then prior research would predict (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, & Widaman, 2007). Additional research is needed to better understand the factors that impact students' acceptance and how school cultures may be changing in light of efforts that support deeper collaborations between general and special educators.

SECTION IV

System Level Supports for Special Education Teachers

In this section we asked respondents to rate the use of collaboration strategies in their schools and the level of support they perceived their district or local school provided them to teach students with exceptionalities. In addition, we asked respondents to evaluate the preparation of their administrators and general education colleagues to support their instruction of students with exceptionalities. Finally, we asked them to reflect on how they are evaluated and the extent that they agreed that the evaluation topics are important.

District Support for Collaborative Teaching Approaches

A variety of collaborative approaches are considered recommended practices to better meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. We asked teachers about the extent to which their local school used four collaboration models: co-teaching, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS/RTI), PBIS, and inclusion. Respondents rated use of the collaborative approaches on a 5-point scale, from "not at all" to "a great deal." ***Figure 13*** combines ratings of 4 and 5, showing that 62% of respondents said their schools use an inclusion model either a lot or a great deal. Nearly half reported similarly high ratings in their use of PBIS (48%) and MTSS/RTI (48%). Surprisingly, fewer (29%) identified co-teaching as a strategy used often.

District Support for Enhancing Teaching Practices

We next asked respondents to report how often their district used specific supports to assist them in helping students to meet their IEP goals. We presented seven supports and asked them to rate their availability on a 5-point scale, from "never to "always." Combined ratings of 4 (most of the time) and 5 (always) are presented in ***Figure 14***.

Figure 13 **Percentage of Respondents Reporting Frequent Use of Collaborative Approaches in Their District**

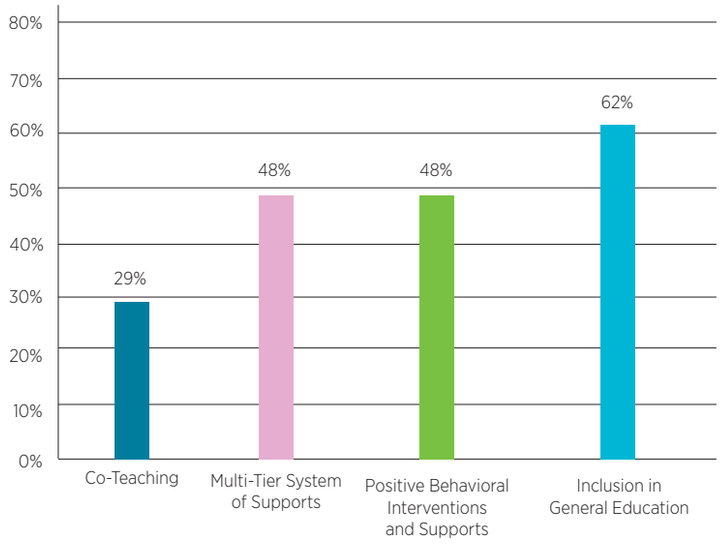
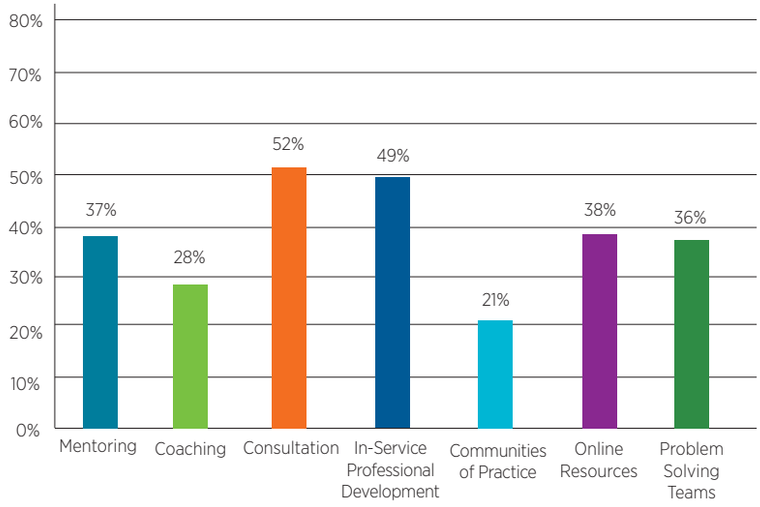


Figure 14 **Percentage of Respondents Reporting Support to Enhance Teaching as Available Most of the Time to Always in Their District**



Respondents most often rated consultation with colleagues and in-service professional development as frequently available. Although fewer identified other forms of support, such as coaching or communities of practice, as often to always available, at least 20% or more used them frequently.

Teacher Perceptions of Educational Leader Preparation and Support for Students

Significantly more respondents rated their special education supervisors and administrators as more prepared to support them in providing instruction to help students with exceptionalities to meet IEP goals than their general education building principals or district administrators. As evident in ***Figure 15***, half of the respondents rated their special education supervisors and administrators as very to extremely prepared to support them in their work (supporting students to meet IEP goals and outcomes) while only one-fourth rated their principal as very prepared to support them. Even fewer (18%) rated their district administrators as very to extremely prepared to support special education instruction. As noted earlier in ***Figure 5***, when asked to rate general educator and paraprofessional preparation to help students with exceptionalities meet IEP goals, even fewer respondents provided strong ratings.

Only 8% of respondents rated their experienced general education colleagues as very prepared and 12% rated their paraprofessionals as very prepared. These perceptions raise significant concerns, given the critical role of collaboration, between special educators and their general education colleagues to support students with exceptionalities in accessing the general education curriculum.

Figure 15 **Percentage of Respondents Rating Supervisors and Administrators as Well Prepared to Support IEP Goals**

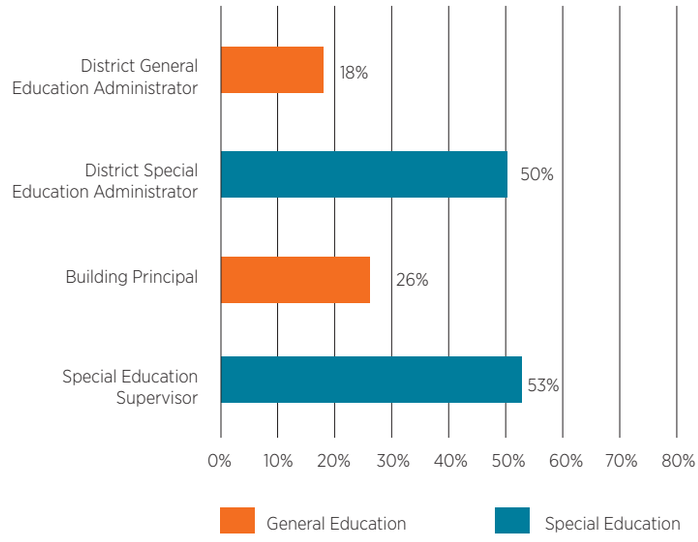
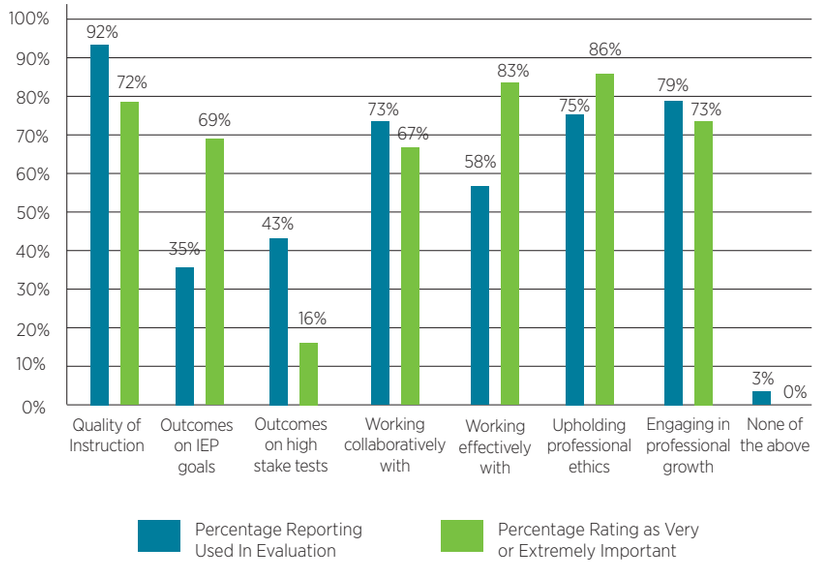
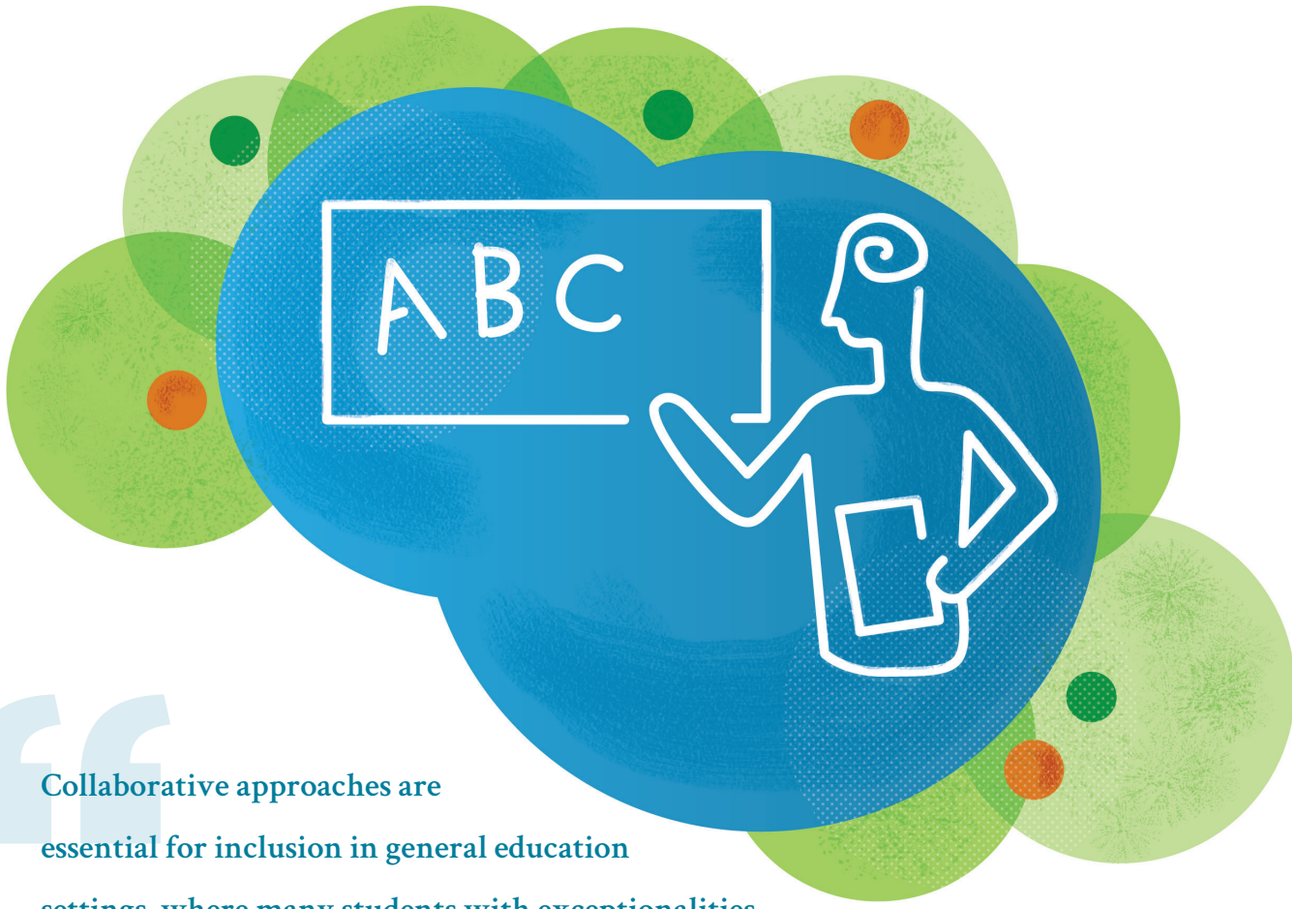


Figure 16 **Percentage of Respondents Identifying Topics used in Their Evaluation and the Percentage Rating of the Importance of the Topic as Very to Extremely Important**



District Evaluation of Teachers and Importance of Evaluation Areas

Respondents were asked to identify areas on which they were evaluated from a list of seven items. Then respondents were asked to rate the importance of only the areas on which they were evaluated (see Figure 16). The most frequent areas of evaluation selected by respondents included: quality of instruction, ability to collaborate, ethical practices, and engagement in professional development. Most agreed that these areas were important for evaluation. In contrast, only one-third of respondents (35%) indicated that they were evaluated on students' IEP goal outcomes, although a majority (69%) of respondents rated this area as very to extremely important. The other area on which less than half



Collaborative approaches are essential for inclusion in general education settings, where many students with exceptionalities spend part to most of their school day.

the respondents were evaluated was high stakes testing, and few respondents (16%) regarded it as very important.

Section IV Summary

Respondents paint a mixed picture of district support for using recommended practices for collaboration and enhancing their instructional skills. Nearly half of respondents reported frequent use of collaborative approaches by their school for teaching students with exceptionalities. This is a promising percentage, because collaborative approaches are essential for inclusion in general education settings, where many students with exceptionalities spend part to most of their school day.

Fewer respondents rated their general education district administrators or building principals as being very prepared to support them in their work in comparison to their special education supervisors and administrators. These finding highlight the need for more collaboration between general and special education supervisors and administrators to better understand and support success of students with exceptionalities.

Teachers provided a promising response to district support for recommended strategies to enhance teaching practices. Half indicated that consultation and in-service professional development are available either most of the time to always and more than one-third identified problem solving teams, mentoring, and online resources as available. They also noted when identifying areas on which they are evaluated that instructional quality was most frequently used. Nearly all respondents also report that most areas on which they are evaluated are important such as working collaboratively and engaging in professional growth.

However, they raise the concern that the heart of specialized instruction, outcomes on IEP goals, is not a prominent focus for evaluation. Only one-third reported that they were evaluated on IEP outcomes, which the majority rated as very important. In contrast, slightly more (43%) were evaluated on high stakes tests, which few (16%) regarded as very important.

SECTION V

What Teachers Need to Be Successful

Finally, we asked respondents to select, from a list of ten options, the three things that they judged most important to ensuring their success with their students with exceptionalities. ***Figure 17*** shows the number of respondents who ranked items from 1 to 10. The top three issues, selected by the largest number of respondents, were adequate resources to meet the IEP requirements, smaller class size/caseloads, and administrators who support the IEP process.

Of the 1467 respondents, 222 (15%) provided additional comments with regard to what they felt was critical to their success. We reviewed comments using a constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) to identify common themes. Table 4 presents themes identified by at least 10 respondents. The written comments expanded on the issues identified in the list provided to respondents in the survey; the largest number of comments (n=69) centered on the need for more planning time. This included time to work with the IEP team and other colleagues, time to plan instruction, and time to work with parents and families.

Several comments indicated that paperwork was not the problem. Respondents seem to understand that the IEP and related paperwork are useful, but they stressed needing more time to get this done. Administrators were mentioned prominently in the second set of comments in ***Figure 18*** (n=42) with a focus on flexible, knowledgeable, appreciative, and committed leaders. Schools that have created a collaborative culture was the third most frequently cited area needed for success (n=38). The fourth theme that emerged (n=29) was related to access to general education materials, curricula, and resources.

Figure 17 **Issues Ranked by Respondents as Most Important to their Success**

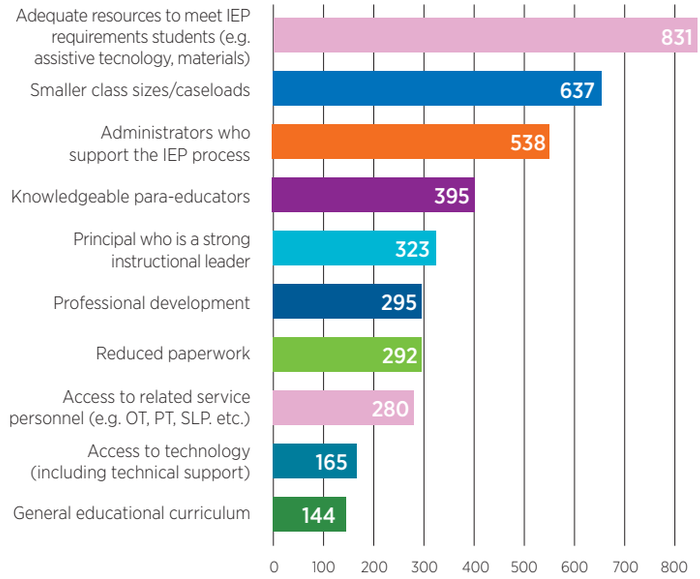
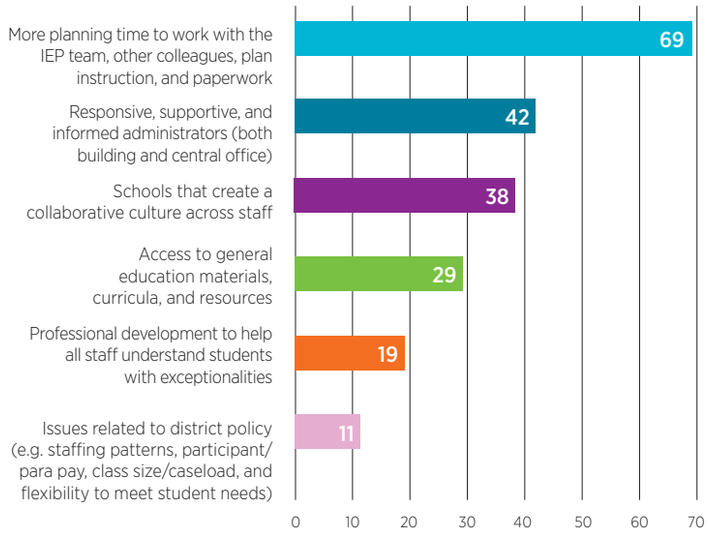


Figure 18 **Other Issues Proposed by Respondents as Important to Their Success**



Section V Summary

The respondents' identification of what they needed affirmed and supported many of the issues identified by their responses in the survey. Again, many respondents identified the importance of the IEP in their instruction and the need for resources to address IEP goals as well as the need to have general education administrators who support the IEP. This is consistent with findings from Section I and IV. The importance of smaller caseloads or class sizes speaks to many of the concerns raised by respondents over having adequate time to meet and plan with colleagues and families, highlighted in Sections I and III.

Discussion and Implications

The survey results demonstrate that the special education profession has much to celebrate, yet challenges remain. Responses indicated that respondents value the IEP and use it to guide instruction and modify curriculum. Most respondents noted they use the IEP frequently, but that they do not have sufficient time to plan lessons, meet with colleagues, or work with other IEP team members.

Many do not receive high levels of school or district support for engaging families in the IEP process. Only one-third of respondents are evaluated on their use of the IEP and outcomes. Few respondents noted that their district general education administrators or building principals are well-prepared to support them in meeting IEP goals.

They also raise concerns about the preparation of their general education colleagues and paraprofessionals to support students with exceptionalities to meet the range of goals in their IEP.

The IEP is at the heart of special education. It is the roadmap for meeting the learning needs of students with exceptionalities. The extent to which school staff and administrators understand and use this map is important to the success of both students with exceptionalities and special educators. Special educators need adequate resources to ensure they can address the IEP, not only with the student but also in partnership with families and school staff. They need all administrators to be knowledgeable about the IEP process and support it (Talbott, Mayrowetz, Maggin & Tozer (2016).

Respondents reported high levels of competence with classroom assessments and instructional practices. However, most perceived their general education colleagues and non-special education administrators as not having the knowledge and skills needed to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. This is problematic, given that inclusion is the most cited

strategy for instruction of children with exceptionalities, the majority of whom are served in general education settings (Kirk, Gallagher, & Coleman, 2015, U.S.D.E. Report to Congress, 2017). Survey respondents also reported they are moderately competent in using a variety of disciplinary approaches. However, more than 70% reported that their schools used administrative suspension (in and out of school) to address discipline issues. The resulting loss of instructional time for students with exceptional learning needs is very concerning as is possible noncompliance with special education law (Yell, 2016).

Areas where respondents rated themselves as lower in confidence included working with diverse-language families and with the use of culturally responsive instructional strategies. These concerns have been noted frequently in the literature (e.g., Henry, 2008; Rossetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, S., 2017). Continued efforts are needed to increase the diversity of the teaching force in response to the increasing diversity of students attending school. In addition, respondents reported a lack of supports to engage families who differ from special educators in language, culture, and lifestyle. Given the increasing diversity of students and their continued disproportional representation, these finding are alarming. A national response is required to both better prepare all educators to be culturally responsive but also for schools to provide supportive strategies to engage and retain students who are diverse (Kozleski, 2019).

A collaborative school culture was seen as a key to success for students with exceptionalities and respondents reported that they have the opportunity to use some collaborative teaching

> **Creating the conditions for excellent intervention and instruction calls for collaborations at all levels of the educational system between those who view themselves as special education specialists and those who view themselves as experts in general education or school administration.**

practices, such as MTSS, in general education settings. However, less than one-third reported the opportunity to use co-teaching, which occurs only in partnership with general educators.

This finding raises a red flag for students with exceptionalities served in general education settings. Co-teaching is a well-established, evidence-based practice that can, if done well, improve outcomes for students (Friend, 2008; Murawski & Dieker, 2013; Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie, 2001). The challenges to co-teaching raised by respondents in this study highlight the lack of sufficient time to plan, collaborative working relationships among teaching partners, and administrative support for co-teaching are the basic building blocks for successful co-teaching (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). Given these barriers and concerns, meaningful, deep collaboration–while difficult at best–remains an aspiration.

Survey respondents see educator evaluation as necessary and, with the exception of the use of high-stakes tests, most support the areas that are used for these performance assessments. Respondents agreed that their quality of instruction, their ability to collaborate, their ethical practices, and their engagement in professional development are important areas for evaluation. However, they raised concerns that the core of specialized instruction (i.e., outcomes on IEP goals) is not a prominent focus. It would only make sense that respondents charged with developing and implementing IEP goals be evaluated on the success of their teaching to these goals (Huefner, 2000; Council for Exceptional Children, 2012).

Respondents also were concerned that general education administrators, who may not have the knowledge or skills to understand special education practices, are often their evaluators. Principals and other building-level administrators who increase their understanding of the role of the IEP become collaborators in increasing learning outcomes. This likely requires more advocacy for the IEP and more focused collaboration among special education administrators and building principals and district administrators. IEP development and implementation that is part of the evaluation of special educators is a fundamental education goal supporting all student progress and outcomes (Danielson Group, 2017; RethinkEd, 2017).

Respondents also presented a somewhat mixed picture of supports available to improve their instruction. Although they rated consultation and in-service professional development as frequently available, they also noted other forms of support as less available. These findings suggest efforts are needed within school districts to enhance and expand collaborative instructional approaches, coaching opportunities, and teacher-to-teacher partnering (Bullock, 2018, Shepherd et al, 2016).

A systems approach is required to address the challenges respondents identified within special education. Future efforts must recognize that specialized teaching is complex, involves collaboration with others, depends on skilled use of instructional practices, and requires opportunities to improve these practices.

Creating the conditions for excellent intervention and instruction calls for collaborations at all levels of the educational system between those who view themselves as special education specialists and those who view themselves as experts in general education or school administration. Effective instruction also depends on the preparation of educators at the university-level and continued in-service professional development, ensuring that educators are knowledgeable about the IEP as a planning document and that educators have the collaboration skills needed to support all students (Shephard et al, 2016).

Creating the infrastructure necessary for excellence in special education is a collective process, which must include all stakeholders: special and general educators and support staff, general and special education administrators, families, and community members, as well as policy makers (Gallagher, 2006; Kirk, Gallagher & Coleman, 2015).

Systems level supports are critical to the success of special education. These supports include policies regarding class size and caseloads, specifying time for planning and collaboration, ensuring professional development for all educators to build capacity, and addressing the need for resources to effectively teach students with exceptionalities (e.g., Bateman and Bateman, 2014; DiPaola and Walther-Thomas 2003). This infrastructure, needed to support many high-quality practices for students with exceptionalities, is not yet in place. The challenge now is to build this infrastructure so that the systems-support necessary to improve general and special educator and administrator preparation and professional development exists.

Survey Limitations

The results of the survey should be interpreted with caution when extending them to the entire field of special education teachers. The sample, although national in scope, and fairly representative of the current demographics of teachers, was selected based on current orrecent membership in the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the primary professional organization for special educators.

The respondents may not be typical of all teachers as these respondents may have access to more opportunities for current information in their profession through their membership in CEC. Thus the findings may not generalize to all special education teachers.

Secondly, the findings represent their perceptions of themselves and others who provide services to students with exceptionalities. Perceptions may change over time. For both reasons, further replication of the survey is encouraged to determine the generalizability of the findings to other special educators and the stability of the findings.

Finally, respondents were provided with a limited time period (maximum of 4 weeks) to respond to the survey and this time limit may have reduced the percentage of respondents. Respondents who requested a link to the survey typically had only 2 weeks to respond. Even so, these findings provide a window into the thoughts, beliefs and issues of special education teachers who have demonstrated an interest in their profession through membership in an international organization.

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Appendix A

Author Biographies

The three authors of *The State of the Special Education Profession Report* are each CEC past presidents who also served as presidents of the CEC Pioneer Division.

Bill Bogdan, Ed.D.

Bill Bogdan served as CEC president in 1999-2000. He began his career as a special education teacher working with students with multiple disabilities, learning disabilities, and significant emotional disturbances. For over 30 years, Bogdan has served in administrative roles that focused on the provisions of special education services at a local, regional, and state level. As his career progressed, he moved into central office positions, finally serving as assistant superintendent and chief operating officer of a large regional educational service center in the greater Cincinnati area. Simultaneously, he served as executive director of a federally funded regional special education resource center in southwest Ohio.

Over the years, Bogdan has focused on systems and organizational development with an ongoing passion for supporting schools, school districts and regional service systems in improving services and structures that support the diverse education needs of all students, especially those with exceptionalities and gifts and talents. His efforts in coordinating professional and technical services offered to more than 50 school districts in southwest Ohio has resulted in strengthened partnerships among school districts, universities, and social service agencies, all committed to serving students and families in a more seamless and cohesive manner.

State of the Special Education Profession Report authors (left to right) Bill Bogdan, Ed.D.; Susan Fowler, Ph.D.; and Mary Ruth Coleman, Ph.D.

Mary Ruth Coleman, Ph.D.

Mary Ruth Coleman is a senior scientist emeritus at the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs Project U-STAR~PLUS (Using Science, Talents and Abilities to Recognize Students – Promoting Learning in Underrepresented Students). Her projects have included: ACCESS (Achievement in Content and Curriculum for Every Student's Success, a National Significance Project funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and applications of response to intervention for young children through the Recognition & Response Project sponsored by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation. Coleman has authored numerous publications, including the 14th Edition of the seminal textbook, "Educating Exceptional Children" by Samuel A. Kirk, James J. Gallagher, and Mary Ruth Coleman (2014) and "Implementing RtI with Gifted Students" Edited with Susan Johnsen (2013). She has served three terms (9 years) on the Board of Directors for The Association for the Gifted (TAG), one of which she was president; three terms (9 years) on the Board of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC); and two terms (6 years) on the Board of Directors for the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). She was president of CEC in 2007.

Susan Fowler, Ph.D.

Susan Fowler has been an active member of CEC since 1975. She received the CEC 2018 Wallin Award for contributions to the field of special education and is former president of CEC (2009), the CEC Pioneers Division (2018) and the CEC Division for Early Childhood (1992). Her research focus is providing high-quality services for young children with disabilities, with a focus on interagency coordination of services for children and families at times of transition between early intervention, preschool and kindergarten. Her most recent research has focused on the perceptions of culturally diverse families on the concept of disability and involvement with special education.

She has been active in personnel preparation and policy issues in special education. She is professor emerita of special education at the University of Illinois where she also served as dean of the college.

Appendix B

Volunteer Recognition

The authors collaborated with a State of the Special Education Profession Design Team comprised of CEC members to identify potential issues affecting the delivery of programs and services to children and youth with exceptionalities.

State of the Special Education Profession Design Team

Bill Bogdan (Co-Chairperson, CEC Past President)

Mary Ruth Coleman (Co-Chairperson, CEC Past President)

Susan Fowler (Co-Chairperson, CEC-PD President, CEC-PD President)

Joan McDonald (CEC-PD Past President)

Gloria Taradash (CEC-PD)

Kelly Carrero (DDEL, IDC)

Paul Zinni (CEC-PD, CEC Board)

Mikki Garcia (CEC Past President)

Mary Lynn Boscardin (CEC President)

Alex Graham, Judy Harrison (CEC Staff)

The project was also supported by a State of the Special Education Profession Workgroup, which included two teams.

State of the Special Education Profession Workgroup

Steering Team

Mary Ruth Coleman

Bill Bogdan

Susan Fowler

Alex Graham

Judy Harrison

Advisory Team

Charlotte Brickhouse (Spec.Ed. Admin.)

Concetta Lewis (MI CEC)

Julie Norflus-Good (NJ CEC)

Megan Elam (DPHMD)

Vicky Spencer (DISES)

Cindy Perras, Canadian Representative

The authors acknowledge the contributions of Linda Owens, Ph.D. at the University of Illinois Survey Research Lab for her guidance on revisions of the final survey, her management, and analysis of the survey data and thoughtful comments on early versions of the manuscript.

We also thank the CEC Pioneers Division for its early support of the survey and CEC Executive Director Alex Graham and CEC Director of Membership, Marketing & Communications Judy Harrison, who made implementation of the survey possible.