

Recruiting and Retaining Special Education Teachers in Hartford Public Schools:

Teacher-crafted Policy Recommendations for HPS' Current Strategic Planning Process

An Introduction from Hartford Public Schools Teachers

As teachers, we hear the word “crisis” used often to describe the challenges in education — whether it's student learning, the teaching profession, or student well-being. But here in Hartford Public Schools (HPS), “crisis” feels deeply personal and undeniably accurate. The challenges we face are especially urgent, and they are felt most acutely by our special education (SpEd) students and the teachers who serve them.

Recognizing this reality — while also understanding the District's precarious financial situation — we, a group of seven HPS teachers, came together to identify the most impactful changes HPS could make to improve outcomes for students and teachers alike. Through a survey of 20% of our fellow educators and qualitative in-person focus groups, we established clear priorities and actionable recommendations that are grounded in the collective wisdom of those who know our schools best: educators.

As HPS crafts the District's next strategic plan, our primary recommendation is to address the urgent need to recruit and retain SpEd teachers by making their current one-time \$5,000 signing bonus an annual — and potentially larger — salary increase. SpEd educators are experiencing an urgent crisis in our District, and SpEd vacancies affect all students and teachers. They stretch the capacity of SpEd teachers to serve their students well, while also forcing general education teachers to fill gaps they are not trained for.

Because compensation increases alone will not turn the tide on SpEd vacancies, **the job itself must also be made less impossible.** SpEd teachers' caseloads and administrative burdens must be reduced, and the resources teachers want — such as collaboration time, effective mentorship, and professional learning — must be strategically channeled toward them. When financially viable, the District must also extend these same resources — financial and otherwise — to all HPS teachers.

Making these changes is vital to HPS' future. Without them, the cycle will continue: more teachers will leave the District, vacancies will persist, and the teachers who remain will incur even heavier workloads, causing students to suffer — all the while not improving the District's finances.

This group acknowledges the difficult decisions HPS leadership faces, and we implore them to listen to educators who are closest to the issues and not make these decisions alone. We see a path forward, and we're committed to partnering to map out solutions, together.

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Methodology

In the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, E4E-CT engaged more than 300 HPS teachers — over 20% of the total teacher population — in an effort to infuse the District’s strategic planning process with the voices of its classroom teachers. In 2023-2024, E4E-CT identified three high-priority, broad issue areas through 1-on-1 conversations with hundreds of teachers, including elected members of the Hartford Federation of Teachers (HFT): 1.) Financial incentives for specific groups of teachers, 2.) School-based flexibility, and 3.) Professional learning and mentoring. They then conducted focus groups with 124 teachers across six schools in the spring of 2024, gathering teachers’ qualitative perspectives and potential solutions to address the challenges they experienced within each issue area.

In the fall of 2024, seven E4E-CT teacher leaders met regularly to draft recommended policy shifts based on input collected the prior year. They designed a survey to collect additional, more targeted feedback from teachers and map a path for advocacy and policy change. 319 teachers across 28 schools took the survey, opining on what they wanted to see prioritized in HPS’ strategic plan. Finally, E4E-CT conducted an additional SpEd-specific focus group to add a qualitative lens to the information collected in the survey.

“I am currently the only special education teacher at this school and we're supposed to have at least four. I support 96 students on my own. So I can tell you firsthand what the consequences are of not having financial incentives for hard-to-staff subjects.”

HPS SpEd Teacher

Findings

Teachers’ Top Strategic Planning Priorities

Before narrowing in on specific policy shifts, E4E-CT wanted to understand HPS teachers’ priorities broadly as the District headed into its strategic planning process. The survey revealed two clear priorities: **teacher recruitment and retention**, which was the top choice of 40% of respondents, and **high-quality teaching and learning**, which was the top choice of 30% of respondents. These two priorities — chosen above financial sustainability and effective operations, community schools, family and community partnerships, and high-quality curriculum implementation — align with the priorities identified in the District’s surveying of a broader set of stakeholders and reveal an urgent focus among teachers on building a high-quality, sustainable workforce.

Teachers’ Top Desired Policy Shifts

Teachers were also asked which specific policy shifts they would like to see HPS make and were presented with six options drafted by the core group of seven teacher leaders. Approximately two-thirds of teachers chose one of two types of financial incentives to address vacancies and retain teachers as their top choice: 36% chose higher pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subject areas, and 26% chose higher pay for highly effective teachers, making these the first and second most popular choices. Finally, the third most popular choice, chosen by 16% of teachers, was to better align PL to curriculum and teacher needs, potentially by improving the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).



| Shift | Ranking |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Provide additional annual pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects to address vacancies | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Top choice of 36% of teachers• In top three choices of 71% of teachers |
| Provide additional pay for highly effective teachers in order to retain them | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Top choice of 26% of teachers• In top three choices of 63% of teachers |
| Better align PL to curriculum and teacher needs, potentially by improving implementation of PLCs | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Top choice of 16% of teachers• In top three choices of 52% of teachers |

A Focus on Special Education

E4E-CT's teacher leaders took special care during this process to not just create a teacher wishlist disconnected from the reality of difficult financial tradeoffs, but to ground our recommendations in strategically targeted ways that address some of the most urgent policy shifts needed. This was top of mind for them during focus groups conducted alongside the survey, during which the SpEd-related challenges in HPS were consistently raised by SpEd and general education teachers alike.

SpEd teachers [have the highest turnover across the country](#) and are the [hardest-to-fill positions in HPS](#). Severe SpEd vacancies impact all students and teachers, as their absence forces general education teachers to support SpEd students in a way that they may not be trained to do. Taken together, this commentary from focus groups and the top survey choice of financial incentives for hard-to-staff areas revealed a need to specifically pay SpEd teachers more. However, HPS must do more than simply offer higher compensation for these positions; changes to the daily experience of SpEd teachers will also be necessary to attract new teachers and retain existing ones.



Special Education Vacancies in Hartford Public Schools

HPS had 173 teacher [vacancies](#) in October 2024; while [SpEd teachers account for around 15% of teachers](#) in HPS, their positions accounted for 31% of those vacancies, leaving 26% of all SpEd teaching positions vacant. While [SpEd vacancies decreased statewide](#) between fall 2023 and 2024, they increased in HPS. The impact of this vacancy rate has a measurable negative impact on students with disabilities. [Half were chronically absent last year](#), compared to 38% of all students. According to one HPS SpEd teacher, "We've had several parents tell us they keep their child home due to lack of appropriate classrooms or resources." Students with disabilities are also [less likely to graduate, more likely to be suspended or expelled, and less likely to pass state exams](#).

Creating a Sustainable Special Education Workforce

Building a [sustainable and high-quality SpEd workforce requires a holistic approach that considers both the role's specific challenges and its compensation structure.](#)

Districts should **provide SpEd teachers with significant, additional annual pay** to encourage teacher candidates to pursue SpEd certification and incentivize [dual-certified teachers working in general education to switch to SpEd](#). [Detroit Public Schools began offering an annual \\$15,000 bonus for SpEd teachers in 2022](#), and they credit this change with reducing a pervasive vacancy issue among those positions that had plagued the system for years.

Districts must also **address the role-specific challenges faced by SpEd teachers**. These educators manage particularly complex workloads spanning subjects and grade levels. They also shoulder heavy administrative burdens and often [work under principals who are not explicitly trained to support SpEd students and teachers](#). Additionally, they are frequently excluded from decisions around curricula selection and common planning and are often considered more “expendable” for extra duties. Districts can address these role-specific challenges by decreasing caseloads and administrative burdens, training administrators to effectively support SpEd teachers, and disaggregating SpEd teacher survey data to better understand their unique frustrations.

“Some days I don’t even feel like a teacher. The label of ‘support staff’ gets stretched pretty far, and half of my day is spent not teaching. I get put on lunch duty, bus duty, I support students having emotional crises, and all of this eats up my actual service time.”

HPS SpEd Teacher



Special Education Vacancies Nationally

Despite having the [second highest number of program completers](#) among teacher preparation certification areas, SpEd positions are the hardest to fill: [77% of public schools report SpEd teaching positions are “somewhat” or “very difficult” to fill](#). This is a frustratingly paradoxical problem: despite a surplus of teachers with SpEd licenses, a shortage of SpEd teachers exists. This is partially because teachers certified to teach SpEd often opt to instead teach general education. In Minnesota, for example, 16% of certified SpEd teachers work in general education positions. Meanwhile, [8% of teachers who work with students with disabilities are not certified to do so](#).

It’s also harder to keep these positions filled. [A three-state study](#) found that SpEd teachers are 11% more likely to leave the field and 72% more likely to switch schools than general education teachers. The financial ramifications of this level of churn can cripple a district; [one study estimated the cost of attrition for one SpEd teacher to be between \\$9,000 and \\$23,000](#).

Recommendations

In line with the policy shifts noted above, we recommend that HPS do the following to combat severe SpEd teaching shortages and better attract and retain a high-quality, diverse SpEd workforce. It should be noted that any compensation-related changes would require HPS and HFT to negotiate mutually satisfactory changes to the current collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

- 1. Make authorized hiring bonuses for SpEd teachers annual rather than one-time payments and consider increasing the dollar amount.** HPS is [authorized to offer signing bonuses up to \\$5,000](#) for SpEd teaching positions, and is offering those bonuses this year in an effort to address vacancies. [National research](#), though, indicates that such incentives must be between \$5,000 and \$10,000 annually in order to be effective. Teachers also note that signing bonuses are a frustrating incentive, as they create the illusion of a “pay cut” in the second year, and that longer-term pay increases or “lane-switches” on the salary schedule would be far more likely to attract and retain teachers.

Such incentives are popular among teachers; a 2024 national teacher survey found that [87% support pay incentives for hard-to-staff subject areas](#). Research also shows they reduce vacancies and teacher attrition and increase student achievement. In [Hawaii](#), annual \$10,000 bonuses for SpEd teachers reduced vacancies by 32%, and annual bonuses for secondary math and science teachers in [Georgia](#) reduced attrition by 25%. Meanwhile, in [Dallas](#), annual incentives of up to \$10,000 for highly effective teachers in the lowest-achieving schools increased student achievement.

Addressing the issue of retention through pay incentives above \$5,000 can save districts money in the long run. [The Learning Policy Institute estimates that the departure of one teacher before retirement can cost an urban district like HPS about \\$20,000](#). A 2007 [study](#) on the cost of teacher turnover calculated that HPS was spending \$4,462,500 per year on teacher turnover.

- 2. Address the specific challenges of the role by reducing caseloads and administrative burdens and concentrating other requested supports — such as mentoring and collaboration time — in schools with the highest numbers of SpEd students and teachers.** SpEd caseloads are set at the school level in Connecticut, as [it is one of 20 states that does not set caseload requirements by law](#). HPS should explore ways to reduce caseloads – such as hiring more paraprofessionals, improving pathways for current paraprofessionals to become SpEd teachers, or strengthening early childhood education to improve student achievement in early grades and ultimately reduce SpEd identifications – and implement the most plausible and high-impact strategies in the highest priority schools. Additionally, throughout this process, teachers highlighted better mentoring and more collaboration time as priorities, both of which research shows lead to heightened teacher impact and improved student outcomes when effectively implemented. While this is explored further below, it’s worth noting here that such highly desired resources could be focused in schools with the highest concentration of SpEd students and teachers, strategically allocating dollars where they are most needed.

“General education teachers receive so much more feedback. I asked one of my school leaders to come and observe my instruction, and I was told, ‘You don’t have to worry about that.’ The thing is, I wanted the feedback, but this person only saw observation as an accountability measure that doesn’t apply to me because my kids are different. They thought they were doing me a favor.”

HPS SpEd Teacher



State-level Special Education Shifts in Connecticut

While E4E-CT's teacher leaders focused their attention and advocacy on shifts HPS can make to improve the working and learning conditions of SpEd teachers and students in the District, the Connecticut state legislature could support this effort by doing the following:

- 1. In addition to fully funding the state's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding formula, add a need-based weight for SpEd students.** Currently, the [state's per-pupil funding formula](#) provides districts an additional 25% of funding for each low-income student, each multilingual learner, and each student living in concentrated poverty. However, it does not allocate any additional funding for students with disabilities unless [that student is estimated to cost the district 4.5 times more](#) than the district's per-pupil expenditure. The state should add a weight for students with disabilities, in line with [recommendations from its Special Education Task Force](#).
- 2. Establish SpEd-focused apprenticeship and residency programs targeted at paraprofessionals.** The heightened complexity and difficulty of teaching SpEd merits preparation programs specifically focused on the field, with extra attention paid to on-the-job training that effectively prepares candidates for its challenges. And, because paraprofessionals are already familiar with the benefits and challenges of teaching SpEd, recruiting them into such programs to become full-time teachers [leads to reduced attrition](#). The state should work with preparation programs and districts to create, run, and evaluate such programs.

Other Shifts to Consider

While higher pay for hard-to-staff subjects and schools is the most popular policy shift among surveyed HPS teachers, the second and third most popular shifts are the following:

- 1. Pay highly effective teachers more.** [Multiple studies](#) have found that, when implemented well, increasing pay for highly effective teachers in high-needs schools reduces vacancies, increases retention of high-performers, and bolsters academic achievement. The District currently [provides annual \\$2,500 bonuses](#) for teachers with good attendance in schools that show "significant" improvement, but research finds that to be effective, such incentives must be [\\$5,000 or more annually](#) and [must also be given to individual teachers rather than entire schools](#). HPS could consider increasing the size of this existing bonus and expanding it to apply to individually highly effective teachers in addition to, or instead of, whole schools. HPS could also consider specifically offering the above-recommended incentives for SpEd teachers only to those identified as being highly effective in order to further prioritize dollars to the highest impact teachers teaching the most marginalized students.

Such a change would require meaningful evaluation systems without room for subjectivity, which we do not believe HPS currently has in place. As such, we do not believe the conditions in HPS are yet ready to fully implement this shift. We also recognize this compensation-related change would require negotiation of changes to the existing CBA.

- 2. Improve implementation of curriculum-aligned Professional Learning Communities.** HPS teachers report that [PLCs — structured cycles of shared learning, real-time practice, and analysis of impact on student learning](#) — are in operation in some schools but are not always curriculum-aligned and vary in effectiveness. [Research](#) shows teachers need 90 minutes of collaboration

time weekly before it leads to increased teacher retention and student achievement. HPS teachers, in contrast, are only contractually guaranteed approximately 45 minutes daily without students, which is not enough for preparing lessons and participating in 90 minutes of PLC time every week. HPS should consider increasing this guaranteed time to allow sufficient time for effective PLCs and training PLC leads and principals on the characteristics of effective PLCs. It should also consider compensation for the PLC lead role, which District leaders report they are in the process of doing. As recommended above, HPS could consider strategically allocating the cost associated with this by extending contractually guaranteed time or concentrating PLC training specifically in the schools with the largest concentrations of SpEd students or the highest priority schools.

Other policy shifts that were raised by HPS teachers throughout this process include creating and compensating teacher leadership roles, increasing school-level decision-making power through increased flexibility, and improving the state-mandated mentoring program. All of these shifts indicate an interest in a more dynamic teaching role in which teachers have opportunities to grow professionally while still teaching. Given this, HPS should provide teachers with opportunities to learn more about school-based flexibility and innovative staffing approaches and consider policy shifts to enable those approaches.

"I love my job. I love what I do. But there are so many barriers to my success."

HPS SpEd Teacher

Conclusion

Against a fiscally challenging backdrop, this report outlines why addressing the vacancy and dissatisfaction crisis among its SpEd teachers through improvements to the role and increased compensation should be at the top of HPS' list. Such a change offers the opportunity for the resource-strapped District to strategically channel its limited resources to the teachers and students who need them most, benefitting the entire workforce and student body in the process. We implore HPS leadership to heed the call to build a more sustainable SpEd workforce, and to extend the priorities identified in this report to all teachers when financially able to do so. We look forward to continuing to work hand-in-hand to build the Hartford Public Schools our students and teachers deserve.