

Serving Children with Autism: School Staffing Challenges

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the United States, and places growing demands on schools across the country to provide support services to students. Many families of children with autism rely on schools as their main source of services such as speech therapy and psychological support, which reinforces the need for more qualified special education professionals in school districts across the United States.

The most commonly used resources of students with autism include:

- Speech therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Special education services
- School psychology and behavior management services



While administrators no doubt recognize the need for these professionals, the supply of special education teachers and school-based therapists struggles to keep up with the growing demand for their services. Schools must seek out new ways to recruit professionals experienced in caring for children with autism.

Special education teachers

The demand for qualified special education teachers is growing across the country. Soliant has seen a dramatic 1722 percent increase in placements of these professionals over the last five years. These numbers reflect the growing need in U.S. schools, particularly in states such as California, New Mexico, Washington and Illinois.



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According to the American Association for Employment in Education, all 11 regions of the United States have reported a shortage of special education teachers. These shortages can be even greater in rural or high-poverty areas.

The shortage of qualified special education teachers is likely to continue. A study in the Journal of Special Education found that special education teachers leave the profession at higher rates than new teachers join the profession. They also leave the profession at higher rates than general education teachers.

To keep these teachers in special education classrooms and help reduce the teacher shortage, researchers suggest that schools:

- Increase the number of resources available for special education classrooms
- Improve administrative support of special education efforts
- Increase compensation for special education professionals
- Improve teacher qualifications and preparation through professional development opportunities



Speech-language pathologists (SLPs)

According to a 2014 study, 84.6 percent of elementary-age children with autism receive speech therapy services from school-based speech-language pathologists (SLPs). Children with autism receive speech therapy more often than they receive any other service.

In an American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) survey, 48 percent of school-based SLPs reported that there were more job openings than job seekers. This trend is expected to continue. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a 21 percent increase in the number of SLP positions by 2024.

Like special education teachers, recruitment and retention of school-based SLPs remains a challenge. The same ASHA survey reported that:

- 83 percent of SLPs feel they have too much paperwork to complete
- 70 percent have high caseloads
- 52 percent have too little time to collaborate with other members of a child's care team



Those challenges aside, most SLPs report that they're satisfied in their jobs.

Alexa Herbers, a SLP who works primarily with children with autism in Aurora, Colo., says having patience, flexibility and teamwork skills can help SLPs provide the proper care. In her community, she notes that the support for children with autism is growing, both from other students and teachers.



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"I am so fortunate to work in a school where autism is accepted by the majority," Alexa says. "Students and teachers are always willing to lend a hand, have students join different groups, and really want to learn about the disorder. There's a long way to go, but it's amazing to see the little steps being made at the ground level."

School occupational therapists

Half of all elementary-age children receive occupational therapy services at school, according to a 2014 study, though older children may not have the same access to these services.

Currently, more than 13,000 occupational therapists work in schools across the country,

according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Bureau notes that there will be an increased demand for occupational therapists to work with children with autism, and that job growth will move faster than the national average.

While they face similar challenges to other school professionals, such as excessive paperwork, heavy caseload, and lack of support, occupational therapists report a high satisfaction with their jobs.

In one survey, 95.4 percent of school-based occupational therapists reported good or excellent job satisfaction despite challenges. Still, schools may be able to look to occupational therapists for guidance on how to improve retention among other professionals who care for children with autism.



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School psychologists

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), there will be a shortage of 15,000 school psychologists by 2020. These professionals provide valuable behavior and mental health support to children with autism, but a 2014 study suggests their services are currently underutilized.

Schools are working to address the shortage and increase access to school psychology services with increased recruitment. However, the resources available have limited their abilities to take on new staff members. Soliant has seen a 144 percent increase in the placement of school psychologists over the last 5 years.

NASP research suggests that more support from school psychologists may help relieve other staffing problems for school autism programs. Increased access to school psychology programs may actually increase teacher retention through improving the

well-being and behavior of students outside of counseling.



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Creative solutions to staffing

Schools are discovering new ways to recruit qualified professionals to support students with autism. These programs include:

Teletherapy Services

Teletherapy services like Soliant's [VocoVision platform](#) use video and audio connections over the Internet to connect students to psychologists, speech therapists, and occupational therapists in real time. These technologies can help schools, particularly those in rural areas, access professionals who are not available in their communities. VocoVision works with school teams to modify environments and materials for the specific special education needs of each child. Current and emerging research supports the effectiveness of teletherapy and other remote services.

Staffing Agencies

To save time and stress, many schools are using trusted staffing agencies to fill many open positions in their districts. Soliant's Schools Division has seen a dramatic increase in demand for school-based healthcare staffing, and it's a demand that is outpacing staffing needs in hospitals and other medical settings.



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"Grow-Your-Own" programs

Grow-your-own programs focus on providing teacher training and education to members of the local community who are dedicated to the area and school district. These programs may begin recruiting future teachers when they are in college or even high school. They combine coursework with field experience in schools which helps them fill staffing needs while preparing a highly qualified workforce.

Grow-your-own programs are widely used to train new special education teachers, often helping instructional assistants or paraprofessionals become certified teachers who hold a master's degree in special education. They continue working in their position while completing coursework for their degree, and thanks to field experience, these teachers know what to expect and may be more likely to remain in their positions.

The future of school-based autism services

No single solution will help schools keep up with the needs of children and teens with autism. Through creative recruitment strategies and a focus on support for special education teachers and other professionals, administrators can make headway in ensuring the children in their district always have access to the services they need.

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