

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMPENSATION ACTION TEAM February 25, 2025**

### **CHARGE TO THE COMPENSATION ACTION TEAM:**

To develop a set of recommendations relative to special educator compensation.

- Recommendations could apply at the state, ISD, or local level.
- Should include creative, non-salary approaches for districts to consider.

The Compensation Action Team met in January of 2025 to address its charge. The charge was considered in light of several realities:

- The ongoing, inadequate pipeline of potential candidates across special education disciplines within not just the state of Michigan but the country at large;
- Inter-district competition that is inherent in attracting/retaining candidates in an environment of significant critical shortages; and
- Special education staffing challenges and compensation as a component of the larger system of educator preparation, recruitment, hiring, and retention.

It would have been easy and overly simplistic for the Action Team to say that we simply should pay educators more money. Our recommendations needed to go beyond simplistic solutions and look at creative ways of constructing an appealing total package---salary, benefits, and working conditions---in order to help districts attract and retain qualified candidates.

The following recommendations resulted from a full day of facilitated dialogue with the Compensation Action Team, an interdisciplinary group from around the state of Michigan. The intent of the recommendations is to put districts in

a competitive position relative to the private sector when it comes to hiring special education staff. The recommendations also attempt to put individual districts in the best possible position when inter-district competition for limited candidates is a factor. The recommendations apply to all categories of special education employees, including teachers, paraeducators, and related service providers such as school social workers, speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, occupational/physical therapists, and teacher consultants.

The Action Team recognizes that potential challenges/pitfalls are inherent in many of these recommendations, therefore, they are given as a list of possible strategies for the state, ISD or district to use. Chief among them is that some employees are likely to be perceived as receiving preferential treatment because they work in a critical shortage area and therefore may receive some additional/different considerations. This perception can be a difficult challenge because the collective bargaining process typically emphasizes equal treatment for all members of the bargaining unit. However, we must face the reality of the climate in which we currently find ourselves; districts will need to work with the entire staff and the bargaining units to build an understanding about the unavoidable special education mandate at the federal level, the critical pipeline issues that are facing us today, and the need to be flexible and differentiated in order to attract and retain the necessary staff to meet obligations relative to the provision of a free, appropriate, public education to students with disabilities.

## **1. SALARY AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS**

It is impossible to consider special educator compensation as separate and distinct from educator compensation as a whole. Special educators---- teachers, related services staff, and paraeducators----are typically part of a collective bargaining unit, and salaries are driven by the collective bargaining agreement. Collective bargaining agreements are clearly an important tool for ensuring parity for members of a community of interest within an employing unit. However, the collective bargaining agreement may have the unintended effect of inhibiting the attraction/retention of qualified special education candidates, particularly during a period of crippling shortages.

All educators have the opportunity to consider salary when comparing one district to another, and inter-district competition is a harsh reality during times of shortages. Districts that are bound by rigid collective bargaining agreements may be less appealing to candidates than districts that have some flexibility relative to accepting years of experience, honoring post-graduate

coursework, placing new hires on steps, and differentiating benefits based on the needs of employees.

Paraeducators, for example, are typically individuals with a high school diploma and perhaps a few college credits. The positions that they could fill in the private sector have seen wages skyrocket since the pandemic, with movie theaters and fast food chains often offering salaries of \$15 per hour or more, sometimes with attractive benefit packages that include college tuition reimbursement. Districts will need to provide a competitive offer in order to attract/retain paraeducator candidates.

Related services staff provide another example of how schools are competing with the private sector for employees. Speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and social workers, as well as occupational and physical therapists (referred to collectively as “related service providers”) have many employment options outside the public schools, including hospitals, clinics, and private practice. Typically, the salaries in these settings significantly exceed what is offered in public schools, even when accounting for a shorter work year based on the school calendar. Collective bargaining agreements tend to exacerbate this challenge by:

- Requiring that new employees, particularly new college graduates, be placed on step 1 of the salary schedule, thereby restricting the potential employee’s access to a salary that would be competitive with the private sector.
- Limiting the extent to which experienced candidates can be placed on a step that fully recognizes their experience and credentials.
- Failing to recognize the variation in credit hours required to earn a master’s degree or higher, meaning that related service providers with a 45-hour master’s program could be paid the same as someone with a 30-hour master’s program.

Lack of awareness/information about the salaries offered by competing entities may inhibit a district’s ability to negotiate a salary schedule that is attractive to related services staff.

### **Recommendations at the state and/or ISD level:**

- Develop and maintain a current, reliable resource document which identifies salary ranges for related services staff in the private sector.
  - This would allow districts to compare local salary schedules to competing employers and consider adjustments as may be necessary to remain competitive and attract/retain candidates.

- Provide districts with up-to-date information about evidence-based practices in other states that have proven effective in addressing special education shortages.
- Explore statewide, regional, or ISD-wide approaches to salaries/hiring such as:
  - Establishing a minimum floor for salaries across the state/region/ISD which could serve as a starting point for collective bargaining.
  - Encouraging consortium agreements among local districts within a region or ISD. Such agreements would identify a district with a higher salary schedule to serve as the fiscal agent and employing district for staff in critical shortage areas. The employing district would deploy staff to participating districts, thereby maximizing the opportunity to offer an attractive, competitive salary to individuals employed under the consortium agreement.
- Reconsider the foundation allowance for public school entities that do not pay into the ORS system, thereby potentially freeing up dollars to be used for other purposes; alternately, revisit the exemption that some public school entities have relative to paying into ORS.

**Recommendations at the ISD and/or local level:**

- Modify collective bargaining agreements (through language changes and/or memoranda of understanding) to:
  - Increase flexibility relative to placement of employees on steps of the salary schedule. This could allow districts to offer more competitive salaries that might attract more and better qualified candidates.
  - Accept credit for all previous experience, whether or not in a public school setting.
  - Consider the need for a differentiated salary schedule for special education teachers/related service providers as compared to general education teachers (recognizing that this is a response to the current shortages and not without pitfalls.)
- For paraeducators in particular, negotiate a competitive benefit package that includes healthcare.
  - An attractive benefit package could be a factor that distinguishes the district from other potential employers in the private sector.

## **2. NON-SALARY CONSIDERATIONS**

Districts may not be able/willing to modify the collective bargaining agreement in a way that provides attractive salaries as compared to the private sector. However, there are non-salary contributions that may be considered in order to make a lower public school salary more appealing to potential hires. These financial incentives also could help with inter-district competition for the same employees, including the retention of employees who may be tempted to “district hop.” These include:

### **Recommendations at the state/ISD level:**

- Study the impact of the defined benefit plan versus defined contribution plan for the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System, including the impact of each model on attracting quality employees in critical shortage areas.
- Continue to reevaluate the employee contribution for health care benefits, so that employee-paid health care is not a deterrent to attracting quality personnel in critical shortage areas.
- Reduce/eliminate impediments to hiring retirees in shortage areas, including substitute teaching.
- Remove barriers to reciprocity with other states relative to teacher certification and licensing of related service providers.

### **Recommendations at the ISD/local level:**

- Provide signing/retention bonuses in shortage areas, and longevity bonuses for staff who stay with the district over time.
- Provide payment for unused sick/leave days.
- Consider housing subsidies for staff in areas where housing costs exceed salary capacity.
- Provide off-schedule payments for after-school obligations or offer compensatory time off/flex time.
- Provide financial incentives for advanced training, such as:

- Tuition reimbursement for advanced degrees or additional endorsements, particularly in shortage areas
- Reimbursement for credentialing fees, including certificate renewal and fees for professional credentialing such as the ASHA certificate of clinical competence.
- Reimbursement for membership fees in professional organizations that support high quality practice (CEC, MAASP, MASSW, MSHA, etc.)
- Release time for advanced coursework, professional learning, and/or day-to-day collaboration with instructional colleagues.
- Provide pathways for paraeducators to pursue certification, such as:
  - Credit for work experience.
  - Waiving testing requirements.
  - College tuition reimbursement.
  - Release time for college coursework.
- Offer a flexible fringe benefit menu for all special educators, including paraeducators, which includes options such as:
  - Free or discounted childcare for employees, or a childcare stipend as part of an individualized benefit package, particularly when the district already offers tuition-based childcare opportunities to the community.
  - Discounted group auto insurance.
  - Mental health/counseling support.
- Provide opportunities for flexible work hours, shared time positions, and remote work as a means of attracting/retaining employees in critical shortage areas.
- Provide opportunities for paid internships/student teaching for candidates who are currently, or who are likely to become, district employees.
- Ensure that district-provided professional development meets the unique needs of all categories of staff and supports the continuing education requirements that are specific to recertification in each discipline.

- Provide extra duty pay for staff who mentor inexperienced staff.
- Provide opportunities within the K-12 system that will attract young people to the profession, such as CTE programs, student employment opportunities, and peer-to-peer experiences.
  - This may include college tuition support for high school students who show an early interest in the field of special education.

### **3. WORKING CONDITIONS/CULTURE**

While salary and other financial benefits are certainly important factors that impact a district's ability to attract and retain high quality personnel, worker satisfaction and working conditions are equally important in securing a competent and stable workforce.

Private sector employees have different caseload and paperwork responsibilities than special education providers in the public school settings. In recent years, financial challenges in the public schools have resulted in caseloads that run at or near maximums identified in state rule, or as increased via Rule 1832 under an ISD Plan for the Delivery of Special Education Services. At the same time, an increased emphasis on accountability has resulted in an increase in the required documentation/paperwork that is required of public school staff, meaning that staff members often spend personal, unpaid time completing paperwork relative to IEP development, lesson plans, data collection/analysis, progress reporting for IEP goals, and report writing. This stands in contrast to the workload requirements of the private sector, where the documentation load is lower and paid time is provided for completing that documentation.

Daniel Pink, in his book "Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us", tells us that employees across professions tend to stay in positions where they feel:

- *Autonomy*, meaning a sense that we can do things our own way, follow our instincts, and feel like we matter;
- *Mastery*, which is a sense of growing competence and confidence; that what we are doing is "working" and there is space and support to promote improvement and growth; and
- *Purpose*, meaning the belief that our work has a genuine impact and that we are contributing to the greater good, motivating us to tackle even the most complex problems.

The following recommendations support the kind of motivation that Pink tells us we should aspire to support/promote among special educators.

**Recommendations at the ISD/local level:**

- Provide intentional onboarding experiences which include tools/resources for successful mentoring, pathways for growth, and leadership opportunities.
- Consider how workload/caseload impact staff retention.
  - Workload expectations may need to be modified for inexperienced staff, increasing as they become more confident/competent.
  - Although special education workload expectations may be especially challenging for new hires, experienced staff also may require consideration in the face of growing demands.
- Provide an appropriate, individual workspace/office that staff can use as a homebase in the school setting, including appropriate technology and other materials.
- Ensure that adequate instructional materials/resources are provided by the district so that educators do not have to purchase necessary supplies out-of-pocket.
  - This may include subscriptions to online resources/tools or web-based applications.
- Ensure appropriate training/resources to support students with significant challenging behaviors and the staff who work with them, including:
  - Alignment of school safety practices with state legislation/guidance.
  - Providing all staff with training in verbal de-escalation techniques.
  - Providing key staff with more intensive training in crisis response/management.
  - Supporting staff in tailoring the standard safety protocols to meet the unique needs of the students who are being served.
  - Providing opportunities for staff to process traumatic situations with peers, receive appropriate professional support, and collaborate with a team to create better future outcomes.



- Provide respite for staff working in high-stress situations to avoid burnout over time, such as:
  - Periodic changes in the staff member’s assignment to facilitate the opportunity to regroup/recharge.
  - Rotating the responsibility for students with significant challenges, including in general education classrooms where a “good” teacher may be rewarded by frequently being assigned students with marked behavioral issues.
  - Paid sabbatical leave for providers in key special education positions, such as self-contained classrooms for students with significant behavioral needs.
- Provide a clothing allowance and/or reimbursement for personal property damage that occurs as a result of the work assignment (eyeglasses, personal technology, etc.).
- Ensure ease of access to high quality emergency medical support for work-based injuries, worker’s compensation claims, physical therapy related to work-based injuries, etc.

#### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OTHER OPTIMISE ACTION TEAMS**

Other OPTIMISE Action Teams have made recommendations that speak to a district’s ability to attract and retain quality personnel. The recommendations in these reports support the recommendations listed above.

- Barriers and Influence Mapping. (2023) *Special Education Teacher Workforce Summary*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SpecialEducationTWGSummary.pdf>
- Behavior Action Team *Behavior Action Team Recommendations-The Why*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/White-Paper - for-WHY-of-BAT-Recommendations-3.pdf>
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing Action Team, including Interpreters. *Recommendations*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/DHH-recommendations-1.pdf>

- Paperwork Reduction Action Team. *Recommendations for Statewide Electronic Special Education Documentation System*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/11.30.2024-Final-Recommendations-Statewide-electronic-special-education-documentation-system-to-align-with-MARSE-IDEA-to-reduce-redundancy.-Electronic-2-1.pdf>
- Paperwork Reduction Action Team. *Recommendation for Universal Training System*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Recommendations-Universal-Training-System-1-1.pdf>
- Paraeducator Action Team. *OPTIMISE Paraeducator Action Team Recommendations*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/OPTIMISE-Paraeducator-Action-Team-Recommendations.pdf>
- OPTIMISE Speech-language Pathologist Shortage Action Team. (2023) *OPTIMISE Speech-Language Pathologist Shortage Action Team Recommendations*. <https://optimise.education/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/OPTIMISE-SLP-Recommendations-2023-24-v08272024.pdf>
- OPTIMISE Workload/Caseload Action Team. (Pending 2025) *Recommendations*.

## 5. OTHER RELEVANT REPORTS/RESOURCES

The following publications from other organizations reiterate many of the recommendations above and also include additional recommendations which may be helpful in addressing the critical shortage of special educators in Michigan.

- Calder Center. (2023) *The Impact of a \$10,000 Bonus on Special Education Teacher Shortages in Hawai'i*. <https://caldercenter.org/publications/impact-10000-bonus-special-education-teacher-shortages-hawaii>
- CEEDAR Center. (2020). *Preparing and retaining effective special education teachers: Short term strategies for long-term solutions (A policy*

brief). <https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CEEDAR-GTL-Shortages-Brief.pdf>

- Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Committees. (2022). *K-12 EDUCATION: Education Should Assess Its Efforts to Address Teacher Shortages*. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105180.pdf>
- National Education Association. (2022) *9 Ways to Make Educator Pay and Benefits Competitive*. <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/9-ways-make-educator-pay-and-benefits-competitive>
- Office of Special Education Programs (2020). *Attract, prepare, retain: OSEP national summit on improving personnel for children with disabilities*. U.S Department Education. <https://osepideasthatwork.org/federal-resources-stakeholders/attract-prepare-retain-osep-national-summit-improving-effective-personnel-children-disabilities>
- Office of Special Education Programs. (Jan. 13, 2025) *Dear Colleague Letter on Special Education Personnel Retention*. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/dear-colleague-letter-on-special-education-personnel-retention-jan-13-2025/>