



Reducing Special Education Paperwork

Sheri Klein

Special education teachers are drowning in paper. Here's how you can help them.

IN BRIEF

The burden of required paperwork is one of the main causes for dissatisfaction of special education teachers, according to a recent study. One of the study's authors examines the problem and reports on four ways principals can help reduce that burden: provide special education teachers more time for paperwork; limit their caseloads; provide more support and resources for the IEP process; and require only essential paperwork.

"I find that the paperwork that is required for all general education teachers to be the least burdensome because it's paperwork that comes with the job...It's the additional special education paperwork that I find most burdensome because I have to generate the same information and repeat it over and over on different forms."

—Elementary school special education teacher

The work of special education teachers overflows the school day. In addition to planning and teaching lessons, grading papers, and scheduling and attending Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, they spend more than 10 percent of their time on paperwork and administrative requirements, such as printing and copying special education forms, mailing parent notices, tracking paperwork from other teachers, evaluating students, and planning students' transitions from school to adult activities.

The amount of paperwork that special education teachers are required to complete can contribute to job dissatisfaction and may be a principal cause of teacher attrition. Because the special education field is experiencing tremendous shortages, the U.S. Department of Education recently commissioned a national survey of special education teachers by Westat, an independent research organization. The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), identified the burden of paperwork as a significant factor in special education teachers' job manageability, and indicated a strong need for school administrators to address the issue.

The study showed four ways in which principals and classroom teachers can help chip away at the special education teachers' paperwork burden:

- Provide sufficient time for paperwork and administrative duties;
- Limit the number of students assigned to teachers who serve as case managers;
- Increase support for special education teachers in the IEP process; and
- Require only paperwork in areas most helpful to teachers and students.

Make More Time

Special educators typically devote one planning period a day, or about four hours a week, to complete their administrative duties and paperwork. But they *spend* six hours a week on these chores, which leaves a two-hour discrepancy they have to make up on their personal time. Most special educators say they could use even *more* time if it was available.

The amount of time that special education teachers must devote to administrative duties and paperwork is directly connected with their feelings about how much those duties interfere with their teaching. Teachers who claimed that administrative duties and paperwork did not interfere with their teaching averaged four hours a week of paperwork, compared with five hours per week for

“...Only 50 percent of special education teachers receive any assistance on paperwork from a paraprofessional...or secretary.”

those who said it interfered to a moderate extent, and eight hours for those who said it interfered a great deal.

Limit the Caseloads

One way that principals can help reduce the paperwork burden of special education teachers is by limiting the number of student cases they manage. The job of case managers, who track student progress; plan, organize, and summarize IEP meeting notes; and coordinate services among teachers and related services personnel, is clearly linked to paperwork responsibilities.

Special education teachers, on average, serve as case managers for 15 students and spend about 36 minutes per week per child on administrative duties and paperwork. This is significantly more time than they spend on students for whom they don't serve as case manager (about 24 minutes). This means, for example, that a special education teacher who serves as a case manager for 15 students will spend about nine hours per week on paperwork.

Two other sources of special education paperwork are the initial and triennial evaluations that determine if students are eligible—and remain eligible—for special education services. Those who conduct these evaluations spend more time on paperwork than those who do not. Limiting special education teachers' role in these evaluations can significantly reduce the time they spend on paperwork.

Provide IEP Support

IEPs take a lot of time. The typical special education teacher spends two hours writing each IEP and 1.5 hours attending each IEP meeting. In addition,

special educators spend two hours per month scheduling IEP meetings, four hours per month printing or copying special education forms, one hour per month mailing notices to parents, and four hours per month tracking paperwork from other teachers. Many of these tasks could be accomplished by non-instructional personnel.

Another way to reduce paperwork associated with the IEP process is to provide additional resources for special education teachers. For example, SPeNSE showed that special educators who were given a list of IEP goals from which to choose spent significantly less time on IEP preparation than those who did not. Also, special education teachers who had to rewrite an entire IEP during an annual review, rather than rewriting only sections where changes were needed, were more likely to exceed the time available to complete their paperwork and other administrative duties.

Reliable access to computer programs to help complete IEPs also helps. SPeNSE found that special education teachers with little or no access to such programs were five times less likely to have sufficient time to complete their paperwork than those with regular access.

Prioritize Paperwork

Not all paperwork is created equal! Some of it can be helpful for special education teachers, such as documenting students' levels of performance, writing short-term objectives, and conducting initial and triennial evaluations.

Conversely, a number of special education teachers found that completing student referrals for initial evaluations and writing reports of student assessment results were not particularly useful. Principals should do all they can to eliminate non-essential paperwork. One way to do this would be to shift some of the paperwork responsibility to others. At present, only 50 percent of special education teachers receive any assistance on paperwork from a

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paraprofessional, instructional assistant, parent, volunteer, or secretary.

The quality of the special educators in your building, and the time and energy they devote to teaching your children, are critical. The more support they have, the better job they will do and the more likely they will remain in teaching. Providing a work environment where they have manageable caseloads, and enough time, support, and resources to complete their work, will reduce the likelihood that paperwork and administrative duties will affect the quality of their teaching. Their performance will improve—and so will their students'. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

Westat's Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education examines the nationwide shortage of special education teachers. The full report is available online.
<http://ferdig.coe.ufl.edu/spense/>

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education has a comparison of the proposed revisions to IDEA with the current law.
www.nasds.org

Perspectives in Education and Deafness, a publication of the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, has posted an article, "It Doesn't Have to Be Like That! Getting the Most from an IEP Meeting," advocating inclusion of students in IEP meetings.
<http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/products/perspectives/sep-oct99/velaski.html>