

Diverse Learner Teacher Retention in Tennessee





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Executive Summary

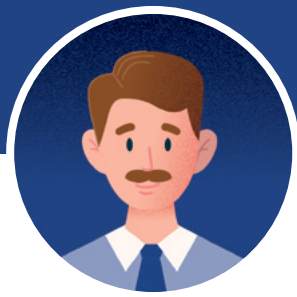
In the three years since the start of the pandemic, teacher retention has steadily declined across the nation. In the past two decades, Tennessee has struggled to staff diverse learner teachers – specifically, special education and English as a second language (ESL) educators. Not only has staffing these two areas been a challenge, but diverse learner teacher turnover has been greatly impacted over the last decade. Further compounding the issue of unfilled positions, diverse learner teacher attrition has continued to increase over the last decade. Tennessee’s lawmakers, state officials, and district professionals have put forth significant and creative efforts to stem the tide of these concerning trends, but few efforts have had a specific focus or impact on the attrition of diverse learner educators. As the number of diverse learners served in Tennessee’s public schools continues to rise, it will be critical for leaders at all levels to develop targeted strategies to recruit and retain special education and ESL teachers.

To inspire such action, the Diverse Learners Cooperative launched and facilitated a study of diverse learner teacher retention across the state of Tennessee. The goal of this effort was to pinpoint factors that influence a special education or ESL educator to enter, remain, or leave the classroom role. Through a series of surveys, focus groups, and interviews, the following recommendations were generated as a framework for action:



State Policymakers Can:

- Introduce, support, and pass legislation that enhances diverse learner teacher working conditions
- Provide districts with professional development materials targeting the needs of diverse learners



District Leaders Can:

- Use TISA funds to raise step-increases for teachers in high-needs content areas
- Implement tailored professional development focused on diverse learners



School Leaders Can:

- Implement structured time for diverse learner teachers to complete legal paperwork, lesson plan, and collaborate with colleagues
- Seek out communication and feedback from diverse learners educators, valuing their voice in decisions that will affect their students



Who is the Diverse Learners Cooperative?

The Diverse Learners Cooperative, a Tennessee-based nonprofit organization, exists to create purposeful networks of educators, providing them with high quality resources and collaborative learning experiences that increase best practices for diverse learners and teacher retention. We are a team of educators and advocates, curious listeners, and courageous doers. Fueled by a shared expertise and passion for equitable access to education for all learners, we partner with schools and systems to remove barriers and create new paths to meaningful inclusion and success.

For more information about the Diverse Learners Cooperative, visit www.diverselearnerscoop.com

Understanding the Problem: Trends in Teacher Retention

A NATION'S CHALLENGE: GROWING TEACHER ATTRITION

Teacher retention in the United States has seen a marked decline in recent years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 300,000 public-school teachers and other staff left the field between February 2020 and May 2022, a nearly 3 point drop in the workforce¹. At the end of the 2021-2022 school year, the national teacher turnover rate reached 10%, a 4 point increase from pre-pandemic rates. Notably, national attrition rates were highest in urban districts, reaching 14%.² Teachers who left the profession cited low pay, health concerns, trauma and violence, and increasing instructional demands as their reasons for leaving, among others.³ The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated this issue. As states and districts scramble to fill empty positions, teacher qualifications have been adjusted, reduced, and sometimes removed altogether in order to fully staff schools.

Despite recent increases in attrition across all areas of education, special education and English as a second language (ESL) teacher turnover has been a challenge for decades. Dating back to the early 1990's, states across the nation have reported special education teacher shortages. Today, 49 states and the District of Columbia report staffing shortages in special education, which includes 98% of US school districts.⁴ ESL teacher retention mirrors these trends. In the 2021-2022 school year, 33 states and the District of Columbia reported statewide ESL teacher or specialist/consultant shortages.⁵ According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, while the nation's multilingual student population continues to skyrocket, "employment of ... ESL teachers is projected to decline 6 points from 2021 to 2031".⁶ Staffing shortages in special education and ESL highlight a critical need for innovative solutions to address the ongoing challenge of teacher turnover and retention in these important areas of education.

CLOSER TO HOME: TEACHER RETENTION IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee reflects similar trends in teacher retention. On the last state report card, Tennessee reported approximately 2,200 teacher vacancies.⁷ However, the overall teacher retention rate in Tennessee has remained relatively stable, from 90.9% in the 2019-2020 school year to 91.2% in the 2021-2022 school year.⁸ Recent research shows that Tennessee's teacher shortages are nuanced and that some positions are harder to staff than others.⁹ Special education and ESL teachers have consistently been named as two roles that are hardest to staff. In addition, over the last five years, the number of graduating teacher candidates has dropped by nearly one fifth.¹⁰ Despite a stable retention rate, Tennessee can expect teacher shortages to continue increasing across special education and ESL fields.

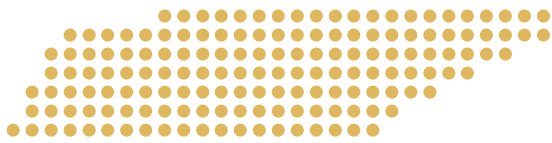


fig. 1

90.9%

2021-2020 retention rate

91.2%

2021-2020 retention rate

20%

less graduating teacher candidates over last 5 years

Special Education and ESL have been identified as teacher shortage areas in Tennessee since

1990

(US Department of Education, 2023)



Impacts of Teacher Shortages and Attrition Rates on Diverse Learners

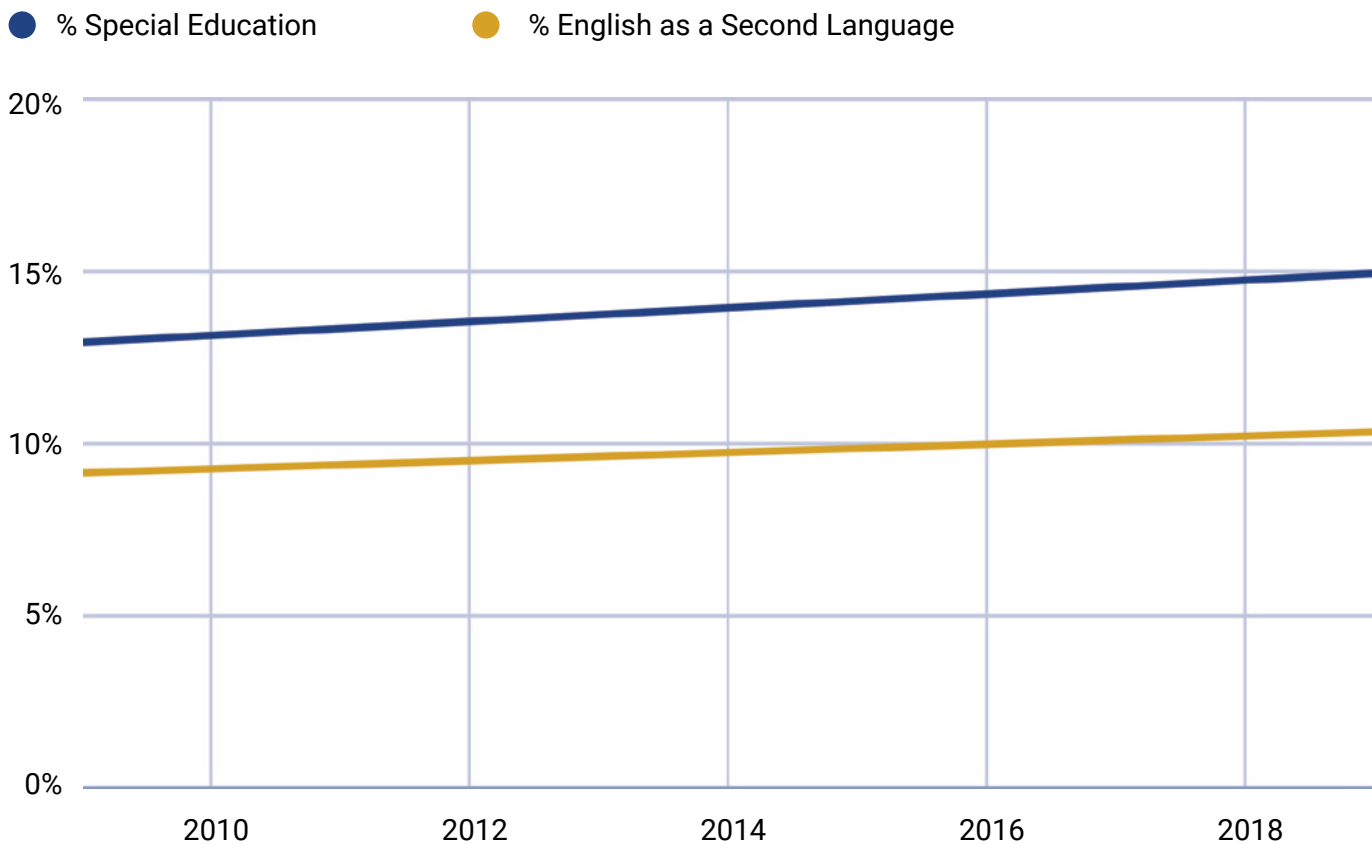
Over the last decade, the nation has seen an increase in the number of students identified with disabilities. Students aged 3–21 who receive special education services grew from 13% in 2009 to 15% in 2020. Along with increasing identification rates, schools are educating students with disabilities in increasingly inclusive settings. Ten years ago, 59% of students with disabilities were taught in general education environments for a majority of their day. As of 2019, that is true for 66% of students with disabilities.¹¹ Whether students are served in general education or highly specialized settings, special education teachers are required to implement high quality, individualized plans. A shortage of special education teachers means that students with the most unique needs are

often served by the least qualified and least experienced teachers.

The United States has a growing ESL population. The number of students receiving English language services grew from 9.2% in 2010 to 10.4% in 2019.¹² ESL service models include both direct and indirect services. Direct services are provided by ESL teachers, while indirect services are provided by the general education teacher scaffolding classroom instruction so that students can access the curriculum in English.¹³ A growing multilingual population will require an increasing number of educators trained in the delivery of services and development of accommodations.

fig. 2

Diverse Learner Student Population Growth In the U.S. (2010 – 2018)

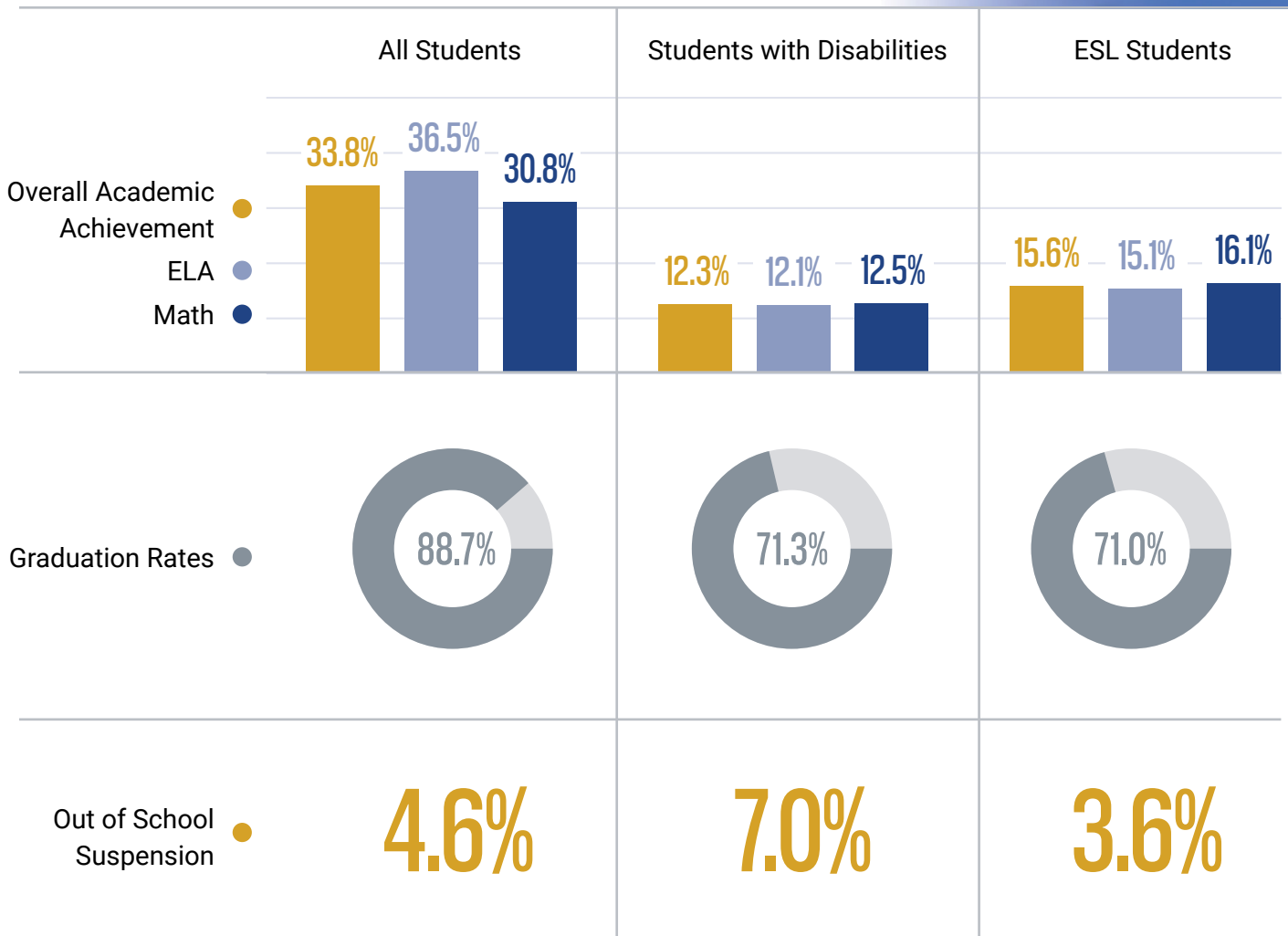


(Tennessee Department of Education, 2022)

Schools require an adequate number of qualified personnel to implement students' service plans effectively and ensure diverse learners have unencumbered access to high quality educational opportunities. During the 2021-2022 school year, Tennessee diverse learners performed significantly lower on state achievement assessments than their general education peers in both math and English Language Arts. Further, compared to the rate of out of school suspensions for all students, students with disabilities were 1.5 times more likely to be assigned this consequence (See fig. 3).¹⁴ More robust staffing and training models are needed to support the growing diverse learners and address the persistent access and achievement gaps they experience.



fig. 3
Tennessee Diverse Learner Academic Achievement (2021–2022)



(Tennessee Department of Education, 2022)

Methodology

The Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC) research team used a mixed-methods approach to investigate teacher retention for diverse learner educators across the state. A statewide survey was digitally distributed to current special education and ESL teachers. Some survey respondents participated in follow-up focus groups. Four participants from the focus groups were selected to take part in individual interviews to discuss their personal experiences and their school's initiatives to retain diverse learner teachers.

301
responses

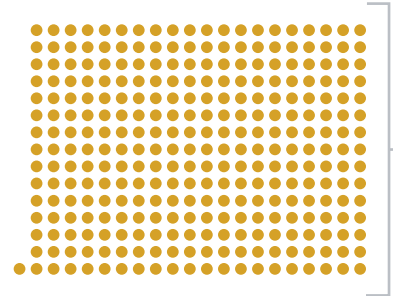
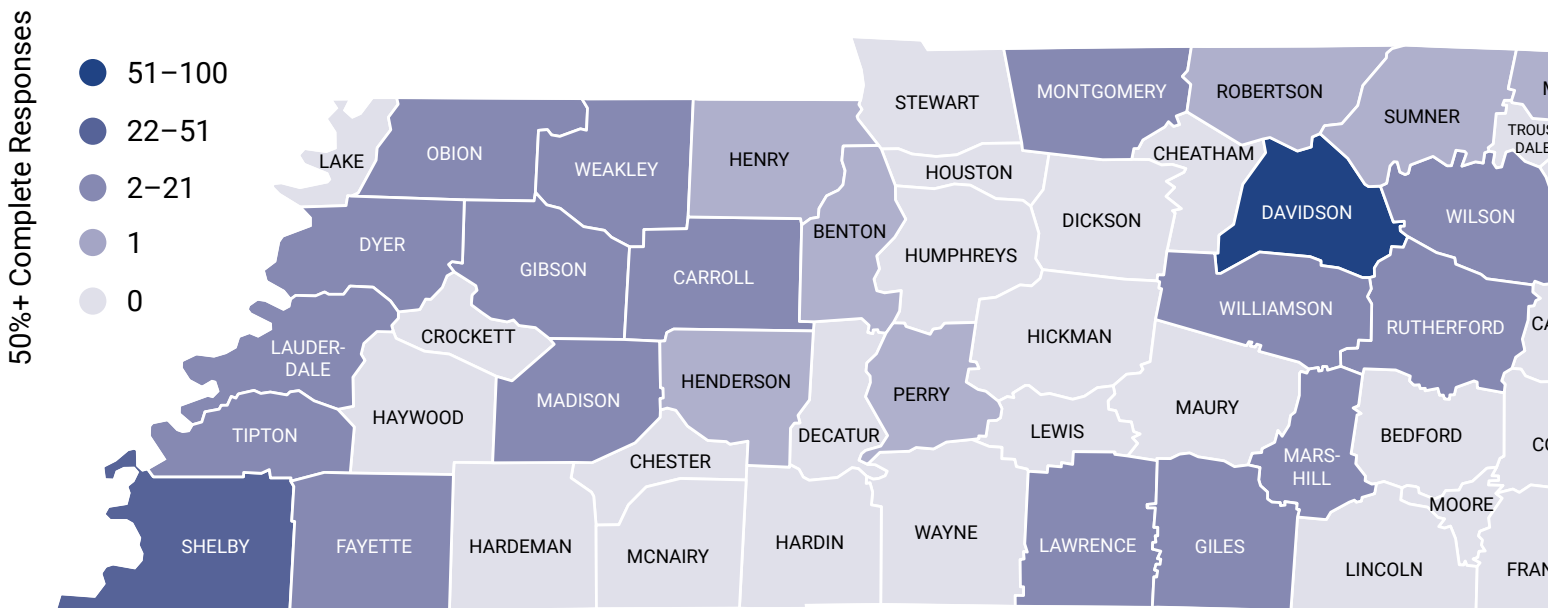


fig. 4
Tennessee Diverse Learner Teacher Survey



SURVEY

The DLC analyzed survey data from respondents that completed 50% or more of the survey. In total, 301 responses were recorded. While most responses came from Davidson County (90), Shelby County (37) and Knox County (23), survey responses were recorded from 45 of 95 (47%) Tennessee counties (See fig. 4).

Of 301 responses, 53% were special education teachers, 45.33% were ESL teachers, and 1.67% held both roles at their school. A majority of respondents currently teach in traditional public schools (70.3%) and are veteran teachers (75%) with six or more years of teaching experience.

Responses by Teacher Role

53%
special education teachers



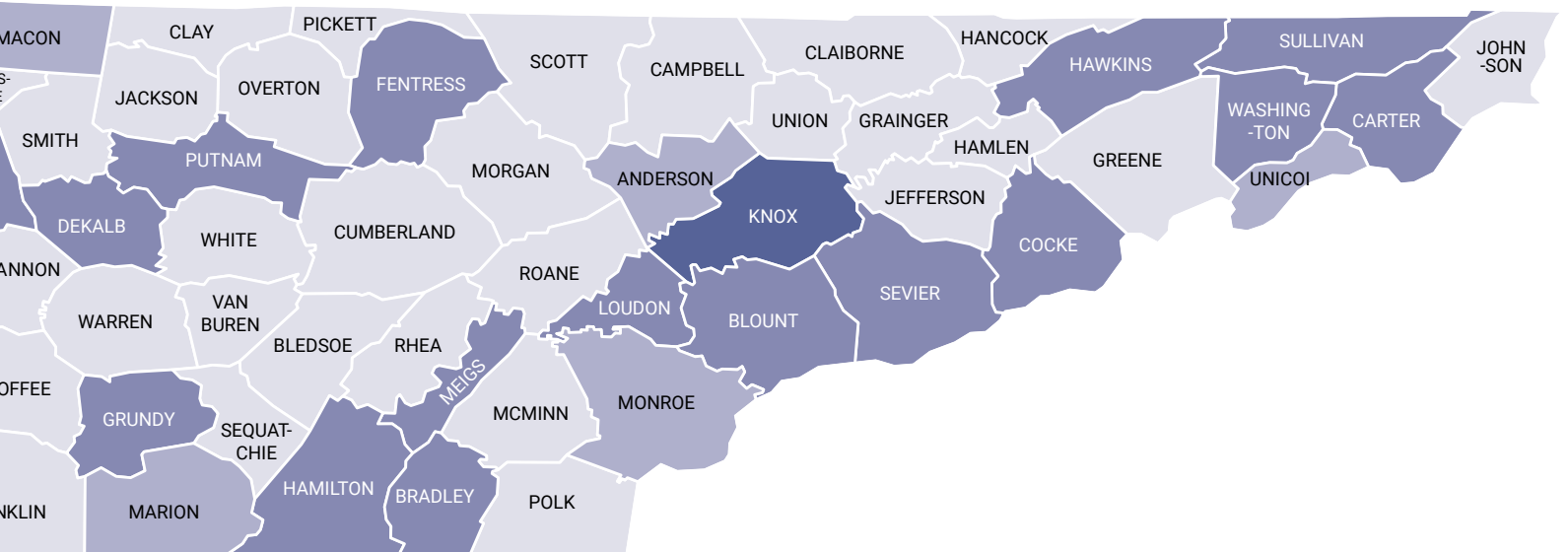
45.33%
ESL teachers



1.67%
both roles



Responses by School Type



75%
with 6+ years of teaching experience



73%
traditionally trained/licensed teachers



FOCUS GROUPS

The DLC conducted four focus groups, including two for special education teachers and two for ESL teachers. Fifteen teachers participated via a virtual meeting platform, including seven special education teachers and eight ESL teachers.

Four participants from focus groups, two special education teachers and two ESL teachers, were interviewed to gather more information on themes they had mentioned during the focus groups. These topics included administrative support, teacher autonomy, teacher capacity, and professional growth and development.

Qualitative and quantitative data from the survey, focus groups, and interviews were collected, coded, and analyzed to identify common themes. Public data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Tennessee State Report Card were used in conjunction with this data to further analyze diverse learner teacher retention in Tennessee.

Sample Focus Group Questions:

- As a special education or ESL teacher, what makes a good work environment for you to best serve your students?
- What were the factors that made you return to teaching this school year? Would these factors remain the same as you decide to return to teaching next school year?
- What would support you to remain as a teacher for years to come?

LIMITATIONS

There is no current or recently collected, publicly available data on the retention rates of diverse learner educators. Though attempts were made to request this data from state entities, no data was ultimately accessed. As a result, this study utilizes teacher retention data from national data sources.

Key Findings

TEACHER SATISFACTION AND FUTURE INTENTIONS

Job satisfaction is a key factor in understanding teacher retention. When teachers are more satisfied in their jobs, they are more likely to remain in their roles from year to year.¹⁵ One tool that Tennessee has used to understand teacher job satisfaction is the annually administered Tennessee Educator Survey. The 2022 survey found that 87% of Tennessee teachers reported being generally satisfied with being a teacher at their school, down 4 points from the prior year.¹⁶ The DLC survey administered specifically to special education and ESL educators further explores this claim with 62% of respondents reported feeling satisfied within their current positions.

In addition to career satisfaction, 77% of teachers on the 2022 Tennessee Educator Survey reported they were planning to continue teaching in their current school next year, five percent less than the prior year.¹⁷ The majority of DLC survey respondents reported plans to stay in their current position next year – 63% of all respondents indicating they planned to stay, while 19% were undecided about their plans for next year. Significant differences were apparent among special education teachers and ESL teachers, with only 57% of special education teachers indicating plans to stay and 22% undecided, while 70% of ESL teachers stated plans to stay with 15% undecided.

fig. 5
Future Intentions

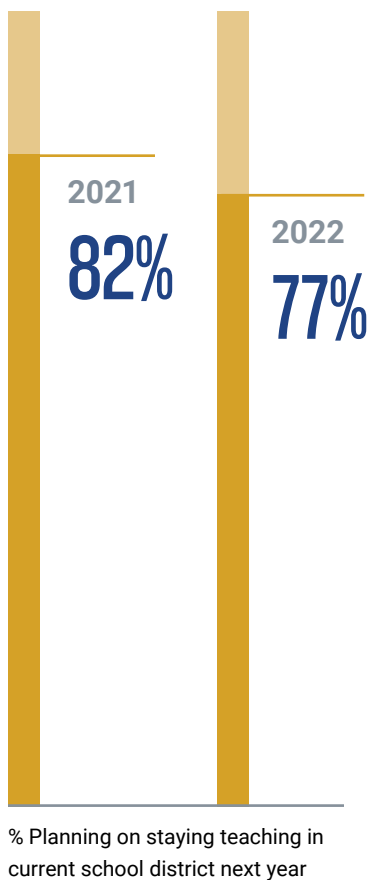
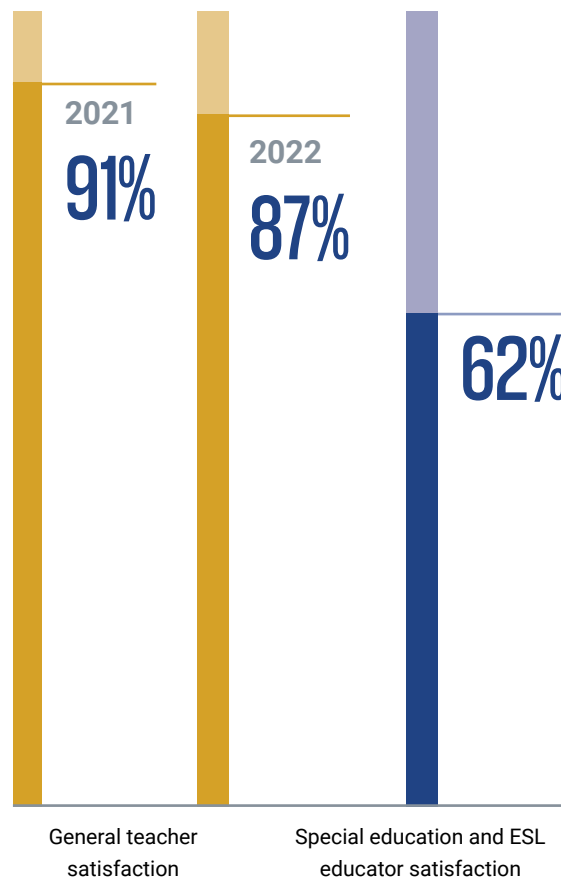
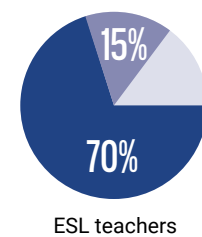
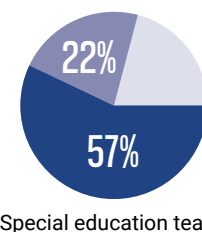
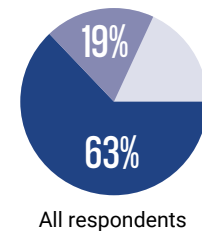


fig. 6
Teacher Satisfaction



Plans For Next Year

- Planned to stay
- Unsure
- Other



(Tennessee Department of Education, 2022)

(DLC survey results)

Influential Factors: Five Emerging Themes

Analysis of survey, focus group, and interviewee responses revealed five primary themes. Each theme reflected a factor that has significant influence on the longevity of diverse learner educators in their roles. The following section will explore each of these themes in depth, offering a look into the current realities of teaching, the impact these realities have on teacher retention, and a framework for considering future action. *The five themes that emerged as a result of this study focus on supportive teams and policies, individualized professional growth opportunities, specialized resources, manageable caseloads, and equitable compensation.*

1 SUPPORTIVE TEAMS AND LEADERS

Educating students with individualized needs requires more than just special education or ESL educators. All school staff members are involved in some capacity, whether implementing individualized

“A very supportive administration that really cares about making sure that students receive the services that they need both in and outside of the regular classroom, is really important for special education teachers to be able to perform their duties successfully.”

— *Veteran Special Education Teacher*

plans, applying accommodations, planning school routines, engaging families, or contributing to a positive and inclusive school culture. Further, schools operate within systems beyond themselves, resourced and held accountable by district administrations and state departments. For effective practice, staff at all levels must have an understanding of diverse learners, the resources required and available to serve them, and the willingness to collaborate in the execution of plans.

While these systems are layered and interconnected, we often hear diverse learner teams describe their experience as “siloes” and “separate.” According to teacher participants, this feeling of isolation and frustration often arises from a lack of diverse learner knowledge from peers and administrators. **1 out of 3 survey respondents noted they do not feel supported by the administration at their school. Similarly, 1 out of 4 survey respondents do not feel supported by the teachers at their school.**

Only 50% of survey respondents agreed that their school administration is knowledgeable about academically supporting diverse learners. Further, only 42% of respondents agreed that their administration is knowledgeable about behavioral support for diverse learners. One in five focus group comments further stamped these trends, noting that administrators needed more awareness and understanding about students with disabilities and ESL learners. When school administrators, general education teachers, and other school professionals approach planning, instruction, program, and policy development with an understanding of diverse learner needs, special education and ESL teachers experience a more positive working environment. This awareness increases teacher feelings of being understood, connected, and supported by school systems and cultures in place.

Beyond school leaders, state leaders at the Tennessee Department of Education can make a significant difference in the experience and



BRIGHT SPOT

“Our [ESL] coordinator attends the office hours offered by the state... and she’s really good about relaying that information to us as teachers. She understands the importance that we’re all on the same page and is very good about making sure we have all the information that we need.”

— *Veteran ESL Teacher*

persistence of a diverse learner teacher. Tennessee’s Department of Education invests their time and resources to provide districts with professional development materials and opportunities related to state initiatives and specific content areas. A greater awareness of the diverse learner specific experience could significantly impact decisions made within these leadership levels, and teachers feel that would influence their longevity. In 30% of the comments made by focus group participants, it was mentioned that they would need greater support from the state to envision themselves returning to their positions in the future. Specific areas of improvement included more continuity in state policies, clarity when relaying information on state policies, and passing policies that reflect the practical needs of diverse learners and their teachers.

Diverse learner educators are seeking knowledgeable, collaborative, and supportive teams and leaders at all levels to persist in their roles. Access to this kind of support greatly impacts a teacher’s decision to stay in their current role.

2 INDIVIDUALIZED PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

The quality of teaching is the most important factor in student achievement. Professional development is an effective strategy districts employ in an effort to increase the quality of teaching. While professional development can take a variety of forms, it always involves engaging a team of teachers in the strengthening of their practice and is most effective when it focuses specifically on the needs of students they serve. Further, teacher learning experiences should incorporate active learning, models of effective practice, and opportunities for collaboration and feedback.¹⁸

Study participants emphasized the importance of having access to professional development opportunities, especially those that focused on the needs of students with disabilities and multilingual learners. Only 50% of survey respondents indicated that they had opportunities to participate in high quality professional development specific to their role, while **64% of survey respondents indicated that access to high quality professional growth is highly or extremely influential in their decision to remain in their current role.**

Diverse learner teachers have expressed a desire for professional development opportunities that are more relevant to their roles, training that addresses the needs of their current students, and access to conferences attended by leading researchers in their field.

Participants further noted their desire for evaluation procedures that are tailored to their roles in serving diverse learners. A little over half of the respondents noted they receive useful feedback on their instruction. Several teachers agreed with a veteran special educator that often **“evaluators are not well versed in understanding how different the environment and teaching strategies are for diverse learners.”** To add to the urgency for inclusive and supportive accountability procedures, 54% of respondents believed that meaningful evaluation and feedback procedures would be highly or extremely influential in their decision to remain in their current role.

Diverse learner educators are eager for professional learning opportunities that align more closely with the needs of the students they serve. Access to such development is a highly influential factor in their decisions to remain in their roles.

“Teachers of diverse learners are often grouped with other teachers for professional development and are not getting the professional development we need to meet our needs and the needs of our students.”

— *Veteran Special Education Teacher*

3 SPECIALIZED RESOURCES

To effectively deliver accessible instruction, diverse learners and their service providers need access to specialized resources. This includes resources related to curriculum, technology, classroom materials, and others per the individual needs of a student. While many other school resources may serve whole grade levels or content areas, resources specific to diverse learners are likely to be needed on a small group or individual basis.

Academic Resources

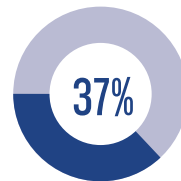
Given their specialized nature, participants noted that obtaining such resources was limited at their school. Respondents indicated a need for their schools to provide more (quantity) or more targeted (quality) resources related to instruction. Only 50% of survey respondents agreed that their school provides them with necessary curricular materials for students with **mild to moderate disabilities**, whereas only 25% of survey respondents agreed that their school provided curricular materials to meet the needs of students with **severe disabilities**. Further, only 37% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their school provides them with curricular materials to meet the needs of **ESL learners**.



agreed that their school provides them with necessary curricular materials for students with **mild to moderate disabilities**



agreed that their school provided curricular materials to meet the needs of students with **severe disabilities**



agreed or strongly agreed that their school provides them with curricular materials to meet the needs of **ESL learners**

BRIGHT SPOT

One Nashville charter school has placed value in the input of the ESL specialist to create customized instructional resources for English learners. The teacher responded positively to being engaged in this way.

“My school administration trusts me to use my discretion in my judgment, to do what’s best for [students] ... Students have benefited from this. It is a life raft to them ... they are going over material that they would not be getting otherwise.”

– *Veteran ESL Teacher*



This gap in materials frequently becomes the burden of the teacher. **55% of survey participants have purchased their own instructional materials to make up for gaps in quantity or quality of learning materials provided by their schools.** Teachers are seeking ways to combat this obligation, with **92% of survey participants advocating for instructional materials to be provided for their students.**

“I have provided almost all of my own materials throughout the years. **I have spent thousands and thousands of thousands of dollars from my own pocket to provide students with what they need to be successful.**”

– *Veteran Special Education Teacher*

Behavior Resources

Similar trends emerged pertaining to the gap in behavior intervention materials accessible at the school-level. Students with behavioral needs require interventions that may be supplementary or distinct from school-wide or classroom-based incentives. Resources related to behavior interventions could include intervention specific curriculum, visual schedules, modifiable behavior charts, and access to sensory tools and alternative communication systems. **Only 37% of respondents agreed that their school provided behavior intervention materials for students with mild to moderate disabilities, and 22% agreed their school provides them with behavioral intervention materials for students with severe disabilities.** Like academic needs, diverse learner educators need access to behavioral tools that will support the individualized interest, preferences, and communication needs of their learners.

Diverse learner teachers are experts in catering academic and behavior resources to their students. As student caseloads change each year, these teachers must make appropriate adjustments and access new materials to meet a variety of needs. Diverse learner teachers require access to specialized resources provided by their schools and districts, without expectation to find and pay for additional resources themselves.

4 MANAGEABLE CASELOADS

Special education and ESL teachers are annually assigned to a particular group of students as case managers. Case managers are responsible for drafting and maintaining individualized learning plans, ensuring that all services are delivered within the specified time, and collaborating with the students' team to implement additional accommodations and assessments.

“Everybody is stretched so thin and at some point you can only stretch so far. Being adequately staffed and having a manageable caseload—I think those would be the things that would keep me coming back.”

—Veteran Special Education Teacher

Until the passage of Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) Formula in 2022, caseload size was determined by the [Basic Education Program \(BEP\)](#) funding allocations. Within the BEP formula, schools are allocated a certain number of special education teachers according to the relative need of students for special education services. These teachers then may be assigned as many as 91 students with less significant need for services or as few as eight students if case managing students with more specialized needs. Most caseload sizes fall within the 12–40 student range. On a similar note, special education teachers who have an assigned class for provision of content instruction are held to the same class size standards of general education per grade level. This includes a maximum of 20 students at the elementary level, 25 at the middle school level, and up to 30 students at the secondary level. Comparably, ESL teacher caseloads are limited to 35 students at any grade level.¹⁹

Regardless of caseload size or range of need represented, diverse learner teachers work to maintain compliance standards and quality services across all assigned students.

Related to caseload size, 60% of survey respondents agreed that they had a manageable caseload, while 22% of special education teachers strongly disagreed that this was true of their experience. Further, **42% of focus group responses identified needing more time to fulfill job requirements as a diverse learner educator** to increase longevity in their careers. Participants noted needing more time to collaborate with colleagues, plan lessons, and complete required paperwork. Many teachers commented on the need to complete planning and operational tasks outside of paid hours in order to fulfill their job responsibilities.

fig. 7

Teacher Caseload

60%

had a manageable caseload

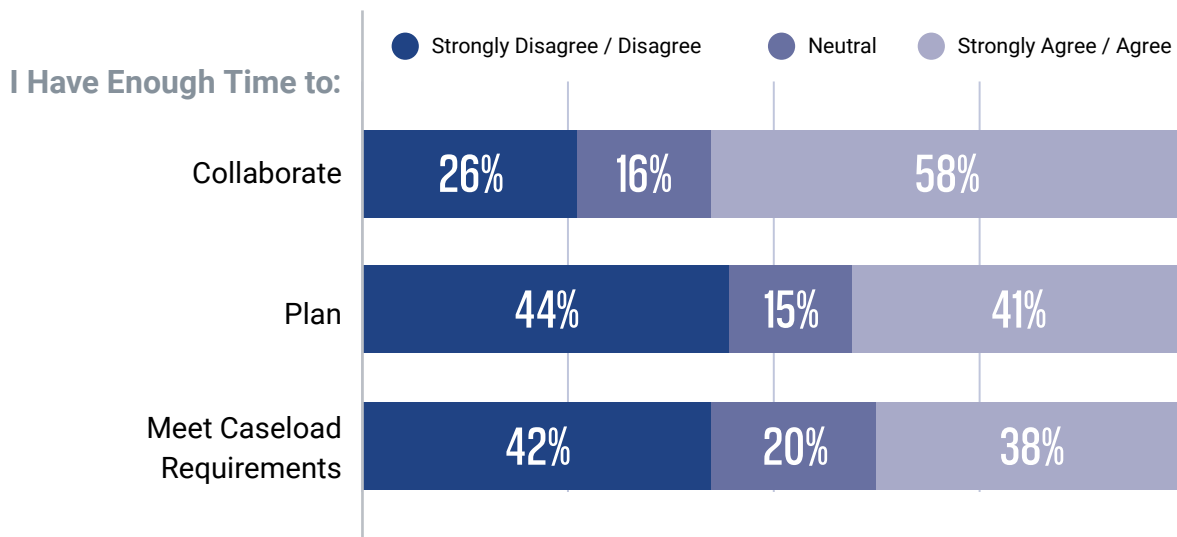
22%

of special education teachers don't have manageable caseload

(DLC survey results)

fig. 8

Diverse Learner Teacher Time to Collaborate, Plan, and Meet Caseload Requirements



26%

do not have time to collaborate with others

44%

do not have enough planning time

42%

do not have enough time to meet caseload requirements

“There are structured opportunities to collaborate, but limited due to time constraints. We are always working bare bones in my self-contained special education class and there is rarely time to complete everything that needs to be done preparation wise, let alone collaborate.”

—Veteran Special Education Teacher

Diverse learner teachers feel overloaded by the needs of large student caseloads and do not have enough time to complete paperwork, plan for instruction, and collaborate with colleagues inside their contracted hours. Having a manageable caseload, available support staff, and adequate time to fulfill job responsibilities were identified as the most influential factors in teacher’s decisions to remain in their roles.



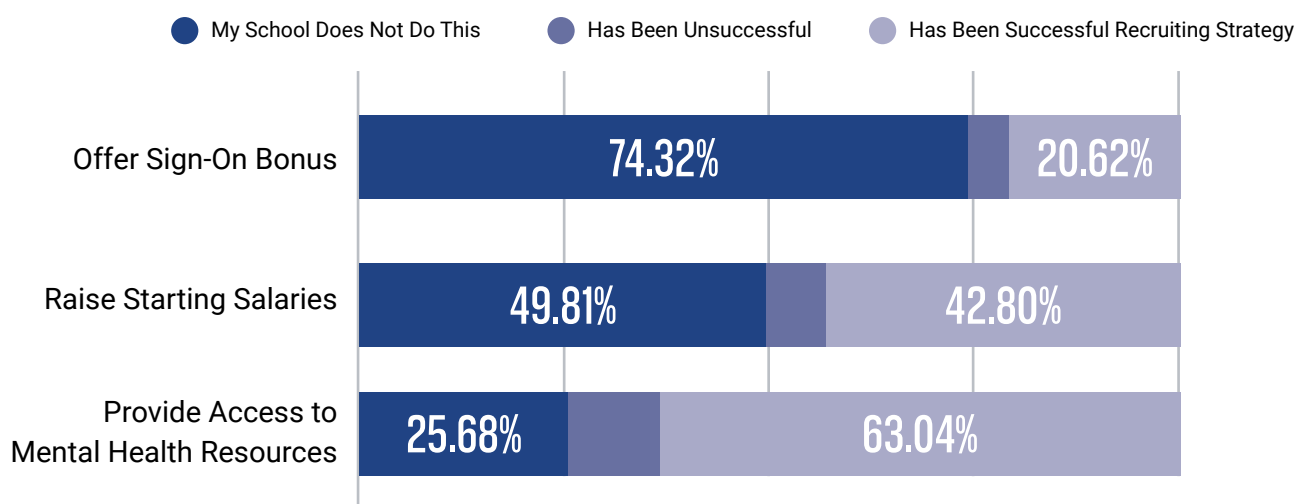
5 EQUITABLE COMPENSATION

The average pay for 2020-2021 Tennessee teachers was \$52,871, with the NEA ranking Tennessee as 42nd in average teacher salary when compared to other states.²⁰ The Tennessee General Assembly passed a bill to raise teacher’s base salary pay to \$50,000 by 2026, but as it currently stands annual salaries for beginning teachers average less than \$40,000. According to the United States Census Bureau, when compared to other professionals with similar entrance credentials (bachelor’s degree, certifications), teachers are paid substantially less than other professionals nationally.²¹ In the last ten years, the average salary of American teachers has risen by 15.2%. However, with inflation factored in, the value of teacher salaries has actually decreased by 3%.²²

Survey respondents noted that this salary was insufficient, with 63% of survey respondents not satisfied with their current salary. Further, **81% of survey respondents expressed that higher salaries for teachers is highly or extremely influential in their decision to remain in their current role.** As for ideas on salary-related strategies that their district could employ, 53% of respondents identified offering sign-on bonuses for special education and ESL teachers as very or extremely successful in recruiting and retaining diverse learner teachers.

fig. 9

Strategies to Recruit and Retain Diverse Learners Teachers



74%

of respondents' schools do not offer sign-on bonus for SPED and ESL teachers

49%

of respondents' schools have not raised starting salaries for diverse learner educators

25%

of respondents' schools do not have access to mental health resources

“For me the biggest thing would be the money and if we got bigger step increases or if base pay was higher ... When I look into my future, that [pay] is what makes me want to not teach. I feel like I could [teach] for so long and I’m never going to make as much as I feel like we deserve for all the hard work that we do.”

—Veteran Special Education Teacher

Recommendations

As Tennessee continues to face high rates of diverse learner teacher attrition, it is critical that state, district, and school leaders take action to develop a sustainable, high-quality workforce to serve diverse learners. Using teacher input and themes from survey results, focus group discussions, and interview comments, we recommend implementing the following recommendations.



STATE POLICYMAKERS: TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TENNESSEE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Many participants expressed the need for substantial system changes that impact on their role in order to remain in their teaching positions.

State leaders can provide resources and invest in initiatives that support Teachers of diverse learners in Tennessee.

State Level Policy Lever 1: Introduce, support, and pass legislation that improves and enhances diverse learner teacher working conditions

The TN General Assembly can introduce, support, and pass legislation that creates necessary system changes that positively impact diverse learner educators. Examples of such legislative issues include: increased and equitable compensation, eliminating barriers to the teaching profession such as teacher licensure costs, increasing protected teachers’ time and resources to successfully complete job requirements, and requiring courses on diverse learner populations for school leaders and all teacher candidates. Introducing, supporting, and passing legislation similar and adjacent to the topics above can help mitigate staffing shortages for diverse learner educators and improve the overall quality of diverse learner education in Tennessee.

State-Level Policy Lever 2: Provide Districts with Professional Development Materials Targeting Diverse Learner Needs

The Tennessee Department of Education should prioritize providing professional development materials that cater to the needs of diverse learners across the state. While the department offers a wide variety

of professional development content already, topics for diverse learners are broad. **Teachers are asking for content beyond what they had learned in their educator preparation programs to further their practice in their classrooms.** The Department of Education could survey diverse learner teachers to compile feedback on professional development content. Teacher feedback would be used to modify existing professional development to center relevant and current needs expressed by special education and ESL teachers across the state. Provision of more targeted professional development opportunities will equip district leaders to offer cohesive and comprehensive growth opportunities across all school professionals. Growth opportunities that address the unique characteristics of diverse learner teachers' jobs will increase teachers' feelings of capacity and value, ultimately increasing the likelihood they persist in their role.



DISTRICT LEADERS: SUPERINTENDENTS, CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION STAFF, & SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

District leaders can implement initiatives that will motivate diverse learner teachers to remain in their current roles. With new TISA budget allocations, districts are in a unique position to provide additional compensation for diverse learner teachers.

District-Level Policy Lever 1: Use TISA Funds to Create Retention Bonuses for High-Needs Content Areas

Strategic investments through TISA can be leveraged to provide financial compensation that recognizes the specific challenges in preparing, recruiting, and retaining high-needs content areas like ESL and special education. This recognition would be an extension of how TISA prioritizes the needs of students with disabilities and ESL students, as it would recognize the unique staffing challenges related to the teachers who specifically serve these students. Compensation is a critical factor that influences teachers' decisions to stay in their roles for an extended period of time. **By rewarding high-needs content teachers for their persistence, districts can demonstrate their commitment to retaining highly qualified educators.** Additional compensation can lead to a more stable and experienced workforce, which can have a positive impact on student outcomes and overall school culture.

District-Level Policy Lever 2: Provide Tailored Professional Development Focused on Diverse Learners

To support the needs of diverse learner teachers and promote inclusive education practices, it is essential to implement district-wide professional development that is tailored to teacher needs, including the groups of students they serve. Districts should also provide training sessions that are available to general education teachers and school administrators, with a focus on diverse learners and their unique needs.

Meaningful professional development cycles can provide diverse learner teachers with growth opportunities that are catered to their specific needs and goals as educators. **By providing professional development programming on diverse learners to all teachers and administrators, districts can increase awareness of diverse learner populations and high leverage strategies aligned with their educational needs.**

This can foster a district community that is knowledgeable about serving all learners. Diverse learner teachers will feel less isolated in their efforts to create and maintain accessible learning environments for their students.

EXAMPLES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THEMES

- Professional development on understanding disabilities and their impact in the classrooms
- Professional development sessions on providing accommodations for students using the district curriculum based on a student's IEP/ILP
- Professional development on English language development for English learners
- Opportunities for veteran diverse learner teachers to read and engage in current research to further their knowledge on special education/ESL research-based findings



SCHOOL-LEVEL LEADERS: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Making intentional and consistent decisions, school leaders can significantly influence the support their school's diverse learner educators feel and therefore, their persistence in the role. Diverse learner teachers had expressed the need for more time to complete job responsibilities in addition to having more support from their school leaders by being well informed on diverse learners while making school-wide decisions.

School-Level Policy Level 1: Implement Structured Time for Diverse Learner Teachers

Supporting the needs of diverse learners requires diverse learner teachers to have sufficient time and resources to plan, collaborate, and complete essential paperwork. To address this challenge, **it is essential to create structured time during the workday for diverse learner teachers to complete job requirements, such as lesson planning, creating accommodated and modified materials, collaborating with colleagues, and completing legal paperwork, including IEPs and ILPs.** Providing teachers with structured time to complete operational tasks can help to alleviate stress and burnout, which can have a significant impact on their well-being and job satisfaction. Enabling teachers to focus on essential tasks during the workday, school leaders can foster a culture of balance and value, which can enhance teacher effectiveness and retention.

School-Level Policy Level 2: Seek Communication and Feedback From Diverse Learner Educators

To foster a culture of collaboration and inclusion, it is crucial to provide diverse learner teachers frequent opportunities to share their insights and feedback on school initiatives. By actively seeking diverse learner teachers' perspectives, school leaders can make well-informed decisions that are inclusive of the needs of the diverse learners and teachers. School leaders will need to create consistent systems of engaging with teacher feedback such as having office hours, using feedback forms, and dedicating a portion of staff meetings for feedback. Incorporating teacher feedback, school leaders can plan or further develop initiatives that are inclusive of all learners and staff. This also strengthens collaborative culture among staff by creating space and time for school teams to discuss diverse learners' needs and brainstorming aligned solutions or next steps.

Diverse learner teachers are valuable stakeholders in the educational process, and their input should be valued and respected. **By establishing consistent opportunities for teachers to ask questions and provide feedback, school teams feel more informed, heard, valued, and accountable for implementing inclusive school initiatives.**

Conclusion

Tennessee is likely to experience ongoing gaps in filling special education and ESL roles unless steps are taken to retain teachers in these roles. With efforts focused on retention, Tennessee will almost assuredly see related effects in recruiting new special and ESL educators to the field. Beyond filled positions, students with disabilities and multilingual learners will have greater access to high quality educational opportunities that lead to academic and postsecondary success.

Survey and focus group participants emphasized the following areas that need to be applied to improve retention for diverse learner teachers: supportive teams and policies, individualized professional growth opportunities, specialized resources, manageable caseloads, and equitable compensation. By implementing the recommendations provided, Tennessee can take steps forward in increasing diverse learner teacher retention and establishing a sustainable workforce for special education and ESL for years to come.

Appendix A. Definitions

Diverse learner: A student who receives special education services and/or ESL services.

Diverse learner teacher/educator: A teacher who teaches students who receive special education services and/or ESL services.

ESL: English as a second language, referring to a specialized service offered by schools to support the development of a student's English language skills. We recognize that state policies most often use "English as a second Language" (ESL) when referring to language services for non-English speakers. To stay consistent with state policies and advocate in spaces where this is familiar terminology, the term ESL will be used most frequently in this report. We acknowledge other terms such as multilingual learners or emergent bilinguals are more inclusive when referring to their group of students, and therefore prefer these terms in other DLC publications.

Special Education: Special education is specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Special education is specifically developed to address a student's needs, and its programming is individualized for each student. Each student receiving special education has an IEP that outlines the school's roles and responsibilities to address a student's academic, behavioral, social, functional, vocational, and extracurricular needs. We acknowledge that other terms are used for special education (i.e. exceptional education). However, we've chosen to use "special education" as it is more widely used in the policy space.

IEP: Individualized Education Plan is a service plan developed to meet the needs of students with a disability in K-12 educational institutions. An IEP outlines a student's needs as it relates to their disabilities and lays out the special education services and supports needed to make progress and thrive in school.

ILP: Individual Learning Plan is a document that describes the academic needs, language needs, and goals for students receiving ESL services.

New Teacher: A teacher who is in their first through fifth year of teaching.

Veteran Teacher: A teacher who has taught for six or more years.

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