

WHY THEY STAY

Leadership Practices That Strengthen Special Education Staff Retention

ACSA Region 6 Annual Conference

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10:00–10:50 AM

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Relationships • Clarity • Consistency



Our Agenda



01

Leadership Before Hiring

Slides 3 – 8

02

Early Employment & Growth

Slides 9 – 12

03

Sustaining Over Time

Slides 13 – 17

There is no single right way—only intentional leadership.



Before the Interview

What does a prospective employee experience from their very first interaction with our schools?

- **Who makes the first contact?**
- **What is that contact?**
- **What tone is communicated?**
- **Would you want to work at your site based on that interaction alone?**

There is no right or wrong answer, but a system to think about.

Why Do First Impressions Matter?



There are currently more special education openings than applicants, so the choice is theirs.

Our practices are being compared to neighboring schools.

Candidates are applying to multiple schools at once and we want ours to stand out!

The Interview

What does our interview environment communicate about our school's culture and leadership?

- How is the candidate brought into the interview space?
- Are we rushing? Making eye contact? Do we have a set of questions ready?
- Who is on the panel?
- What is the candidate told about the details of the job? Do they know they will toilet, deal with bodily fluids, manage behaviors?
- Is there time and space for authentic questions?

How do our practices create positivity and transparency?

Reflection...

Even when we don't hire someone, we have made an impression.

That impression leaves a mark on how others feel about our school and our district.

*Regardless of the outcome, candidates should leave an interview feeling **seen, heard, and respected**—and with a positive impression of the school and its leadership.*



A background image showing two hands shaking over a document, symbolizing a deal or agreement. The hands are in the foreground, and the document is slightly blurred in the background.

Closing the Deal

What role does site leadership play once an offer is on the table?

Questions to Consider

- How are candidates supported once HR enters the process?
- What happens when the initial offer doesn't match the demands of the role or experience level of candidate?
- What message is sent when leaders do—or do not—advocate?

Site administrators don't control compensation, and advocating doesn't always change the outcome. But sometimes it does. And even when it doesn't, how we show up in this moment still communicates something to the candidate.

Conversation #1

Leadership Before Hiring: First Contact, Interview Process, Closing the Deal

After you introduce yourself, discuss with your group:

- **Where do first impressions at your site feel strongest?**
- **Where might small shifts make a meaningful difference?**

Be ready to return with **one takeaway** or **one leadership move** worth considering.



Before the First Day

Once a candidate accepts an offer what are our next steps?

- How is communication handled between acceptance and Day 1?
- What information is proactively shared to reduce uncertainty and anxiety?
- How are expectations, logistics, and culture introduced—clearly and thoughtfully?
- What does the first day look like from the employee's perspective?

Current Staff: Do we tell current staff about a new employee? Who do we tell? What do we say? How does that action (or inaction) affect the arrival and welcoming of a new employee?

Early clarity communicates care and sets the tone for trust, confidence, and belonging.

The First Day on Site

How are we setting the tone for belonging, clarity, and confidence?



Arrival

Where does the new employee go first, and who greets them?



Tour

Do we give a school tour? What do we show them and why? Who gives the tour?



Expectations

Is there a slide show or other document you review that clearly spells out expectations? (see Resources at end of presentation)



Introductions

Who do you introduce them to?

- Dedicated time with service providers?
- Access to a caseload study of their new students?
- Time to just observe?
- How are new employees scaffolded into the environment? Are they immediately paired with the most difficult students to give other staff a break or are they given easier students first to help acclimate?
- What is the balance between structured support, on-the-job training and being left to figure it out on their own?

A thoughtful first day helps new employees feel grounded, welcomed, and ready to learn.

Building Relationships Early

How do we intentionally support new employees during their first weeks on campus?

- How and when do we check in during the first week? The 2nd week? The 3rd week? etc.
- What systems exist to notice questions, stress, or uncertainty early?
- How do early relationships help new employees feel connected, capable, and accountable?

Early connection reduces isolation and builds the foundation for long-term commitment.





Conversation #2

Early Employment & Growth: Before First Day, First Day, Building Early Relationships

Discuss with your group:

- **Where do new employees at your site feel most supported?**
- **Where might additional clarity or connection make a difference during the early employment phase?**

Be ready to return with **one insight** or **one leadership move** you want to strengthen.

Observations

How are we intentionally using observations to support growth and set expectations?

- How much time passes before getting into classrooms or workspaces after an employee starts?
- What are we looking for during early observations?
- How are observations connected to the job descriptions? District evaluation standards? Site expectations?
- How is feedback framed to support growth while maintaining high expectations?
- **Feedback from Others:** Who do we ask about how the employee is doing? Or do we?

☐ *Early observations communicate priorities, values, and leadership presence.*



The First Evaluation

How do we balance high expectations, honest feedback and encouragement?

- How are strengths explicitly named and honored?
- How are growth areas addressed clearly and professionally?
- How are difficult conversations framed to support learning?
- How are goals co-developed so employees feel both supported and accountable?
- How do you ask for feedback?

A thoughtful first evaluation builds clarity, trust, and professional confidence.

Becoming a Permanent Employee

How do we acknowledge and respond to the milestone of permanency?

- How is permanency communicated to the employee?
- What message does this moment send about belonging and value?
- How do leaders recognize the effort it took to get here?
- How are expectations reinforced as employees move from "new" to "established"?



❑ *Permanency is not the end of support—it is a transition into deeper trust and responsibility.*

After Permanency: Sustaining Relationships & Expectations

How do we intentionally maintain connection and accountability after an employee becomes permanent?

Connection

- What systems exist to stay connected beyond the first year?
- Do we acknowledge birthdays?
- Do we know personal stories?
- Is there a subculture within our special education departments that promotes celebration, acknowledges milestones, etc?

Growth

- How do we continue to provide feedback, recognition, and growth opportunities?
- Do we know our employees hopes and dreams for their career, their future?

Expectations

- How are expectations revisited and reinforced over time?
- Do we have systems in place to regularly get staff together?

Intentionality

How do we avoid the "set it and forget it" approach once staff are no longer new?

☐ *Sustained leadership—not just early support—is what keeps great staff for the long haul.*

Conversation #3

Sustaining Over Time: Observations, Evaluations, Permanency, Beyond

Discuss with your group:

- Where do relationships and expectations feel well balanced?
- Where might greater intentionality in this phase of the journey make a difference?

Be ready to return with **one insight** or **one leadership move** you want to carry forward.

One Final Thought...

When an employee leaves, how do we handle it?

Do we ask why?

Do we reflect on the reason?

Was there anything we could have done to prevent it?



Pause & Synthesize

Take a moment to reflect:

Which leadership moment in this journey stood out most to you?

Where do you see the greatest opportunity to strengthen retention at your site?

What is one insight you're taking with you?

Retention is shaped by small, intentional leadership choices over time.



People don't stay because everything is easy. They stay because they feel supported, trusted, and clear about what matters.

Thank You!

Shared Tools & Examples

Resources shared are examples, not prescriptions. Adapt what fits your site, your staff, and your context.

[Sample onboarding communication](#)

[First-day agendas](#)

[Check-in tools](#)

[Observation email samples](#)

[Onboarding Slideshow](#)

[Exit Interview Tools](#)

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