

Details

Attracting and Retaining Special Education Professionals - Bonus Episode with BlazerWorks

In this episode, Erin Hoganson, Special Education Advisor at BlazerWorks, joins me to discuss strategies for attracting and retaining special education professionals for schools and districts. You'll also hear about the importance of fostering community and belonging, being proactive in supporting educators' needs, and leveraging technology tools for connection.

Show notes: <https://classtechtips.com/2023/10/13/special-education-bonus/>

*special education professionals

Introduction

Hello there and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If we haven't met before, my name is Monica Burns. I'm a former NYC public school teacher and I've been out of the classroom for a few years leading professional development for teachers, and writing about all things EdTech on my blog [ClassTechTips.com](https://classtechtips.com)

You might be used to joining me on Tuesdays for new episodes of the podcast, and today is a special bonus episode in partnership with BlazerWorks. I'm excited to bring you another special bonus episode on a Friday.

Before we jump into today's episode, a quick reminder — you can head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode, and if you're listening to this episode on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, you should see a link in the description that you can click on as you listen today and it will take you to all of the resources I mention.

Promotion/Reminder

This episode is sponsored by BlazerWorks. A Special Education Advisory Service Provider with over three decades of experience in the education industry, BlazerWorks' mission is to elevate special education in the United States by providing advisory services and support to districts and school-based professionals.

Today's Intro

Today's episode is titled "Attracting and Retaining Special Education Professionals" a Bonus Episode with BlazerWorks. Now this is a topic that I'm so excited to explore today with Erin Hoganson the Special Education Advisor at BlazerWorks. For those of you who have followed along with me for a while or have connected with me in person at an event, you might know that I taught Upper Elementary School for several years so this topic of

retaining and attracting special education professionals is definitely one that's near and dear to my heart with an elementary mindset.

But we know of course this is something schools that schools and districts throughout K-12 struggle with so I was excited to chat with Erin about this topic, some of the tech connections that they use to address their goals and I think that you'll find this conversation provides different tips and strategies that you might take into your own practice as well. Let's jump into the conversation!

Episode Transcript

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to chat with you today. You know, all about this idea of helping school districts attract and retain those hard to fill positions, right? Special education positions specifically. So, as we get ready to talk about that topic, would first love for you to share a bit about your role in education. What does your day-to-day look like?

Erin Hoganson:

Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much for having me today, Monica. I'm really excited to be on here and chatting with you. So I started my career as a paraprofessional and I did that for about eight years, and I thought I wanted to become a special education teacher, and then I kind of shifted to school psychology because it kind of, it meshed my love of psychology with working with kids, but also I kind of was at a point where I wanted to maybe take it further at some point. So I went that route. And then through that time I worked with a variety of ages, preschool to post-secondary, a lot of different populations. And I definitely really found that love for elementary. And so I stayed there for quite a long time and worked as a program specialist and a coordinator, so various roles throughout my time. And so I really got to see a lot of different angles of working in special education. And so yeah, here I am. I joined this team about a year ago, and I was excited for this opportunity to really be able to kind of impact in education on such a broader scale because I worked, you know, in one district, in one area for a very long time. And so this was an exciting opportunity for me to kind of shift and support in a different way.

Monica Burns:

And your perspective, I would imagine, really informs all the conversations that you're having around this topic. And, you know, today we're talking about hard to fill special education positions. So can you give us an overview of the current challenges school districts face in attracting and retaining special education professionals?

Erin Hoganson:

Absolutely. So, you know, years ago when I first started, when I actually finished school and was getting ready to start for my first school psych job, I remember applying for a job and a director in Southern California told me they had 45 applicants for that one particular job. Now we look around and we can't even fill, you know, multiple positions. There's a national shortage of school psychologists, and we're, look, we're moving that way for speech pathologists and teachers, and it's, we just see this huge impact that, you know, was happening prior to the pandemic, but then the pandemic hit and it's really just snowballed since then. And so our company helps attract and retain staff. And so as a special education advisory service, we help fill positions. Not only do we fill the positions, then our team provides support for them from kind of step one and really gives them the tools they need to be successful across their assignments. And then also that support they need. I'm sure we'll get into this a bit more, but I think, you know, the burnout and what we see and there's just, there's a lack of feeling of support from many educators. You know, there's a variety of reasons why we're seeing staffing shortages, but our team is really working to help support kind of all along that process.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And I would imagine there's lots of conversations that you and your team are having with school districts around this, you know, what are some of the strategies you've shared with school districts to address staffing shortages and tight budgets right? To meet the needs of special education students and those professionals that support them?

Erin Hoganson:

Yeah, great question. There are many different things that we're helping with. And because we're a multidisciplinary team and we're supporting across the United States, we really get to kind of see maybe what some states are doing that's been successful, and we can share that with other districts that, districts that we partner with. So really sometimes it, it really starts with finding the right fit, the right fit candidate for the right fit position. So we really will help our recruiters understand maybe the different terms and programming that are in schools so that when they're talking to a candidate, they're able to give a candidate a real picture of, okay, you may walk into a classroom where kids are aggressive, or you may walk into a classroom where kids have significant medical needs. And so it really starts with that piece of kind of matching the right candidate to the right position which helps the district retain that person, and then hopefully continually, you know, keeps them to come back the next school year.

Erin Hoganson:

And then we also really provide them with a, a high level of support. So really we meet the candidate where they are, if that's just a phone call or a text message, that's okay. And then we have candidates who wanna get on Zooms or even meet us in person. We're able to do that. We, because we've expanded our team, we're, you know, across the US there's 30 of us across the United States, so we can visit school districts mm-hmm. <Affirmative> to provide that support for candidates that sometimes really need that in-person connection. And then we can kind of do that in a lot of different ways. We can do just, you know, a quick one time support them with something, or we can do an ongoing mentorship, which we have seen a lot of our kind of new grads that came outta school during covid really just need more support because now they're in it and it, you know, wasn't what, what they got outta school. So yeah, definitely a lot of support needed.

Monica Burns:

That's such a great point about the remote learning connection for those graduates, right? Who are coming in and maybe had a different kind of practicum experience than someone right. In a different setting or a different couple years <laugh> of going through, you know, their schooling. And as you were talking there, just imagining all the ways that you're leveraging technology to foster those connections, right? It's so wonderful when you have the chance to be in person or side by side or shoulder to shoulder, right, as we sometimes say, right. For that support. But then the ability to have that text messaging, to have those Zoom or video conferences even like we're talking today, right? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, that's just,

it's wild to think about how that support has shifted so greatly, you know, just in the past decade, <laugh>, let alone the past few years, you know, for educators.

Erin Hoganson:

Absolutely. I would say primarily we do a lot of zooming with our candidates and our school districts. So we are also creating presenting professional development for school districts. And it is pretty amazing that we can present via Zoom and really be able to support so many districts. And one day we may support, you know, multiple districts across the United States with that technology.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. It's just so important for the scale, right? Of the great work that you all do. And, you know, can, you can talk a bit about, you know, the, the impact here, right? We might scale all that support, but we know that the impact that turnover can have, especially in these specific roles that impact they can have on students is, is significant and, you know, what can, what does it look like, right? Can you talk about the impact of turnover in these specific roles on the students and that overall special education program?

Erin Hoganson:

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Absolutely. And you know, when we look at the statistics of things, there are, you know, almost half of schools across the United States can report a shortage of some sort. And the districts that are lucky to fill their positions may not be able to retain those staff members. So it is such a huge impact. We are able to also kind of be creative and help a district figure out, you know, maybe they need two SLPs, but if we can staff it with an S L P and a slip a an S L P A, then we can hopefully help them at least, you know, bridge that gap for now while we still work to try to help them find the SLPs that they're looking for. There's also really some interesting things that districts out there are doing. I just met with a district this week that they're building housing for their mm-hmm.

Erin Hoganson:

<Affirmative> teachers to really attract and retain. And I feel like districts have to really start to shift their thinking and be more creative in, you know, because it is kind of as we talk about all

these openings, you know, you're a teacher, you can, you could go get a job at multiple districts. And so it's really challenging and really competitive in that space. And so I think districts have to really think ahead to, you know, scholarships or incentives partnering with universities thinking about caseload versus workload and what does that look like, and are there other ways that we can support maybe with administrative support or clerical support to kind of take some of those pieces off of a provider's plate. So we really love to get in there and work with a district and problem solve and figure out, okay, what are your unique needs? What can we, you know, kind of highlight about your district to bring people in? And then what can we do to keep them here? Because ultimately that's what impacts the students. And, you know, when we're really trying to have a student-centered focus which is really important to me, then we can't have that if we have so much turnover. Ultimately, we want the kids to benefit from continued services and that continuity in their teams that are working with them.

Monica Burns:

Those interrupted services, right? A lot of people moving in and out of roles, right? For some of the reasons that you talked about already, right? Even getting someone there in the first place could be really tough, right? You might have openings in the community you currently live in, but even as you were talking about the housing component, right? That creative thinking to say, how can we set up everyone right, for success that we're bringing in? Right? Or attracting those quality candidates. And there, there are, it sounds like a lot of creative conversations, right? Happening in places that have unique needs that might be different than a school somewhere else. And, and yeah, just making sure that, that everyone is, is able to kind of get in there right, if you will, so that that turnover isn't happening at quite the same rate.

Erin Hoganson:

Absolutely. And another kind of thing that just popped into my mind, our company does have a teletherapy component mm-hmm. A whole department or com brand that does teletherapy. And so sometimes that's a really great option for a district that's remote or I spoke to a California district earlier this year that they're in the mountains and not everybody wants to live in the mountains, right? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> you know, definitely trying to be creative with some of the areas that districts are seeing, maybe people moving out of their state. Mm-Hmm. And so they're, they can still have access to high quality providers using that technology component. So I think it's really just our, you know, our work we do is really

digging into what the unique need is and then helping them be really creative with, with filling, filling the gaps.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And, and you know, we've talked about the impact here, right? Of what turnover can mean some strategies that schools and districts can think about, but when someone comes, right, when they are able to bring someone in, you know, what are some of the common reasons a special education professional might leave, right? And, and how can districts address these issues proactively? Which I think sometimes, right? We're, we're always reactive in lots of ways, but you know, if they can anticipate that there may be something that causes someone to choose to leave, right? How can a district address these issues proactively?

Erin Hoganson:

Yeah, that's a great question. So I think there, you know, it's really a, a very layered question and, and answer. I think, you know, when districts are facing staffing shortages, oftentimes the other members of those teams end up, you know, taking on more of a workload. So it's just kind of a negative cycle that perpetuates itself. So definitely trying to, you know, get people in and get those positions filled, but then also really helping to support them once they're placed in a, in a school. I think many, you know, previously kind of staffing agencies or agencies were seen as kind of a last resort and now that really has had to shift for districts. And so I feel that us being able to provide that support and working with the district and helping them really blend into the current existing staff is, is a really big component of keeping people there and keeping them happy.

Erin Hoganson:

And then also, you know, that ongoing support we provide them, sometimes they just need an ear to vent to, it's just having that level of support that maybe they can kind of decompress and maybe it's about a colleague situation or, you know, they don't feel like they have someone that they can vent it out to. We, we end up doing a lot of that as well. And then again, that helping to really find that right match. And if a person doesn't have experience with a specific population, then that's our job as well to really give them resources to help them. Okay. So you're shifting from, you know, you've, you've been an SLP in a hospital setting and now you're gonna shift to a school setting. So what supports can we give in terms

of learning i e p processes and, you know, just kind of how a school system works so differently than a clinic maybe.

Erin Hoganson:

And so I think there's a lot of kind of different layers of support. And also really we love to focus on self-care and that wellness component, because that work-life balance, I think is a huge reason why we've seen so many people leave education. That's something I've been really proud of to be part of creating professional development for educators and administrators. This summer we hosted a conference and we presented to administrators on self-care for themselves, but also how do they support their staff members in, you know, feeling good in their workspace. It's, you know, it's, education is an extremely challenging place to work, but if you have support, I mean, you know, I think that for me, that's the biggest thing really, just helping our people to feel like they have support and not just feel it in a, you know, really be there and be available to them. So if they text us midday, then we can respond to them. And that's really exciting that that's part of our job to get to support in that way.

Monica Burns:

And just that community, that sense of belonging, we know is so important. And it can be something that is in, you know, is part of what's happening early on, right? That doesn't always work well when it's reactive, right? It doesn't feel as authentic if we're not proactive about those commitments. Right. To fostering that community and, and having those regular check-ins, you know, for support. And, you know, you mentioned Erin, Professional Development, right? The conference that you just hosted, I think about professional development and, and so much of, of my day, just earlier today as we were recording, I was on with a group of educators virtually, right? Hosting a webinar. It's a big part of the work that I do and think about, and I'm curious, you know, the, what is the role that professional development can play, not just in attracting, but also retaining special education staff?

Erin Hoganson:

Absolutely. It's huge. And I think for, you know, educators who are, as we talked about, kind of really coming out of that, that pandemic time in grad school recently, they don't, their experience was so different and children are very different now after the pandemic, right? So really being able to help provide, not just, you know, creating something for a district that's customizable to them but also then being there to give kind of the hands-on walking them

through things after we present something. So we're not just, you know, one and done, we present and then we can come back. We can even go into a school and model behavior, you know, model things that we are teaching. And so I think really for me, that component of creating content, but then also delivering it in a way that is ongoing. And, you know, again, continually providing resources and, you know, things are constantly changing. I'm really excited to share so many of your resources with my team because, you know, we really are always trying to find new things to get out to our candidates and our school districts. And so there's definitely so much out there, but it's, you know, when you're in the zone of stress and I can't manage this and all those things, you're not able to seek resources in the same way. And so that's, that's what we're there for. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

And just this idea of leveraging digital spaces, right? To help foster that. It's different now than it would've been, you know, a decade or two ago, right? That ease that everyone has to click on the link someone sent them, or to check out this resource and to have that, you know, level of communication and resource sharing I think is such a great compliment to, you know, what we're talking about to today in terms of professional development and that support, and again, right, being proactive, right. Retaining the people, the great people that you have. So, would love for you to tell us more about BlazerWorks and the work that you do.

Erin Hoganson:

Yeah, absolutely. So BlazerWorks is a special education advisory service. We partner with school districts across the United States to support with their staffing. And then also our part of the, the group is the special education advisory team. So we have a multidisciplinary team of educators. So we have school psychs, BCBAs, special ed teachers, SLPs OTs, and at specialist and AAC specialist. I mean, we really had tried to build a, a very diverse team to support our educators that are out across the United States, and then also support the districts that are that we partner with. And so we are also able to support, you know, if a district that we partner with has a staff member who's struggling, even if they're not a candidate of ours, we can support them as well, which I think is really, you know, our goal is really just to take some of that off of the plate of the school district directors and program specialists and people that are really involved in traditionally involved in supporting the candidates and the teachers.

Erin Hoganson:

And so that's one big component of what we are aiming to do. We're visiting school districts. So I've been a part of many, many school district visits across the United States. We are almost to 500 visits for the year, our team, which is really exciting considering we're a pretty new team. And so really we go and we meet with the school district and we find out, you know, what, how are our candidates doing what they need support with, what's unique really to their state, their county, their city. You know, every district across the US has just different challenges and different strengths. And so we really then come in and try to be creative and help solve or resolve some of the situations and difficulties that they are seeing. And there are many commonalities across the US of course, but every district is unique. And so it's been really great to just to learn about so many districts. And then as I shared earlier, kind of taking some of that information and maybe bringing it to a district in another state, have you thought about this solution? Have you thought about this creative way to fund something maybe, or as I mentioned earlier, kind of caseload versus workload and, you know, that looks different everywhere, but then we can kind of bridge that gap and help, help support in that different way.

Monica Burns:

So this has just been such a great conversation, Erin, for getting everyone thinking on not just the filling piece, right, or, or finding and attracting great staff members, but also the retention component. So both of those going hand in hand with all of the supports that you all offer. And I will of course make sure to link out so anyone listening can, can find, you can connect with the team and, and all of that. But for someone who might be on the go walking around <laugh>, listening in, making that mental a bookmark, tell people where can they connect with you and learn more about your work?

Erin Hoganson:

Absolutely, yes. So we have a website, BlazerWorks.com, but we are also on Instagram and LinkedIn and Facebook. So a lot of the, the different social media outlets. And we actually, again, as I said, we create professional development, so you may see us posting at conferences or webinars. And then also we do write some blogs and some of those things. So we definitely try to get that out on like our LinkedIn and website platforms. For sure.

Monica Burns:

Well, I'll make sure to link out, so anyone listening today can click learn more, write in the show notes, all the information. Thank you so much, Erin, for your time today.

Erin Hoganson:

Thank you so much for having me, Monica. I appreciate it.

So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode...

Create a sense of belonging in your school community.

Look for ways to be proactive to address educator needs.

Use technology tools like text messaging and video conferencing to stay connected.

Examine the role professional development can play.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode on classtechtips.com/podcast including all of the ways to connect with the team at BlazerWorks.

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Outro

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