

# Getting Down to Facts III 2026

## Successes, Challenges, and Opportunities in California Special Education



Webinar  
October 1, 2026

# Welcome

## GDTF III Objective:

Provide the best possible evidence on where CA's education system is, where it can go, and how to get there so that CA can be a model of excellence for all of our students

Across the studies, researchers found that California faces three systemwide challenges:

- Accountability and Alignment
- Balance Between State Guidance and Local Control
- Capacity

# Thank you!



## Individual Supporters

Jenny and Gerald Risk  
Grace and Steven Voorhis  
others



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# Today's Speakers



**Michaela Krug O'Neill**  
*University of Michigan*

*(Moderator)*



**Lindsey Kaler**  
*University at Albany,  
SUNY*

California's System of  
Special Education  
Staffing



**Tye Ripma**  
*Stanford University*

Mandatory  
Regionalization and Its  
Limits: How California  
Districts Experience  
and Navigate Special  
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**Elizabeth Kozleski**  
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Redesigning Special  
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# California's System of Special Education Staffing

Lindsey Kaler

University at Albany, SUNY



# Why study staffing for special education?

## Special education caseloads a flash point in teacher contract fights across California

by Emma Gallegos, EdSource February 27, 2026



## San Diego teachers plan first strike in 30 years over issues with staffing and services for special education

Survey reveals almost 50% of California teachers may quit teaching soon

## Los Angeles, San Francisco Teachers Unions OK Strikes Over Pay, Staffing Demands

United Educators of San Francisco could call walkout within 10 days — its first in 50 years. San Diego union plans 1-day strike, others at an impasse.

# Why study staffing for special education?

- Increasing numbers of California students are identified with special education needs, and most are taught in inclusive general education classrooms (e.g., Ondrasek et al., 2020).
- Sufficient supply of staff is necessary to provide legally required services for students with disabilities across learning environments (e.g., Cleveland et al., 2025; Gilmour et al., 2026).
- Staffing capacity is strained by turnover and shortages given rising special education needs in California (e.g., Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Theobald et al., 2025).

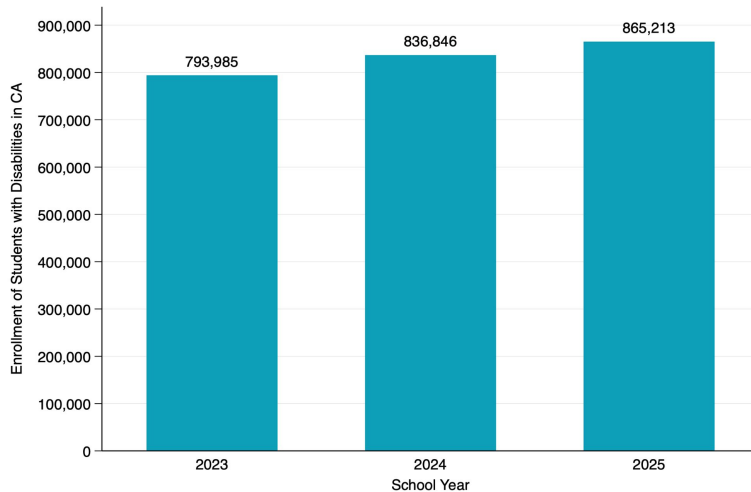
# Data and Methods

*We explore statewide staffing for special education, focusing on the landscape of school staffing and administrator perceptions.*

- **Landscape** of staffing: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education (CDE) and California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC)
- **Administrator perceptions:** Interview data from 82 school principals who were asked open-ended questions about special education staffing

# More students with disabilities are being identified, and staff workload is correspondingly increasing.

Students with Disabilities Enrolled in CA, 2023-25

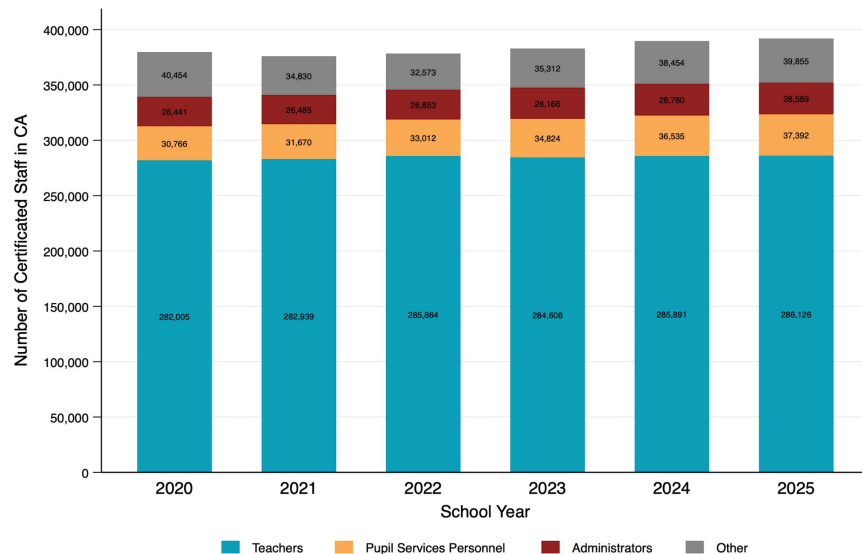


“I can't tell you why those numbers are so high and why we have so many students, but I can tell you **the legal requirements** of ensuring that we cross every T and dot every I **demands more and more and more staff to accommodate.**” (Principal Interview 095)

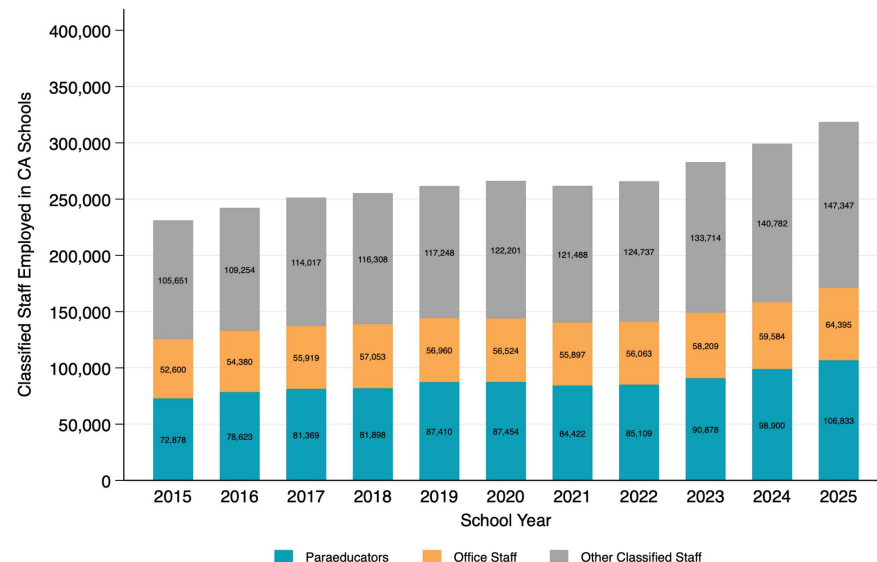
“I sat in 197 IEPs last year. So to sit in 197 hour-and-a-half to two-hour meetings. **It is beyond a heavy load... And so it is very hard to manage the workload.**” (Principal Interview 398)

# Administrative data reflects increases in the supply of teachers, related service providers, and paraeducators.

## Certificated Staff Employed in CA Schools, 2020-25



## Classified Staff Employed in CA Schools, 2015-2025



# Yet, despite an increase in the perceived supply of staff, administrators feel shortages on the ground.

“So **hiring people is finding somebody who is absolutely qualified, which is pretty near impossible**. So we're hiring teachers now that have never read an IEP, have never seen an IEP. They're brand spanking new to the teacher world, and so we'll just say we're going to train them as we go... because we have such inexperienced staff, but you can't go without staff. So **it's like, *how desperate are you? Well, we're very desperate right now.***” (Principal Interview 174)

“And to me, I think **they're doing more work with the same pay or less pay, and the *burnout*** in special ed.” (Principal Interview 335)

# Implications for California

- The **ecosystem** of staff supporting students with disabilities, includes: teachers, related service providers, and paraeducators.
  - There is no slack in the system across these positions. Schools cannot make up for short- or long-term shortages in one area by leaning on another.
- More needs to be done to **recruit, train, and retain** educators across positions to meet rising student needs, including preparing general educators.
- **Additional data is needed** to know who is educating students with disabilities in California and how they do so.

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# Mandatory Regionalization and Its Limits: How California Districts Experience and Navigate Special Education Governance

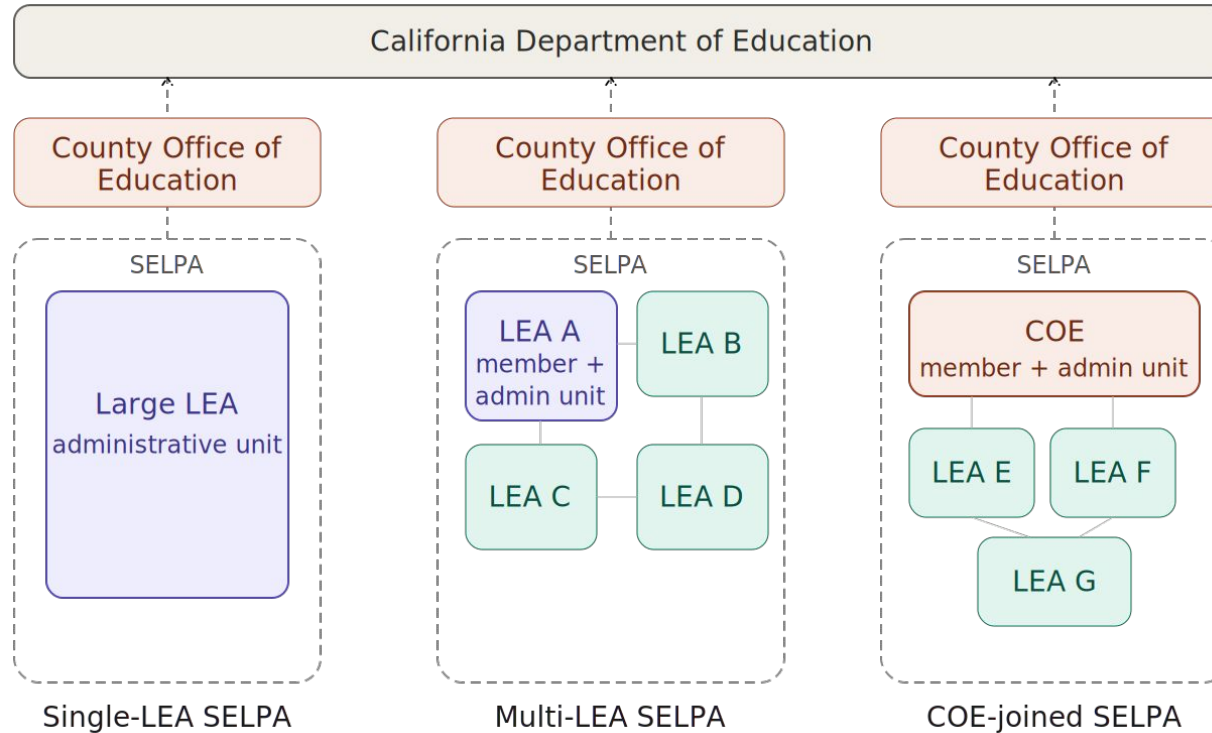
Tye Ripma

Stanford University



- Number of SELPAs per County, 2024-25 School Year*

# What Is a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA)?



# The Fiscal Stakes and the Governance Puzzle

## The Fiscal Stakes

- Special ed spending in California has more than doubled since 2004–05 (Bruno, 2026)
- Now represents ~20% of total K–12 student spending (Bruno, 2026)
- Reports have raised concerns about transparency, equity, and accountability in California's special education funding for the past decade (e.g., Dautre et al., 2021; Warren & Hill, 2018).

## The Governance Puzzle

- California's SELPA model is unusual: state & federal dollars flow to regional entities, not directly to LEAs
- SELPA boards — composed of member superintendents — decide how funds are split between regional ops and district allocations.
- A moratorium was in place from 2020 to 2026 preventing districts from forming new single-LEA SELPAs.

# Research Questions



1. What governance functions do LEA administrators identify as the primary value of regional cost-sharing?
2. How do SELPAs allocate funds between regionalized operations and direct LEA allocations — and how does this vary across SELPA types?
3. How do LEAs construct alternative arrangements when SELPA coordination capacity is insufficient or misaligned with local needs?

# Finding 1: What LEA Special Education Directors Value

**LEA administrators value SELPAs more for their administrative and regulatory expertise than for the direct student services they provide.**

## **Coordination and Compliance Support Functions**

- Administrative expertise & compliance support
- Information brokering
- Alternative dispute resolution (ADR)

## **Service Provision and Resource Pooling**

- Low-incidence specialists: DHH/VI specialists are highly valued
- Fiscal risk pooling
- Regional classrooms

## Finding 2: Fiscal Allocation

**But... the cost of these regionalized operations far exceeds state funding**

**~\$20**

per-ADA state  
allocation

**\$44**

median SELPA  
regionalized spending

**\$547M**

total annual  
regionalized ops  
beyond state allocation

## Finding 3: Variation in What SELPAs Do

**There is significant variation in how SELPAs perform functions, even when they receive dedicated state funding to do so.**

*"The SELPA has been instrumental in the alternative dispute resolution process and we use it liberally...the first consultation with any family usually is covered by the SELPA...and if we go beyond that, we pay for it and we're happy to do that because we found it to be a valuable process."*

*"[SELPA ADR support] is just really, very minimal...[and] I don't have enough leadership to actually do some intentional reshaping based upon the trends to actually bolster site capacity to mend those relationships. [If I had ongoing ADR support] I would see an immediate reduction in CDE complaints and due process filings."*

## Finding 4: Alternative Arrangements

**LEAs have built an extensive parallel system of collaboration outside of formal SELPA structures.**

- Horizontal collaboration
- Direct private contracting
- Building internal capacity
- Exercising voice

# Four Policy Implications

1

## **Funding Adequacy for Network Functions**

What does it cost to support the administrative and compliance infrastructure for special education regionally?

2

## **Performance Expectations for Coordination**

It is unclear what is expected of SELPAs in terms of coordination and information brokering.

3

## **Accountability for SELPAs**

More systematic reporting could help the state identify regions where funded services are/not operating as intended.

4

## **Membership and Geography**

SELPAs are primarily providing support that could be provided remotely, but districts are confined to their regional SELPA.

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# Redesigning Special Education: Leveraging Technology for Flexibility, Equity, and Inclusive Designs for Learning

Elizabeth Kozleski  
Stanford University



# Teaching ALL our Students: From Sorting to Learning

\$\$ spent for information with the least instructional value and the least \$\$ on what teachers need in their daily practice

**Enormous investments** in sorting students - **comparatively little** in what happens after we've sorted.

**One of the largest hidden cost centers in our entire system.**

The cost to determine that one student is eligible for special education? **10 to 25** hours of multidisciplinary professional time.

Between **\$2,500 and \$7,000** per student for initial determination plus the costs of mandated triennial reviews.

The assessment practices most closely tied to instruction?

***Curriculum based measurement embedded progress monitoring, a fraction of the diagnostic investment.***

# Inequities: Predictable Outcome of Assessment Design

Episodic, Decontextualized Snapshots are Vulnerable. Reproduction of Inequities Students Carry into the Testing Room

**Educational assessment** is not culturally or linguistically **neutral**. Individualized educational assessment looks for **learning anomalies**. Assessment scores are based on population samples.

**Educational assessment** does not diagnose psychiatric or functional brain-based issues.

Outcomes include (a) **over and under identification**, (b) **language fluency conflated with disability**, and (c) **unrecognized genuine needs** from lack of appropriate tools.

**Remedies are structural**: Assessment systems built into culturally and linguistically responsive learning designs embedded in lesson design, continuous feedback, and learning experiences that draw on student histories and realities.

**Needed**: Distinguish between **ability and linguistic differences** and **opportunities to learn**.

# The Workforce is Drowning in the Current Design

Educator Workforce: ~24,548 waivers/emergency permits vs. ~17,726 new special education credentials in California over five years;

~15% annual Special Educator Attrition;

School Psychologist ratios ~1:1,000 vs. recommended 1:500–750;

1 in 5 schools nationally report a special education vacancy

More than half of the nation's schools report difficulty filling positions.

# Disproportionality is a Predictable Output of Our System



The compliance machinery consumes exactly the human capacity that instruction requires.

That is design failure.

Design failures can be addressed.

# Technology Could Rebalance the Equation - If We Design It that Way

What AI enhanced systems are doing now....

Continuous, embedded **progress monitoring**

episodic testing

**Assessment** woven into instruction, generates real-time evidence of what each student can do.

**Automated progress monitoring** — scoring, data integration, report writing — could hand back hundreds of hours.

**Assistive technologies** — speech-to-text, text-to-speech, gesture recognition can be tailored to individual communication patterns.

Adaptive content can adjust pacing, modality, and scaffolding without asking one teacher to hand-build twenty-six parallel lessons.

Technology assists can provide lesson scaffolds that a specific classroom of student needs.

Serve individual needs *across* diagnostic categories without placing the burden for design and planning on educators.

We can get the preventive and mental health work that our school psychologists were educated to provide.

# We can do this now...

**Prepare all educators** — general and special — for inclusive, linguistically competent pedagogy, data use, and collaborative teaming, most students with disabilities spend most of their day in general education.

**Widen the research lens:** from where students sit to how learning environments are designed, and for whom they work.

**Move discretionary dollars** from eligibility confirmation toward coaching, collaborative planning time, and classroom-embedded supports buys more learning than another round of testing.

**Pilot technology-enhanced models** — but co-design them with your teachers, students, and families. Demand evidence on equity, not efficiency.

# Redesign for Personalization

01

**Coach Teachers**

02

**Tailor classroom activity through rapid feedback**

03

**Respond to Student Voice**

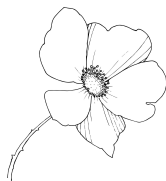
04

**Optimize Teacher/Student Feedback Loops**

# Q and A



# Learn More



Use “Poppy” the GDTF III Bot to find what you’re looking for.

Use the QR code to go to a stand-alone page or use it on the GDTF III website in the bottom right-hand corner of the page.



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