

Best Practices Guide **Special Education Licensure Programs in Illinois**

July 2026

This document serves as a best practices guide for educator preparation programs and relevant state agencies, aimed at strengthening recruitment and retention in special education—an area identified as high need in Illinois. It is designed to support institutions in improving their practices by highlighting strategies used by programs that performed well on the Illinois Educator Preparation Profiles (IEPP). The guidance is informed by data gathered from high-scoring institutions and surveys.

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Introduction

ISBE is strategically focused on developing and sustaining high-quality educator preparation programs at institutions of higher education (IHEs).

As part of this work, ISBE established Strategic Goal 1.4.1 for 2026: to identify effective recruitment and retention practices used by high-performing educator preparation programs in high-need subject areas.

ISBE selected Special Education licensure programs as the focus for this goal because special education teaching positions have consistently experienced some of the highest vacancy rates in Illinois. According to the state's 2024-2025 Educator Shortage Report, 31% of all unfilled teaching positions in the state (1,215 of 3,864) were special education teacher roles. In the state's 2025-2026 Educator Shortage report, 37.2% of all unfilled teaching positions in the state (1,078.80 of 2,900) were special education teacher roles.

A majority (76%) of education leaders reported that they have a problem with special education teacher shortages. Education leaders reported that their most common remediation for unfilled special education teaching positions was to increase the caseload of existing employees, increasing strain on educator systems and retention more broadly. Special education was also identified as a focus for this evaluation because education leaders reported that they do not have a high-quality recruitment pipeline; 85% of leaders received 0 to 5 applications per open position, and 53% of leaders reported that the majority of the applicant pool was not qualified.

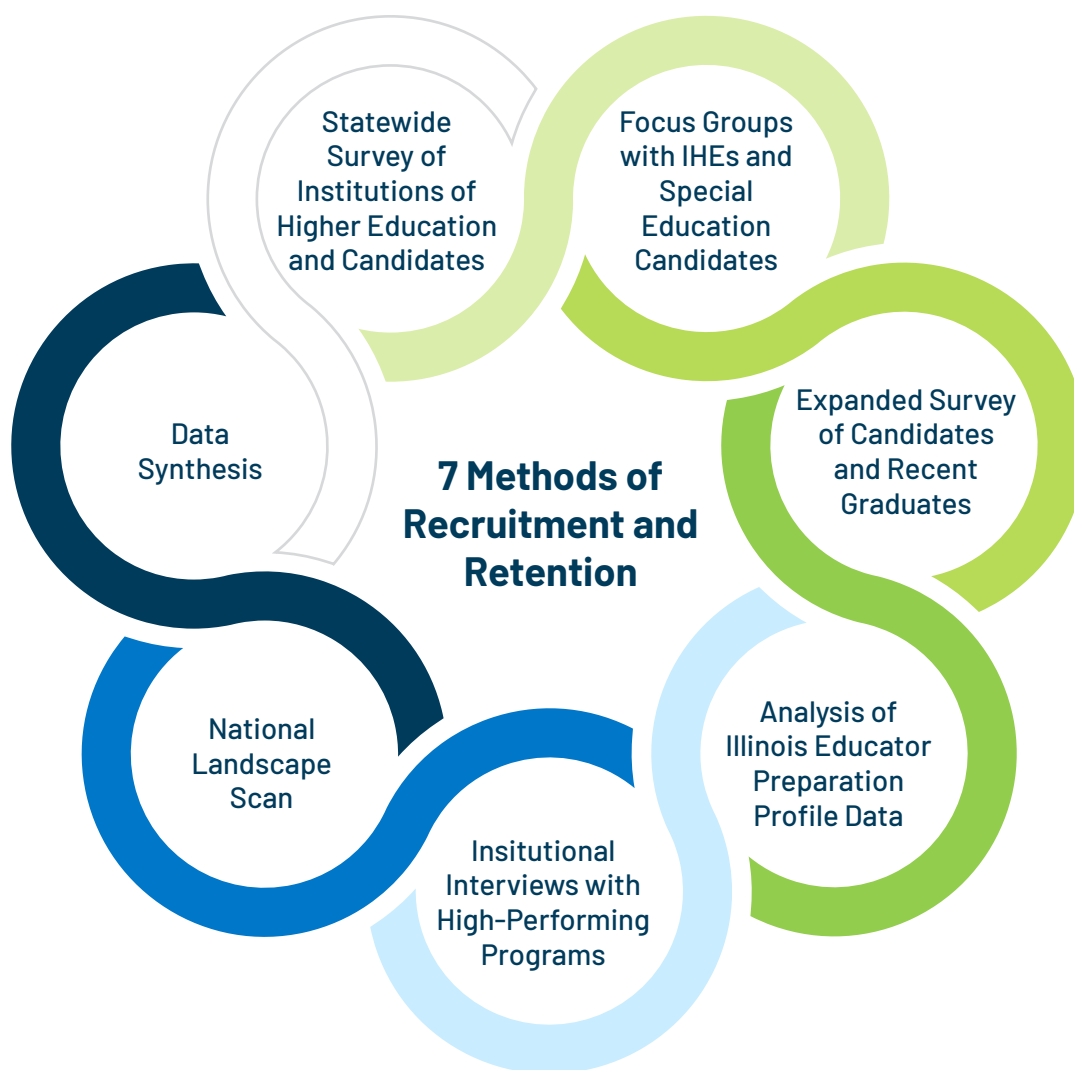
To identify high-performing programs for focused analysis in this work, ISBE analysed Illinois Educator Preparation Profile (IEPP) data to determine the institutions with the highest scores for contribution to state need, with an emphasis on placement and persistence in high-needs schools.

37.2% of unfilled teaching positions in Illinois were special education teachers

76% of education leaders report special education teacher shortages

Methodology

This best practices guide on recruitment and retention for special education educator preparation programs in Illinois was developed through a rigorous, multi-phase process led by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The methodology was designed to integrate multiple data sources and perspectives, including institutions of higher education (IHEs), current candidates, recent graduates, and national policy and practice trends. The approach combined quantitative analysis, qualitative inquiry, and comparative research to ensure that findings are both evidence-based and grounded in practice.



Statewide Survey of Institutions of Higher Education and Candidates

In summer 2025, ISBE administered a comprehensive statewide survey to all Illinois IHEs offering special education educator preparation programs, as well as to all currently enrolled candidates within those programs. The survey was designed to collect baseline data on recruitment and retention practices across the state.

For IHEs, the survey gathered information on institutional recruitment strategies, program structures, partnerships, and supports aimed at improving candidate persistence and completion. For candidates, the survey explored motivations for entering special education, factors influencing program choice, perceived barriers to entry and completion, and experiences within their preparation programs. This initial phase provided a broad overview of statewide practices and candidate experiences, establishing a foundational understanding of key trends and challenges.

Focus Groups with IHEs and Special Education Candidates

Following the summer 2025 survey, ISBE engaged an external contractor to facilitate focus groups with IHE faculty, program administrators, and currently enrolled special education teacher candidates. Participants were drawn from survey respondents who indicated interest in continued engagement.

The focus groups were designed to build upon survey findings by exploring emerging themes in greater depth. These discussions provided rich qualitative insights into lived experiences, institutional practices, and contextual factors influencing recruitment and retention. The inclusion of both institutional and candidate perspectives allowed for a more nuanced understanding of effective strategies and persistent challenges.

Expanded Survey of Candidates and Recent Graduates

As a further follow-up, ISBE developed and distributed a refined and more targeted survey to two groups: (1) currently enrolled special education teacher candidates and (2) individuals who had graduated within the past two years from an Illinois IHE with a special education credential.

This enhanced survey focused specifically on identifying the recruitment strategies that initially attracted candidates to their programs, as well as the retention strategies and supports that contributed to their persistence and program completion. By incorporating the perspectives of recent graduates, ISBE was able to capture retrospective insights on program effectiveness and the longer-term impact of institutional practices.

Analysis of Illinois Educator Preparation Profile Data

To complement survey and focus group findings, ISBE conducted an analysis of the Illinois Educator Preparation Profile (IEPP). This analysis was used to identify institutions demonstrating strong performance in special education educator preparation based on available program metrics, including candidate outcomes, and other indicators of program effectiveness.

The purpose of this analysis was to identify exemplar institutions whose practices could provide valuable insights into successful recruitment and retention strategies.

Institutional Interviews with High-Performing Programs

Based on the IEPP analysis, ISBE conducted structured interviews with faculty and staff from selected high-performing institutions. The institutions included:

- Chicago State University
- Eastern Illinois University
- Northeastern Illinois University
- National Louis University
- Southern Illinois University Carbondale
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- Western Illinois University

These interviews explored institutional approaches to recruitment, program design, candidate support systems, partnerships with school districts and communities, and innovative practices. This phase provided detailed, practice-based insights into strategies that have demonstrated success in real-world contexts.

National Landscape Scan

In addition to Illinois-based data collection, ISBE conducted a national landscape scan to examine how other states are addressing recruitment and retention in special education educator preparation. This effort included a review of state policies, initiatives, and relevant research literature, as well as identification of promising practices and innovative strategies implemented in other contexts.

The purpose of the landscape scan was to situate Illinois' efforts within a broader national context, identify practical strategies, and ensure that the guide reflects both state-specific and national best practices.

Data Synthesis

Findings from all phases of the methodology were systematically analyzed and synthesized to identify key themes, evidence-based strategies, and actionable recommendations. This process involved incorporating quantitative survey data, qualitative insights from focus groups and interviews, and findings from the national landscape scan.

Through this comprehensive approach, ISBE ensured that the resulting best practices are informed by multiple perspectives, validated across data sources, and relevant to diverse institutional contexts across Illinois.

Summary

Effective recruitment and retention in special education depends heavily on program design and relationships. Institutions are most successful when they design programs for working adults and paraprofessionals, offering flexible formats that fit candidates' real lives, and when they rely on trusted messengers (such as alumni, faculty, advisors, and district partners) to connect candidates to programs. Recruitment also relies on enhanced marketing strategies to draw candidates to special education programs. Through this work, it was clear that most candidates are relying on search engines such as Google to provide them with information about institutions they may attend.

Retention is strongest when candidates feel prepared for the realities of special education work and personally supported throughout the program. Coursework aligned to on-the-job responsibilities like Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and case management builds confidence and commitment, while early, consistent advising and mentorship helps candidates navigate workload, stress, and key milestones. Together, these practices reduce barriers, strengthen persistence, and improve completion.



Best Practices for Recruitment

Design programs around working adults and paraprofessionals. Programs should be intentionally structured for candidates who are already working through online or hybrid delivery, evening classes, cohort models, and flexible pacing.

- ✓ Many candidates work full time while enrolled, and many are paraprofessionals already serving in schools.
- ✓ Seventy-eight percent of working paraprofessionals in the ISBE Winter Candidate Survey chose programs based on convenience and flexibility of program format.
- ✓ Programs tailored to working adults show stronger enrollment and completion than programs altered later.

Use trusted people as your main recruitment strategy. Look to alumni, faculty, advisors, school leaders, and district partners to actively recommend programs to prospective candidates.

- ✓ Both candidates and IHEs noted the importance of learning about programs through word of mouth and direct encouragement.
- ✓ Trust-based recommendations are especially powerful for paraprofessionals and nontraditional students.
- ✓ Programs with strong relationships recruit more consistently.

Optimize search engine results for online recruitment and ensure that your website is user friendly and up to date. Your website is an important recruitment tool.

- ✓ Regardless of how a candidate discovers a program, they are likely to follow up by visiting the website for more information.
- ✓ Most candidates conduct their own research online for programs using search engines such as Google.
- ✓ If programs are not easily discoverable through search engines, candidates may never encounter them, even if the program is a strong fit.

Best Practices for Retention

Align coursework closely with on-the-job special education practice. Thread IEP development, special education law, case management, and collaboration across multiple courses and field experiences.

- ✓ Candidates consistently report wanting more preparation in IEPs and legal responsibilities.
- ✓ Programs that integrate these skills throughout coursework produce candidates who feel more confident and prepared.
- ✓ Practical experience strengthens motivation and reduces doubts about staying in the program.

Provide early, consistent, and personalized advising and mentorship. Assign advisors early, monitor progress proactively, and ensure candidates have access to faculty, mentors, and emotional support throughout the program.

- ✓ Candidates consistently report wanting more preparation in IEPs and legal responsibilities.
- ✓ Programs that integrate these skills throughout coursework produce candidates who feel more confident and prepared.
- ✓ Practical experience strengthens motivation and reduces doubts about staying in the program.

Support candidates at high-stress milestones. Provide targeted support for field placements, student teaching, and licensure exams.

- ✓ Licensure testing, clinical placements, and student teaching are major stress points that drive attrition if candidates feel unprepared.
- ✓ Programs offering structured test preparation and strong clinical supervision report high pass rates and stronger persistence.
- ✓ Candidates value support that is tailored specifically to special education, not generic teacher preparation.

Best Practices for Recruitment Explained

- 1. Design programs around working adults and paraprofessionals. Programs should be intentionally structured for candidates who are already working through online or hybrid delivery, evening classes, cohort models, and flexible pacing.**

The research highlighted that most special education candidates are balancing full-time employment while pursuing licensure, which stressed the importance of flexible and supportive program design. Survey data indicate that 57% of candidates work full time during their preparation programs, and notably, 43% of those individuals are also enrolled as full-time students, managing significant academic demands alongside professional responsibilities. Within this group, 63% are enrolled in online programs, showing a clear preference and need for flexible, accessible delivery models that accommodate working adults. These patterns reinforce that paraprofessionals and other school-based staff represent a primary and highly effective recruitment pipeline.

Institutions report that candidates most often learn about preparation programs through their current schools or districts, with encouragement from principals, special education leaders, and colleagues playing a critical role in influencing enrollment decisions. Additionally, many candidates identify their own classroom experience as the primary factor motivating them to pursue careers in special education, further emphasizing the value of “Grow Your Own” strategies that cultivate and retain talent from within existing school communities.

During one-on-one interviews with Institutions of Higher Education, the following pathways to support paraprofessionals were noted:

Southern Illinois University–Carbondale

- Operates a Grow Your Own program focused on special education
- Supports paraprofessionals pursuing licensure

Northeastern Illinois University

- Serves a high number of paraprofessionals within its programs

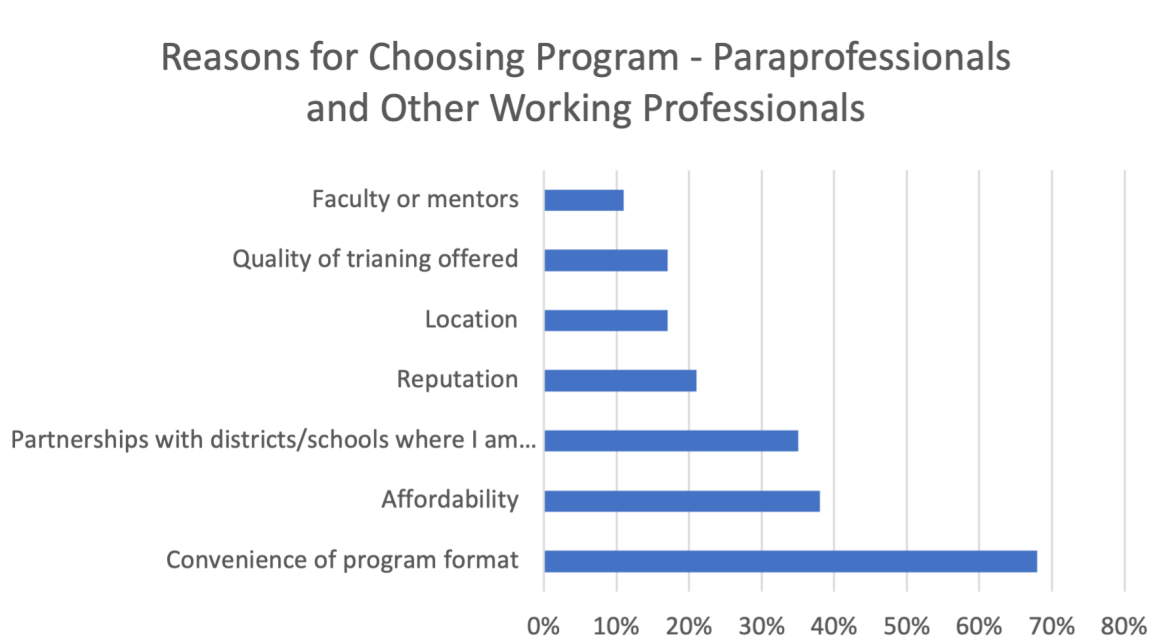
Eastern Illinois University

- Uses a multi-strategy recruitment approach:
 - Targeted marketing (e.g., special education MAT flyers)
 - Partnerships with regional cooperatives (e.g., EZ Cooperative)
 - Cohort-based recruitment of local paraprofessionals
 - Strong alumni networks



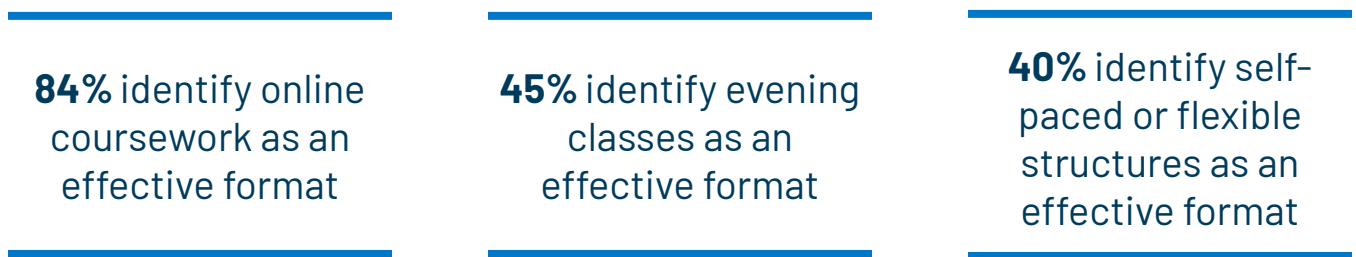
The landscape scan conducted by ISBE showed that Grow Your Own initiatives have been consistently identified as effective strategies for recruitment in special education teacher preparation. Specifically, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington have recognized and elevated Grow Your Own models as a key approach to addressing workforce shortages by cultivating talent from within local communities and school systems. These programs primarily target paraprofessionals, instructional aides, and other school-based staff, providing structured pathways to licensure that are responsive to the needs of working adults. By leveraging existing relationships with districts, offering flexible program delivery, and supporting candidates throughout the licensure process, Grow Your Own initiatives expand the educator pipeline. This alignment between work that is occurring in other states as well as at Illinois Institutions of Higher Education underscores the role of Grow Your Own strategies as a sustainable and scalable best practice in special education workforce development.

Program format consistently emerges as the primary factor influencing candidate selection of special education preparation programs. This emphasizes the critical role of flexibility in recruitment and retention efforts at the IHE level. Across candidate groups, individuals most frequently cite the convenience of program structure—including course scheduling, delivery modality, and program duration—as the deciding factor in where they enroll. This trend is even more pronounced among paraprofessionals, 68% of whom identify program format as a key determinant in their decision-making. These findings highlight the importance for institutions to prioritize accessible, flexible program designs—particularly online and hybrid options that accommodate working professionals—while leveraging program structure itself as a central component of recruitment strategy.



Flexible program structures are a critical driver of candidate persistence and completion in special education preparation programs at the IHE level. Institutions consistently report stronger recruitment outcomes in pathways intentionally designed for working adults—such as paraprofessional-to-licensure routes and cohort-based models—compared to traditional programs that are later altered to accommodate nontraditional students. Candidates emphasize that when program design aligns with the realities of their professional and personal responsibilities, they are significantly more likely to start a program, even when facing substantial workload and stress. Across institutions, cohort-based models are widely cited as a particularly effective strategy, fostering a sense of community, accountability, and mutual support that strengthens commitment to the program.

Candidate feedback further reinforces this pattern:



Collectively, these findings highlight that intentionally designed, flexible program models—especially those incorporating cohort structures—are a best practice for supporting completion and sustaining engagement among special education candidates.

2. Use trusted people as your main recruitment strategy. Look to alumni, faculty, advisors, school leaders, and district partners to actively recommend programs to prospective candidates.

Word of mouth consistently emerged as an effective recruitment strategy for special education programs at the IHE level. Candidates overwhelmingly reported learning about programs through personal and professional networks. This dynamic is particularly pronounced among paraprofessionals and working professionals who rely heavily on trusted guidance from leaders within their school communities when considering program enrollment. Institutional perspectives reinforce this trend: representatives from National Louis University, Eastern Illinois University, and Northeastern Illinois University identified word of mouth as one of their most successful recruitment strategies. Furthermore, qualitative evidence indicates that encouragement from colleagues often serves as a decisive factor for enrollment. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of cultivating strong partnerships with schools and districts and leveraging existing professional networks as a primary strategy for recruitment.

"I have been working in special education for over 20 years and already had the skills to become a special education teacher so my principal encouraged me to pursue a master's degree and get my LBS1. I also am encouraged to pursue a leadership role within the cooperative and will continue training and schooling for that within the next two years."

**Survey respondent,
Summer 2025 Candidate Survey**

Alumni engagement plays a role in candidate recruitment.

Alumni and faculty engagement are critical components of effective recruitment strategies in special education programs at the IHE level. Institutions consistently report that alumni referrals constitute a significant source of new candidates, particularly among paraprofessionals. Additionally, faculty and advisors who cultivate strong, ongoing relationships with students play a pivotal role in shaping both initial interest in special education careers and subsequent program decisions. Programs that intentionally structure opportunities for alumni involvement—such as mentorship, outreach, and testimonial sharing—tend to develop stronger, more consistent recruitment pipelines. Together, these findings underscore the importance of leveraging alumni networks and faculty-student relationships as strategic assets to enhance program visibility, credibility, and sustained enrollment.

"We employ a full-time mentor who provides additional individual support and mentoring. We also track and monitor progress each semester for every individual student. All advisors and faculty meet every week throughout the academic year to monitor student progress in all classes and licensure requirements."

**Survey respondent, Lewis University,
Summer 2025 Institution of
Higher Education Survey**

Relationship-based recruitment practices play a critical role in advancing equity and access within special education programs at the IHE level. Research indicates that nontraditional students and paraprofessionals are less likely to engage with traditional higher education recruitment pathways and are instead more responsive to direct encouragement from trusted individuals. These candidates are also more likely to persist once enrolled when their entry into a program is facilitated through such trusted referrals. Retention data further reinforce the importance of relational supports, as 93% of institutions report that mentorship, advising, and consistent encouragement from faculty or advisors are central to sustaining candidate success.

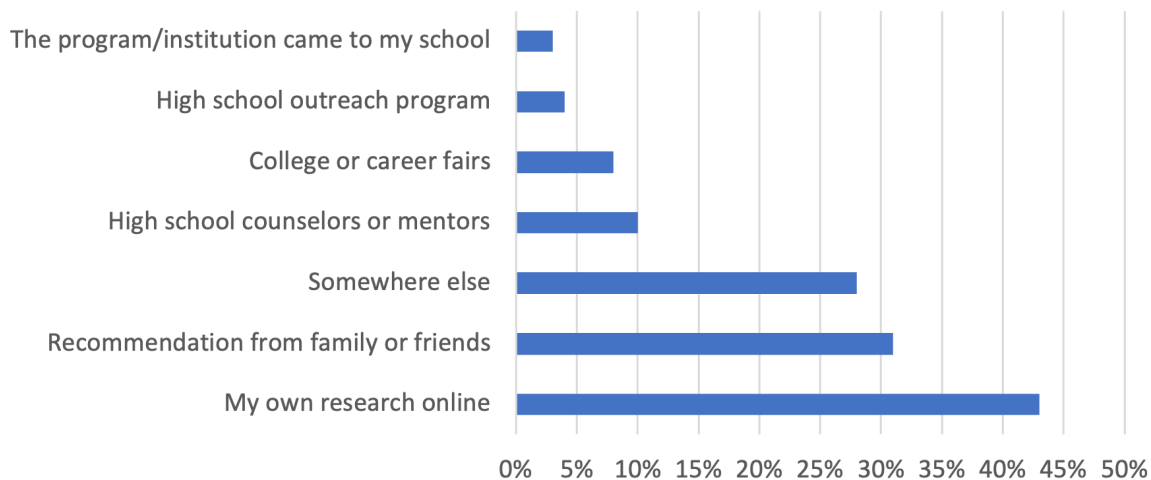
Collectively, these findings suggest that institutions can strengthen both access and persistence by prioritizing personalized outreach, fostering strong interpersonal connections, and embedding structured mentorship and advising systems within their programs.



3. Optimize search engine results for online recruitment and ensure that your website is user friendly and up to date. Your website is an important recruitment tool.

Independent online research represents the most common initial entry point through which candidates identify special education programs at the IHE level. Across candidate groups, 43% report discovering their institution through their own online searches, underscoring the importance of a strong and accessible digital presence in recruitment strategies. This finding highlights the need for institutions to prioritize clear, informative, and user-friendly websites, as well as search visibility and up-to-date program information, to effectively reach prospective candidates. While relationship-based pathways remain essential for influencing decision-making, ensuring that programs are easily discoverable online is a critical first step in attracting a broad and diverse pool of applicants.

Awareness of Institution - Currently Enrolled or Recently Graduated Undergraduates



Data from the December 2025 survey further underscores the importance of optimizing digital recruitment strategies for special education programs at the IHE level. Among candidates who conducted independent online research, 86% reported using Google as their primary search tool, indicating that search engine visibility is a critical factor in program discovery. Following these searches, institutional websites were the most frequently accessed destinations—far surpassing engagement with social media platforms or third-party sites. These findings highlight the importance of maintaining a strong, search-optimized web presence, with clear, accessible, and comprehensive program information, as a foundational element of effective recruitment efforts.

86% reported using Google as their primary search tool

Nontraditional and working candidates depend heavily on accessible, high-quality online information when exploring program options. These individuals, often balancing full-time employment with coursework, are less likely to engage in traditional recruitment activities such as college fairs or extended exploratory outreach. Instead, they tend to rely on efficient, self-directed online searches to quickly assess program fit and feasibility. As a result, institutions must ensure that their digital platforms provide clear, concise, and comprehensive information about program structure, scheduling flexibility, admissions requirements, and support services. Prioritizing accessible and user-friendly online content is essential to effectively reach and recruit this population, enabling candidates to make informed decisions within the constraints of their professional and personal responsibilities.

Websites should be updated to include key information.

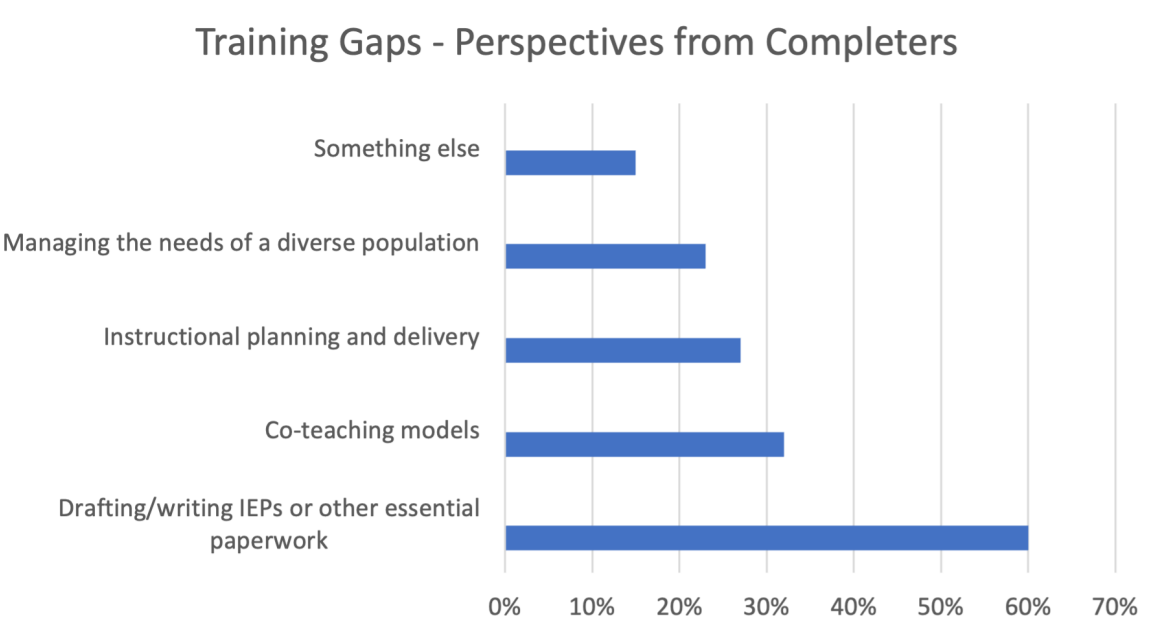
Program selection among prospective special education candidates is heavily influenced by the availability and clarity of key information presented online. Candidates consistently report making enrollment decisions based on factors such as program format and flexibility, affordability and access to financial supports, partnerships with local districts and schools, and overall program reputation and quality. Importantly, these are criteria that candidates expect to evaluate independently prior to applying and primarily through institutional websites. This underscores the critical role of ensuring that essential program details are easy to locate, clearly communicated, and transparently presented in online formats. Institutions that effectively organize and highlight this information position themselves to better attract candidates who are conducting efficient, self-directed comparisons across programs.

Institutional websites play a critical role in reinforcing and validating relationship-based recruitment efforts in special education programs at the IHE level. While personal recommendations from alumni, faculty, and school leaders often serve as the initial catalyst for candidate interest, prospective students consistently turn to program websites to confirm key details, assess overall fit, and evaluate logistical considerations such as scheduling, costs, and program expectations. As a result, the website functions as a decisive checkpoint in the recruitment process. If information is unclear, difficult to locate, or outdated, it can erode confidence and undermine otherwise strong word-of-mouth endorsements. Ensuring that websites are accurate, comprehensive, and easy to navigate is therefore essential to converting interest generated through personal networks into actual applications and enrollments.

Best Practices for Retention Explained

1. Align coursework closely with real-world special education practice. Thread IEP development, special education law, case management, and collaboration across multiple courses and field experiences.

A critical factor influencing candidate retention in special education programs at the IHE level is the extent to which programs effectively prepare candidates for the practical and legal responsibilities associated with IEPs. Across surveys of both currently enrolled candidates and recent completers, the development of IEPs and related documentation consistently emerges as the area where candidates feel least prepared. Notably, 60% of candidates report wishing they had received more comprehensive training in IEPs and essential paperwork, highlighting a significant preparation gap. Addressing this need through targeted, practice-based instruction, applied learning opportunities, and ongoing support in navigating compliance requirements is essential to building candidate confidence and competence. Strengthening preparation in this area can reduce candidate stress, increase perceived readiness for professional roles, and ultimately support greater persistence and program completion.



Retention outcomes in special education programs at the IHE level are closely tied to candidates' perceived preparedness for core professional responsibilities, particularly in IEP development and management. Survey data indicate that candidates completing endorsement programs experience greater gaps in this area than those completing full majors, with 67% of endorsement completers reporting a need for more IEP training compared to 54% of full major completers. Furthermore, only 22% of endorsement completers report feeling well prepared to write and manage IEPs, signaling a substantial deficit in confidence and readiness. These findings suggest that programs—especially endorsement pathways—must strengthen targeted, practice-based instruction and applied experiences in IEP processes to better support candidate competence. Enhancing preparation in this critical area can improve candidates' sense of efficacy, reduce attrition risks, and promote sustained engagement through program completion.

"The paperwork demands and the legal contract that is an IEP scares me a little bit."

**Survey respondent,
Summer 2025 Candidate Survey**

"More support in how to write IEP goals and more education on the different co-teaching models."

**Survey respondent,
Summer 2025 Candidate Survey**

A key driver of candidate retention in special education programs at the IHE level is the extent to which coursework incorporates practical, applied learning aligned with real-world responsibilities. Candidates consistently report a need for more hands-on experience, particularly in IEP writing and case management, as well as clearer preparation for navigating special education law and compliance requirements. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of stronger alignment between coursework and the realities they encounter in classroom and clinical settings. Qualitative feedback reveals that many candidates experience significant fear and uncertainty around IEPs as legally binding documents, underscoring the need for structured, guided practice rather than primarily theoretical instruction. Programs that embed applied learning opportunities, scaffolded practice, and explicit connections to professional expectations are better positioned to build candidate confidence, reduce anxiety, and support sustained engagement through program

Programs that thread practice across courses report stronger outcomes.

Programs that intentionally integrate practice-based learning across coursework demonstrate stronger retention outcomes in special education preparation. Institutions with commendable or exemplary performance consistently report success when IEP development and special education law are introduced early—often as early as the sophomore year—and systematically revisited across multiple courses. By sequencing learning experiences to build progressively deeper understanding and explicitly connecting coursework to field-based application, these programs strengthen candidate confidence and readiness over time. Several institutions have further improved outcomes by re-sequencing coursework in response to licensure exam data and field performance feedback, resulting in more coherent preparation and stronger candidate competency.

High-performing institutions also address candidate concerns around IEPs and applied experience through intentional program design and field integration. For example, Western Illinois University has revised its curriculum to include coursework directly focused on legal requirements and IEP processes, while National Louis University embeds IEP-related learning throughout the program, expanding candidates' knowledge incrementally across courses. Chicago State University reinforces this approach by encouraging candidates to attend IEP meetings during student teaching placements, when appropriate, to gain firsthand experience. Collectively, these practices highlight the importance of sustained, scaffolded, and experiential learning opportunities in building candidate confidence, reducing uncertainty, and supporting persistence through program completion.

Field experiences strengthen understanding and persistence.

Early and sustained field-based experiences, intentionally paired with coursework, are a critical driver of candidate retention in special education programs at the IHE level. The evidence indicates that programs emphasizing early, frequent, and progressively intensive field experiences report stronger candidate confidence, a deeper understanding of special education roles, and higher persistence as candidates transition into more demanding clinical phases. Candidates themselves frequently identify field experiences as pivotal moments in which they solidify their commitment to the profession, underscoring the importance of authentic, practice-based exposure throughout preparation.

High-performing institutions further demonstrate how structured, scaffolded field experiences can support sustained engagement and completion. For example, Western Illinois University implements a sequenced model that begins with observation and clinical hours, progresses to small-group tutoring and supervised practicum with coaching, and culminates in extensive teaching practice and student teaching across grade levels. Similarly, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign offers multiple field experiences across grade bands and service delivery models, gradually increasing field intensity while correspondingly reducing coursework to allow for deeper immersion. Northeastern Illinois University emphasizes early, continuous, and supervised placements beginning as early as the sophomore year, ensuring that candidates actively engage with students with disabilities across diverse settings. Collectively, these approaches highlight the importance of embedding consistent, developmentally sequenced fieldwork throughout preparation programs to build practical competence, reinforce professional identity, and support candidate persistence through program completion.

Practical relevance is tied directly to retention.

Although workload and stress are commonly reported challenges among special education candidates, survey findings indicate that attrition risk remains relatively low, with very few candidates reporting that they seriously considered switching programs. When asked what contributed to their persistence, candidates most frequently cite feeling adequately prepared for the responsibilities of the profession, developing a clear understanding of the impact of their work, and gaining confidence through applied learning experiences and mentorship. These findings highlight the importance of program structures that prioritize real-world practice and supportive relationships, as such approaches help candidates transition from initial anxiety to a sense of competence and professional readiness. By fostering both skill development and a strong sense of purpose, programs can effectively sustain candidate engagement and support successful completion.



2. Provide early, consistent, and personalized advising and mentorship. Assign advisors early, monitor progress proactively, and ensure candidates have access to faculty, mentors, and emotional support throughout the program.

Most candidates feel supported—and that support directly impacts persistence

Findings from ISBE research demonstrate a strong relationship between candidate support and program persistence in special education at the IHE level. A substantial majority of candidates—77%—report feeling well supported by faculty, advisors, peers, and program resources, with 50% indicating they feel “extremely supported.” This widespread perception of support reflects the critical role that structured, accessible, and responsive support systems play in sustaining candidate engagement throughout program completion.

Importantly, this support often translates into tangible intervention during moments of difficulty, as 53% of candidates report that faculty or advisors directly assisted them in overcoming program-related challenges. These findings highlight that retention is not solely influenced by program design or rigor, but by the presence of strong, proactive support networks that help candidates navigate academic and professional demands. Institutions that prioritize consistent advising, meaningful faculty interaction, and responsive support mechanisms are better positioned to promote candidate resilience, persistence, and successful completion.

“Special education students often face high levels of stress due to the emotionally demanding nature of the work. Having counselors or mentors available to provide guidance, discuss career paths, and address stress-related concerns ensures that students feel supported throughout their educational journey.”

**Survey respondent,
Summer 2025 Candidate Survey**

“Personal relationships with students is our first priority...We, as a faculty, advise our majors rather than have central advising so we are able to intervene earlier. We also are engaged with students outside of the classroom through student organizations and student faculty events.”

**Survey respondent,
Summer 2025 Candidate Survey**

Personalized advising is the most frequently cited form of effective support.

Faculty and advisor support plays a central role in sustaining candidate persistence in special education programs at the IHE level, particularly when that support is multifaceted and responsive to individual needs. Candidates most frequently attribute their ability to remain enrolled to a combination of academic guidance, emotional encouragement, and practical assistance provided by program staff. This includes help navigating coursework, reassurance during periods of uncertainty or stress, and clear guidance on career pathways and professional decision-making. In addition, candidates highlight the importance of being connected to financial resources and receiving logistical flexibility, such as deadline extensions, alternative arrangements, and scheduling support, which enable them to balance program demands with personal and professional responsibilities. Collectively, these forms of support underscore the importance of holistic, student-centered advising models that address both academic and non-academic barriers, thereby strengthening candidate resilience and promoting successful program completion.

“They were supportive and listened to me, selected field supervisors that would keep my concerns confidential, and reassured me that not every school district is the same. The greatest, most helpful support I received during the MAT program was the IEA/NEA Virtual Mentor meetings, resources, guest speakers, and the mentors I was assigned. It is essential that the program is funded and available to MAT students. It was the lifeline that got me through my two years of residency. Their programming was high quality and provided the absolute best PD I received during my two years of residency. This does not diminish what Western offered. I just want to emphasize that the IEA/NEA program is vital for retaining MAT teachers.”

**Survey respondent,
Summer 2025 Candidate Survey**

Time, workload, and financial stress make proactive advising critical.

Retention in special education programs at the IHE level is significantly influenced by structural challenges that extend beyond candidates' individual capacity to manage independently. Across surveys of both institutions and candidates, the most frequently cited barriers to persistence include time constraints and workload demands, financial pressures, and the difficulty of balancing fieldwork requirements with employment and personal responsibilities. These challenges are particularly acute given that a majority of candidates are working full time while simultaneously completing rigorous coursework and intensive clinical or field-based experiences. As a result, effective retention strategies must account for the complex realities of candidates' lives by incorporating flexible program structures, financial supports, and coordinated fieldwork expectations. Programs that proactively address these systemic barriers are better positioned to reduce strain, support candidate well-being, and sustain engagement through program completion.

Programs with early alert systems and dedicated advisors report stronger retention.

High-retention special education programs at the IHE level consistently prioritize proactive, relationship-centered advising structures that support candidates from entry through completion. These programs emphasize early assignment of advisors—often at the point of program entry—paired with regular and systematic monitoring of candidate progress, ranging from semester-based reviews to more frequent check-ins. Ongoing communication among faculty and advisors enables early identification of potential challenges and coordinated intervention, while dedicated mentors or supervisors foster sustained, trusting relationships that support both academic and professional development over time.

Practices observed among high-performing institutions further illustrate the impact of intentional advising models. Northeastern Illinois University demonstrates a holistic, high-touch approach that integrates academic guidance with wraparound supports, including assistance with technology access and basic needs, while remaining responsive to candidates' external life circumstances. Eastern Illinois University emphasizes relationship-driven advising by promoting mentee choice in advisor selection and maintaining consistent, informal engagement alongside structured supports, reinforcing the importance of personal connection in effective mentorship. Additionally, many institutions leverage alumni as mentors or cooperating teachers, creating continuity between preparation and practice while strengthening professional networks. Collectively, these strategies highlight the importance of sustained, personalized advising and mentorship in reducing barriers, building candidate confidence, and supporting persistence through program completion.

Emotional support and mentorship help candidates stay in rigorous programs.

Retention in special education programs at the IHE level is strongly influenced by the extent to which candidates feel emotionally supported throughout a demanding preparation process. Candidates frequently describe both the work itself and the preparation experience as emotionally intensive, noting that counseling, mentorship, and consistent reassurance play a critical role in counteracting negative narratives about burnout in the field. Supportive relationships with faculty, advisors, and mentors help candidates maintain their commitment, even during periods of doubt, by reinforcing their sense of purpose and connection to the students they serve.

Importantly, despite high levels of stress, very few candidates report seriously considering leaving their program, with those who persist often attributing their decision to the presence of strong, supportive relationships. Programs that provide targeted support at key high-stress milestones—such as field placements, student teaching, and licensure exam preparation, particularly for special education-specific assessments—are especially effective in sustaining engagement. These findings underscore the importance of embedding emotional support, mentorship, and structured guidance at critical points in the candidate journey to reinforce resilience and promote successful program completion.

In ISBE's national landscape scan, mentoring supports frequently showed up as a tool that other states were using. Arizona, Indiana, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Washington are just a handful of the states that mentioned utilizing mentorship as a part of their recruitment and retention strategies. Some of these states mentioned partnering with their state-specific departments of education to secure these mentorships for teachers post-graduation, while others worked through district and university partnerships.

3. Support candidates at high-stress milestones. Provide targeted support for field placements, student teaching, and licensure exams.

Fieldwork and student teaching create major time and workload pressures.

Retention in special education programs at the IHE level is significantly shaped by the intense time and workload demands candidates face, particularly during practicum, clinical experiences, and student teaching. Candidates consistently report difficulty balancing field placements with full-time employment and academic coursework, often describing schedules that require them to be in placements during the day, attend classes in the evening, and complete assignments outside of both. These challenges are especially pronounced because the majority of special education candidates are working adults rather than traditional full-time students, resulting in compounded pressures across professional, academic, and personal responsibilities.

Given these realities, effective retention strategies must explicitly address the structural demands placed on candidates by incorporating flexible scheduling, coordinated fieldwork expectations, and supportive program design. Institutions that recognize and proactively respond to these constraints are better positioned to reduce candidate strain, support well-being, and sustain engagement through program completion.

Licensure exams are a major stressor and barrier to completion.

Licensure exam preparation is a critical factor influencing candidate retention in special education programs at the IHE level, with survey data indicating it as one of the most frequently identified areas for improvement. Approximately 20% of candidates explicitly cite the need for enhanced support in preparing for licensure assessments, often describing significant anxiety related to exam content, test-taking strategies, and the alignment between coursework and tested material—particularly for special education-specific content exams. These concerns can create additional stress during an already demanding program experience, potentially impacting persistence if not addressed. In response, many high-performing institutions have strengthened retention outcomes by intentionally embedding licensure preparation into their curricula. Several report near-universal pass rates on special education content tests after aligning coursework with exam expectations and incorporating targeted preparation supports. For example, National Louis University supplements coursework with dedicated tutoring and coaching for content exams, helping candidates build confidence and competence. These findings underscore the importance of integrating structured, aligned, and supported licensure preparation into program design to reduce anxiety, improve outcomes, and sustain candidate engagement through completion.

Special Education-specific exam preparation is more effective than generic support.

Retention in special education programs at the IHE level is significantly strengthened when licensure exam preparation is intentionally embedded within program design and delivered by discipline-specific faculty. ISBE research indicates that candidates derive the greatest benefit from exam preparation led by special education faculty rather than generalized test-prep services, as this approach ensures alignment with both content expectations and professional practice. Institutions that provide dedicated supports—such as practice exams, data-informed remediation, and individualized feedback—consistently report strong or near-universal pass rates, underscoring the effectiveness of targeted, program-integrated preparation. Moreover, several institutions have improved candidate outcomes by revising coursework sequencing and enhancing exam support structures after identifying specific areas of difficulty among special education candidates. These findings highlight the importance of using performance data to inform continuous program improvement and of embedding specialized, responsive exam preparation as a core retention strategy to reduce candidate anxiety, build competence, and support successful program completion.

Targeted milestone support strengthens persistence and confidence.

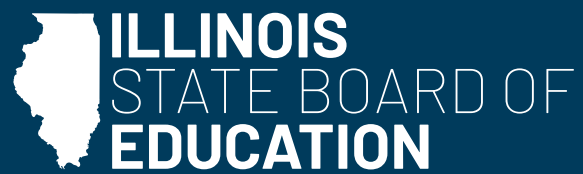
Targeted, program-integrated supports at critical phases of preparation are a key driver of retention in special education programs at the IHE level. Institutions consistently identify focused supports for field and clinical placements—such as strong supervision, intentional placement matching, and ongoing mentorship—alongside structured licensure exam preparation and guidance in job placement and transition to the profession as among their most effective strategies. Candidates who receive this coordinated support are significantly more likely to report feeling both well prepared and well supported, reinforcing their persistence through program completion. This is reflected in broader survey findings, with 77% of candidates indicating they feel well supported overall and 53% reporting that faculty or advisors actively helped them overcome challenges, often during these high-stress phases. Together, these findings highlight the importance of delivering timely, targeted interventions at key transition points to build candidate confidence, reduce attrition risk, and promote successful program completion.

Milestone support helps candidates stay committed to special education.

Despite the significant stress associated with program demands, very few special education candidates report seriously considering leaving their program. When asked what contributes to their persistence, candidates consistently point to the presence of strong, supportive relationships with faculty and mentors, which provide both encouragement and practical guidance throughout their preparation. In addition, candidates highlight the confidence they gain through structured fieldwork and guided, practice-based learning experiences, which help them feel increasingly capable in their professional roles. Equally important is the presence of clear, well-articulated pathways to licensure and employment, which reinforce the relevance and value of their efforts. Together, these factors demonstrate that retention is strengthened when candidates feel supported, capable, and confident in their trajectory toward a meaningful and attainable professional outcome.

Acknowledgements

This best practices guide was developed using feedback from surveys, focus groups, and interviews with more than 20 Illinois higher education institutions and nearly 600 current and former special education licensure candidates. ISBE is grateful for the participants who took time and effort to share their experiences. The ISBE team collaborated with North Third on survey design and analysis.



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