

THE INCLUSIVE PRACTICE, LLC

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The Measurement Gap

Why special education keeps failing the people who deliver it, and what a 2020 study of administrators reveals about the fix

“You cannot sustain what you cannot see.”

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Executive summary

The argument in brief. Special education does not fail for lack of belief. In original research with district administrators, I found near-universal commitment to inclusion paired with a consistent inability to deliver it, a gap the administrators themselves traced to capacity rather than conviction. This paper argues that the missing variable beneath that gap is workforce sustainability: the measurable relationship between what we ask special educators to do and what is humanly possible in the hours they are contracted to work.

Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act first guaranteed students with disabilities a free appropriate public education in 1975, the law renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (U.S. Department of Education, 2024a), the field has measured compliance with that mandate in exhaustive detail, and the sustainability of the workforce delivering it almost not at all.

That is half a century of measuring one side of the ledger. That omission is the root cause hiding under the symptoms of staff burnout and turnover, as well as restrictive placement for students.

Why it matters now. Districts are in a fiscal crisis: the federal pandemic-relief funding (ESSER) that propped up staffing had to be committed by September 30, 2024, and is now largely spent (U.S. Department of Education, 2024b), and administrators are being asked to cut while legal obligations only grow. In this environment, the instinct is to cut what cannot be seen, and the workforce gap is invisible, so it gets cut blind. That is the most expensive mistake a district in distress can make, because the cost of the unmeasured gap is already being paid, just never on a line item anyone can point to during the budget cycle.

Consider where the money is quietly going. Caseload standards that vary by state line rather than by the weight of the work mean some clinicians are loaded far past sustainability while the district has no way to know it. Recent research finds that how manageable the workload feels is the strongest predictor of the stress and burnout that drive clinicians out. Each teacher who leaves costs a district an estimated \$11,860 to \$24,930 to replace, depending on district size (Tan & Patrick, 2024), and that cost climbs when the departure comes mid-year and the district must spend additional funds on contractors, overtime, and/or compensatory services to cover the gap. And when in-district capacity collapses, students are placed out-of-district, where tuition commonly runs from tens of thousands of dollars a year for a private day program to well over \$100,000 for a residential one, every year.

None of these costs appear as “the workforce gap” in a budget. They appear as a turnover line, a contractor invoice, a tuition payment, a legal settlement, never summed, never traced to the single variable underneath them. A district in crisis is therefore not choosing

between measuring sustainability and saving money. It is already paying for the gap; it simply cannot see the bill. Measurement is what turns that hidden, recurring cost into a decision a district can actually make.

What is newly possible. Workforce sustainability was historically unmeasurable, so the field measured what it could count. That constraint no longer holds. This paper introduces two frameworks, the Capacity Gap (a diagnosis of why belief and practice diverge) and the Sustainability Maturity Model (a four-stage path from compliance-only to sustainability-managed), to give leaders a shared language and a measurable target.

The gap I found

This paper begins with a research finding, one I did not expect, and one that has organized my thinking for the better part of a decade.

In 2020, I completed a qualitative study of how district administrators perceive their own district's capacity to deliver on its inclusive philosophy (Oxford, 2020). The design was deliberately built for candor rather than scale: ten building administrators (five principals and five team chairpersons) in a single Massachusetts public school district, each interviewed through the same nine open-ended questions across three research questions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded for themes, and member-checked (participants reviewed their own transcripts for accuracy), with an expert panel reviewing the protocol in advance to limit researcher bias. The aim was to understand, in depth, how the people responsible for inclusion actually experience the distance between what they believe and what they can do.

Four themes emerged from the data. The first two are the foundation of everything that follows.

Theme one: the belief is real and articulate

Every administrator could describe inclusion with conviction, though their definitions differed, and none hedged on its importance. They articulated it with nuance. One participant defined an inclusive philosophy as being *about not just all students, but all staff members and how everyone fits together*. Another grounded inclusion in meeting students *at their point of greatest need*, and a third insisted it *includes all learners*, whatever they arrive carrying. Across all ten participants, the commitment itself was strong and consistent. If belief were the bottleneck, this district would have had inclusion solved.

Theme two: the practice does not match, and they know it

The same administrators who articulated inclusion so clearly described, often in the same breath, a stark misalignment between that philosophy and daily practice. They were not in denial. They named the gap themselves, with discomfort. One principal put the core danger plainly, stating that a district can believe it has a philosophy it has never actually operationalized:

“We should probably articulate what an inclusive philosophy is sooner rather than later...because if we just assume that we have one as a district, that’s kind of a dangerous assumption. I’m not sure if every teacher in this district would know that we have an inclusive philosophy.”

Participant 1, building principal

A special education team chairperson located the misalignment precisely where capacity is built or lost, in the training and support of the staff who do the daily work, and in whether students with disabilities are even counted:

“The district does not provide enough training, knowledge, support within inclusion...students that are on an IEP being part of the classroom, however, they’re not counted in head counts for attendance...I’ve seen examples of teachers being trained or receiving PD in [other] topics...but not in special education topics. And that makes up a huge population of our school.”

Participant 2, special education team chairperson

Read those two quotes together. What is missing is the infrastructure to carry the belief into practice: articulated philosophy, trained staff, the time to train them, even an accurate count of who needs serving. The gap is not a gap in values, but rather it is a gap in capacity.

Theme three: the named barrier is capacity

When asked directly what blocked inclusion, all ten participants converged on a single theme: a lack of support, resources, and training. The codes that built this theme are revealing: budget issues, personnel issues, staff training, supporting faculty, role and jobs. These categories are workforce and capacity constraints. One principal anticipated his colleagues’ answer almost wearily:

“I think a lot of my colleagues are going to say there’s budget issues and there’s personnel issues ... or that we just don’t have the staff to do as much as we could.”

Participant 1, building principal

And a team chairperson described the most concrete capacity failure of all, a contract structure that makes it physically impossible to train the very staff inclusion depends on:

“The biggest one for me is that staff training piece. If contracts have support staff coming in 15 minutes beforehand and leaving 15 minutes afterwards, that leaves me no time to train the support staff, and they are the anchors of everything; they’re in the nitty-gritty of the day.”

Participant 2, special education team chairperson

Theme four: communication and teaching strategies

The fourth theme is easy to underread. When students struggled in inclusive settings, administrators described responding through team meetings, open communication, and adjustments to teaching strategy. They described these responses as deliberate professional practice, not improvisation.

But we must recognize that this practice quietly depends on the time, attention, and goodwill of the people in the building. When the structural capacity to deliver inclusion is thin, too few staff, too little training time, as the second and third themes established, it is pure human effort that closes the distance, meeting by meeting. That is a credit to the educators who work tirelessly. It is also a dependency with a ceiling, because effort is itself a finite resource drawn from the same workforce the earlier themes showed to be strained. This paper is about what happens as that ceiling is approached.

From belief-practice gap to the measurable variable

The dissertation established that administrators believe in inclusion but cannot operationalize it, and that they trace the failure to capacity. This paper takes one further step: that the decisive and measurable dimension of that capacity is workforce sustainability. The step is worth walking through carefully, because everything else rests on it.

The chain of reasoning

1. **Inclusion is delivered by people, not policies.** An inclusive philosophy becomes real only through the daily culture in school, carried out by educators. Specifically, the special educators, teachers, related service providers, specialists, and instructional assistants, must embrace the philosophy and implement practices to demonstrate it daily.
2. **Those people operate under finite capacity.** Every provider has a fixed number of working hours defined by contract. Those hours not only include direct services (caseload minutes), but also evaluations, consultations, IEP writing, documentation, meetings, travel, and supervision. Staff capacity is an arithmetic ceiling that carries a heavy weight with a weak structural foundation.

3. **The administrators named capacity, not belief, as the binding constraint.** This notion is the empirical finding, not an assumption. All ten participants maintained the attitude and energy to embrace inclusive practices, but located the failure in support, resources, training, staffing, and time.
4. **Capacity, in operational terms, is workload against available time.** “Lack of support and resources” and “no time to train the anchors of the program” are, precisely, statements about workload exceeding available hours. The administrators were describing a sustainability problem without the vocabulary for it.
5. **Therefore the belief-practice gap is, at its operational root, a workforce-sustainability gap. And workforce sustainability is measurable.** This is the conclusion. The thing standing between philosophy and practice is whether the workforce can carry the load. It can be measured: total workload against contractual capacity, per provider, over time.

Anticipating the obvious objection: “Isn’t this just about money?”

A reasonable reader will object that “capacity” is simply a polite word for funding. They will argue that districts know exactly what is wrong (not enough money) and that measurement changes nothing. But the objection is only half right.

It is true that more funding would ease the constraint. But three things follow from the research that money alone does not resolve:

1. Districts do not actually know where their capacity is breaking. Participant 2’s point that IEP students were “not counted in head counts” is an admission that the data itself is missing; you cannot fund a gap you cannot locate.
2. The administrators described misallocation, not only scarcity. One administrator noted the district could be “more thoughtful about that allocation of resources” for tutors and paraprofessionals. Allocation is a measurement problem before it is a money problem.
3. Funding requests fail without evidence. A director who walks into a budget meeting saying “we feel stretched” loses to one who arrives with a defensible number. Measurement is the precondition for arguing for money, targeting money, and proving that the money was needed. The money objection, properly understood, is an argument *for* measurement, not against it.

The cost of the unmeasured gap

If workload were a minor variable, its invisibility would be a minor problem. The public record shows the opposite: the consequences of not measuring it are large, compounding, and paid in both dollars and students’ access to free appropriate public education (FAPE).

The figures below are presented as ranges, with their limits noted, because the credibility of this argument depends on honesty about the numbers.

The governing numbers were never measures of sustainability

The caseload cap, the figure most often used to decide whether a clinician is “full”, varies with jurisdiction. A school speech-language pathologist may be capped at 60 students in Illinois, but at 80 school-age students in Ohio (23 Ill. Admin. Code § 226.735; Ohio Admin. Code 3301-51-09). Ohio allows one-third more students than Illinois for the same role, a difference set by a state line. Colorado and Massachusetts set no state caseload maximum at all (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2025).

If you interrogate the number further, it collapses as a sustainability measure: two clinicians at “60 students” can carry radically different real workloads depending on service frequency, evaluation volume, meeting burden, and number of buildings. A caseload count measures bodies on a roster. It was never designed to measure whether the work fits in the week. Hint: it does not. In July 2026 the Council for Exceptional Children formally endorsed moving from caseload limits to a workload approach, warning that caseload maximums overlook “the qualitative complexity and actual demands of special education service delivery” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2026).

Workload manageability, not headcount alone, predicts burnout

In a study of 453 school-based speech-language pathologists, perceived workload manageability was the best predictor of total stress and of two core measures of burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Marante et al., 2023). This is the empirical hinge of the argument: a leading predictor of whether the workforce breaks is, in this research, the very variable the field does not measure.

Two limits stated plainly: the study was conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of atypical strain, and it examines one professional discipline (SLPs).

The honest claim is therefore specific rather than sweeping, but it points squarely at workload as a primary, and currently unmeasured, driver, and independent work continues to converge on it: a 2025 grounded-theory study centers on the “invisible workload” of school-based SLPs who identify as overwhelmed (Palafox et al., 2025).

The churn is expensive in ways the budget never books

When the unmeasured load breaks a provider and they leave, the district pays to replace them. The Learning Policy Institute estimates that each teacher who leaves costs a district \$11,860 to \$24,930 to replace, depending on district size (Tan & Patrick, 2024). A mid-year

departure costs more again, because the district must cover the gap with contractors or overtime.

Model it forward and the picture worsens: the departed provider's caseload does not vanish. Rather, it is absorbed by colleagues whose own workload then exceeds capacity, raising their burnout risk, in a feedback loop. A single unmeasured overload can therefore cascade into multiple departures. The line item the budget never sees is the second and third resignation caused by the first.

The steepest cost is paid by students, and by inclusion itself

The most expensive thing a district can do is also, too often, the thing that moves a student out of their own school. When in-district capacity is insufficient to support a student, the student is placed out-of-district, in a private day or residential program that specializes in the need the district could not meet. These placements are not extravagances; they are sometimes genuinely appropriate, and they are always costly. Out-of-district tuition commonly runs from tens of thousands of dollars a year for a private day program to well over \$100,000 for a residential one. Transportation alone adds more: in Massachusetts, transporting a student to a special education program cost an average of \$13,825 in fiscal year 2024, and more for out-of-district riders (Massachusetts Office of the Inspector General, 2026).

Hold this math up to the light. Three placements at \$90,000 each cost \$270,000 a year. These costs are recurring, every year the students remain out-of-district. For a comparable recurring sum, a district may be able to build and staff an in-district therapeutic program. More importantly, the district could serve those three students, and others with similar profiles, alongside their peers, in the least restrictive environment (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004). The program is a fixed investment that compounds in value as it serves more students over time; the placements are a recurring bill that compounds in cost. In a meaningful share of cases, the more inclusive path and the more affordable path are ultimately the same path.

So why do districts so often take the expensive path? Not because administrators prefer it. The research that opens this paper shows the opposite: a workforce that believes deeply in keeping students included. Rather, they take it because, at the moment of decision, they cannot see the alternative clearly enough to choose it.

Building an in-district program requires knowing, with confidence, which students could be served in-district, what those students actually need, and what staffing and workload that would require of providers who may already be at their limit. That is workforce-capacity information, precisely the information no compliance system captures. Without it, the out-of-district placement is not a considered financial choice; it is the only option a district can see. The decision gets made in the dark, and the dark is expensive.

This is where the dissertation's original problem statement closes the loop. That study began from a specific concern: that students who cannot make progress in an inclusive setting are transitioned into substantially separate placements. In budget terms, that transition is the single most expensive consequence of the unmeasured capacity gap. In human terms, it is something harder to put on a budget line: a student sent away from their school, their neighborhood, and their peers, to close a gap that was never theirs to close. Measurement will not make every out-of-district placement avoidable; some are appropriate and necessary. But it is the difference between sending a student away because it is genuinely best for them and sending a student away because the district could not see that keeping them was possible.

Two frameworks for seeing the gap

Naming a problem is not enough to own it. The field needs a shared language and a measurable target. I offer two frameworks, one diagnostic and one developmental.

The Capacity Gap

The **Capacity Gap** names the distance between two things every district has but only one of which it measures: its inclusive intent (the philosophy, the IEPs, the mandates extensively documented) and its workforce capacity (the real, finite ability of its people to deliver, essentially unmeasured).

Compliance systems measure the first. Few systems measure the second against an educator's contracted hours.

The gap between them is where burnout, turnover, and restrictive placement are generated. The diagnostic insight: most districts believe they have an inclusion problem or a budget problem, when what they have is a measurement problem. They monitor the vital signs of compliance, every plan, every deadline, while never once checking the pulse of the workforce that carries it out.

The Sustainability Maturity Model

Districts can be located on a four-stage path. The point is not judgment; it is a shared target, and a sequence in which measurement is the unlock that makes every later stage possible.

STAGE 1 Compliant	The district measures whether plans are written and timelines met. Workforce capacity is invisible. Burnout and turnover appear to arrive “out of nowhere.” Most districts live here.
STAGE 2 Aware	Workload is measured; real work against real capacity, per provider. The Capacity Gap becomes visible for the first time. Leaders can see who is over the line before it breaks them.
STAGE 3 Responsive	The district acts on the measurement: staffing decisions, budget cases, and retention moves are driven by capacity data. The gap begins to close on purpose, not by luck.
STAGE 4 Sustainable	Workforce sustainability is managed continuously and tied to student outcomes and placement decisions. Inclusion holds because the people delivering it can carry it. Belief and practice align.

The model’s argument is sequential: a district cannot manage what it has not measured. Stage 2, making the *Capacity Gap* visible, is the gate. Everything past it depends on it. This is why the lever is measurement, not willpower: you do not close this gap by urging people to care more, but by giving them something they can finally see and act on. The shift from compliance to sustainability is a category shift, not a feature.

“All” means all, including the adults

It is easy to put the word *all* on a wall. It is a far harder thing to deliver, and the research I began with explains why. The belief was never the problem. The capacity to carry it was. My participants proved they believed. They told me, in their own words, that they could not always deliver. The distance between those two facts is where students lose access and adults lose careers.

Recall Participant 1’s definition: inclusion as *not just all students, but all staff members and how everyone fits together*. He was more right than he knew. A speech-language pathologist past the limit of her capacity cannot deliver the belonging we promised. A special educator weeks beyond sustainable load cannot be the adult a struggling student needs. Belonging for every student rests on a workforce that is not quietly breaking, and for half a century, we have refused to measure whether it is.

That refusal is not malice; it was a genuine constraint. Sustainability was hard to measure, so we measured compliance and hoped. The constraint is now gone. We can see the Capacity Gap. The only question left is whether we choose to look, because you cannot sustain what you cannot see, and you cannot include every student on the backs of adults you are unwilling to measure, protect, and keep.

About the author

Eric Oxford, Ed.D., is the co-founder of **The Inclusive Practice, LLC** and the creator of **PULSE**, a workforce-sustainability platform for special education. A former special education administrator, his 2020 doctoral research at Abilene Christian University examined the gap between districts' inclusive philosophy and their everyday practice, the foundation of the argument in this paper.

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Note on method and sourcing. The originating research is the author’s qualitative descriptive dissertation: ten building administrators (five principals and five special education team chairpersons) in a single Massachusetts district, nine open-ended questions across three research questions, analyzed thematically with member checking and an expert-reviewed protocol (Oxford, 2020). Its findings are descriptive and intentionally not generalized beyond the studied district; this paper treats them as a hypothesis-generating foundation rather than as proof of universality, consistent with the study’s stated design and limitations. Peer-reviewed external findings are cited in full below. Cost figures (turnover, tuition, transportation) are presented as illustrative ranges that vary by region, student need, and district. Regulatory citations reflect the versions in effect in October 2026.

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