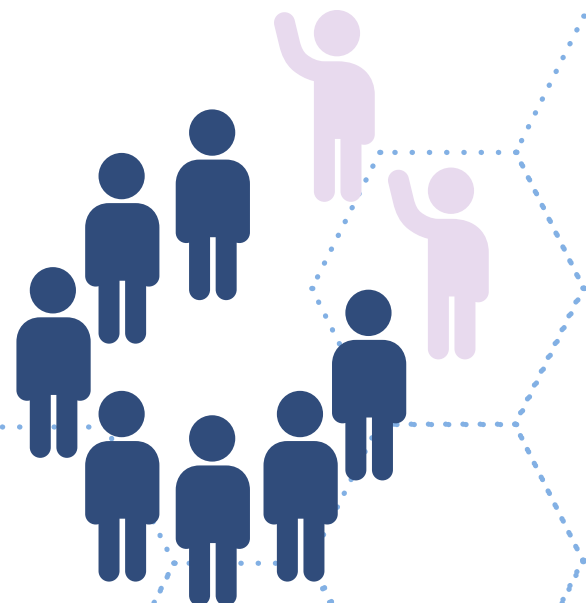




An Improvement and Learning Journey: Empowering Local Special Education Entities to Address the Special Education Teacher Shortage in Illinois

Where are we now

In the K–12 education landscape, a critical challenge is continuing. **Low retention rates among special education teachers has led to staff shortages and detrimental outcomes for students with disabilities.** Recognizing the urgency to address this issue, the *Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)* has partnered with the *National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI)* to embark on a collaborative mission to design a state system of support to begin addressing the shortage. The journey began as ISBE identified 40 entities with low retention rates among special education teachers and invited them to participate in a two-year grant program (Fall 2023–Spring 2025) using federal emergency relief funds (CFDA: 84.425) to fund innovative strategies to address local shortages. Out of the 40 invited, 27 entities opted in to the initiative, ready to explore new avenues for improvement.





NCSI provided technical assistance to ISBE in several core areas:

- in modeling improvement science principles and methods,
- in codeveloping a high-level design of the learning experiences needed to guide local entities through a root-cause analysis process,
- and in concrete strategies on how the ISBE could collaborate internally to have an integrated approach across two separate divisions: educator effectiveness and special education.

OUR PROGRAM

The program commenced with three webinars co-planned with NCSI and hosted by ISBE. These webinars were for entities to develop theories why they experienced retention challenges with special education teachers. Through root cause analysis and targeted improvement-science training, these entities gained invaluable insights into the underlying causes of their struggles. In between the learning webinars, the entities investigated their own context — using improvement methods — to learn more about

the issues facing their special education teachers and began identifying root causes. Later, each team designed and implemented personalized interventions connected to their investigations.

ISBE provided a supportive environment, offering virtual, collaborative spaces where entities could connect; share challenges; learn from each other; and exchange successful strategies relevant to their unique contexts. The shared learning experience

fostered a sense of community, transcending mere compliance and accountability, as ISBE wanted to genuinely learn and engage with local entities on their journey of growth and improvement.

The grant program will end in June 2025. ISBE and NCSI are both eager to evaluate the impacts of the grant program on special-education teacher retention rates among the entities.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

A formative evaluation, conducted by Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk, examined the state educational agency (SEA) capacity built by the partnership with NCSI. The questionnaire asked participants to reflect on their experience.

Several highlights from the responses include:

- **100 percent of survey respondents shared that NCSI emphasized the SEA's role to support learning and impact rather than solely enforce compliance.**
- **One ISBE staff shared, "I think this is a great first step in changing the mindset of ISBE employees, in opening the doors to better collaboration between departments, and in painting a different picture of ISBE — more of a partner than a governing body."**
- **Another participant shared that this experience made them "more open to collaborating with other departments — this work made it seem more possible."**
- **The experience built capacity to collaborate across SEA divisions. One staff member shared, "[SEAs] have been traditionally so siloed and territorial even, so I am hoping this trend continues."**

Lessons Learned

LESSON 1: EMBRACE STRATEGIC DESIGN FOR STATE SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT.

Codesigning a high-level design plan and strategy allowed ISBE to define targeted objectives and relevant actions, along with establishing a clear roadmap for the entities. Of the staff surveyed, 75 percent of staff expressed intentions to implement a similar design and planning approach for future initiatives.

LESSON 2: FOSTER INTERNAL SEA COLLABORATION TO PROVIDE AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO SUPPORT LOCAL ENTITIES.

Modeling the power of collaboration across two separate teams, NCSI established structured, weekly meeting agendas with well-defined objectives. ISBE embraced this practice, establishing regular work routines to ensure clarity. The result was a significant shift, as staff members expressed newfound openness to collaborating with other departments; to breaking down silos; and to transcending typical departmental boundaries.

PROJECT REACH

LESSON 3: EMBODY IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE PRINCIPLES.

NCSI's effective modeling of improvement mindsets and teaching materials proved instrumental in conveying leadership dispositions. Grounded in a gradual-release approach, the Technical Assistance plan allowed ISBE to independently execute webinars, effectively teaching improvement science methods such as root cause analysis. The newfound knowledge resonated with entities and guided the selection of relevant strategies. The impact extended beyond the immediate project scope, with ISBE staff members — and participating entities — expressing a strong willingness to employ the improvement science process in other areas of their work.

LESSON 4: DESIGN STANDARD METHODS AND MATERIALS TO BUILD SEA CAPACITY.

Recognizing the importance of a standardized approach, NCSI and ISBE collaborated to develop a consistent method for conducting root cause analyses. This codesigned framework incorporated

continuous improvement principles, ensuring consistency and enhancing the effectiveness of technical assistance and professional development. Staff members enthusiastically embraced this standardized approach: 100 percent of participants stated their intention to utilize the improvement science process in their future work. ISBE will train their special education team at the SEA in the standard method for root cause analysis established in this grant and include it as one of the activities within their general supervision system.

LESSON 5: CULTIVATE A SHIFT TOWARDS LEARNING SUPPORT OVER COMPLIANCE

A fundamental transformation in ISBE's role was observed as the partnership emphasized the importance of supporting learning rather than merely enforcing compliance. The shift in mindset from a governing body to a collaborative partner. The culture of collegiality helped foster an authentic engagement with local entities to make a difference in outcomes.

- **1 State Education Agency**
- **27 Local Education Agencies**
- **1,000+ teachers impacted**