



2026

PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFFING REPORT

INTRODUCTION

At Sunbelt, our job is to equip your district with the professionals you need to ensure that your students shine. Whether you are a district decision-maker or a school leader, we hope that this report inspires you to find the staff to support your special education teams in a sustainable way.

With schools across the United States learning to navigate critical staff shortages, especially within special education and key support roles, understanding the changing talent landscape is more important than ever. This report covers generic and region-specific information about the paraprofessional job market with the goal of equipping education leaders with the data and context needed to hire support staff with confidence.

All data and figures in this report are sourced from the **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)**, the **Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)**, and **Lightcast Analyst**, ensuring every insight is backed by the most comprehensive labor data available.

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STAFFING INDUSTRY TRENDS

Rising Special Education Enrollment

The number of IDEA-eligible students in the United States reached nearly 8 million by the fall of 2023, representing a 3.4% increase over the previous year. If similar growth trends continue through 2026, hundreds of thousands of additional students would require services, placing increased strain on special education systems and providers.

Strain on Special Education Teams

With a higher student demand than ever, vacancies nationwide present a growing issue. During the 2023-2024 school year, 70% of schools nationwide faced vacancies, and 74% of elementary and middle schools struggled to fill special education positions.

The demand for special education services may be rising, but the number of qualified professionals entering the field is shrinking. As a result, many positions remain unfilled or are staffed by unqualified employees, creating a high-pressure environment that fuels burnout and turnover.

Paraprofessionals are

5x

more likely to call out of work



Although vital to service delivery and in-classroom support, paraprofessionals and other student support staff often have much higher turnover rates than other special education professionals. Turnover and call-outs create additional pressure on specialized district staff, administrators, and HR departments. When your support staff is unreliable, services become delayed or are pushed onto other district staff, amplifying frustrations and burnout potential.

Adapting Your Staffing Strategy

Facing these staffing challenges alone is a big task. Luckily, staffing agencies like Sunbelt can work with you to develop specific strategies for managing paraprofessional hiring, call-outs, and management to relieve pressure on your administration. Our goal is to take on the hiring burden so you can focus on what your district does best—educating happy, healthy students.

Today, we are seeing an increasing number of special education support professionals choosing contract and agency-based roles for their flexibility, support, and reduced burnout potential. In fact, 1 in 5 contract workers cite flexible work arrangements as the primary reason they chose agency roles. With some school professionals preferring agency-based roles over direct hire, this presents an opportunity for school districts to partner with specialized staffing agencies to gain access to these professionals who are only seeking contract opportunities. In addition to this, staffing agencies can take over the responsibility for recruiting and sourcing, credential management, finding substitutes for call-outs, tracking attendance, and workers' compensation claims.

Leveraging a staffing agency expands your reach to candidates who prefer contract work. And, by extension, helps you achieve better outcomes for your students.

Paraprofessionals are

4x

more likely to file a
workers' compensation
claim



PARAPROFESSIONAL MARKET OVERVIEW

Paraprofessionals are the foundation for the success of special education services. Whether it's managing behaviors in the classroom or providing feedback for IEP development, they are there every step of the way with your students. Now, with an overwhelming number of students with IEPs, many school districts are utilizing non-traditional staffing models to ensure their needs are met by qualified paraprofessionals despite these challenges.

Know The Numbers



595,460

Active Job Seekers
(Matching Online Profiles)



242,117

Annual Job Postings



2.1%

Projected Job Growth
(2025-2030)



1,395,837

Professionals Currently
Employed



Over 330,000

Paraprofessionals
Approaching Retirement



Almost 32,000

Employers Competing

What This Means for Your District

The market is flooded with people searching for paraprofessional jobs. While this presents a huge pool of interested candidates, it creates a heavy administrative load for district leaders and HR departments. This burden can manifest as issues with credential management, a lack of proper screening due to application volume, and difficulty finding the person with the experience to meet your needs.

Partnering with a staffing agency like Sunbelt provides recruiting support to locate candidates with the right experience and qualifications for your specific job and lessens the administrative burden on your HR department.

WESTERN PARAPROFESSIONAL MARKET ANALYSIS



129,312

Active Job Seekers
(Matching Online Profiles)



60,564

Annual Job Postings



7,567

Employers Competing



4.4%

Projected Job Growth
(2025-2030)



Over 75,000

Paraprofessionals
Approaching Retirement



325,749

Professionals Currently
Employed

Staffing Insights

The West region presents a fairly balanced job market. Paraprofessional job growth is notably higher than the national average, especially when compared with other regions of the United States. While growth has slowed compared to the previous 5-year period, the gap between expected and actual employment is expected to continue to increase over the next 5 years. This means that crafting a long-term strategy to handle increased paraprofessional hiring will be important.

Compensation is the highest in this region, but the regional cost of living is 11.3% above the national average. While high compensation will attract many interested candidates, the cost of living may make retaining the good candidates difficult.

MIDWESTERN PARAPROFESSIONAL MARKET ANALYSIS



120,257

Active Job Seekers
(Matching Online Profiles)



52,052

Annual Job Postings



7,374

Employers Competing



1%

Projected Job Growth
(2025-2030)



Over 75,000

Paraprofessionals
Approaching Retirement



317,203

Professionals Currently
Employed

Staffing Insights

The Midwest's paraprofessional market is expected to remain balanced over the next five years. With job growth expected to even out at 1% through 2030, school districts can expect average competition over a moderate candidate pool.

Compensation in this region is 6.5% lower than the national median, but the cost of living is lower than the national average by 2.5%. This is reflected in how far candidates commute, especially in rural areas, as many travel to more populated areas in different counties for work. Partnering with a staffing agency like Sunbelt can help manage candidates who may commute long distances by offering reimbursements, bonuses, or other unique retention strategies at no extra cost to you.

NORTHEASTERN PARAPROFESSIONAL MARKET ANALYSIS



134,329

Active Job Seekers
(Matching Online Profiles)



52,005

Annual Job Postings



7,701

Employers Competing



2%

Projected Job Growth
(2025-2030)



Over 80,000

Paraprofessionals
Approaching Retirement



320,709

Professionals Currently
Employed

Staffing Insights

The Northeast is indicating continued, stable job growth for paraprofessionals despite employment already exceeding the national average for this area. There is aggressive job posting competition between employers, likely due to a high concentration of large cities and school districts in this region.

Despite high job post competition, there are more hires than postings annually. This means that many school districts are turning to non-traditional sourcing methods to place qualified paraprofessionals in their classrooms. Especially considering that compensation is average across this area when adjusted for the high cost of living, school districts need to be discerning and implement effective hiring strategies to make the most of their available candidate pool.

SOUTHERN PARAPROFESSIONAL MARKET ANALYSIS



161,901

Active Job Seekers
(Matching Online Profiles)



69,622

Annual Job Postings



10,977

Employers Competing



2%

Projected Job Growth
(2025-2030)



102,094

Paraprofessionals
Approaching Retirement



418,502

Professionals Currently
Employed

Staffing Insights

The paraprofessional job market in the South is projected to slow to 2% growth by 2030. Regional employment is also lower than the national average, with more employers competing for qualified candidates. This means that, on average, fewer paraprofessionals are employed despite the South having the largest disparity between active job seekers and job postings. Paired with extremely low compensation (up to 17% lower than the national average), school districts may find it difficult to locate interested candidates.

Knowing that qualified regional talent is spread thin, along with low compensation, school districts should prepare to address vacancies and high turnover with a solid staffing strategy.

OUR TAKEAWAYS



While all regions have more available candidates than job postings, each faces a unique problem that impacts sourcing or retention efforts. From an excess of candidates creating unnecessary noise for HR departments to low regional employment and compensation creating retention difficulties, it's clear that each school district needs a very specific solution that addresses their unique support personnel needs. In fact, the numbers show that all regions hire more paraprofessionals than they post for, indicating that many school districts are already turning toward non-traditional methods of keeping their special education classrooms fully staffed.

Utilizing Sunbelt as Your Staffing Partner

Sunbelt is an expert at sourcing qualified paraprofessionals quickly. And, with the ability to pre-screen candidates with district interview questions, manage their credentials, handle any workers' compensation claims, and track attendance, we take the burden of management away from your HR teams and district administrators.

To learn more about Sunbelt's services or request help creating a paraprofessional hiring strategy for your school district, please visit our [**Request Professionals**](#) page.

5 PROVEN STEPS FOR IDENTIFYING EXCEPTIONAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

Hiring the right professionals means better student outcomes, stronger compliance, and less turnover. Our team uses these five essential steps to help districts identify and secure top talent.

1

Build a Clear Scorecard for the Role

Define success before the first interview. Think about the role's mission, three to five key outcomes expected in the first year, and up to six must-have competencies (e.g., adaptability, student advocacy, collaboration).

2

Research Candidates' Online Presence

Review social media or relevant online contributions to spot alignment (or red flags) with your values.

3

Conduct a 30-Minute Screening Interview

Ask five to seven structured questions to determine their drivers for considering a new role, their fit for the role in question, and their experience with IEPs, diverse learners, etc.

4

Conduct a Top-Grading Interview

Deep dive into their career history. Look for patterns of success, their motivation for working in special education, real examples of problem-solving and student support. Ask how their former employers would describe them.

5

Check References with Four Targeted Questions

In what context did they work with the person? What were the candidate's biggest strengths? What were their biggest areas for improvement back then? What tips do they have for us on how to coach this person?

OVERVIEW OF SUNBELT STAFFING

Sunbelt Staffing has been partnering with school districts across the United States since 1989, providing highly qualified professionals so you can do what you do best—educate happy, healthy students. Our mission has always been to utilize our unmatched knowledge, unwavering commitment, and unrivaled determination to advocate for and empower your students.



Unmatched Special Education Staffing Expertise



Highly Qualified Candidates

We'll do what we do best, so you can focus on doing what you do best.



Nationwide Reach

Whether you're in an inner city, a rural community, or somewhere in between, we'll make sure you get the best specialists for your needs.



Personnel Management and Support

We will screen, coordinate communications, schedule interviews, and manage the onboarding and credentialing for the candidate of your choice. Our screening includes license verification, drug testing, background checks, and detailed reference checks.

“Sunbelt is an extremely professional organization and has helped us fill our critical needs by providing a high-quality special education staffing service to our school district.”

- **Christine F., School Staffing Coordinator**

CONTACT US

Strengthening your team with the right talent partner can have a profound impact on the students, the families, and the communities you serve. After all, better education professionals produce better student outcomes. By partnering with us, you can feel confident that you're getting access to the country's highest quality credentialed candidates.



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sunbeltstaffing.com/employers/



Request Professionals today and learn how Sunbelt can help you see education staffing in a whole new light.