



REPORT

Navigating Hiring Challenges in Unconventional Classrooms

Effective Retention Strategies for Special Education and Virtual Learning Environments



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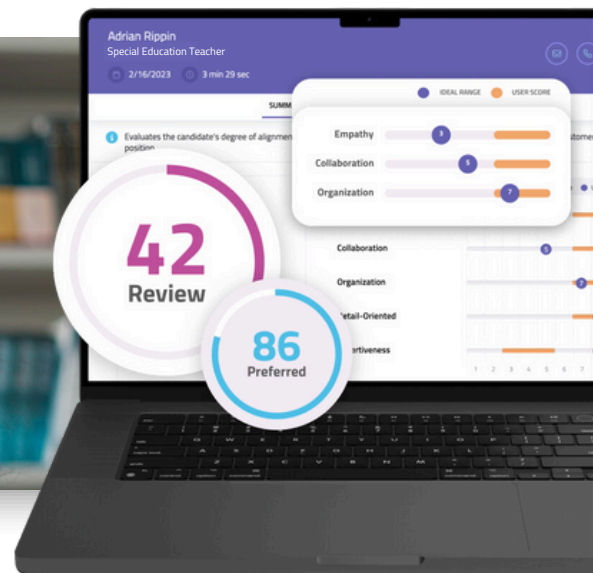
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PURPOSE

This report will analyze the current hiring and retention challenges faced by unconventional classrooms (virtual and special education), providing actionable insights and strategic solutions to help administrators attract and retain the most qualified educators for improved workplace culture and long-term success.

Introduction

Unconventional K-12 classrooms—specifically virtual and special education—have been rapidly increasing in value due to growing demands for educational equity. **With a 900% growth rate since its inception in 2000, virtual learning is education’s fastest-growing sector, and is expected to be worth \$686.9 billion by 2030.**¹ Brick-and-mortar special education classrooms are likewise experiencing an attendance boom. During the 2022-2023 school year, **7.5 million children ages 3-21 with disabilities participated, making up 15% of total students**, the highest number on record.² Both virtual and special education classrooms provide vital flexibility and accessibility to students with diverse behavioral and academic needs. Despite their critical role in fostering equitable education, unconventional learning environments face significant challenges that hinder their potential to become leading forces in tomorrow’s education initiatives.

**900%
growth**

Since its inception in 2000, virtual learning has experienced a **900% growth rate.**

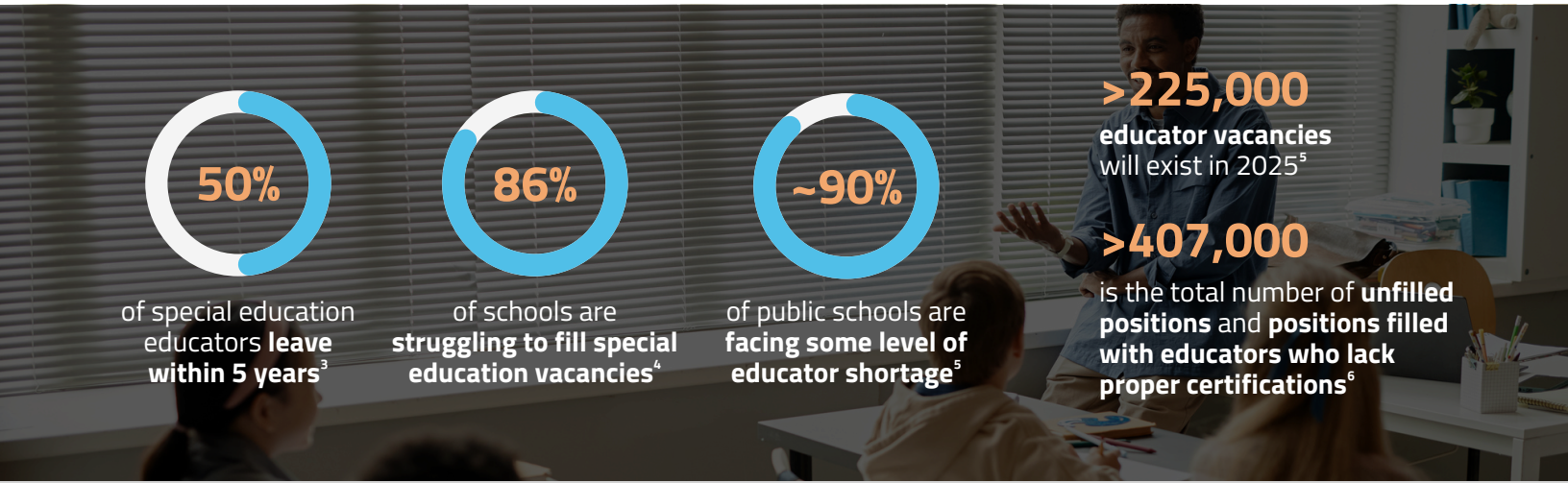
**7.5
million**

7.5 million children ages 3-21 with disabilities participated, making up **15%** of total students.



THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CRISIS

Special education, being predominantly brick-and-mortar based, continues to be jeopardized by the **substantial educator shortage** and **rapid turnover** in education.



This staffing crisis leads to **high turnover**, **inconsistent learning experiences for students**, and **increased costs for schools**, which must continuously recruit, train, and replace staff.

THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM CHALLENGE

Virtual classrooms, on the other hand, experience significantly **higher educator retention rates**, with some schools maintaining **90% retention** over the past three years.⁷ However, they face their own hurdles:

- ▶ Many candidates are unprepared for the realities of virtual teaching, leading to frustrations for educators, students and administrators.
- ▶ Only 9% of educator preparation programs have found every educator to be fully proficient in leveraging instructional technology.⁸

These gaps result in **technology-related setbacks** and **unmet expectations**, compounding the challenges of recruiting and retaining high-quality virtual educators.



THE NEED FOR NEW HIRING STRATEGIES

Staffing shortages and **misaligned candidate expectations** generate high costs for schools. Salaries are wasted, and the cycle of hiring drains more time and money while disrupting students' learning. To remedy these challenges and place unconventional classrooms as leaders in the education sector, administrators must learn how to **hire more efficiently and strategically to attract the most prepared special educators and accelerate their acquisition of role- and culture-aligned virtual educators.**

Although the education system is facing a crisis, the damages of turnover from staffing shortages and misaligned expectations in special education and virtual classrooms can be improved with **competitive offerings** and **modernized hiring solutions** that focus on optimizing the talent pipeline and workplace culture in order to boost retention.

Current Hiring Challenges in Unconventional Classrooms

Financial pressures and increasing educator burnout worsen turnover's impacts and compound hiring and retention challenges.

THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF RISING TURNOVER

Every educator lost is a higher cost. Estimates place the **cost per lost special educator to be around \$10,000 to \$21,000,⁹ with \$14,000 being the average.¹⁰** For larger districts, that price sometimes peaks to \$25,000.¹¹ Expenses include lost salaries, paying for substitutes, hiring, and onboarding. Given **special educators' 50% turnover rate**, these financial impacts are substantial.

The wider scope of educator turnover, including virtual educators, piles on further costs. By one calculation, **within the next 4 years, 18% of educators intend to quit and 37% intend to move schools, potentially leading to around 575,000 lost educators and 600,000 school changes by 2028.¹²** Factoring in the impact per educator, that is an astronomical cost to school districts.

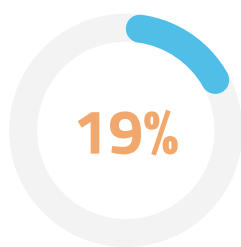


THE PRICE OF DISINTEREST AND BURNOUT

Lately, the **completion rate of education-based degrees has dropped by 19%**.¹³ Fewer people want to teach. Among those that do, **many turn over in just 2 to 4 years**.¹² Much of the educator shortage stems from a mismatch in college graduates' expectations versus the expectations of school administrations.¹⁴ Too many candidates view teaching positions as **lacking a supportive workplace culture** or the **competitive compensation that matches the required labor**.

The overwhelming workload placed on teachers drives burnout, with **90% of educators viewing it as a serious problem in the field**,¹⁵ and it is the **leading factor behind 55% of educator departures**.¹⁵ Under burnout, educators' **engagement** and **sense of fulfillment** plummets. Younger educators, more likely to be less prepared and less experienced, are **2.5 times more likely to quit due to burnout**.¹⁵ While burnout peaked during COVID-19, it is a permanent challenge because its root causes are poor work-life balance and lack of supportive workplace culture.

Burnout complicates efforts to attract and retain educators in unconventional classrooms, where **unique demands** worsen the issue. Educators in these settings often juggle multiple roles beyond teaching, **servicing as disability experts, operating with greater autonomy**, and **troubleshooting technology**, further intensifying the strain.



The **completion rate of education-based degrees** has dropped by 19%.



90% of educators view **burnout** as a serious problem in the field.





Factors Contributing to Hiring & Retention Issues

Many factors greatly contribute to hiring and retention issues in unconventional classrooms. These difficulties are unique to each context but all make effective educator placement and retention much more challenging.

Special Education Factors

LACK OF COMPETITIVE OFFERINGS AND APPRECIATION

Salary is a major pain point for special educators, who often receive the same salary as their general education counterparts despite facing a much heavier workload. Special educators are tasked with regularly collecting data for each student's academic and behavioral goals, holding annual meetings to update parents, and revising legally binding service plans for each student. They may also be expected to manage severe classroom behaviors while teaching basic curriculum requirements, adding to the demands of the role.

Despite these challenges, there is no corresponding increase in compensation. The current base pay and benefits are not competitive enough to offset the sector's challenges, resulting in high turnover. **Only 46% of educators are satisfied with their working hours, and only 36% find their base pay adequate.**¹⁶ Most educators feel that they need to earn roughly \$80,000 base pay to remain in their position.¹⁶ Educators also frequently feel **undervalued and overworked** by administration, parents, and students, leading to **resentment and disengagement**.



Only 46% of educators are **satisfied with their working hours**.



Only 36% of educators **find their base pay adequate**.

\$80k

Most educators feel that they need to earn \$80,000 **base pay** to remain in their position.

UNEQUAL COMPENSATION AND STRESS

Gender and racial inequalities contribute to lack of job satisfaction. Teaching is a women-dominated field, but **female educators experience higher rates of job-related stress and burnout than male educators and report a significantly lower base salary than male colleagues despite working the same hours per week.**¹⁶ Most special educators are white, while around half of their students are not, sometimes creating a disconnect between the educator and their students. **Black educators are also less likely to admit job stress, more likely to leave, work more hours per week than their peers, and receive lower salaries.**¹⁶

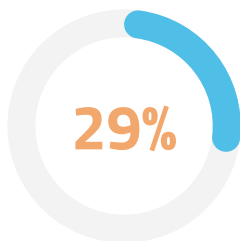


INABILITY FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE

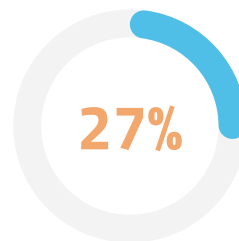
Lack of work-life balance overburdens educators, who report an **average of 53 hours worked per week, almost ten more hours than similar working adults.**¹⁶ Special education educators face significant time shortages as they take on multiple roles beyond their primary responsibilities as teachers, such as behavior assessor, individualized education plan (IEP) developer, and constant adapter to high-intensity learning needs.

LACK OF SUPPORT AND MENTORSHIP

Support and mentorship, crucial for special educators' success, are often lacking or absent in many placements. Special educators must teach, develop, and collaborate with other educators and specialists on IEP plans, advocate for their students, and manage diverse needs and abilities. **With a lack of guidance, special educators feel they have been left high and dry while trying to adapt to challenges and balance their students' needs and their own. Most special education educators would rather have the full-time support of a paraprofessional than receive a 12.5% salary increase.**¹⁷



Inadequate compensation causes 29% of employees to leave retail.



Perceiving their work as lacking meaning led to 27% of employees departing retail.

MISALIGNMENT OF EXPECTATIONS: OVERWHELMED AND UNPREPARED

New special educators often enter the field without proper preparation for the additional roles they must fulfill. **Writing IEPs, collaborating effectively with families and other educators, and handling highly unpredictable classrooms** are often not skills they are taught by their programs. **Little mentorship and frequent confusion from administration regarding special educators' duties** contribute to a serious misalignment of expectations for new special educators.



Virtual Classroom Factors

MISALIGNMENT OF EXPECTATIONS: NOT AS “EASY” AS THOUGHT

Virtual educators are being encouraged as a remedy for the brick-and-mortar staffing crisis, and many candidates are more interested in virtual teaching’s work-from-home model. However, many educators enter virtual classrooms with misaligned expectations.

Skilled teaching in brick-and-mortar schools does not always translate to proficiency in the virtual classroom.¹⁸ Student engagement, in particular, is a major challenge in virtual learning, where greater autonomy and unsupervised distractions make it difficult for educators to maintain focus. Unlike in brick-and-mortar classrooms, virtual environments limit teachers’ ability to oversee and moderate student behavior effectively.¹⁹

INABILITY FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Virtual educators face more challenges than expected with balancing time due in large part to the **high volume of communication necessary in a virtual setting and unexpected technology updates or errors stalling progress.**¹⁸ **Shortages of resources and funding** as well as **high inequity in technology and internet access**, especially in underserved populations, add to educators’ burdens. Often, educators who sought virtual teaching as a way to have more time flexibility find themselves working just as much because of the additional demands of the virtual classroom.

LACK OF STRONG WORKPLACE CULTURE

In brick-and-mortar settings, a strong workplace culture built on close community connections between educators can **boost retention even amidst a lack of job satisfaction.** Virtual settings require the same strength of culture to support and retain their workforce effectively. However, challenges arise in the virtual school, where **educators may feel more disconnected or overlooked. Policy frustrations, less professional development, lack of oversight, or feelings of little support and colleague connection between educators and their peers or their administrators fuels burnout.**¹⁸

The virtual school must emphasize a culture of **high-quality education** and a **strong support system** to create enduring bonds.



Impact of High Turnover on Unconventional Classrooms

High turnover undermines educational efforts, leading to diminished student learning outcomes and even the potential loss of school funding.

DISRUPTS COMMUNITY STABILITY

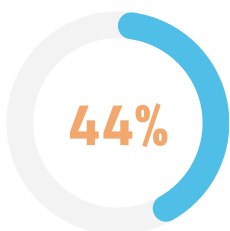
High educator turnover means **constantly rebuilding relationships between students, families, administrators, and educators**. This turmoil can introduce conflict into the school community or make students and retained educators jaded towards new teachers. With **44% of educators feeling often or constantly burned out**,²⁰ every educator lost pushes a greater burden onto those who remain. Fewer teachers means larger class sizes and increased emotional and time demands, fueling a turnover cycle.

REDUCES STUDENT LEARNING AND RETENTION

A high-stress, inconsistent learning environment **reduces students' ability to absorb and retain content**. In special education classrooms, this impact is the most severe because many students with disabilities rely on routine and high trust relationships more than the typical student in order to thrive. In virtual classrooms, where students already face hurdles of adapting to new practices and technology, a feeling of unreliability about their educators can cause **decreased performance and engagement**.

WASTES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

When educators rapidly turn over, professional development opportunities become wasted investments for the school. **High turnover often makes the \$18 billion that schools collectively spend annually on teacher learning programs²¹ an unchecked drain on resources**. However, **strong professional development** is a good factor in retaining educators—if the training is something that they actually see as benefiting them, their work, and their students.



44% of educators feeling **often or constantly burned out**

\$18 billion

High turnover causes school to spend \$18 billion annually on **teacher learning programs**

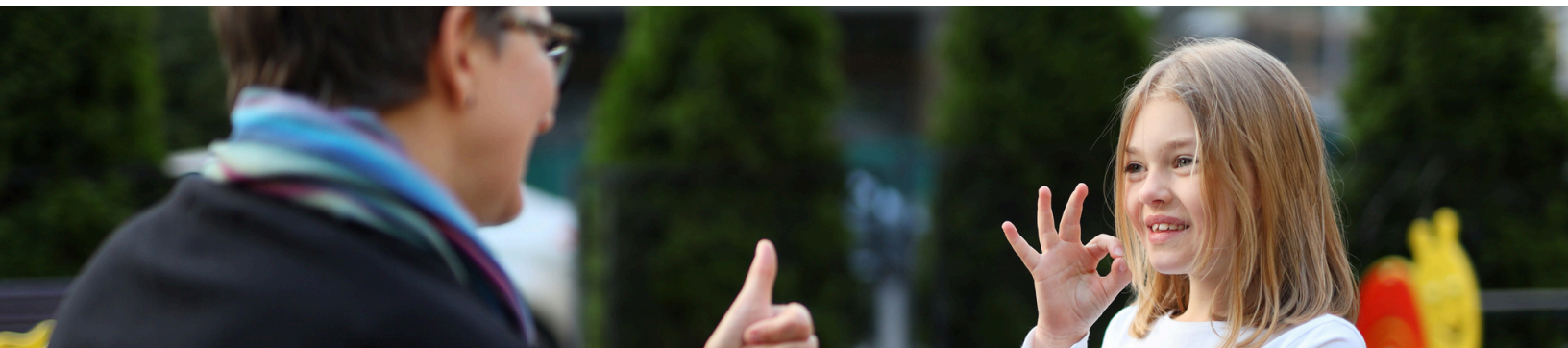


Strategic Solutions to Improve Hiring & Retention

IMPROVED HIRING PRACTICES: SPECIAL EDUCATION

To mitigate the staffing crisis, school administrators must provide **more attractive offerings** to special educator candidates. **The four following steps provide a guide to fostering initial attraction from candidates and remedying the major pain points that keep driving special educators away:**

- 1 Give competitive pay and benefits.** Increased wages directly boost retention and reduce vacancies.²² Providing **strong, competitive offerings including health benefits, sick leave and pay, family leave and pay, mentorship programs, mental healthcare, professional development, and continuous support for special educators** gives them more reason to stay.
- 2 Provide strong work-life balance.** To keep intensive work demands from overwhelming special educators, it is crucial that they have **classroom support staff, guidance on clear expectations of their duties, and enough time to recharge between work sessions.**
- 3 Offer growth and development opportunities.** Make these opportunities clearly relevant and efficient for special educators. Pitching development to them in ways that address their ongoing pain points not only gives them more buy-in to **professional development**, but also gives them more buy-in to the school because these efforts show that administrators care about **improving their workloads.**
- 4 Cultivate a workplace culture of appreciation.** Recognition and support are paramount for a culture that will retain special educators. They need to know that the **administration has their backs, that they will get time off to recharge, that their concerns and complaints will be heard and addressed, and that they are not tackling high-challenge classrooms alone.** Teaching is a team effort, especially for special educators, when so much collaboration is involved: show your educators that you believe in this.





IMPROVED HIRING PRACTICES: VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

To accelerate their hiring pipeline, virtual school administrators must innovate their hiring process to improve its efficiency, letting them focus their onboarding time and money on securing and retaining the most promising talent. **The following four steps provide a roadmap to making hiring as meaningful as possible to your organization:**

- 1 Leverage technology for talent acquisition and retention.** Automating your hiring process and making it mobile-friendly boosts efficiency, letting you reach more candidates faster. Utilizing **pre-employment screening assessments** like minimum qualification surveys and job previews lets you sort through a huge volume of applicants to identify those who are the best fit for your needs.
- 2 Implement comprehensive onboarding and training programs.** Upskill educators to the virtual setting. Demonstrations of how to manage the virtual classroom, all the tools you use, and where they can go for tech help are game-changers. **Video guides** give new hires the ability to refresh their memories and stay on top of learning new tasks or better familiarize all educators with new technology being added to their classrooms.
- 3 Create a positive, supportive workplace culture.** Emphasize in your hiring what you consider a “good fit” candidate. Make the workplace a space with strong, clear avenues of communication where everyone can contribute and be heard. Encourage and support **work-life balance, diverse ideas, and collaborative troubleshooting**. Model the supportive leadership you want your educators to emulate.
- 4 Develop career pathways and advancement opportunities.** Leverage **professional development** as a chance for further workplace culture building. Show educators how training will provide them with actionable skills that will make their jobs easier and help them more efficiently combat common challenges. Emphasizing practicality and personal value gives educators greater buy-in, ensuring those investments pay you back.





UTILIZING AUTOMATED HIRING TOOLS FOR THE UNCONVENTIONAL CLASSROOM

A key component to long-term school stability is efficiently hiring the right candidate for the right position. **Automated hiring tools can help by screening, assessing, sorting, and streamlining your candidate pipeline for you.**

Make your hiring matter more and last longer with minimum qualification surveys, realistic job previews, early screening questionnaires and custom skills assessments, and culture fit assessments.



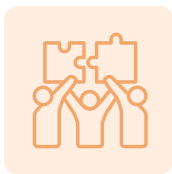
Minimum Qualification Surveys present candidates with the **minimum skills, knowledge, experience, and other requirements they must have to be accepted into your position.** This includes base pay and hours. If a candidate does not find these requirements a good fit for them, they can opt out of the rest of the hiring process, saving both of you time.



Realistic Job Previews tell candidates what a **real day on your job will be like.** These are usually **videos or highly detailed written summaries** that list daily tasks, common challenges or problems, benefits, and core expectations. Best of all, these previews let candidates opt out of the process if they do not feel like a good fit, expediting your applicant load.



Early Screening Questionnaires and Custom Skills Assessments examine a candidate's **personality, teamwork skills, problem-solving approach, and other competencies that are crucial for a strong culture fit.** These automated tools score and sort candidates for you. By evaluating a candidate's perspectives and hard and soft skills early, you can quickly identify who has the most potential and is worth interviewing.



Culture Fit Assessments specifically analyze a candidate's **likelihood of fitting into your workplace culture based on their personality, soft skills, and psychology.** These tools are essential for building towards the workplace culture you want to cultivate and ensuring that you continue hiring candidates that grow and maintain your positive, supportive workplace culture and values.



How HighMatch Can Help

HighMatch has over 15 years of experience helping clients with diverse needs accelerate their hiring pipelines, improve their candidate quality, and boost their retention. Unlike other vendors, we tailor our product suite to your preferences, not ours.

Our personalized assessments combine modular and custom-built components under the expert guidance of our I/O Psychologists. By choosing HighMatch, you choose a strategic partnership committed to high-quality hiring that gives you the confidence of making the right choices the first time.

Minimum qualification surveys expedite the right hiring.

With **HighMatch's Min Qual surveys**, you can quickly screen and score applicants on whether they meet and agree to your most basic requirements. Even better, this tool collects data on your candidate pool's preparedness for your roles, giving you a **better understanding of the talent you are working with**. Our surveys utilize **personalized, streamlined questions** and allow applicants to opt out of the hiring process if they do not feel that the position is the right fit for them.

Realistic job previews prevent misaligned expectations.

HighMatch's Job Preview capability lets you show applicants what your position's daily tasks are via a video or a written descriptive preview. Applicants that do not align with your detailed and transparent portrayal of the position can self-select out of the hiring process, **condensing your pipeline to qualified individuals**. This level of transparency helps **curb early turnover by ensuring candidates know what to expect** and are **better equipped to overcome challenges from negative job aspects** rather than quitting because of them.

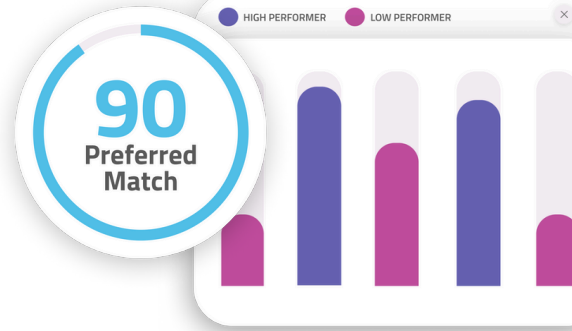
Early screening and assessment provides more insightful, actionable data.

HighMatch Screen allows you to rapidly screen and sort applicants based on personality, teamwork skills, and problem-solving approach. This tactic quickly provides you with actionable data that lets you **funnel your hiring pipeline to the most worthwhile candidates**. Refine that pipeline further with tools like **HighMatch Assess**, which delves more specifically into applicants' core competencies and soft and hard skills so that you can **determine if an applicant will bring the best potential to your role and fit the best within the positive, supportive workplace culture** that is essential to long-term retention.

Culture fit assessments boost hiring consistency and quality.

HighMatch's Culture Fit capability builds personalized assessments that score candidates based on your preferred organizational language and values. By comparing candidates directly to what most defines the workplace culture you want to strive for and maintain, you quickly receive **actionable data that ensures you only hire candidates that further your cultural goals and values**.

Conclusion



High turnover in brick-and-mortar classrooms and misaligned expectations in virtual ones jeopardize the stability and quality of schooling that the diverse students of special education and virtual classrooms need. With these ongoing challenges putting schools through high costs and serious disruptions to learning, colleague bonding, and positive workplace culture, **school administrations and placement centers must adapt their hiring processes to better assess and prepare candidates for their roles.**

Utilizing more automated, highly vetted, personalized assessment tools makes the process of hiring or placing the right candidate in the right role much easier. Customized, transparent hiring tools like minimum qualification surveys, job previews, pre-employment screening, and culture fit assessments save time and money by streamlining your candidate pipeline to the most qualified applicants.

Focusing on finding the right fit first boosts your retention and your workplace culture at the same time. **This two-pronged tactic combats the challenges that unconventional classrooms face and positions those classroom models to lead the future in more effective, supportive schooling.**

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RESOURCES

¹ <https://www.devlinpeck.com/content/online-learning-statistics>

² <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2024144>

³ https://teachplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Teach-Plus-IL_Million-Paper-Cuts.pdf

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⁶ <https://www.fullmindlearning.com/blog/educator-shortages>

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¹⁰ <https://edresearchforaction.org/research-briefs/addressing-special-education-staffing-shortages-strategies-for-schools/>

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¹² <https://tytonpartners.com/spring-2024-data-on-whats-causing-k-12-educators-to-quit-schools-and-what-will-make-them-stay/>

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¹⁴ <https://bellwether.org/>

¹⁵ <https://www.schoolsthatlead.org/blog/educator-burnout-statistics>

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¹⁷ <https://orilearning.com/how-close-are-we-to-solving-the-sky-high-special-education-educator-turnover-rate/>

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¹⁹ <https://learn.padistance.org/blog/k-12-challenges>

²⁰ <https://research.com/education/educator-burnout-challenges-in-k-12-and-higher-education>

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