

A smiling man with a beard, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt, stands in a classroom. His hands are clasped in front of him. The background is a wall covered with various educational posters. Some visible posters include "don't just WISH for it, WORK for it" and "THINK". The entire image has a green color overlay.

Protecting Compliance, Continuity & Student Progress

A Guide for Special Education Administrators to Prevent Staffing Shortages Through Strategic Partnerships

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When Staffing Shortages Become Systemic

School staffing challenges have shifted dramatically.

What were once localized, persistent shortages in specific roles have become a widespread crisis. Pandemic-era burnout, high turnover among early-career educators, and increased competition from other industries have intensified the strain. While teacher shortages are not new, the current conditions are more severe and harder for schools to manage.

This eBook examines how service gaps develop, how they cascade across tiered student support systems, and how districts can prevent disruption through service partners like eLuma. For more than 15 years, eLuma has partnered with school districts navigating persistent shortages across mental health, special education, and related services.



The Crisis Landscape: Rising Needs, Shrinking Capacity

Districts are experiencing sustained pressure to meet timelines, maintain documentation, and deliver services as required, despite shrinking capacity.

As of June 2025, students with disabilities represent a significant and growing portion of the K–12 population.⁵ This increases the need for IEP evaluations, ongoing therapy services, and heightened compliance requirements, all of which demand qualified staff.

Meanwhile, rates of teen anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts have **increased by more than 40%** over the past decade,¹ affirming the need for consistent mental and behavioral health support.

However, current staffing shortages present significant roadblocks to addressing these challenges. National analyses show widespread staffing instability across education roles, with **approximately 1 in 8 being either vacant or filled by teachers not fully certified for their assignments.**⁶

Districts have to close existing gaps to remain compliant while special education referrals climb, and student behavioral health needs compound the pressure on strained resources and staff.

✓ More than half of school-based speech-language pathologists report shortages in their schools⁷

✓ The national ratio of school psychologists to students is roughly 1:1,182, nearly double the recommended levels⁷

✓ Student-to-school-counselor ratios approach 500:1, far exceeding best-practice guidance⁷

✓ Nearly all states report shortages of special education teachers and related service personnel⁷

The Cost of Waiting: When Gaps Compound

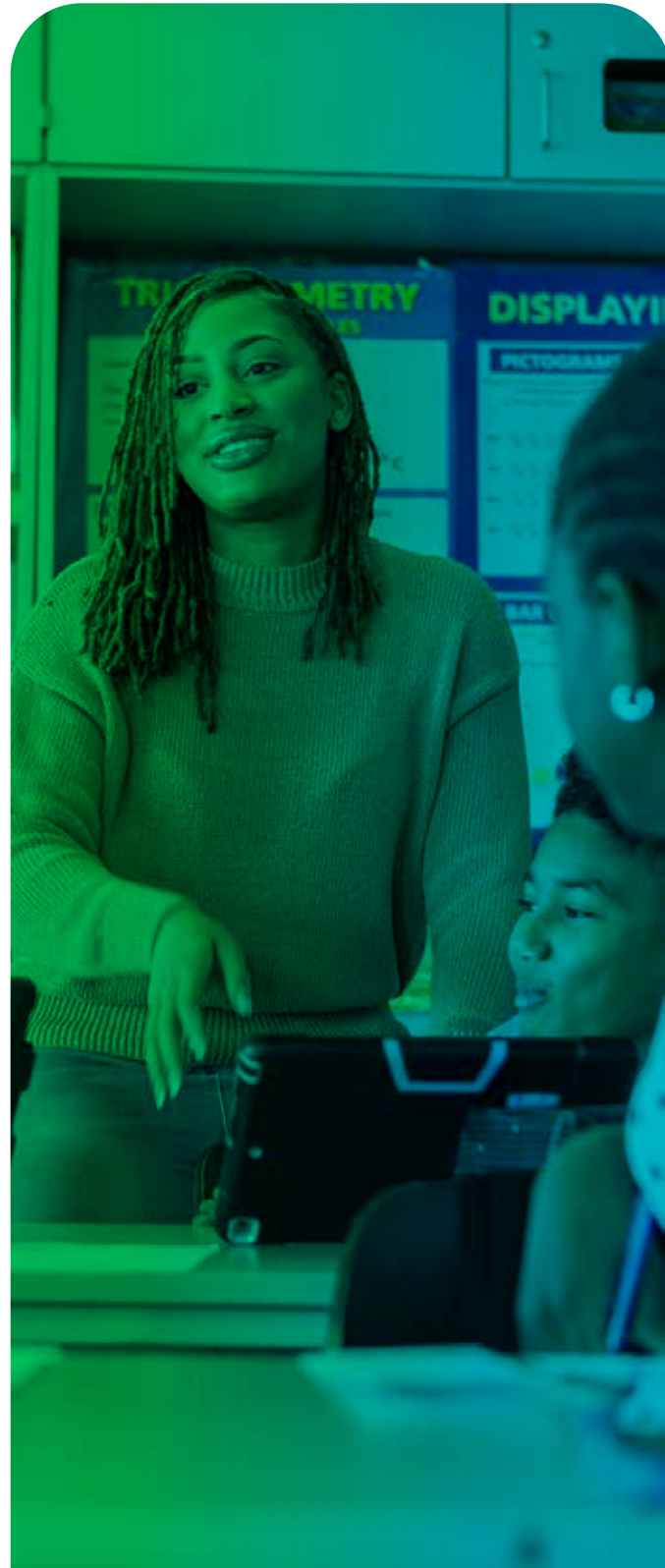
As vacancies persist and workloads shift, gaps develop, leaving districts at increased risk of legal escalation and safety concerns.

The cost of a service gap rarely shows up as a single line item. It shows up as staff overtime, compensatory service hours, and legal costs that were never budgeted for.

From the 2021-22 to the 2022-23 school year, special education **due process complaints jumped by 16.4%.**⁸

Moreover, research shows that poor mental health negatively affects student attendance and academic performance, reinforcing the urgency of timely intervention.² In a 2023 school safety survey, **60% of K-12 school leaders** reported feeling ill-equipped to address those challenges.¹⁰

Addressing gaps across all tiers or layers of support **prevents avoidable escalation**, preserves internal capacity, and protects documentation integrity, allowing districts to maintain stability and promote student achievement.



How Service Gaps Affect Support at Every Tier

Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) are designed as an integrated framework. When capacity breaks down at any level, pressure increases across the system.

Tier I Visibility and Early Stability

Tier I establishes visibility into student needs and provides early intervention. When staffing constraints interrupt these supports, emerging concerns are identified later, documentation becomes inconsistent, and response timelines tighten under greater pressure.

identified later > documentation inconsistent > response timeline tightens

Tier I demonstrates proactive monitoring and timely action. When this layer erodes, districts lose early leverage and face increased strain downstream.

eLuma supports Tier I through **universal mental health screening via our SSIS partnership, staff professional development, and caregiver training**, building schoolwide capacity for early identification. Our role is to strengthen visibility, consistency, and internal capacity.

eLuma's Tier I support includes

- ✓ **Universal mental health screening**, including evidence-based tools to support consistent identification and defensible decision-making
- ✓ **Staff professional development**, focused on building schoolwide capacity and helping educators proactively support struggling students
- ✓ **Caregiver training and support**, reinforcing consistency and reducing breakdowns between home and school that can stall progress



When Tier I services remain stable, fewer students require escalation.

Tier II

Targeted Support Under Pressure

Tier II supports students who require targeted intervention. Staffing constraints at this level frequently lead to delays, allowing needs to intensify and increasing pressure on evaluation timelines and intensive services.

Delayed Tier II intervention weakens the ability to demonstrate timely, appropriate response before escalation. **When this layer falters, Tier III demand rises faster than districts can staff for it.**

Consequences for Tiers I & II (Universal and Targeted Supports) if gaps persist:

- Early interventions are delayed or inconsistent
- Minor behavioral or academic issues escalate
- Student needs that could be addressed in lower tiers move into Tier III
- Increased strain on high-need staff and resources
- Continuity of support for all students breaks down

eLuma helps districts **augment capacity at Tier II when internal teams cannot keep pace**, allowing targeted services to begin on time and remain consistent throughout staffing transitions.

eLuma's Tier II support includes

- ✓ **General education counseling services**, delivered individually or in small groups, to address emerging needs
- ✓ **Behavioral support services**, focused on skill development, behavior replacement strategies, and environmental adjustments
- ✓ **Consultation and collaboration** with educators and caregivers to align supports and reinforce progress
- ✓ **Monitoring and documenting progress**, supporting informed movement across tiers and defensible decisions



Maintaining Tier II continuity helps districts reduce unnecessary escalation, protect Tier III resources, and support internal staff sustainability.

Tier III Compliance Critical Services

Tier III services carry the highest compliance exposure that districts manage. Demand typically rises because earlier supports couldn't be sustained.

Vacancies in counseling, psychology, speech-language therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy immediately affect IEP service delivery, evaluation timelines, and documentation requirements. Each week without coverage increases the likelihood of compensatory services, due process complaints, and regulatory scrutiny.

Consequences for Tier III (Intensive/High-Need Supports) if gaps persist:

- IEP service minutes fall behind schedule
- Evaluation timelines are missed
- Compensatory services increase
- Documentation gaps emerge
- Staff burnout accelerates turnover
- Student progress stalls, creating compliance risk

eLuma prevents Tier III service gaps by providing licensed, credentialed providers who integrate into district service delivery models while hiring remains underway. When Tier III services remain stable, districts stay compliant, meet required timelines, and support consistent progress for students with the highest needs.

eLuma's Tier III support includes

- ✓ **Psychoeducational evaluations**, provided by licensed school psychologists, including assessments, written reports, and participation in eligibility and IEP meetings
- ✓ **Speech-language therapy services**, delivered by licensed speech-language pathologists, including assessments and ongoing intervention
- ✓ **Occupational therapy services**, delivered by licensed occupational therapists, including assessments and ongoing intervention
- ✓ **Special education instruction**, delivered by credentialed special education teachers, including instruction, IEP goal tracking, and progress monitoring aligned to student plans
- ✓ **Counseling and behavioral support as IEP-related services**, executed by licensed mental health providers aligned to student goals
- ✓ **Case management and documentation support**, ensuring accurate records, timely reporting, and compliance-ready documentation across service delivery

Speed With Accountability: A Distinctive Approach

Districts facing staffing shortages are often forced to choose between transactional staffing support or slow internal hiring processes.

Speed with accountability means:

- Rapid service initiation without compromising licensure standards
- Alignment with district tiered supports and IEP frameworks
- Consistent documentation and oversight
- Continuity through staffing transitions



When to Partner

External staffing support is most effective when used intentionally. Districts should consider partnering when:

- Vacancies threaten service or evaluation timelines
- Backlogs begin to form
- Internal staff workloads become unsustainable
- Hiring pipelines cannot meet near-term demand

“[eLuma providers] are consistent. They are reliable. They’re there when they say they’re going to be there.”

– Vonnie P., Special Education Director in Utah

Proof in Practice: What Stability Looks Like

Districts partnering with eLuma consistently report improved service continuity during periods of staffing disruption, including faster service initiation and sustained coverage during extended vacancies.¹¹ Districts that stabilize coverage early are better positioned to avoid compounding risk.

Continuity Without Limits

Virtual service delivery allows districts to access qualified providers beyond local labor markets, begin services more quickly, and maintain continuity during staffing transitions.

A local hire or single contractor leaving mid-year means starting over. eLuma's provider network means coverage continues, records stay intact, and students don't lose momentum when one person's availability changes.

eLuma matches districts with the best provider to meet their specific needs, not just whoever is available.

This model removes long turnover recovery times and geographic constraints while preserving accountability and service quality.

A named point of contact, all year.

Every district partner works with a dedicated Customer Success Partner who manages caseloads, resolves issues, and stays engaged for the full school year, not just through onboarding.

A Partner, Not a Replacement

eLuma is not a replacement for internal teams or a transactional staffing broker. Our role is focused on preventing service gaps when districts cannot afford disruption.

“Whenever we face staffing challenges, eLuma quickly gets onboarded and navigates our schedules and systems, ensuring students don't miss services.”

– Aimee B., Assistant Director of Special Education in Minnesota¹¹

Moving Forward: Preventing Gaps Before They Escalate

Service gaps often develop quietly before becoming visible.

District leaders can begin by asking:

- ✓ Are service or evaluation timelines slipping?
- ✓ Are staff absorbing work intended for vacant roles?
- ✓ Are Tier II and Tier III demands increasing faster than capacity?
- ✓ Are you weighing the cost of a vacancy against the cost of a compliance gap?

If so, gaps may already be forming.

“In my opinion, going with eLuma is a no-brainer! Their therapists have provided high-quality services.”

- Lena K., Executive Director in Kansas



Contact us today to discuss where your district's capacity is under the most pressure, and what stabilizing it could look like this school year.

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