

ISSUE BRIEF

Overview

As the nation continues to face a critical shortage of educators, we have made a longstanding commitment to ensuring special educators have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the unique needs of our infants, toddlers, children, and youth with exceptionalities. Now more than ever, we need to develop a workforce pipeline to attract diverse personnel into all areas of special education; effectively prepare the personnel to provide opportunities for positive outcomes and post-school success; and retain special education teachers for long-term overall impact. To ensure an effective workforce, we need to ensure there is an effective pipeline.

The pandemic created a unique set of inequities and challenges such as higher attrition rates, accelerated retirements, lower enrollment in preservice programs, and increased stress—all of which exacerbated pre-pandemic issues. It is imperative that we collectively develop and utilize a multi-pronged approach, as attracting, preparing, and retaining educators must ALL be considered and addressed to yield a significant systemic improvement. We must identify short-term, intermediate, and long-term comprehensive strategies, funding options, professional learning opportunities, and needed resources.

Although persistent shortages exist among all the professional disciplines, this brief's focus is on special education teachers and early intervention providers.

Shortages of Fully Prepared Special Educators Persist, Impacting Equity

Every student deserves an equitable opportunity to achieve. Shortages of fully certified personnel and unfunded positions impede the ability of infants, toddlers, children, and youth to reach their full developmental and academic potential. They also hinder the work of preparing all children and youth to be college- and career-ready. Nevertheless, the crisis remains persistent:

- 48 states and the District of Columbia reported a shortage of special education teachers in the 2020-2021 school year—with this area being the most severe shortage for most states.
- Special education teachers leave the teaching profession at nearly twice the rate of their general education colleagues.

Shortages of Special Education Teachers and Early Intervention Providers

Members of Congress Are Urged To:

- Promote and endorse policies that attract, prepare, and retain a diverse, qualified special education workforce fully reflective of the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with exceptionalities.
- Promote and provide incentives to increase diversity in the educator profession.
- Increase Part D funding and expand programs that provide incentives such as TEACH grants, Teacher Quality Partnership Grants, and federal loan payback opportunities to facilitate affordability of higher education. This will help recruit and retain teacher education candidates throughout the completion of their degrees and strengthen the capacity of educator preparation programs in higher education.

- Just 18% of special education teachers and 10% of special education professors are people of color, while more than half of students with disabilities are from minority backgrounds.
- 42 states report a shortage of early intervention providers, including special educators and related service providers.
- Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped 35% over the last five years, foreshadowing an insufficient pipeline of special education teachers.

Decline in Special Education Higher Education Faculty and State-Approved Programs

Special education higher education faculty are critical to training future generations of special educators. However, the number of special education faculty in higher education programs is declining. In 2020-2021, there was a 5% decline in adjunct faculty and 13% decline in full-time faculty due to the ongoing recession, reduced budgets, and enrollment cliffs. To support the faculty pipeline, institutes of higher education need to develop and implement strategies that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion to support a sustainable change in the future.



Teacher Loan Burden and Salary Deficit

Teacher and early intervention provider salaries lag those of other occupations and educator candidates often accrue significant debt to prepare for these professions. More than two-thirds of those entering the education and early intervention field borrow money to pay for higher education, and college loans represent a significant debt burden for many prospective teachers and providers. Prospective educators must also pay for numerous certification exams and state licensure. These factors provide a barrier for many potential educators—particularly people of color—and a financial disincentive for all wishing to enter the profession. When the financial benefit meaningfully offsets the cost of professional preparation, it is more likely that teacher education programs will successfully recruit and retain high-quality professionals in the fields and communities where they are most needed.

Recruitment, Preparation, and Retention

The recruitment, preparation, and retention of special education teachers and early intervention providers each require a systemic approach that is multifaceted and long-term. By underwriting the cost and addressing the other barriers to completing high-quality preparation programs, policymakers can ensure special education teachers and early intervention providers are better prepared for successful, long-term careers. Fully prepared teachers and providers are more effective and are more likely to remain in the field than those who enter through abbreviated or fast-track routes. Teachers and providers who are fully prepared—which includes access to opportunities for extensive fieldwork—can provide high-quality instruction, resulting in significant achievement gains for children and youth with disabilities.

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