

COVID RELIEF FUNDING

A Guide for District Planning and Implementation to Address Educator Shortages

Council for Exceptional Children

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The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the success of children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant educational challenges to infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and exacerbated existing special educator shortages. In response to the ongoing pandemic, the federal government has dedicated over 280 billion dollars in emergency relief funds to education. These funds provide an opportunity to address issues that have been created or amplified by the pandemic, with an emphasis on addressing “learning loss” and supporting historically underserved communities, including infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. The most recent and largest round of emergency funds, the [American Rescue Plan](#) (ARP) Act, allocated \$130 billion for K-12 schools. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) guided areas for consideration in the use of these emergency relief funds, including supporting the educator workforce and addressing the critical special education teacher shortages. To recover from the pandemic in a sustainable manner, schools and districts will need to make meaningful and significant investments in their special educator workforce pipeline to fully support infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, many of whom have been disproportionately impacted over the last year.

As school-aged children across the country embark on summer learning, the urgency of the special educator shortage crisis is impossible to ignore. From Virginia to Minnesota, Florida to North Carolina, plans to conduct summer school for students with disabilities have been delayed as districts scramble to fill vacancies while facing higher-than-usual enrollment. Sustainable plans involving multiple fronts, including strategies to attract, prepare, and retain special educators while diversifying the workforce, are vital to managing and overcoming the qualified personnel shortage. This guide is designed to support district planning and implementation of COVID-19 relief funds to address the critical special educator shortages through evidence-based practices.

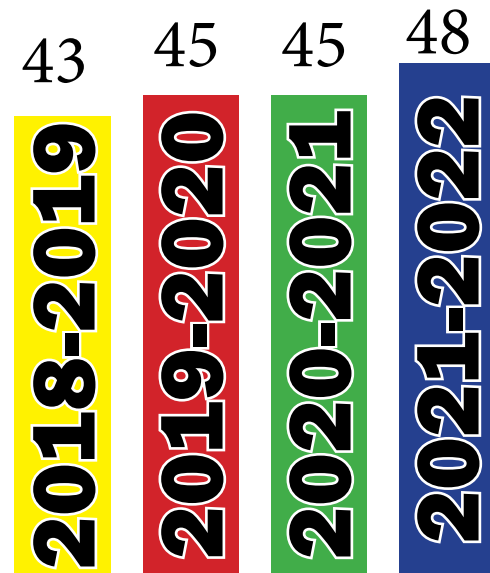
BACKGROUND

THE SPECIAL EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

Currently, at least 48 states and the District of Columbia report special educator shortages (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), a crisis that has been ongoing for decades. At least one million education jobs were lost

during the pandemic, resulting in increased 2021/2022 school year shortages. Simultaneously, the number of students receiving special education services continues to grow, exacerbating the shortage crisis. Research has identified significant academic gaps between students with disabilities and their general education peers (Gilmour et al., 2018). An adequate supply of special education teachers is an essential component to addressing these gaps. Therefore, districts must consider action now to address this crisis.

STATES REPORTING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER SHORTAGE



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

During a [hearing on the President’s Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request](#) in June of 2021, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona emphasized and encouraged local innovation in how school districts decide to use the ARP funds. An ED [FAQ](#) from May 2021 specifically identifies acceptable areas of use that directly address the educator pipeline shortages, including:

- Assisting districts with personnel shortages by hiring additional early childhood special education and related services providers; (pg. 33)
- Investing in personnel preparation programs focused on increasing the number of qualified special education teachers, related services providers, and faculty; (pg. 34)

When drafting and implementing district plans, it is crucial to ensure representation of the special education community. This includes school and central office personnel, parents, and students. Local school districts should make evidence-based decisions, utilize additional relevant data to inform decisions, and understand the impact of each decision made in using these funds. Districts should identify issues prior to the pandemic, issues that were further disrupted by the pandemic, and issues that arose as a result of the pandemic. Districts should consider short, medium, and long-term issues and solutions for efficient and effective use of relief funds. This includes one-time immediate use decisions to address and enhance services needed right now and long-term and sustainable options. New programs could be developed while preexisting ineffective and/or inefficient programs could be revamped. The following evidence-based strategies to attract, prepare, and retain a qualified special educator workforce have been implemented in districts across the country. These strategies can be supported by ARP funds and will contribute to reversing the educator shortage crisis.

WIDENING THE NET: ATTRACTING NEW SPECIAL EDUCATORS TO THE FIELD

In considering innovative approaches to generating prospective teachers, districts may need to evaluate the effectiveness of their current strategies for attracting teachers. Districts may already be using an “all-hands-on-deck” approach due to the critical nature of special educator shortages. However, this approach may still leave out many potential future special educators. Districts can proactively work to identify additional community members with possible skill sets that fit the characteristics of a forthcoming special education teacher. Many of these potential teachers may have never considered a career as an educator nor had the opportunity to pursue a degree in the field. These community members are untapped resources that have a valuable understanding and investment in the community.

By targeting individuals within a community, educator preparation programs and districts can work together to recruit and create a larger pool of educator candidates. There is already an identified appeal for educator candidates to return to their original location to teach

after completing their programming. Additionally, these programs have shown success in areas and disciplines that have difficulty recruiting, such as special education (Jessen et al., 2020). While many pathways focus on “career switchers,” this is one of the only methods for attracting individuals into the field of special education as their first choice. Unlike other professions, there are few opportunities for a high school student to learn and experience first-hand what it is like to be an educator.

An example of this approach is observable through the implementation of grow-your-own (GYO) programs. These programs provide community members, high-school students, and other potential educator candidates an opportunity to become involved in local schools, exposing them to a career in education. GYO programs identify this track to high school students while also providing a pathway that minimizes barriers that typically deter other community members from pursuing higher education, such as cost. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has identified the [Illinois GYO](#) as an exemplar of this pathway into the profession. This program is rooted in a commitment to “return teachers back home where they can be leaders inside and outside classrooms.” Partnerships exist across the state between several school divisions and institutions of higher education. Focused on holistic candidate support, this program is tailored to reduce systematic obstacles by implementing support that includes state-funded forgivable loans to offset tuition costs; 1-1 support from coordinators to navigate challenges related to higher education, licensure, and the transition to the classroom; and peer groups to address social, racial, and economic inequities that impact hard-to-staff schools. In 2019, the Illinois GYO program ran in five districts and supported over 200 educator candidates.

The burden of student loans may deter potential candidates from pursuing a degree in education. Financial incentives and the reduction of financial barriers are additional methods for attracting potential special educators. This includes covering college tuition costs through grants and/or loan forgiveness. Partnerships such as the [North Carolina Teaching Fellows](#) have led to implementing programs that provide financial support to secondary students entering an educator preparation program in exchange for a commitment to teaching in their district. Other programs, such as the [Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation](#) (TLC) system, utilize the appeal of competitive starting salaries and provide leadership opportunities for educators. Fostering

the development of educators while also providing opportunities to advance their careers is critical for attracting and retaining effective teachers. Each school district in Iowa implements this system. As a result, teacher leadership roles have expanded to include almost 10,000 teachers.

EFFICACY AND EXCELLENCE: SUCCESSFULLY PREPARING EDUCATORS FOR THE WORKFORCE

Practice-based opportunities are commonly used as an effective strategy outside of education in developing and training future employees. Much like these professions, this strategy has proven successful for educator candidates by providing the opportunity to utilize evidence-based practices in the field as part of their preparation programs. Ongoing practice-based opportunities can occur in a multitude of ways, including virtual simulations, bug-in-ear coaching, and residencies. Many of these opportunities arise within local school districts that have partnered with nearby educator preparation programs. Advances in technology and broadband allow additional partnerships where educator preparation programs are not within a feasible physical distance to a local school district, such as remote and rural areas.

[Project VIDEO](#) (Virginia Intensification for Individuals with Dyslexia who need Explicitness and Ongoing Tiered Supports) at the University of Virginia is an OSEP-identified exemplary model for practice-based opportunities. This program is designed for both special education teachers and speech-language pathologists, both of which have been identified as critical shortage areas within Virginia. The program focuses on preparing school personnel to work with students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia. An OSEP-funded grant offers a \$12,000 fellowship that includes coursework and practice-based opportunities in shared clinical experiences.

An additional practice-based opportunity that has received attention from OSEP is teacher residency programs (TRPs). TRPs provide the opportunity for a prospective teacher to learn through the experience of working alongside an effective teacher and cooperating mentor. Much like residency programs of other

professions, this model focuses on an embedded clinical experience, typically a year long. In addition, TRPs rely on strong partnerships between local school districts and educator preparation programs. A prime example, the Boston Teacher Residency Program has prepared over 600 teachers in high need areas, including special education, in the last 20 years. While teacher candidates complete masters degrees, they also work in Boston Public Schools with experienced mentor teachers. TRPs are effective at both preparing and retaining educators- after three years of teaching, 80% of residency graduates from the [Boston Teacher Residency Program](#) still teach in the local school district.

ONGOING SUPPORT: RETAINING NOVICE, MIDDLE-CAREER, AND VETERAN EDUCATORS

While it is widely understood that new educators need frequent and ongoing support, it is essential to have continued support throughout an educator's career. More than 44 percent of teachers leave the field within the first five years of service, instilling a supportive workplace environment is critical to increasing retention rates. Educators' workloads and responsibilities vary dramatically. A supportive work environment requires leadership to tenure educators who have and feel the support necessary to fulfill their obligations. This support goes beyond professional development. School leaders should also implement evidence-based strategies to support staff's overall wellness, including mental health support.

[A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#), established by a consortium of professional organizations and associations, highlights best practices for improving school climate and thus improving retention rates. Many of these suggestions result in the reduction of workload for special educators, an important retention strategy given the relationships between workload and educator burnout (Betinni et al., 2020; Hester et al., 2020). Some additional practices to improve the success and safety of schools and thus educator retention include:

- Improving staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of a full range of services, including school–community partnerships, and set standards that will help schools effectively and accurately assess their needs (Pg. 3)
- Improving access to school-based mental health supports by ensuring adequate staffing levels of

school-employed mental health professionals trained to infuse prevention and intervention services into the learning process and integrating services provided through school-community partnerships into existing school initiatives (Pg. 3).

- Considering the context of each school and district and providing services that are most needed, appropriate, and culturally sensitive to a school's unique student populations and learning communities.

While this framework can be applied to all educators, it is critical to ensure that novice teachers have access to necessary supports as they navigate their new careers. New teachers' induction and mentoring is an evidence-based strategy to support brand new and early career teachers (Billingsley et al., 2019). According to a 2019 OSEP survey completed by practitioners, strong mentorship and induction for new teachers were identified as the most effective methods for improving teacher retention. Within its [2019 state strategic plan](#), the Minnesota Department of Education set a goal to support evidence-based retention by implementing a state-wide mentoring model. Special educators received mentor and induction support beginning in their preservice training and continuing through their first three years in the field. The [Minnesota Mentor Program](#), now identified as an exemplar by OSEP, celebrated a 95% retention rate of the 60 participants involved in the first three cohorts (2015 - 2018).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT USE OF STIMULUS FUNDS

The American Rescue Plan and other federal stimulus funds provide a unique opportunity to reverse the long-standing special educator shortage. Evidence-based, sustainable solutions are key to overcoming the crisis. Districts should consider the following recommendations when developing and implementing their plans for use of stimulus dollars:

- Document efforts to determine unique needs in order to efficiently and effectively plan to attract, prepare, and retain special educators.
- Identify potential special educators and generate interest through intentional recruitment of high school students, faculty and staff members currently

working in schools, and community members.

- initiate or reignite key partnerships with institutions of higher education to provide sustainable pathways that include practice-based opportunities in the field of special education.
- Dismantle barriers by providing financial support and incentives to prospective teachers to enter the field and current teachers to further their career through tuition reimbursement and stipends.
- Generate or reevaluate school-based programs (ex: professional development, school-wide wellness) and policies to improve school climate

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund State Plan Requirements: Office Hours \(May 20th, 2021\)](#) (U.S. Department of Education)

[American Rescue Plan Act Overview: Understanding the New Law and Its Impact on Education](#) (Council for Exceptional Children)

[Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs Governor's Emergency Education Relief Programs FAQ](#) (U.S. Department of Education)

[OSEP Ideas That Work: Attract, Prepare, Retain](#) (Office of Special Education Programs)

[Thought Leaders on the American Rescue Plan Act: Guidance for State and Local Leaders on Flexible Options to Increase and Support the Special Education Pipeline](#) (Council for Exceptional Children)

[Educator Shortages in Special Education: A Toolkit for Developing Local Strategies](#) (CEEDAR Center)

["Taking the Long View: State Efforts to Solve Teacher Shortages by Strengthening the Profession"](#) (Learning Policy Institute)

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