



Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions

A Policy Brief

Prepared by:
The CEEDAR Center
The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders

Many states struggle with shortages of special education teachers (SET). To address the shortage problem in the long term, policymakers, preparation providers, and state and district administrators must ensure that any short-term strategies are combined with a comprehensive plan that includes long-term systemic strategies to strengthen the supply, preparation, and retention of special education teachers.

Scope of the Special Education Teacher Shortage—Research Findings

- Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia currently report special education teacher shortages (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).
- Certain populations of students are more disadvantaged by shortages—students in high-poverty urban schools, remote rural schools, and students with serious emotional and behavioral disorders (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Oloraunda, 2009; McClesky, Tyler, & Flippin, 2003).
- The pipeline of novice special education teachers was never sufficient and dwindled further during America's Great Recession (Sutcher et al. 2016).
- Shortages are exacerbated by high rates of attrition of special education teachers, who are 2.5 times more likely to leave the profession as teachers in general education (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Some Short-Term Strategies May Be Counterproductive

- In response to the shortage, some states are reducing requirements for entry into teaching and are creating fast tracks into the classroom. States may often feel they have no other choice in the short term, but such strategies will not solve the shortage problem in the long term and could in fact create additional challenges associated with students not being educated by effective teachers.
- Because underprepared special education teachers are less effective and most likely to leave the field, fast tracks to the classroom create a revolving door. A more systemic approach to solving special education teacher shortages is needed to complement quick fixes.

Comprehensive, Long-term Strategies across the Career Continuum are Needed

- **Preparation matters in special education.** Not only do fully qualified special education teachers improve outcomes for students with disabilities, but research has shown that fully prepared special education teachers are more likely to remain in teaching than are teachers prepared through fast-track routes (Feng & Sass, 2013; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999).
- **States that prepare more special education teachers have fewer shortages.** States with the smallest SET shortages have more preparation programs and graduate more special education teachers than states with the highest SET shortages. (Peyton, Acosta, Pua, Harvey, Sindelar, Mason- Williams, Dewey, Fisher, & Crews, under review, “State Level Characteristics Influencing the Supply and Demand of Special Education Teachers”).
- **Alternative routes can be effective.** The quality of alternate route programs is highly variable, in terms of the coursework and supervised clinical experience they offer. Alternatives that involve district and university partnerships and provide more comprehensive training produce teachers who stay in the field longer and score higher on observations of classroom instruction (Sindelar et al., 2012; Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004). New alternatives, such as urban and rural teacher residency programs, offer strong apprenticeships and coursework and have high rates of retention (Learning Policy Institute, 2016).
- **Financial incentives can help.** Adjusted for cost of living, average teacher salaries in the lowest SET shortage states are nearly \$7,000 greater than salaries in the highest shortage states. (Peyton et al.). Districts paying beginning teachers more than \$40,000 a year are more likely to recruit and retain them. Loan forgiveness and tuition remission programs that provide \$2,500 or more in financial relief per year yield more prepared and effective special education teachers who stay in the field longer (Feng & Sass, 2015).
- **Positive school climates retain special education teachers.** Research has shown that retention is fostered when teachers work in positive school climates where general and special education teachers share responsibility for students’ achievement, have administrative support, and work with collaborative colleagues who value inclusive practice. Positive school climates also can mitigate the impact of role overload for beginning special education teachers (Bettini, Jones, Brownell, Conroy, & Leite, 2018; Miller et al., 1999).
- **Manageable workloads retain beginning teachers.** Administrators need to be clear about the roles beginning teachers will play and protect their time. This is especially true for special education teachers who are balancing diverse student caseloads with administrative duties related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Brownell, Bettini, Pua, Peyton, & Benedict, 2018; Youngs, Jones, and Low, 2011). Not assigning these teachers additional duties and helping general education teachers understand their workload, can be helpful.
- **Formal and informal induction strategies retain beginning teachers.** Strong induction programs that rely on well-trained mentors, provide systematic professional learning opportunities, and introduce new teachers into a collaborative school culture promote retention in the field and effective teaching, particularly when provided over a 2-year period (Billingsley, Griffin, Smith, Kamman, & Israel, 2009; Brownell et al., 2018). In special education, specific attention must be paid to ensuring beginning teachers have access to special education mentors who understand the unique needs of the students they are serving.
- **Leadership matters.** Special education teachers are more likely to stay in schools with supportive administration (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Olorunda, 2009; Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013).

- **Access to quality curriculum.** Beginning teachers benefit from having access to curriculum, combined with high-quality professional development that supports them in delivering effective instruction (Leko & Brownell, 2011). It is important to note that many beginning special education teachers feel that they do not have the necessary curriculum materials to support them in their jobs (Youngs et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Lowering standards and abbreviating training are stop-gap measures that will exacerbate attrition and contribute to poor student outcomes. To solve persistent shortages in special education, states will need to tackle comprehensive, long-term solutions rather than relying largely on low-quality stop-gap measures. Policymakers, states, districts, and educator preparation programs should consider a three-pronged approach designed to address the full educator career continuum.

- Ensure that financial incentives are grounded in research and combined with other long-term solutions.
- Provide well-designed, extensive preparation combined with ongoing induction and instructionally focused professional learning. Comprehensive approaches to improving teaching are likely to have a more substantial and sustained impact on shortages than are quick fixes to increase supply.
- Assist school districts and their leaders in developing more supportive work environments that attend to issues of workload manageability, collaboration among general and special education teachers, effective curriculum combined with professional development, and administrative support.

Talking Points

- Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia currently have a special education teacher shortage.
- Stop-gap measures used in isolation are likely to exacerbate the shortage problem and contribute to poor student outcomes.
- States faced with the prospect of teacher shortages need a combination of short-term solutions and a multipronged, long-term strategic approach to ensure that every student with a disability has a fully prepared teacher.
- Addressing this problem immediately will require short-term solutions combined with intermediate- and long-term solutions that address the systemic nature of the problem.

Recommendations

Enhance Supply

Short Term Solutions

- Offer financial incentives such as loan forgiveness, service scholarships, or retention bonuses.
- Provide incentives for general education teachers to add special education licensure.

Intermediate- to Long-Term Solutions

- Create comprehensive recruitment strategies focused on identifying and developing local talent.
- Develop licensure and program approval standards that ensure general education teachers are prepared to educate students with disabilities and to contribute to a collaborative, inclusive school environment.

- Invest in the creation of more successful alternatives, such as teacher residencies, that provide robust preparation for teaching students with disabilities.
- Develop *Grow Your Own* programs founded in strong district–university collaboratives.

Foster Retention

Short Term Solutions

- Collect data on working conditions and develop a comprehensive, long-term plan to address identified needs
- Work with principals to reduce workload expectations for beginning special education teachers.
- Implement an intensive induction experience for teachers prepared in quick routes to the classroom.

Intermediate- to Long-Term Solutions

- Offer professional learning opportunities that engage general and special education teachers in collaboratively designing and implementing instruction.
- Create high-quality induction and mentoring policies and programs.
- Provide principals with the ongoing support and development to provide high-quality instructional leadership and to establish an inclusive environment.
- Fund innovative preparation approaches that feature university and district partnerships.
- Strengthen data systems that collect information on the root causes for special education attrition to allow administrators to identify and respond to the causes of special education teacher attrition in their schools or districts.

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