

# SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKFORCE *watch*

INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

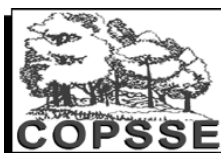
## An Insufficient Supply and a Growing Demand for Qualified Special Education Personnel

### What School Districts Should Know

#### IN THIS WATCH

**P**ersonnel who serve the needs of students with disabilities are in high demand and short supply—Are you prepared to ensure a quality special education workforce?

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CENTER ON PERSONNEL  
STUDIES IN SPECIAL  
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Federal law provides that school districts utilize qualified individuals to provide special education and related services to students with disabilities. However, nationwide, there is a growing shortage of qualified special education teachers, related services personnel, paraprofessionals, and special education administrators. Further, while demographics point to an increasingly diverse student population, in all personnel areas, the number of individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is declining.

Shortages can affect the quality of education and services, thus making retention and recruitment of certified and qualified personnel in special education an increasing challenge for district administrators. Are you prepared to ensure a qualified special education workforce? Read on to gain insights from the research.

#### **Are You Prepared for Shortages of Special Education Teachers?**

There is a severe, chronic shortage of special education teachers. Some 98 percent of the nation's school districts report shortages of qualified special edu-

cation teachers. During the 2000-2001 school year, approximately 47,500 special education positions were filled by uncertified personnel—a 23 percent increase from the previous year. The problem is equally challenging in low incidence areas—teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and teachers of students with visual impairments—where shortages have resulted in many students receiving limited service, too often from individuals without appropriate certification or licensure.

Some districts may be hit harder by shortages than others. For example, shortages may vary:

- **Across districts**—with high poverty, urban areas reporting the highest turnover rates and unfilled openings.
- **By job description**—with the area of emotional disturbance experiencing the greatest need nationally. [Note: All areas of disability show shortages.]
- **By diversity of teaching staff**—with estimates ranging from a five to a 12 percent diversity rate among the teaching force in the coming years (2005 - 2009), compared to 40 percent of the student population.

### **Are You Prepared for Shortages of Related Service Providers?**

There have been and continue to be shortages of qualified school-based related service providers. Consider these facts:

- In 1997-1998, the overall vacancy rate for physical therapy positions was seven percent for children six through 21 years of age, and two percent for children three through five years of age.
- During the next five years, the demand for occupational therapists is expected to increase by as much as 35 percent.
- Between 2000 and 2010, more than 34,000 additional speech-language pathologists will be required to fill demands, bringing the total vacancies to an estimated 57,000.
- Currently, there is one educational audiologist for every 71,555 students—a significant departure from the one for every 10,000 to 12,000 children currently recommended by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and many state licensing agencies.

Supply has not kept pace with shortages. Traditionally, few related service providers have sought employment in schools. There are a variety of reasons why this is so, the most common being that few have an interest and/or specialized training in school-based treatment. Moreover, salaries typically are much higher in the private sector (e.g., hospitals).

### **Are You Prepared for Shortages of Paraprofessionals?**

As school districts increasingly rely on paraprofessionals to assist with instructional and learning tasks, the issue becomes one of quantity—ensuring an adequate supply—as well as quality—making sure that those paraprofessionals who are employed are qualified. Demand has increased significantly and may be even more acute in school districts that have turned to paraprofessionals to help address needs related to continuing efforts to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom and the community.

Further, shortages of paraprofessionals are being noted in some rural areas, as well as in specialized areas such as assisting students in transition programs, working with students with autism, helping students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and providing positive behavioral support to students with emotional and behavioral problems.

### **Are You Prepared for Shortages of Special Education Administrators?**

The present number of unfilled special education administrator positions nationwide indicates that districts are experiencing a shortage. Further, it is estimated that more than 20 percent of district-based special education administrators are not fully certified.

Fewer than one percent of all administration graduates with mas-

ter's or doctoral degrees specialize in special education administration. If these trends continue, a significant number of special education administrator positions will remain open in the coming years, because there will not be enough qualified candidates to fill them.

### **For More Information**

This policy brief summarizes information found in other COPSSE policy briefs (PB-3, PB-4, PB-5, PB-10, PB-18, PB-19, and PB-21). These policy briefs are based on COPSSE papers that contain in-depth information regarding supply and demand, as well as offer recommendations that school districts may undertake to improve recruitment and retention efforts. The documents can be found on the COPSSE web site at [www.copsse.org](http://www.copsse.org).

	<p><b>CENTER ON PERSONNEL STUDIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION</b></p>
<p><b>About COPSSE</b></p>	
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<p>University of Florida, 300 Norman Hall, P.O. Box 117050, Gainesville, FL 32611 352-392-0701 (X283), <a href="http://www.copsse.org">www.copsse.org</a></p>	
	<p>Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education.</p>