

SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKFORCE *watch*

INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

An Insufficient Supply and a Growing Demand for Qualified Special Education Teachers

What State Policymakers Can Do

- *Some 98 percent of the nation's school districts report shortages of special education teachers.*
 - *Special education is the area with the greatest shortage of teachers in 200 of the largest cities in the United States.*
 - *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.*
 - *During the 2000-2001 school year, approximately 808,000 students with disabilities were taught by personnel who were not fully certified.*
- education teaching positions are filled by noncertified individuals.
- **Within state**—with high poverty, urban areas reporting high turnover rates and unfilled openings compared to their suburban counterparts, who may have waiting lists of possible candidates.
 - **By job description**—with the area of emotional disturbance experiencing the greatest need nationally, followed by the areas of specific learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, and mental retardation. [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.

Student enrollment figures prominently in predicting teacher shortages. During the 1990s, the number of students with disabilities increased by 20.3 percent, and that growth pattern is expected to continue during the next decade. Indeed, if student growth trends continue, the number of special education teaching positions will increase by 33.7 percent, requiring an additional 135,793 teachers by the year 2008.

IN THIS WATCH

A growing demand, a decreasing supply, and an increase in attrition—Are you prepared to ensure a quality special education teacher workforce?

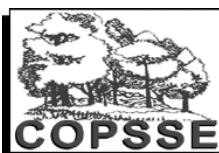
There is a severe, chronic shortage of special education teachers in the United States. Retaining certified and qualified personnel in special education is an increasing challenge for state policymakers. Are you prepared to ensure a quality special education teacher workforce? Read on to gain insights from the research.

Shortages Vary—Is Your State at High Risk?

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

- **By state**—with some states reporting that more than 20 percent of special

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Prospects for meeting the demands are not encouraging. Currently, the nation is experiencing a decrease in the number of graduates from special education teacher preparation programs.

The problem is compounded by the fact that only a portion of graduates actually enter teaching. Moreover, the reserve pool of special education teachers—experienced teachers who are returning to the profession after an absence, or graduates of teacher education programs who delayed entry into the profession—is not sufficient.

WATCH THIS...

One-third of newly hired special education teachers are not fully certified. While quality is certainly at issue, it is questionable whether this practice actually addresses shortages because uncertified teachers are three times more likely than certified teachers to leave their positions.

State Support to Address Teacher Shortages

Attrition is a major contributing factor in the demand for special education teachers. Overall, the annual attrition rate for special educators is estimated at 13.5 percent, compared to 6.4 percent for general education teachers. This results in an annual loss of approximately 22,000 special education teachers.

Special educators report a variety of reasons for leaving the profession that are specific to teaching conditions in their field. These include:

- Role overload—paperwork burdens, heavy caseloads, limited resources, lack of planning and meeting time.

- Student characteristics that place significant demands on teaching and learning practices (e.g., lack of progress, behavior management requirements, safety issues).
- Limited collegial support from administrators and teachers.

Factors that affect general education teachers’ decisions to remain in the field—higher salaries, entering the profession prepared and certified, a collaborative school climate, etc.—also influence special educators.

Even if you are not currently experiencing shortages, retaining qualified special education teachers makes good sense. Systemic and administrative support is critical to retention and to improving teachers’ ability to have a positive effect on outcomes for students with disabilities. Following are recommendations that state policymakers may consider to attract and retain special education teachers:

- Ensure funding equity across all state school districts.
- Conduct outreach activities to attract teachers (e.g., recruitment activities in high schools and community colleges) and use recruitment strategies such as college scholarships, forgivable loans, and financial incentives for teacher interns.
- Increase salaries and benefits (e.g., bonuses, lower state tax rates, assistance with housing costs, bonuses for achieving National Board Certification).
- Allow retired teachers to draw full pensions and full salaries if they return to the classroom.
- Provide incentives (e.g., financial bonuses, moving expenses)

for teachers who relocate to critical shortage areas.


- Reduce barriers related to the hiring process, including uniform hiring approaches, web sites where candidates can post applications, etc.
- Offer ongoing professional development for teachers.

For More Information

Information reported in this brief was based on two COPSSE papers:

- *The Supply and Demand for Special Education Teachers*, by James McLeskey, Naomi Tyler, and Susan Flippin.
- *Special Education Administration at a Crossroads: Availability, Licensure, and Preparation of Special Education Administrators*, by Carl Lashley and Mary Lynn Boscardin.


These documents can be found on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.



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About COPSSE
 The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The policy briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.

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