

ADDRESSING SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFFING SHORTAGES: STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS

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Overview
Brief



KEY INSIGHTS

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

- Special education teachers provide specialized, often intensive instruction tailored to the unique needs of students with disabilities to ensure their academic success and legal rights are met.
- In March 2024, 51% of public schools nationwide reported that they would need to fill positions in Special Education before the start of the next school year, the most of any teacher specialty. This shortage has been consistent over decades, indicating deep-rooted and persistent challenges.
- Fewer people are entering the field of special education, and the number of students who are identified as needing special education services continues to increase over time.
- Challenging working conditions – including excessive non-instructional duties, insufficient curricular resources, and lack of administrator and colleague support – reduce job satisfaction and contribute to high turnover among special education teachers.
- Due to the shortage, many schools resort to hiring uncertified or emergency-credentialed teachers, despite federal regulations requiring fully certified staff. Because low-income, high-minority schools are the most likely to have uncertified teachers, the most vulnerable students are frequently taught by the least qualified teachers.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Partnerships with local teacher preparation programs align student teaching experiences with district-specific needs, which has been shown to improve the supply, effectiveness, and retention of educators, especially in high-need areas.
- Financial incentives for teachers in surplus areas to move into special education roles can reduce the special education teacher shortage by leveraging the existing workforce.
- “Grow your own” programs can increase the number of local candidates and candidates of color to be special education teachers.
- Special educators are more effective and experience less stress and burnout when they have access to strong curricula, feel supported by administrators, and are provided with targeted professional learning.
- Adequate planning time and reasonable workloads enable special educators to fulfill their responsibilities well, such that they experience less burnout, are less likely to leave their jobs, and provide higher-quality instruction.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

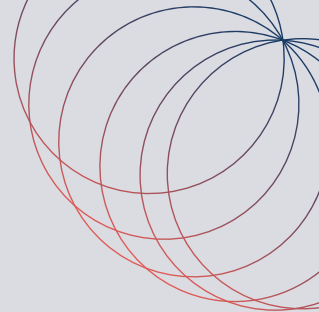
- Other educators, such as reading specialists and early elementary teachers, possess skills to provide academic interventions, while school counselors can support social-emotional interventions.
- With training, observation, and ongoing coaching, paraeducators and personnel with relevant professional experience can effectively deliver highly structured interventions and evidence-based practices.
- Inexperienced and uncertified personnel are more likely to stay and serve students effectively with induction support and ongoing coaching.

PRACTICES TO AVOID

- Reducing service minutes or changing placement options to cut costs or address staffing challenges violates IDEA requirements and compromises the effectiveness of specialized instruction.
- Untrained personnel do not have the pedagogical and content knowledge required for intensive intervention, making them unlikely to make well-informed and responsive decisions.
- Excessive workloads are a major factor in special education teachers’ burnout and intent to leave, negatively affecting instructional quality and intensifying the educator shortage.
- When one dual-licensed educator is assigned to cover both special and general education roles, this limits their capacity to provide high-quality instruction in both the general education curriculum and students’ individualized goals.

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CENTRAL QUESTION:

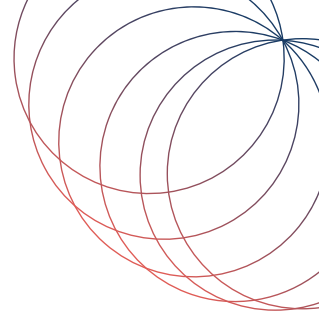
How can schools effectively recruit, prepare, and support special education teachers in the context of teacher shortages?



BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Special education teachers provide specialized, often intensive instruction tailored to the unique needs of students with disabilities to ensure their academic success and legal rights are met.

- Effective special education instruction is [distinct from general education](#) instruction in that it prioritizes explicit, systematic, and often intensive instruction focused on teaching specific skills and strategies. Students with disabilities depend on [qualified special education teachers](#) as crucial members of their educational teams to provide interventions and services to which they are legally entitled and which are essential for their access to and success in school.
- Earning a special education credential typically requires obtaining a bachelor's degree, completing a teacher preparation program with student teaching, and passing state exams. Ongoing professional development is often needed for renewal.
- Special educators do more than provide direct academic and behavioral instruction to students with disabilities. In fact, [one study](#) found that special education teachers only spent 32.4% of their day providing instruction. Outside of instruction, special educators develop Individualized Education Programs, track progress toward students' goals, coordinate the services students receive, train and supervise paraeducators, and provide consultative support to other educators and school staff who share responsibility for serving students with disabilities.
- Special educators provide instruction and support to students in [a variety of settings](#), including general education settings, pull-out or resource settings, and separate special education classes.
 - In general education, special education teachers and general education teachers may collaborate to provide support and differentiated instruction.
 - During pull-out instruction, special education teachers may provide specialized small group or 1:1 instruction in a separate setting to students with disabilities.
 - Special education teachers working in a separate special education class may provide instruction in all subjects to a group of students with disabilities who require intensive support and a highly individualized curriculum.

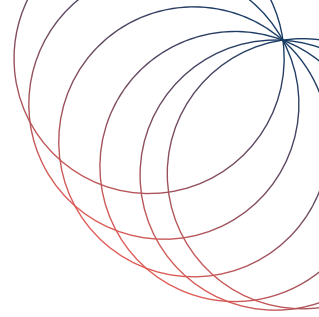


In March 2024, 51% of public schools nationwide reported that they would need to fill positions in Special Education before the start of the next school year, the most of any teacher specialty. This shortage has been consistent over decades, indicating deep-rooted and persistent challenges.

- Special education staffing problems have been “[severe, chronic, and pervasive](#)” for as long as special education has existed as a national public education mandate.
- About 13.5 million students receive special education services from 445,215 teachers nationally, of which [33,660 \(or 8%\) are not fully certified](#). Because there are no national data on vacancies, this figure represents a minimum estimate of the special education teacher shortage in the U.S. Far more special education teachers are likely needed because many schools have vacant special education positions.
- Vacancies vary by district and state. In California in 2017, nearly [60 percent of first-year special education teachers](#) were working without being special education certified.
- Paraeducator shortages, though less researched, present similar staffing challenges. In [Washington](#) (one of the only states in which researchers have analyzed data on the paraeducator workforce), districts post more paraeducator positions per 1000 students than for any other personnel category and experience high turnover rates. At the end of the most recent school year, [40% of paraprofessionals](#) in Washington, or about 5,800 paraprofessionals, had left their positions.

Fewer people are entering the field of special education, and the number of students who are identified as needing special education services continues to increase over time.

- Since 2012, the number of special education program completers has [significantly declined](#). Although the rates vary substantially by state, the decline is not limited to a few states, suggesting a broader national trend.
- Researchers have identified [several factors that may have contributed](#) to the decrease in the number of people who want to be teachers across all teacher specialties: stagnant wages, rising college costs, declining prestige, deteriorating working conditions, increased workload, stress, and safety concerns.
- There has also been a rise in the number of educators completing [fast-track, for-profit programs](#), which have been criticized for misleading advertising, lack of mentorship for candidates, and failure to base their training on research. These issues have led to concerns that educators prepared through them may be [ineffective and more likely to leave](#).
- Even teachers who get certified in special education often shift to general education roles over time. Many teachers [with dual special education and general education credentials](#) are not employed in special education roles. For example, in [Washington state](#), less than half of those credentialed in special education in 2010 were working in a special education position by 2016.



Challenging working conditions – including excessive non-instructional duties, insufficient curricular resources, and lack of administrator and colleague support – reduce job satisfaction and contribute to high turnover among special education teachers.

- Special education teachers leave teaching at higher rates than general educators—[15% annually as of 2012](#). Attrition rates are rising post-pandemic, as seen in Pennsylvania, where special education teacher departures increased from 17% in 2019-2020 to 22% in 2021-2022.
- Despite [enthusiasm for teaching](#), special educators report [higher workloads](#) than their general education colleagues, with more responsibilities than they have time or resources to fulfill well.
- Special educators are frequently [required to](#) attend meetings, conduct assessments, and manage extensive paperwork, often [without dedicated time](#) to fulfill these responsibilities well.
- Special educators often lack access to high-quality [curricular materials](#), which makes their workloads [less manageable](#) and affects [the quality of instruction](#).
- When [administrators fail](#) to provide necessary resources, protect planning time, or engage regularly with special educators, it [negatively impacts](#) their job satisfaction and [intent to continue teaching](#).
- Some evidence indicates [caseload sizes](#) have been increasing over time, as the number of students with disabilities has increased, without commensurate increases in the number of special educators employed.

Due to the shortage, many schools resort to hiring uncertified or emergency-credentialed teachers, despite federal regulations requiring fully certified staff. Because low-income, high-minority schools are the most likely to have uncertified teachers, the most vulnerable students are frequently taught by the least qualified teachers.

- Open positions are often filled [by inexperienced teachers and teachers without adequate training](#).
- Schools with significant teacher shortages may struggle to implement individualized education programs (IEPs) effectively and [meet the requirements of IDEA](#).
- Unfilled positions can [increase the demands](#) on remaining special education teachers leading to [burnout](#), [lower job satisfaction](#), and eventually [attrition](#).
- High special education teacher turnover rates impose significant financial burdens on schools and districts, with replacement costs ranging from [\\$14,000](#) to [\\$20,000](#) per teacher. These expenses, associated with recruitment, hiring, induction, and training, divert scarce financial resources that could otherwise be allocated to direct student support.
- Research from general education suggests that teacher turnover can negatively affect students' academic achievement, even when teachers [switch grades or subjects](#) within schools, or a [teacher in another grade](#) leaves the school. Although we don't have commensurate evidence of the causal impact of special educator attrition, [special educators' collaborative roles](#) mean that many families and colleagues rely on them; thus, their attrition may be especially challenging for schools to manage.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

State and district policymakers should consider both (1) long-term strategies to help prevent these problems in the future by building pathways into the profession and sustaining current special educators; and (2) short-term strategies to ensure continuity in students' access to high-quality intensive intervention, with skilled personnel, even when positions are vacant.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

Partnerships with local teacher preparation programs align student teaching experiences with district-specific needs, which has been shown to improve the supply, effectiveness, and retention of educators, especially in high-need areas.

- Partnering with local teacher preparation programs [enhances alignment between teacher training and actual staffing needs](#), improves the effectiveness of new special education teachers, and establishes pathways into districts and schools with high needs. Research has shown that [teachers are more likely to work where they completed their student teaching](#), suggesting that hosting student teachers could increase the supply of special educators in areas that are challenging to staff, like rural districts. This could be particularly effective when paired with [financial support for student teaching](#).
- Special education teacher candidates are [more likely to stay in their initial roles](#) when those positions are similar to the environments where they student taught. For example, teachers who student-taught in an inclusive setting but were hired into a self-contained special education setting are more likely to leave the workforce early in their careers. This suggests that offering student teaching placements in classroom settings that reflect the environments where new teachers are most needed can increase teacher retention.
- Aligning curricula between teacher preparation programs and in-service teaching supports new teachers' [instructional quality](#) and effectiveness. For example, in Washington state, special educators whose teacher preparation programs and in-service school districts both emphasized [literacy instruction](#) methods aligned with the science of reading were more effective than teachers who experienced misalignment between pre- and in-service approaches to literacy instruction.
- Student teaching with a cooperating teacher who holds a special education endorsement increases the [likelihood of entering a special education position](#), regardless of whether the placement was in a special or general education setting.

Financial incentives for teachers in surplus areas to move into special education roles can reduce the special education teacher shortage by leveraging the existing workforce.

- Dual-certified teachers often [prefer general education positions](#). Implementing financial incentives could motivate these general education teachers to work directly in special education. This strategy highlights the untapped potential of leveraging existing educators to fulfill the critical needs in special education.
- For example, researchers found that Hawaii's [\\$10,000 bonuses for special education teachers reduced vacancies and reliance on uncertified teachers](#) by inducing general educators in surplus areas to switch to special education teaching positions.



“Grow your own” programs can increase the number of local candidates and candidates of color to be special education teachers.

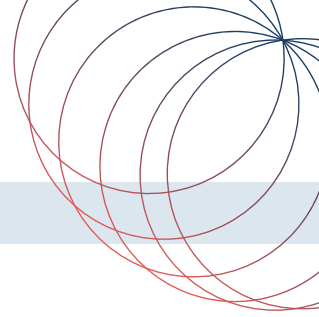
- Grow your own (GYO) programs, which recruit local community members to become teachers, are [increasingly popular across 40 states](#), often offering alternative certification paths with less coursework and student teaching. These programs show promise in [reducing teacher attrition, improving student outcomes, and enhancing the diversity of the teaching workforce](#).
- Nearly half of students with disabilities are students of color, yet [only 18% of both special and general education teachers are people of color](#), highlighting a significant demographic gap between students and teachers. Studies have found that “homegrown” teachers are more likely to [match the racial and ethnic demographics of their students](#), especially in historically underserved urban districts.
- However, some research from [Virginia](#) and [Tennessee](#) suggests that alternatively certified teachers might require more support to meet certification standards, highlighting the importance of providing support for meeting state certification requirements (e.g., supporting the costs of licensure tests and test prep support).

Special educators are more effective and experience less stress and burnout when they have access to strong curricula, feel supported by administrators, and are provided with targeted professional learning.

- Research shows that all teachers are more effective at improving student outcomes when they have access to strong curricula, including well-developed lesson plans and logistical support. However, special educators often report a lack of adequate curricula and are sometimes [excluded from curriculum purchases](#) for their school, [leaving them to find or create their own materials](#). Including special educators in all curriculum purchases for the grade levels they teach is essential for ensuring they have the necessary resources.
- Consistent evidence indicates that special educators who feel supported by school administrators experience less [stress](#) and [burnout](#) and are more likely to [intend to continue teaching](#). [Administrators can build relationships with special educators](#), meeting with them regularly and being responsive to their requests for support (e.g., purchasing materials that they need and protecting their time). Administrators can also consistently [communicate value](#) for special education and students with disabilities, building a culture of [shared responsibility](#) for ensuring students with disabilities have equitable educational experiences and outcomes.
- Targeted [professional learning](#), especially [coaching](#), supports special educators by enhancing their knowledge and skills specific to their unique roles. [Regular, non-evaluative observations with feedback](#) and problem-solving opportunities are effective in promoting professional growth.

Adequate planning time and reasonable workloads enable special educators to fulfill their responsibilities well, such that they experience less burnout, are less likely to leave their jobs, and provide higher-quality instruction.

- Special educators who rate their planning time as adequate are less likely to experience [burnout](#) and less likely to [plan to leave](#) their jobs. Further, [emerging evidence](#) indicates special educators may be more likely to use [evidence-based practices](#), [implement newly learned practices](#), and provide [higher-quality instruction](#) when they have adequate planning time. [Protecting this planning time](#) requires well-designed [school schedules](#) that prevent special educators from being pulled away to provide student support.
- Shifting duties like lunch and bus supervision to paraeducators and assigning administrative assistants to handle non-substantive paperwork can reduce special educators’ workloads, lowering stress and enhancing their focus on core responsibilities.



SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

Other educators, such as reading specialists and early elementary teachers, possess skills to provide academic interventions, while school counselors can support social-emotional interventions.

- Other educators in the school may have the expertise necessary to provide interventions. For example, [reading specialists](#) or early elementary teachers may have the skills to provide reading interventions, while school counselors may have the skills [to support social-emotional interventions](#).
- Reconfiguring these educators' work creates dedicated time to provide interventions to students whose special education teacher's position is vacant.

With training, observation, and ongoing coaching, paraeducators and personnel with relevant professional experience can effectively deliver highly structured interventions and evidence-based practices.

- Paraeducators are not trained to develop interventions, but prior research has consistently shown that paraeducators can deliver interventions that are highly structured or scripted. For example, paraeducators can effectively use [evidence-based practices, such as simultaneous prompting, supporting peer interactions, and teaching vocational skills](#), contributing to significant positive outcomes for students.
- Paraeducators should be provided with [appropriate training](#) to provide these interventions effectively. [Effective training includes](#):
 - Initial instruction on how to deliver the intervention
 - Observation and feedback on how well they deliver it
 - Ongoing coaching, with more intensive coaching and support for paraeducators who struggle to implement the intervention with fidelity
- In some subjects, personnel may bring valuable professional knowledge and skills to teaching, even if they do not have a teaching license. In particular, [career and technical education teachers](#) who have prior professional experience in the area for which they are providing instruction may promote better short- and long-term outcomes for students with disabilities than traditionally prepared career and technical education teachers.
- Thus, in some selected areas for which robust pedagogical content knowledge can be developed outside of teacher preparation, districts can consider acknowledging expertise gained through other professional experiences and hiring these personnel.

Inexperienced and uncertified personnel are more likely to stay and serve students effectively with induction support and ongoing coaching.

- Personnel hired without training may especially need and benefit from support for their professional learning, including [coaching](#) and mentoring.
- [Intensifying these supports for these personnel](#) may be especially important for ensuring they are able to provide robust services.



PRACTICES TO AVOID

Reducing service minutes or changing placement options to cut costs or address staffing challenges violates IDEA requirements and compromises the effectiveness of specialized instruction.

- IDEA requires that students receive the specialized instruction and related services they need to make meaningful progress toward their educational goals. The setting in which students receive these services should be determined by need, not by staffing. Schools cannot reduce service minutes or end intervention services because of a lack of available staff.
- In survey data from the [IDEA State and Local Implementation Study 2019](#), 28% of districts reported that they changed available educational placement options to reduce the cost of special education. Similar reductions to the availability of a continuum of services in a district because of staffing challenges would fail to meet the requirements of IDEA (2004).
- Effective intervention requires certain [active ingredients](#), such as small, homogenous groups. Expanding group sizes or the range of student needs within a group in response to staffing challenges will make specialized instruction less effective.

Untrained personnel do not have the pedagogical and content knowledge required for intensive intervention, making them unlikely to make well-informed and responsive decisions.

- Intensive intervention requires sophisticated [pedagogical content knowledge](#) – knowledge of both the content being taught, how to effectively provide explicit instruction, and how to provide explicit instruction in the specific content being taught to students who struggle in that area.
- Untrained personnel are [unlikely to have this knowledge](#) and thus unlikely to be able to make well-informed and responsive decisions about how to promote students' skills.

Excessive workloads are a major factor in special education teachers' burnout and intent to leave, negatively affecting instructional quality and intensifying the educator shortage.

- Overwhelming workloads are a major factor contributing to special education teachers' [burnout](#) and [intent to leave](#) their jobs. Further, special educators with too many responsibilities may also [triage instructional responsibilities](#), thereby negatively impacting the [quality of the instruction](#) they provide.
- Adding more responsibilities to current special educators' plates will increase the likelihood that they are overwhelmed, burned out, and unable to effectively serve their students – thus increasing the likelihood that they will leave and exacerbating the shortage overall.

When one dual-licensed educator is assigned to cover both special and general education roles, this limits their capacity to provide high-quality instruction in both the general education curriculum and students' individualized goals.

- [Some districts](#) have required dual licensed teachers to serve as both the general and special educator for the same class of students – effectively serving as their own co-teachers.
- [Effective co-teaching](#) fundamentally depends on the capacity of [two educators to coordinate their work](#) with one another, dividing up responsibilities for the same group of students.
- Assigning dual licensed teachers to serve as their own co-teachers is not co-teaching, and it is likely to yield poor-quality instruction and overwhelm these educators.

This EdResearch for Action Project brief is a collaboration among:



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