



## Shortages of Special Education Teachers and Early Intervention Providers

### Members of Congress Are Urged To:

- Provide \$102 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 to fund IDEA Part D Personnel Preparation Grants.
- Provide an infusion of \$300 million in the next COVID-19 relief bill for IDEA Personnel Preparation Grants.
- Increase CARES Act/COVID-19 funding to support evidence-based remote learning professional development for special education teachers and support staff.
- Provide incentives to SEA's, LEAs, and early intervention providers to implement creative plans to decrease furloughs and "reduction in staff" numbers of special education teachers in the wake of COVID-19.
- Provide \$48 million in FY 2021 to fund IDEA Part D State Personnel Grants to assist SEAs and Part C state lead agencies.
- Strengthen and improve the implementation of the Higher Education Act TEACH Grant Program.
- Provide \$80 million in FY 2021 to fund the Higher Education Act Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program.
- Strengthen the Higher Education Act Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, the Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program, and the Loan Forgiveness for Service in Areas of National Need
- Co-sponsor and support the Educator Preparation Reform Act, S. 969 (Reed, D-RI).
- Co-sponsor and support Supporting the Teaching Profession Through Revitalizing Investments in Valuable Educators Act (STRIVE), S. 1866 (Booker, D-NJ) and H.R. 3139 (Norcross, D-NJ).
- Co-sponsor and support Preparing and Retaining Education Professionals Act (PREP), S. 752 (Kaine, D-VA).
- Include education administrators and specialized instructional support personnel in any legislation applicable to addressing education shortages.
- Provide \$70 million for National Center for Special Education Research in Institute of Education Sciences (IES).
- Continue to invest in technical assistance and resource development through existing centers such as the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL) and develop priorities within existing centers to focus specifically on preparing to serve children with disabilities.

## ISSUE BRIEF

### COVID- 19 Pandemic Impact

Latest assessments show that without adequate aid to state and local governments, the COVID-19 devastation may lead to a revenue shortfall of nearly \$1 trillion by 2021 for state and local governments. In lieu of substantial federal investments, budget cuts are certain. In the reverberation of the Great Recession, state and local government austerity added to a substantial shortage in employment in public K–12 schools and early intervention programs—a shortfall that continued through 2019. As of early 2020, public employment in school settings had yet to return the levels established prior to the Great Recession. In 2019, almost every state lead agency for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C reported personnel shortages. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit—and local education jobs dropped sharply. More K–12 public education jobs were lost in April than in all of the Great Recession. What's more, 50 percent of the jobs lost in K–12 public education between March and April 2020 were among special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Such dramatic declines will significantly undermine capacity to deliver a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities.

### Background

Special education, early intervention, and related services provided through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are delivered collaboratively by a multidisciplinary team of professionals, including special education teachers, early intervention providers, specialized instructional support personnel, and administrators. Although persistent shortages exist among all the professional disciplines, the focus for this issue brief is on special education teachers and early intervention providers.

The shortage of special education teachers and early intervention providers is at persistent crisis proportions:

- 48 states and the District of Columbia report a shortage of special education teachers—with this area being the most severe shortage for most states.<sup>1</sup>
- Special education teachers leave the teaching profession at nearly twice the rate of their general education colleagues (12.3% vs. 7.6%).<sup>2</sup>
- 51% of all school districts and 90% of high-poverty school districts report difficulty attracting qualified special education teachers.<sup>3</sup>



- Just 18% of special education teachers and 10% special education professors are people of color, while more than half of students with disabilities are from minority backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>
- 42 states report a shortage of early intervention providers, including special educators and related service providers.<sup>5</sup>
- Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped 35% over the last five years, foreshadowing an insufficient pipeline of special education teachers.<sup>6</sup>
- Over 50% of the teaching force will retire in less than 10 years.<sup>7</sup>
- Before COVID-19, there were challenges; now, the shortage is even more challenging.<sup>8</sup>

## Effect on Student Achievement and Fully Prepared Special Education Teachers

Shortages of fully certified personnel and unfunded positions impede the ability of children and youth with disabilities to reach their full developmental and academic potential and hinder the work of preparing all children and youth to be college- and career-ready. The national cost of public school teacher turnover has been estimated at more than \$7.3 billion a year. High turnover rates create extra costs for schools and early childhood programs—potentially \$20,000 or more for every teacher or early intervention provider who leaves.

As a result of this turnover, high-need urban and rural schools and early childhood programs are frequently staffed with under-prepared and inexperienced teachers, providers, and specialized instructional support personnel. Not only do fully qualified, fully prepared special education teachers improve outcomes for students with disabilities, but research has shown they are more likely to remain in teaching than teachers prepared through fast-track routes (Feng & Sass, 2013; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). The constant re-training of new staff means that high-need schools and early childhood programs are unable to close neither the quality staff gap nor the student achievement gap. 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 two-year period (Billingsley, Griffin, Smith, Kamman, & Israel, 2009; Brownell et al, 2018).

## Decline in Special Education Higher Education Faculty and State Approved Programs

In addition, the number of special education faculty in higher education programs has declined in recent years. Between 2014 and 2016, there was a loss of 38 state-approved special education teacher preparation programs. An anticipated wave of retirements will continue to shrink this dwindling capacity to address the teacher shortage. States that prepare more special education teachers have fewer shortages. States with the smallest special education teacher shortages have more preparation programs and graduate more special education teachers than states with the highest special education teacher 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”). While most states have identified professional standards for early childhood educators that reflect the work of supporting young children, minimum preparation requirements are inconsistent across programs, which has led to some programs being shorter than others and to a patchwork of different degree requirements.

## Teacher Loan Burden and Salary Deficit

Teacher and early intervention provider salaries lag behind those of other occupations that require a college degree, and young individuals often accrue significant debt to prepare for these professions. Adjusted for cost of living, average teacher salaries in the lowest special education teacher shortage states are nearly \$7,000 greater than salaries in the highest shortage states (Peyton et al). Beginning teachers and providers nationally earn about 20 percent less than individuals with college degrees who enter other fields, a gap which widens to 30 percent by mid-career. Compounding this challenge, more than two-thirds of those entering the education and early intervention field borrow money to pay for higher education, resulting in an average debt of \$20,000 for those with a bachelor’s degree and \$50,000 for those with a master’s degree. College loans represent a significant debt burden for many prospective teachers and providers and mark a potential disincentive to enter the profession. In addition, teachers must pay for numerous certification exams and state licensure. When the financial benefit meaningfully offsets the cost of professional preparation, it is more likely that teacher education programs will successfully recruit and retain high-quality professionals in the fields and communities where they are most needed. While the CARES Act temporarily deferred some of this burden, co-sponsoring the STRIVE Act would assist in mitigating the significant loan debt accrued by special education teachers and early intervention providers



## Recruitment, Preparation, and Retention

The recruitment, preparation, and retention of special education teachers and early intervention providers requires a systemic approach that is multifaceted and long-term. The goal is to ensure an adequate supply of fully prepared special education teachers and early intervention providers who enter the field and stay there. By underwriting the cost of completing high-quality teacher and early intervention provider preparation programs and addressing the other barriers to completing preparation, policymakers can ensure special education teachers and early intervention providers are better prepared for successful, long-term careers. Policies that support such a strategy include:

- Servicing scholarships and loan forgiveness programs that cover or reimburse a significant portion of tuition costs in exchange for a commitment to teach in high-need schools and early childhood programs or subject areas such as special education and early intervention
- Teacher candidate programs that use rigorous preparation and clinical experiences
- Grow-your-own programs that recruit teacher and provider candidates from nontraditional populations who are more likely to reflect local diversity and remain in the profession

Fully prepared teachers and providers are more effective and are more likely to remain in the field than those who enter through abbreviated or fast-track routes (Feng & Sass, 2013; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Teachers and providers who are fully prepared, including access to opportunities for extensive field work, are able to provide high-quality instruction—which results in greater achievement gains for children and youth with disabilities.

## Footnotes

<sup>1,5</sup> <https://tsa.ed.gov/#/home/> , 2020

<sup>2,3</sup> [https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/EducShor\\_Data%20Tool%20User%20Guide.pdf](https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/EducShor_Data%20Tool%20User%20Guide.pdf) , 2019

<sup>3</sup> [https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/EducShor\\_Data%20Tool%20User%20Guide.pdf](https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/EducShor_Data%20Tool%20User%20Guide.pdf), 2019

<sup>4</sup> Edweek, 2019

<sup>6</sup> [https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/EducShor\\_Data%20Tool%20User%20Guide.pdf](https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/EducShor_Data%20Tool%20User%20Guide.pdf), 2019

<sup>7</sup> Gallup, Special Education Legislative Summit, 2019

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.epi.org/blog/public-education-job-losses-in-april-are-already-greater-than-in-all-of-the-great-recession/> , 2020

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