

ISSUE BRIEF: EDUCATOR SHORTAGES

Overview

As the nation continues to face a critical shortage of special educators, early interventionists, and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP), we have made a longstanding commitment to ensuring special educators have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the unique needs of our infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Now more than ever, we need to develop a workforce pipeline to attract diverse personnel into all areas of special education; effectively prepare personnel to provide opportunities for positive outcomes and post-school success; and retain special educators for long-term overall impact. To ensure an effective workforce, we need an effective pipeline.

The pandemic created a unique set of inequities and challenges such as higher attrition rates, accelerated retirements, decreased enrollment in preservice programs, and increased stress—all of which exacerbated pre-pandemic issues. It is imperative that we collectively develop and utilize a multi-pronged approach, as attracting, preparing, and retaining educators must ALL be considered and addressed to yield a significant systemic improvement.

We must support comprehensive strategies, funding options, professional learning opportunities, and needed resources. Although persistent shortages exist among all the professional disciplines, this brief's focus is on special educators, early interventionists, and SISP.

Members of Congress are Urged to:

- ▶ **Invest \$300 million in IDEA Part D personnel preparation (Sec. 662)**, the federal program dedicated to improving the special educator pipeline by comprehensively preparing specialized instructional support personnel, special educators, early interventionists, and the higher education faculty and researchers that support their preparation
- ▶ **Invest \$300 to the Augustus F Hawkins Center for Excellence Program**, the federal grant program dedicated to diversifying the educator workforce by supporting comprehensive teacher preparation programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) of higher education including Alaska Native-serving or Native Hawaiian-serving institutions (ANNH), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISI), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Native American-serving nontribal institution (NASNTI), and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs).
- ▶ **Invest \$1 billion for Teacher Quality Partnerships**, the federal grant program dedicated to improving the quality of educators by funding comprehensive educator preparation programs at institutions of higher education that pair intensive student teaching under the supervision of an expert mentor teacher with coursework in children's learning and development, as well as curriculum and teaching methods.

Shortages of Fully Prepared Special Educators Persist, Impacting Equity

Every student deserves an equitable opportunity to achieve. Shortages of fully certified personnel and unfunded positions impede the ability of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities to reach their full developmental and academic potential. They also hinder the work of preparing all children and youth to be college- and career-ready. Nevertheless, the crisis remains persistent:

- ▶ 48 states and the District of Columbia reported a shortage of special education teachers in the 2020-2021 school year— with this area being the most severe shortage for most states. 98 percent of districts report shortages in special education
- ▶ Special education teachers leave the teaching profession at nearly twice the rate of their general education colleagues.
- ▶ Just 18% of special education teachers and 10% of special education professors are people of color, while more than half of students with disabilities are from minority backgrounds.
- ▶ 42 states report a shortage of early intervention providers, including special educators and related service providers.
- ▶ Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped 38% over the last five years, foreshadowing an insufficient pipeline of special education teachers.

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

Special education higher education faculty are critical to training future generations of special educators. However, the number of special education faculty in higher education programs is declining. In 2020-2021, there was a 5% decline in adjunct faculty and a 13% decline in full-time faculty. To support the faculty pipeline, institutes of higher education need to develop and implement strategies that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion to support a sustainable change in the future.

Loan Burden and Salary Deficit

Salaries in the education field lag behind those of other occupations and educator candidates often accrue significant debt to prepare for these professions. More than two-thirds of those entering the education and early intervention field borrow money to pay for higher education, and college loans represent a significant debt burden for many prospective teachers and providers. Prospective educators must also pay for numerous certification exams and state licensure. These factors provide a barrier for many potential educators—particularly people of color—and a financial disincentive for all wishing to enter the profession. When the financial benefit meaningfully offsets the cost of professional preparation, it is more likely that educator preparation programs will successfully recruit and prepare high-quality professionals who remain in the fields and communities where they are most needed.

Recruitment, Preparation, and Retention

The recruitment, preparation, and retention of special educators, early interventionists, and SISPs requires a systemic approach that is multifaceted and long-term. By underwriting the cost of completing high-quality preparation programs and addressing other barriers to completing preparation, policymakers can ensure personnel are better prepared for successful, long-term careers. Fully prepared educators are more effective and are more likely to remain in the field than those who enter through abbreviated or fast-track routes. Educators who are fully prepared, including through access to opportunities for extensive field work, can provide high-quality instruction—which results in greater achievement gains for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.