

## ISSUE BRIEF: EDUCATOR SHORTAGES

### Overview

The nation continues to face a critical shortage of special educators, which includes teachers, early interventionists, specialized instructional support personnel (SISP), administrators, faculty in higher education, and paraeducators. A renewed commitment to ensuring special educators have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the unique needs of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities in urban, suburban, and rural areas is essential to addressing these shortages. Now more than ever, a comprehensive workforce pipeline must be developed 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.

A unique set of inequities and challenges perpetuate special educator shortages, such as declining interest in the profession, higher attrition rates, larger caseloads, a decline in comprehensive training programs, decreased enrollment in preservice programs, and the emotional demands of the job. It is imperative to collectively develop and utilize a multi-faceted approach that includes better recruitment strategies, improved working conditions, enhanced training, and robust policy support, as attracting, preparing, and retaining educators must be considered and addressed to yield a significant systemic improvement. Investing in these areas can ensure that all individuals with disabilities receive the services they need to thrive and are delivered by appropriately credentialed staff.

Through targeted recruitment, enhanced support and training, increased funding, and policy reform, the impact of the special education personnel shortage can be mitigated, creating a more equitable, inclusive educator system for all students. Elevating the profession and changing the perception of a special educator is essential. Collaborative and actionable strategies from policymakers, educational institutions, and communities are imperative to resolve this ongoing challenge.

### Members of Congress are Urged to:

- **Cosponsor S. 1341/H.R. 2992, the *EDUCATORS for America Act*.** A comprehensive approach to expanding the educator pipeline is essential to address educator shortages nationwide. This bill, sponsored by Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Representative Alma Adams (D-NC), would strengthen the educator pipeline by attracting, preparing, and retaining effective educators. The bill would target workforce development in educator shortage areas and support comprehensive preparation; provide funding for states to create plans to meet their specific personnel needs; expand the Teacher Quality Partnership program to include school leaders and specialized instructional support personnel; improve diversity of the workforce; and make educator preparation more affordable through an expansion of the federal TEACH grant program and the Teacher Loan Forgiveness program.
- **Cosponsor S. 3681/H.R. 4550, the *Preparing and Retaining All (PARA) Educators Act*.** Paraeducators provide essential supports that enable individuals with disabilities to participate in inclusive settings. Paraeducators are typically hired from within the communities they serve and are the most diverse category of school personnel. Unfortunately, they are often underpaid and not afforded the professional development necessary to support their attraction and retention, leading to significant shortages. The PARA Educators Act, sponsored by Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) and Representative Ann Kuster (D-NH), would support state and local grants to attract and retain paraeducators in preschool and K-12 settings and provide the professional development necessary to best serve students.
- **Cosponsor S. 2605, the *Supporting Teaching and Learning through Better Data Act*.** While schools, districts, and states experience the daily challenges of educator shortages, data is lagging, incomplete, and hard to compare across states, failing to reflect the nationwide urgency of the issue. This bill, authored by Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA), would instruct the National Center for Education Statistics to conduct a study on current data collection related to personnel shortages and make recommendations for improving data collection, analysis, and dissemination to yield timely information about how to rebuild the supply of diverse, well-prepared educators. The bill would also provide technical assistance to states to attract, prepare, and retain a well-prepared and diverse workforce.

**Attract, Prepare, Retain:**

Strengthening the special educator pipeline requires a comprehensive approach that includes attracting, preparing, and retaining personnel.

**Attract**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, enrollment in teacher preparation programs declined by 16 percent in the decade spanning the 2009-10 school year to the 2019-20 school year. Intentionally targeting teacher candidates in preparation programs is the essential first step to addressing personnel shortages. Strategies such as targeted marketing campaigns, including through social media, job fairs, and community events, can pique the interest of potential educators. Partnerships with universities and colleges to create a pipeline of well-prepared special education teachers, including offering internships, student teaching opportunities, and collaborative research projects, can incentivize entry into preparation programs.

**Prepare**

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 fieldwork, can provide high-quality instruction, resulting in greater achievement gains for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. 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. A longstanding shortage of special education faculty in higher education contributes to the special educator personnel shortage and further limits the capacity of higher education to address this significant problem. Thus, when considering preparation programs, supporting doctoral-level special education programs must be a priority.

**Retain**

Retention is a pressing challenge that exacerbates pipeline issues- special education teachers are approximately 2.5 times more likely to leave the profession than teachers in general education (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). From unmanageable caseloads to inadequate preparation and support for novice teachers, many stressors of the job contribute to attrition and impact teaching and learning for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Offering robust professional development opportunities helps teachers stay updated with the latest special education practices and techniques. Establishing mentorship programs for new teachers can provide valuable support and guidance, helping them to acclimate and grow in their roles. Ensuring manageable caseloads and class sizes can reduce burnout and make the job more attractive.

**FAST FACTS  
ON EDUCATOR  
SHORTAGES**

- ▶ According to the U.S. Department of Education, 7.7 million (roughly 15%) of individuals with disabilities were served under IDEA during the 2023-2024 school year.
- ▶ 53% of public schools reported feeling their school was understaffed entering the 2022-23 school year. Of these schools, 65% reported being understaffed in special education teachers. (National Center for Education Statistics)
- ▶ Total enrollment in teacher preparation programs fell 16% between 2009 and 2020. (U.S. Department of Education) Similarly, 85,000 fewer teacher candidates were enrolled in teacher preparation programs in 2020-21 than in 2012-13. (Learning Policy Institute)
- ▶ Approximately 50 percent of special education teachers leave the teaching profession within their first five years. (U.S. Department of Education)
- ▶ For the 2023-24 school year, 43 States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia projected a shortage of qualified teachers in special education, more than for any other teacher shortage area by an eight-state margin (U.S. Department of Education)