



Shortages of Special Education Teachers and Early Intervention Providers

Members of Congress are urged to:

- Provide \$102 million in FFY 2020 to fund IDEA Part D Personnel Preparation Grants that support aspiring special educators (teachers, early intervention providers, and administrators) and doctoral-level leaders (faculty in colleges and universities and special education administrators).
- Provide \$48 million in FFY 2020 to fund IDEA Part D State Personnel Grants to assist states to reform and improve personnel preparation and professional development.
- Strengthen and improve the implementation of the Higher Education Act TEACH Grant Program for students preparing to be teachers in high-need fields.
- Provide \$53 million in FFY 2020 to fund the Higher Education Act Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program supporting higher education PK–12 partnerships to expand clinical preparation for educators in high-need fields and in low-income schools.
- 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), to strengthen and update Title II of the Higher Education Act.
- 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), strengthening the federal investment in recruiting, preparing, and retaining education and early childhood personnel and diversifying the teacher workforce.
- Co-sponsor and support Preparing and Retaining Education Professionals Act (PREP), S. 752 (Kaine, D-VA), strengthening the federal investment in “grow-your-own” programs which diversify the teaching workforce, and expanding this effort to include early childhood providers.
- Include education administrators and specialized instructional support personnel in any legislation applicable to addressing education shortages.

ISSUE BRIEF

Background

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.
- Special education teachers leave the teaching profession at nearly twice the rate of their general education colleagues (12.3% vs. 7.6%).
- 51% of all school districts and 90% of high-poverty school districts report difficulty attracting qualified special education teachers.
- 42 states report a shortage of early intervention providers, including special educators and related service providers.
- Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped 35% over the last 5 years, foreshadowing an insufficient pipeline of special education teachers.

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.

Effect on Student Achievement

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 over \$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.

Special education and related services and early intervention services provided through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are delivered in collaboration 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.

As a result of high 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. The constant retraining of new staff means that high-need schools and early childhood programs can close neither the quality staff gap nor the student achievement gap.

Teacher Loan Burden

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. Beginning teachers and providers nationally earn about 20% less than individuals with college degrees who enter other fields, a gap which widens to 30% 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 a potential disincentive to enter the profession. 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.

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 remain there.

By underwriting the cost of completing high-quality teacher and early intervention provider preparation programs and addressing the other barriers to completing preparation, policy makers can ensure special education teachers and early intervention providers are better prepared for successful, long-term careers. Policies that support such a strategy include:

- Service 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. Teachers and providers who are fully prepared, including having had opportunities for extensive field work, are able to provide high-quality instruction—which results in greater achievement gains for children and youth with disabilities.

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