

Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Systemic Solutions for Addressing Teacher Shortages

The Problem

Pending shortages of special education teachers have many states and local districts scrambling to find solutions for securing the teachers they need. Some states are proposing incentives for recruiting special education teachers (as well as teachers in other high need areas) and reducing requirements for entry into the classroom. Others are looking for alternative ways of preparing teachers in high needs areas. Quick routes to the classroom and incentives such as signing bonuses will do little to solve the shortage problem in the long term. At best, they create a revolving door, because unprepared special education teachers are more likely to leave teaching. At worst, they exacerbate the problem. Instead, a more systemic approach to solving the teacher shortage problem in special education is needed – one that will increase the likelihood that an adequate supply of fully prepared special education teachers enters the classroom and remains there.

In this brief, we provide research-based information about the preparation and retention of effective special education teachers. We conclude with systemic solutions that can be used to increase the number of well-prepared special education teachers.

Research Identifying Factors that Influence Special Education Teacher Shortages

In special education, preparation matters. Research shows that special education teachers prepared through more substantive routes are more effective and more likely to remain in teaching than teachers prepared through abbreviated or fast track routes:

- *Special education teachers with more preparation secure better student achievement gains*
- *Alternative route programs that involve district and university partnerships produce teachers who stay in the field*
- *Special education teachers who are fully prepared provide better instruction than teachers who are not fully prepared*
- *Graduates of more substantive preparation programs stay longer than those prepared in fast track programs*
- *Beginning special education and general education teachers with extended teacher preparation are more likely to report feeling well-prepared to teach content*

- *Experience teaching special education predicts stronger reading achievement for students with disabilities*
- *Insufficient numbers of special education teachers, however, are prepared yearly through more substantive routes to fill vacant positions*
- *Loan forgiveness programs, particularly those that provide considerable healthy financial support, are effective in securing more certified special education teachers (and ESOL, math, and science teachers). Additionally, prospective teachers and practicing teachers who receive higher larger forgiveness loans are more likely to stay in the classroom and have higher value-added scores than their peers who do not receive loans or small loans.*

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Retention also matters. That retention can mitigate shortages is important because experienced special education teachers are shown to be more effective than novices in supporting the achievement of students with disabilities. Research also shows that special education teachers are more likely to become effective teachers and be committed to and remain in their positions, when, they:

- *Work in a school with a positive climate*
- *Have more teaching experience*
- *Have collegial interactions with general education teachers*
- *Work in environments where there is a strong sense of collective efficacy*
- *Participate in more instructionally focused interactions with their colleagues or mentors, both in general and special education*
- *Work in environments where there is collective responsibility for the achievement of all students, including those with disabilities*
- *Have manageable workloads that include streamlined instructional responsibilities, reduced administrative responsibilities, and assistance with paperwork*
- *Receive administrative support in terms of role clarification, instruction, and managing different responsibilities*
- *Have access to induction and professional development that supports their learning and the learning of their general education colleagues through coaching, feedback, and other active learning opportunities*
- *Earn salaries over \$40,000, and earn more than teachers in bordering districts and states*

Further, special education teachers are more likely to be effective when they have knowledge for teaching reading, work with smaller numbers of students, and have more time to provide intensive instruction.

A Systemic Approach

The problem requires a systemic solution. Research suggests that a systemic approach to improving the profession is needed to develop an adequate supply of effective special education teachers. This systemic approach must focus on the preparation of special education teachers as well as the preparation of general education teachers and school leaders to better serve students with disabilities. Steps also should be taken to develop schools where general education teachers are supported in teaching students with disabilities and including them in their classrooms. We suggest that policymakers, educator preparation providers, and educational leaders at the state and district level consider the following strategies:

1. Ensure that all licensure routes for special education teachers provide adequate preparation for teaching students with disabilities
2. Develop licensure and program approval standards that ensure general education teachers and school leaders are prepared to provide effective educational services and supports to students with disabilities
3. Fund innovative preparation approaches that involve university and district partnerships for preparing special education teachers in high need districts
4. Identify experienced general education teachers and incentivize them to enter preparation programs for special education teachers
5. Develop beginning teacher induction and mentoring programs that would support general and special education teachers in collaboration and teaching learners with complex needs
6. Develop professional development efforts that engage both general and special education teachers in the collaborative design and implementation of instruction
7. Design and implement leadership academies to provide practicing principals with the ongoing support and development they need to support effective collaboration and instruction in inclusive schools

Summary and Conclusion

Although allowing easy entry to special education teaching may seem necessary to address critical shortages, it offers no real solution for this pernicious problem. In fact, easy entry perpetuates special education teacher shortages and places students with

disabilities at greater academic risk. Further, it does little good to focus on preparation if special education teachers end up leaving the classroom.

We recommend a more systemic approach to address special education teacher shortages -- one that focuses on preparing and retaining all school staff to serve students with disabilities. Well-designed and extensive preparation of special education teachers, general education teachers, and leaders combined with ongoing induction and professional development is likely to have a greater impact on shortages than quick fixes to increase supply.

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