



2025 Legislative Priorities

Supporting the Next Generation of Special Education Leaders

The Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) is a national organization representing more than 70 university programs that prepare doctoral level personnel for leadership roles in special education. HECSE member institutions work to ensure that preparation is informed by research and evidence-based practice, which has demonstrated positive outcomes for P-12 students. HECSE institutions collaborate to support general education personnel in developing needed skills to teach students with disabilities and to encourage the full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society.

Special Educator Shortages: The Perfect Storm

Special educators are vital for children with disabilities eligible under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal law that ensures children with disabilities a right to a free and appropriate public education. Yet personnel shortages have been a persistent issue across most states for decades. According to the most recent data from the School Pulse Panel:

- [45 percent](#) of schools reported vacancies of special education personnel
- [79 percent](#) of schools reported hiring special education personnel to be challenging

To compound the issue, the need for additional personnel has risen as the number of children eligible under IDEA continues to grow each year, while the capacity to educate prospective educators shrinks. A shortage of special education faculty in higher education contributes to the special education teacher shortage and further limits the capacity of higher education to address this significant problem. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 7.9 million children with disabilities are served under IDEA Part B for Fiscal Year 2025, as compared to 6.5 million a decade ago. Simultaneously, according to a National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics Survey of Earned Doctorates, between 2009 and 2018, there was a [19% reduction](#) in the number of special education doctoral programs.

The result is shortages of personnel across the nation. For the 2023-24 school year, 43 States, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia projected a shortage of qualified teachers in special education. States are also experiencing shortages of other special education personnel, including speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and psychologists (U.S. Department of Education).

To address the persistent and widespread shortage of special education personnel HECSE supports policies, programs, and funding opportunities that promote research, doctoral preparation, teacher preparation, and strong P-12, college, and career outcomes for students with disabilities.



Priorities for Congress

Preserve and grow programs that support special education doctoral preparation and educator preparation.

- Example: The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) supports doctoral training for special education faculty through IDEA Part D Personnel Preparation. Currently funded at \$115 million annually, aims to meet the demand for personnel to serve children with disabilities including at the masters and doctoral level, emphasizing the integration of research into training programs. These grants are essential for sustaining the field in research, best practices, and for improving the state of services for students served under IDEA.
- The U.S. Department of Education estimates that an investment of \$125 million annually (an increase of \$10m) could support the addition of 480 faculty members, supporting the training of 14,000 special educators. Sustained investments could produce over 15,500 additional service providers annually, ultimately impacting nearly 340,000 students per year.

Preserve and grow federal support for research in special education.

- Example: The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSE), administered by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), supports rigorous research to improve services through IDEA for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Recent research has focused on interventions for behaviors, functioning skills, academic achievement in core content areas, transition to employment and postsecondary education, and personnel shortages. NCSE is currently funded at \$64.3 million annually.

Modernize loan programs designed to incentivize entry into the teaching profession to increase educator recruitment and preparation.

- Example: The Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant program offers up to \$4,000 annually to both undergraduate and graduate students who complete the service obligation to teach a high-demand subject in an underserved elementary or secondary school for four years.
- Example: The Teacher Loan Forgiveness (TLF) Program offers up to \$5,000 in loan forgiveness for teachers who work in underserved schools for five consecutive years. Those who teach special education or other high-need subjects in these schools can receive up to \$17,500 in loan forgiveness.
- Neither TEACH nor TLF award amounts have been increased in the nearly two decades since they were established. Increasing award amounts can increase the pipeline of prospective educators into high-quality educator preparation programs and place them where they are needed most nationwide.