

ISSUE BRIEF

Special Education Teacher and Early Intervention Provider Shortages



RECOMMENDATIONS

CEC urges Congress to:

- Provide \$102 million to fund IDEA Part D Personnel Preparation Grants providing scholarships for beginning special educators and early intervention personnel.
- Provide \$48 million to fund IDEA Part D State Personnel Grants to states to reform and improve personnel preparation and professional development.
- Increase the federal investment in the Higher Education Act TEACH Grant Program for student grants in high-need fields and low-income areas.
- Provide \$43 million to fund the Higher Education Act Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program supporting higher education/K–12 partnerships to expand clinical preparation.
- Support 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 S.2370 and H.R.4914, Supporting the Teaching Profession Through Revitalizing Investments in Valuable Educators Act (STRIVE), strengthening the federal investment in recruiting, preparing, and retaining education and early childhood personnel and diversifying the teacher workforce.

BACKGROUND

The special education teacher and early intervention provider shortage 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 is down 35%** over the last 5 years, foreshadowing an insufficient pipeline for the future.

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 retirement 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 could be 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.

As a result of high turnover, high-need urban and rural schools and early childhood programs are frequently staffed with inequitable concentrations of 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 nor the 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

The national teacher shortage is projected to grow substantially over the next decade. School districts and early childhood programs are challenged with building capacity and maintaining a quality special education and early intervention workforce. Schools and early childhood programs facing shortages often resort to hiring inexperienced or uncertified personnel, increasing class size and caseload, or cutting class offerings—all of which affect the education of children and youth with disabilities.

preparation, however, these programs can 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 and early intervention providers will require a systemic approach that is multifaceted and long-term. The goal is to ensure an adequate supply of fully prepared special educators and early interventionists 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 better prepare special education teachers and early intervention providers 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 residency programs that employ 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 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.