
Antartica

Understanding Special Education Teacher Shortages

State policies meaningfully affect recruitment and retention.

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While supply and demand for fully qualified special education teachers has ebbed and flowed for nearly 30 years, demand has consistently outpaced supply nationally.[1] These shortages imperil the opportunity for students with disabilities to receive an appropriate, individualized educational program, as guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, not every state is experiencing the same shortages.

Teacher shortages are often viewed as a national issue and through a national lens. But individual states' challenges in addressing special education teacher shortages differ in degree and kind, and states thus enact varied solutions to address them.[2] A state's geography, resources, and political climate are just a few elements that can drive differentiated approaches to shortages or constrain implementation of thoughtful solutions.

By and large, state policymakers are well positioned to assess the extent of shortages, navigate the vagaries of regional differences, and carry out effective policies. As state boards of education and other state policy leaders consider their approaches to shortages of special education teachers, it will be instructive to consider how their policies differ from those of other states.

Defining Shortage

Teacher preparation programs have recently been seeing declining numbers of graduates, signaling inevitable teacher shortages. Understanding special education teacher shortages is more complicated, however. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey administered by the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), shortages have historically been considered as the proportion of fully certified special education teachers within the total pool of special education teachers,[3] known as a quality shortage. That is, although there are individuals staffing special education teaching positions in states with quality shortages, those teachers either have not met state-level requirements for certification or are serving only in a temporary capacity. Regardless, having teachers who are not fully certified undermines the intent and spirit of IDEA, with remote and underserved communities bearing the brunt of the quality shortages.

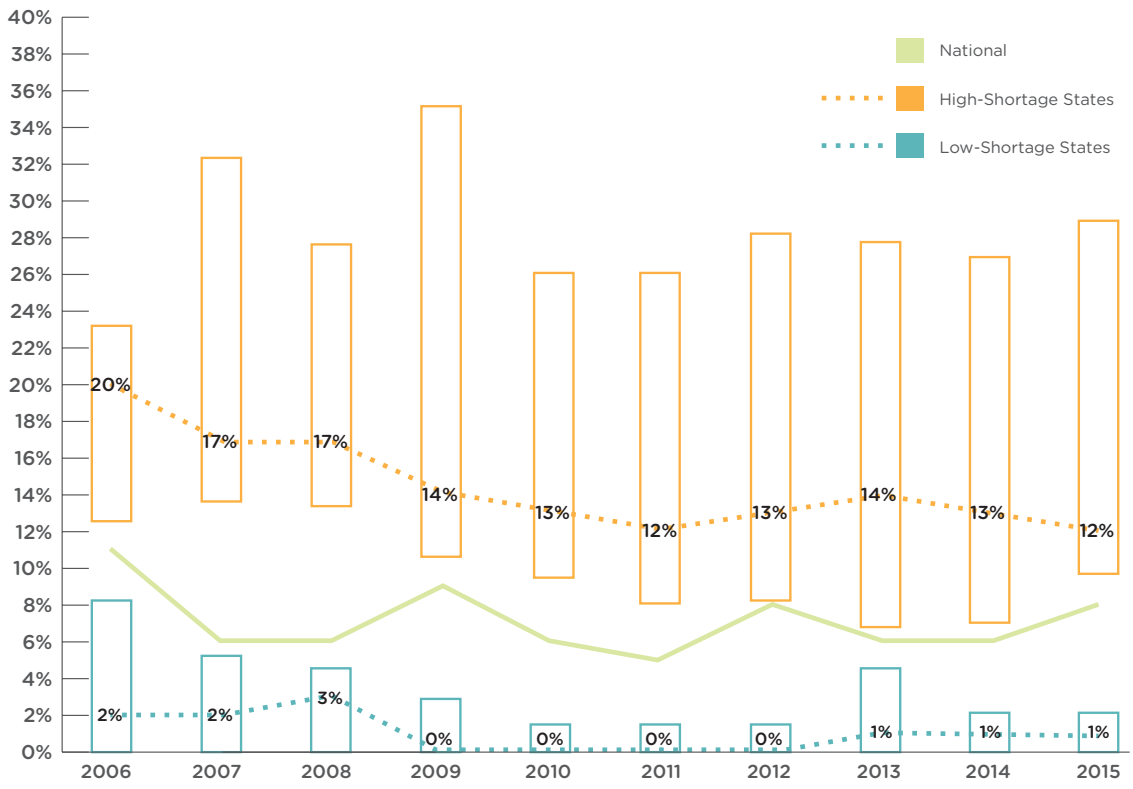
Thus state leaders might want to consider the key policy differences in states with lower rates of uncertified special education teachers. And what might be learned from these policies and applied to future policy proposals to address shortages? My colleagues and I set out to investigate these very questions.

What Policies Tend to Matter?

Our research examined what differentiates states with high and low shortages of fully certified special education teachers.[4] Using a conceptual framework that aligns factors influencing supply and demand in the teacher labor market with state policies related to recruitment and retention,[5] we compared states that reported complete, consistent personnel data to OSEP over a 10-year period (figure 1). We identified fourteen states with reliable data: seven with low and seven with high shortages[6] of special education teachers. States with low shortages were consistently 3 percent below the national average; high-shortage states were above.

In the states with high levels of special education teacher shortages, we saw higher student-to-teacher ratios, an

Figure 1 Uncertified Special Education Teachers in Low- and High-Shortage States, 2006–15 (percent)



Note: As reported by the federal Office of Special Education Programs in their annual report to Congress. Median percentages of high- and low-shortage states are compared with the national average, and annual ranges are provided for each group.

estimation of teachers' student caseload. When asked as part of the Schools and Staffing Survey, special education teachers stated they are more likely in high-shortage states to either leave their current position for another (for example, as an elementary teacher or a special education position elsewhere) or leave the profession altogether. Presumably, these intentions eventually create vacancies that are more likely to be filled by less qualified individuals.

States with low special education teacher shortages tended to have greater capacity to recruit and retain them and thus to offset statewide quality shortages. For example, they had access to a more robust pipeline of potential special education teacher candidates, producing on average 11 special education graduates for every teacher in the state who was not fully certified. Low-shortage states also invested more in teacher compensation (figure 2) and had higher per-pupil expenditures, taking into consideration a state's cost of living and compensating differentials—that is, the additional amount of income a given worker must be offered in order to motivate them to accept jobs viewed as undesirable compared with all other available positions.

In essence, states with low shortages of special education teachers had similar demand conditions as did high-shortage states, with few exceptions. However, low-shortage states addressed this demand for special education teachers with supply-side policies that allowed them to avert state-level quality shortages. In the

case of more acute shortages at the district level, a local school administrator may experience a paucity of any candidates for a posted position, even though there may actually be more candidates statewide to fill special education positions than vacancies. We suspect that this is a challenge both low- and high-shortage states face in some of their districts and regions.

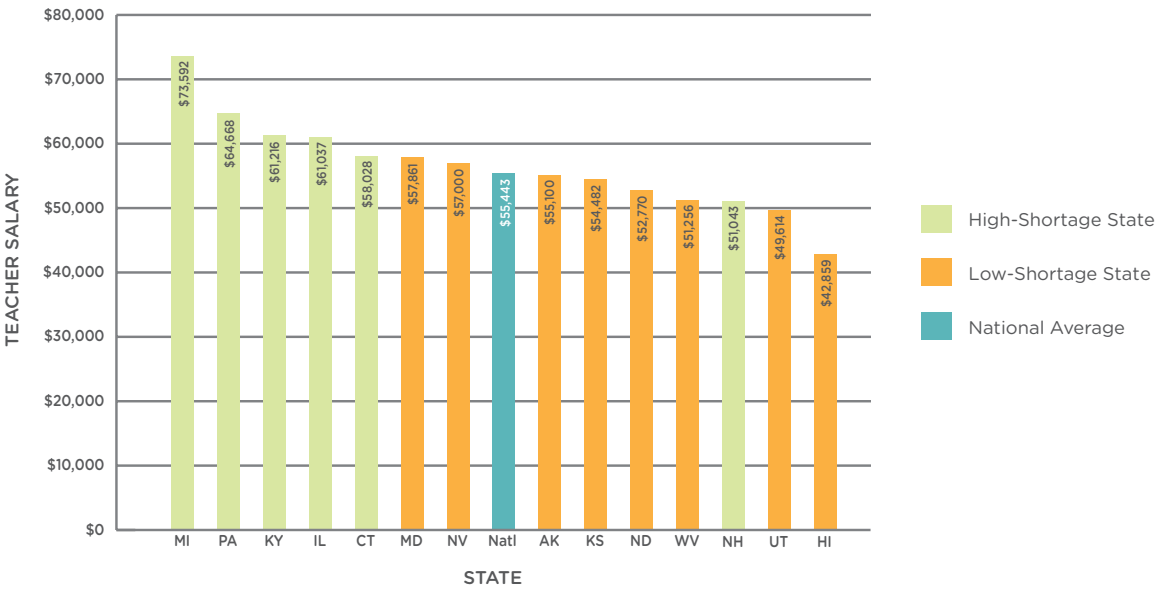
What Steps Can State Boards Take?

A common solution proffered in discussions of special education teacher shortages is to simply pay more and wait for the market to adjust. While this solution may hold in the private sector and where funding is bountiful, neither condition describes the realities of K-12 public education. For state policymakers, this solution may be neither politically nor fiscally practical. A more utilitarian approach is to consider degrees of change that are targeted, less contentious, and data driven. To this point, we outline four strategies that deserve consideration from state boards of education, placing them in ascending order of difficulty: improved data collection, improved working conditions, partnerships with teacher preparation programs, and differentiated pay scales.

Data collection. State data collection and reporting has been a pervasive challenge across the country.[7] More nuanced, timely data reporting can help states and school districts identify and target short- and long-term strategies to meet local demand that are more cost effective and more likely to improve student outcomes. A comprehensive analysis of statewide and local data in Wisconsin, for example, enabled the state to identify available, qualified teachers within the statewide pool and identify districts with pervasive staffing problems who were unable to retain special education teachers due to a lack of administrative support and poor working conditions. This analysis led to targeted recommendations that the state and its districts could adopt to address shortages.[8]

To help states and local districts collect and analyze relevant data, the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center, in partnership with the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institute of Research, a

Figure 2. Teacher Salary with Cost of Living Adjustments, by State Studied



In exit surveys, special educators cited poor school culture and climate as their top reason for leaving.

nonprofit, nonpartisan behavioral and social science research, evaluation and technical assistance organization based in Washington, DC, developed a shortage toolkit that allows users to input data and customize visualization tools to identify shortage gaps and potential root causes.[9] The accompanying facilitation guide and selection tool helps users analyze the data and develop targeted solutions at the local and state levels. In partnership with CEEDAR, staff at the Mississippi Department of Education, educator preparation programs, and six Mississippi school districts from various contexts used the toolkit to collect and review statewide and district-level data on the special educator pipeline.

Their analysis showed that preparation programs were not producing enough special educators to fill statewide demand. For example, in 2018–19, there were 135 graduates in special education but 183 vacancies for fully certified special education teachers. In addition, districts were retaining special education teachers for a few years but tended to lose them after their third year. In exit surveys, special educators cited poor school culture and climate as their top reason for leaving. Their principals, however, indicated that they believed the teachers had left due to paperwork burdens.

The Mississippi team initially targeted their retention efforts on development of a robust induction and mentoring program for first- and second-year special educators, which is just under way. The program will include mentor training and monthly check-ins with mentors, administrator professional development focused on inclusive practices and professional development for first- and second-year special educators on high-leverage practices, a professional learning community for third-year special educators, and ongoing monitoring of data on program effectiveness.

Working conditions. A robust research base has established that working conditions matter.[10] Special education teachers who have unfavorable working conditions are less likely to remain in their position and continue teaching, disproportionately affecting high-poverty schools and exasperating acute shortages.

Clarity and consistency of roles and responsibilities are working conditions that matter. Too often, a special education teacher is pulled in multiple directions, with little time to provide instruction. Estimates suggest that special education teachers spend as little as 40 percent of their day actually teaching, with paperwork, meetings, and consulting consuming the remainder of their instructional day.[11] Moreover, roles and responsibilities can change from year to year, limiting their instructional effectiveness.

To carry out these roles, teachers need accepting school cultures, well-informed leadership, and collaborative colleagues. The lack of these forms of support is related to special education teachers' burnout, intent to leave, and attrition. Conversely, leaders who are schooled in effective practices for students with disabilities, think systematically about collaboration between general and special education teachers, seek out differentiated professional development, and provide tailored curriculum stand a better chance at retaining teachers.

State board leaders can take two meaningful steps with regard to working conditions. First, they can seek baseline data about working conditions across the state but specifically in the hardest to staff areas. Next, they can press for targeted funding and incentives to develop the leadership in these districts and schools necessary to improve working conditions. Most administrators do not know how to support special education effectively or understand what conditions enable teachers to carry out the job effectively. Addressing this gap is essential to staving off attrition, and it is fiscally responsible. The cost to provide such supports is considerably less than that for hiring and training a new teacher.

Teacher preparation programs. State education leaders can also incentivize opportunities for districts and schools to partner with teacher preparation programs to leverage student teaching placement and implementation of evidence-based practices for students with disabilities. Student teaching placements are powerful predictors of not only special education workforce entry but also retention beyond three years. Not all placements yield the same outcomes. Special education teacher candidates who are placed with experienced teachers licensed in special education are more likely to take a special education teaching position

and to have greater impact on student reading outcomes, all else being equal.[12]

The next step is to better align the skills teachers gain in preparation programs with those required in the field. For example, special education teachers who apply evidence-based reading practices in the classroom that are aligned with practices they learned in preparation yield better reading outcomes for students with disabilities. This synergy also promotes alignment of the roles that special education teachers prepare for and are hired for, increasing the likelihood that teachers will remain at the school.

Pay scales. Increasingly, researchers have found that there are not necessarily too few credentialed special education teachers but rather not enough willing to work in unfavorable conditions for the compensation being offered.[13] Differentiated pay structures have been suggested time and again for hard-to-staff positions and more challenging roles. However, the pay differential needs to be substantial. Estimates from our studies and others suggest that the differential to recruit and retain special education teachers must exceed $2,500 to have an effect.[14]

At the state level, increasing teachers' salaries is a hard sell in many political environments. However, the experience with recent teacher work stoppages and the prolonged bout with the pandemic have indicated that public opinion and political will might well be changing—and that willingness to make investments in public education may be more malleable than in the past.

There is no easy solution to addressing special education teacher shortages. But if any of these proposals are to have their intended impact, state and district leaders will first need to identify the scope of the problem. Then they can marshal the data and resources necessary to act. Each of the strategies we present for recruiting and retaining special education teachers requires a substantial investment of time, resources, and coordination among a host of stakeholders. ■

[1]Ed Boe, "Long-Term Trends in the National Demand, Supply, and Shortage of Special Education Teachers," *Journal of Special Education* 40, no. 3 (2006): 138–50, doi:10.1177/00224669064000392 01; James Dewey et al., "Explaining the Decline in Special Education Teacher Employment from 2005 to 2010," *Exceptional Children* 83, no. 3 (2017): 315–29, doi: 10.1177/0014402916684620.

[2]Paul Sindelar et al., "The Demand for Special Education Teachers in Rural Schools Revisited: An Update on Progress," *Rural Special Education Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2018): 12–20, doi: 10.1177/8756870517749247; Peter Goff, Bradley Carl, and Minseok Yang, "Supply and Demand for Public School Teachers in Wisconsin," WCER Working Paper No. 2018-2 (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 2018).

[3]However, OSEP does not report on annual state-level special education teaching vacancies, a hole in the data states could and should address, as we discuss below.

[4]David Peyton, Kelly Acosta, et al., "Special Education Teacher Shortage: Difference between High and Low Shortage States," *Teacher Education and Special Education* 44, no. 1 (2021): 5–23, doi: 10.1177/0888406420906618.

[5]Cassandra M. Guarino, Lucrecia Santibanez, and Glenn Daley, "Teacher Recruitment and Retention: A Review of the Recent Empirical Literature," *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 2 (2006): 173–208, doi: 10.3102/00346543076002173.

[6]Low-shortage states include Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania. High-shortage states are Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, Maryland, Nevada, Utah, and West Virginia.

[7]Thomas Dee and Dan Goldhaber, "Understanding and Addressing Teacher Shortages in the United States," report (Washington, DC: Brookings, The Hamilton Project, 2017).

[8]Goff, Carl, and Yang, "Supply and Demand for Public School Teachers in Wisconsin."

[9]CEEDAR Center and Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, "Educator Shortages in Special Education: A Toolkit for Developing Local Strategies," website, https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/shortage-toolkit/.

[10]Bonnie Billingsley et al., "Improving Working Conditions to Support Special Educators' Effectiveness: A Call for Leadership," *Teacher Education and Special Education* 43, no. 1 (2020): 7–27, doi: 10.1177/0888406419880353.

[11]Kimberly Vannest and Shanna Hagan-Burke, "Teacher Time Use in Special Education," *Remedial and Special Education* 31 (2010): 126–42, doi: 10.1188/0741932508327459.

[12]Roddy Theobald et al., "Special Education Teacher Preparation, Literacy Instructional Alignment, and Reading Achievement for Students with High-Incidence Disabilities," CALDER Working Paper No. 253-0621 (Arlington, VA: AIR, CALDER Center, 2021); Roddy Theobald et al., "The Special Education Teacher Pipeline: Teacher Preparation, Workforce Entry, and Retention," *Exceptional Children* (2021), doi: 10.1177/00144029211010162.

[13]Loretta Mason-Williams et al., "Rethinking Shortages in Special Education: Making Good on the Promise of an Equal Opportunity for Students with Disabilities," Teacher Education and Special Education 43, no. 1 (2020). 45-62. doi: 10.1177/0888406419880352; Matthew Kraft, "What Will Teachers' Raises Buy Students," *New York Times*, June 13, 2019.

[14]Li Feng and Tim Sass, "The Impact of Incentives to Recruit and Retain Teachers in 'Hard-to-Staff' Subjects," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 37, no. 1 (2018): 112–35.

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