

Governance Brief

California's Teachers of Students with Disabilities

By Mary Briggs and Manuel Buenrostro, with contributions from Mary Cichy Grady, Maureen O'Leary Burness, and Geri F. West

Introduction

California provides special education services to more than one in 10 infants, children, and youth, a number slightly below the national average.¹ By law, local educational agencies (LEAs) are responsible for providing students with disabilities free and appropriate instruction specially designed to meet their unique needs. These services occur in a range of settings and are determined in close consultation with students' families and the educators that serve them. In 2017-18, nearly 775,000 students with disabilities were enrolled in the state's public schools and programs,² and their educational needs range from relatively minor to intensive interventions.

Yet, California continues to struggle to meet the needs of many students with disabilities. The state's current accountability system highlights this issue: of the 374 districts that the California Department of Education (CDE) identified for differentiated assistance due to performance on the 2018 California School Dashboard, 65 percent (243 districts) were identified based on their results for students receiving special education services.³

These outcomes highlight the importance of governance decisions that lead to practices and programs that better serve students with disabilities. Improving student learning is accomplished through a variety of strategies and reforms, and any sustainable effort must include attention to the education and support teachers receive. Board members can improve outcomes for children and youth with disabilities by ensuring teachers have the necessary training and experience to meet their students' particular needs.

This brief provides information about teachers who serve students with disabilities: their preparation requirements and challenges, their continuing professional development

In this brief you will find:

- » Information on special education teacher preparation and credentialing
- » Information about special education teacher shortages
- » Best practices for the professional development for teachers of students with disabilities
- » Questions that board members can ask district staff to learn about special education in their local context

needs, and what California is doing to address the shortage of qualified educators. A set of questions and resources to assist board members in discussing personnel considerations is also provided.

Special Education Teacher Preparation

Persistent and troubling achievement outcomes for students with disabilities led California to convene a Special Education Task Force that examined challenges in the field, with the goal of making recommendations for improvement to the CDE, the State Board of Education (SBE), and California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). The final 2015 report from the task force argued that changes to the state's teacher credentialing system would be necessary to improve special education. As a result, the

CTC undertook a multi-year, comprehensive approach to improving the preparation process for teachers to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have access to qualified educators.

Although evidence indicates that teachers who have participated in special education preparation programs are associated with improved learning and well-being for students with disabilities, many students with disabilities spend little time with such teachers. By 2014, almost two-thirds of U.S. students receiving special education services were spending 80 percent or more of their day in general education classrooms.⁴ This inclusion-based approach is consistent with the legal requirement—and research-based best practices—to ensure that students with disabilities are placed within the “least restrictive environment” (LRE), as appropriate. While general education programs are the appropriate placement for the bulk of students with disabilities, it means that general education teachers must also be able to meet a range of student needs. Thus, the Special Education Task Force recommended the development of teacher credentialing models that better prepare both general and special education teachers to serve students with disabilities.⁵

Changes to Requirements for Teacher Preparation

Some historical context might help board members understand the direction of recent reforms to the state’s general and special education credential requirements. Prior to the 1990s, California required special educators to earn two credentials in order to teach students with disabilities: a general education teaching credential and an education specialist (i.e., special education) credential.

Facing serious shortages, the state eliminated the general education credential requirement for special educators in 1996. The goal was to make the education specialist credential easier and faster to earn, in hopes of attracting more people into the profession. Despite the reduced requirements, the state’s number of certified teachers in special education continues to decline while the number of students needing special education services increases.

Moreover, the degree of special education preparation required is now greater than before 1996. Although the CTC removed the general education credentialing requirement, it also increased the kinds of credentials and authorizations a person must earn to become an education specialist. By 2017, the state offered seven types of preliminary education specialist credentials and nine additional possible authorizations. These added authorizations were designed to ensure

Teacher Shortages

The demand for qualified special education teachers continues to grow, while the supply of these teachers is diminishing. A reduction in the number of candidates enrolling in preliminary credential programs as the current special education teacher workforce is aging is exacerbating these shortages. Researchers predict that more than a quarter of special education teachers who were employed in 2014 will retire by 2024, a rate that outpaces teacher retirements in all other subject areas.⁶

Today, many schools struggle to find qualified instructors, an issue that can be particularly challenging for the state’s small and rural districts.⁹ And the shortage has created a situation of difficult trade-offs. Because schools need teachers, thousands of substandard credentials—emergency and intern permits—have been issued, leaving some of the state’s most vulnerable students with teachers who do not have adequate preparation to teach them.¹⁰

To address this challenge, California invested millions of dollars in efforts to increase the number of special education teachers in its public schools. However, recent estimates suggest that it will be five years or more before schools see the fruits of that investment.⁷

Other personnel shortages compound the negative impact on special education students.¹² For years, California’s schools have struggled to find enough “specialized instructional support personnel” such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, and physical therapists. These unfilled positions further complicate the challenges for schools.

educators could provide appropriate supports and services for specific groups of students. However, they also placed an extra credentialing burden on all special educators, especially on those who want to work with students who have “low-incidence” disabilities, i.e., those which occur infrequently in the general student population.⁸

One consequence of eliminating the requirement that special educators earn both a general education and special education credential is that without general education credentials, education specialists are not authorized to teach general education students. This credentialing strategy limits the continuum of service options available to LEAs.¹¹

Changes to Teacher Preparation: Moving to a Unified Approach

In its 2015 report, the Special Education Task Force found that once students are identified as needing special services, particularly for learning disabilities, they rarely catch up to their peers.¹³ The report documented that California's students with disabilities were not only attaining significantly lower levels of school success than their peers with disabilities in other states, they were graduating from high school at lower rates and realizing poorer post-secondary outcomes (e.g., fewer employment and educational opportunities, lower earnings, and lower levels of independence).

The report also found that general education and special education had, in effect, become two systems, noting that "significant barriers to school success for students with disabilities have grown out of [the] unfortunate evolution of two separate 'educations.'" One problem of this dual system is that the teacher preparation and licensing approach restricted the ability of education specialists to serve students in general education settings—and offered inadequate special education training for general educators.

In response to these concerns, the CTC developed new standards for general education teacher preparation and approved six Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs) for candidates receiving their preliminary credentials.¹⁴ These expectations—a set of skills and knowledge for every beginning teacher—require general educators to develop a more comprehensive foundation in understanding the needs of students with disabilities and learn an array of instructional strategies that better serve students with disabilities in general education classrooms, as appropriate.

Changes to the education specialist (i.e., special education) credentials are forthcoming as well. The CTC worked to simplify the credentialing requirements for special education teachers, along with new teacher preparation program standards. The challenge is one of balance: ensuring rigor in preparation so that every teacher is highly qualified, without placing undue preparation burdens on those who want to teach students with disabilities.

In 2018, the CTC reduced the number of preliminary special education credentials to five and approved new TPEs for each credential. Like general education teacher candidates, all special education teachers must take and pass a teaching performance assessment prior to being recommended for a credential, once such an assessment has been developed and adopted by the Commission. This assessment would require that candidates demonstrate they have mastered the competencies outlined within the TPEs. Finally, the Commission announced that it will discuss and make recommendations

about issues such as revised subject matter competency requirements and field work for teacher candidates, along with updated specific credential authorizations.

New Preliminary Education Specialist Credentials

Adopted in August 2018 for Fall 2020 Implementation:

- » Mild to Moderate Support Needs
- » Extensive Support Needs
- » Early Childhood Special Education
- » Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- » Visual Impairments

The CTC sought to design teacher preparation requirements that provide general education and special education teacher candidates with a common foundation (something the Special Education Task Force and the CTC refer to as a "common trunk") of knowledge and skills with the goal of promoting greater collaboration and understanding between special and general education teachers during their credential programs and beyond. The hope is that general education teachers will benefit from a program that integrates special education knowledge and skills throughout. Likewise, special education teachers will benefit from the same pedagogical knowledge as their general education peers. This approach aims to break down some of the silos that currently exist between special education and general education. Several college and university programs that prepare teachers have already merged their general education and special education preparation programs, training all teachers together.¹⁵

While these developments reflect important shifts in credentialing approaches, board members should note that full implementation of changes to teacher preparation programs for education specialists are not anticipated to begin until Fall 2020. Teacher preparation for general education teachers, however, has already been incorporated the addition of TPEs related to serving students with disabilities.

Professional Development

Ongoing teacher shortages raise an important issue for board members: How can districts and county offices of education better serve students with disabilities while the teacher pipeline issues are being addressed? One strategy for addressing the problems of teacher preparation and personnel shortages lies with the professionals who are already in the classroom. High-quality professional development makes it possible to reduce attrition and help teachers provide more effective instruction.

A comprehensive study of California educators found that the lack of quality professional development is one of the main reasons special education teachers leave teaching.¹⁶ Yet, studies also suggest that too many teachers experience professional development as “episodic, superficial, and disconnected from their own teaching interests or recurring problems of practice.”¹⁷ Improving the professional learning opportunities for general and special educators will improve their effectiveness in the classroom and strengthen both teacher recruitment and retention efforts, even in schools that are hard to staff.^{18,19}

Research about how adults learn also points to a clear remedy. Providing mentors (especially for new teachers), in-class coaches, professional learning communities, collaborative school-wide cultures, and concerted and visible administrative support all serve to develop the teaching professionals in a school in the best ways possible, making teachers more effective in the classroom, happier in their jobs, more willing to take risks and be creative, and generally more committed to their professions and less likely to leave.²⁰

Conclusion

In response to recommendations from the state’s 2015 Special Education Task Force Report, California is working to build a system of education that is unified, coherent, and able to readily field a workforce of highly qualified instructors and other special education providers. As this vision is realized, special and general educators will find themselves working together more closely to support each other in ways that help them meet the demands of their profession and, even more importantly, open doors to a brighter future for all students, including students with disabilities.

Questions for Board Members

1. How many of our education specialists are not fully or appropriately credentialed?
2. What are the strategies our district or county office of education is using to bring talented new teaching professionals to our community?
3. Do our education specialists report challenges related to their working conditions that are impacting retention (e.g., case load, assessment schedules)? Are there policies we can put in place to address some of the working conditions specific to our special education teachers’ responsibilities?
4. How many of our special education teachers do we anticipate will retire within the next five to 10 years?

5. What mentoring and professional development opportunities do we provide our special education teachers?
6. What professional development opportunities do we provide for general education teachers so that they can better serve students with disabilities?
7. What opportunities do special education and general education teachers have to collaborate with each other?

Resources

- » **California Department of Education.** Special Education Division. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/>
- » **One System: Reforming Education to Serve ALL Students – Report of California’s Task Force on Special Education (2015).** Report that highlights the key issues facing California’s special education systems and recommendations for reform. This report provided the impetus for credentialing changes for general and special education teachers. <https://bit.ly/2InqcQm>
- » **Learning Policy Institute.** Research and remedies for teacher shortages. <https://bit.ly/2HkkwIO>
- » **Getting Down to Facts II: Teacher Supply Falls Short of Demand in High-Need Fields, Locations (2018).** Research brief on California’s teacher shortage and the prevalence of teachers on intern permits and waivers. <https://bit.ly/2OIWusP>
- » **California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.** Memo for the Commission that provides background on credential revisions and teaching performance expectations (standards) for candidates in the newly developed programs.
- » **Keeping Good Teachers: Why It Matters and What School Leaders Can Do (2003).** Article by Linda Darling-Hammond on teacher retention, including recommendations for school leaders. <http://bit.ly/2tCXJ5X>

Endnotes

- 1 National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Children and youth with disabilities*. The Condition of Education. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2iFUY96>
- 2 California Department of Education. (2018). *Special Education – CalEdFacts*. <https://bit.ly/2XB1nbk>
- 3 Fensterwald, J. (2018). *Ratings in updated California School Dashboard target more districts for assistance*. EdSource. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2SwSuw9>
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- 6 Fong, A. B., Makkonen, R., & Jacquet, K. (2016). *Projections of California teacher retirements: A county and regional perspective*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2F9hcvz>
- 7 Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Addressing California's growing teacher shortage: 2017 update*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Ilflcd>
- 8 By definition, a low-incidence disability is one that occurs infrequently in the general school population. Specifically, and by California Education Code, "(1) Pupils with low incidence disabilities, as a group, make up less than 1 percent of the total statewide enrollment for kindergarten through grade 12. (2) Pupils with low incidence disabilities require highly specialized services, equipment, and materials. [30 EC 5600.5]"
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- 10 Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *California special education teacher shortages grow more severe*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2IkVyr5>
- 11 Darling-Hammond, L., Furger, R., Shields, P. M., & Sutchter, L. (2016). *Addressing California's emerging teacher shortage: An analysis of sources and solutions*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2G8d4kl>
- 12 National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services. (2014). *Understanding shortages of specialized instructional support personnel*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2Fverd2>
- 13 See Endnote 5.
- 14 California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2016). *California teaching performance expectations*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2pFkZfc>
- 15 CEEDAR (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform) Center. *Intensive TA profiles: California*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2G8MQia>
- 16 Futernick, K. (2007). *A possible dream: Retaining California teachers so all students learn*. The Center for Teacher Quality, California State University. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2l67Sv4>
- 17 Little, J.W. (2006). *Professional community and professional development in the learning-centered school*. National Education Association. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2lWVrIU>
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- 20 See Endnote 5.

Mary Briggs and Manuel Buenrostro are Education Policy Analysts for the California School Boards Association.

Mary C. Grady is the editor of the CDE Special Education Division newsletter, The EDge.

Geri F. West is an educational consultant in special education and early childhood education.

Maureen O'Leary Burness is a special education consultant.