

Testimony of Dr. Jane E. West, Education Policy Consultant

Tackling Teacher Shortages

House Subcommittee on Labor/HHS/Education Appropriations

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Good morning, Chair DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to provide information about the critical shortage of special educators facing our nation.

In 1975, the Congress enacted the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), enabling students with disabilities to gain full access to education after decades of exclusion. For 47 years the law has required a free appropriate public education for every student with a disability, no matter how significant that disability¹. With bipartisan support from its inception, and now serving 7.3 million students and their families, IDEA has stood the test of time. As a special educator before the enactment of the law, and afterwards, I can tell you what a difference it made for federal policy to hold the door open for all students with disabilities for full access to school.

The challenge we face today is that we have yet to realize the full implementation of the law. While IDEA requires that services are delivered by qualified personnel, that is increasingly not happening. The critical obstacle is the crisis of a special educator shortage — among special education teachers, paraprofessionals, school psychologists, early intervention providers, specialized instructional support personnel and more. Our shrinking capacity in higher education to prepare special education teachers threatens the pipeline for the future². The combination of a dearth of new teachers and the high attrition rate of practicing special education teachers has generated an urgent challenge for today and for the future.

At the same time, we confront this shortage tsunami, the number of students requiring special education services has increased. The number of students receiving special education services under IDEA has risen by 17% since 2000-2001³. Between 2017-18 and 2020-21 alone the increase was 8%. In some states as many as 19% of students receive special education services. In addition, the mental health needs of our students, exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, have put additional pressure on our workforce.

It is important to note that most of the funding that is dedicated to IDEA goes to the state grant program — \$13.3 Billion in Fiscal Year 2022. These much-needed funds are provided to states and districts to carry out the law in provision of a free appropriate public education for every eligible student. However, they are not targeted to the preparation of the special education workforce. Funding to prepare the workforce of the future is supported primarily through Part D Personnel Preparation of IDEA. The investment in the preparation of the workforce to implement IDEA represents less than 1% of all IDEA funds, a proportion that is insufficient to address the personnel needs⁴.

Scope of the Special Educator Shortage

- 48 states and the District of Columbia reported a shortage of special education teachers in 2021-22.
- Most states identify special education as their greatest teacher shortage field.
- 98% of school districts report special education shortages.
- At least 25,243 special education teacher positions were filled by individuals who were not fully qualified for those positions in 2018-19 including
 - In the state of Nevada 20.44% of those serving as special education teachers were not fully qualified; in Louisiana 18% and in Oklahoma 15% were not fully

qualified; in Texas 5800 individuals serving as special education teachers were not fully qualified to do so.

- The proportion of uncertified teachers grew by 50% from 2014 to 2016 and that number continues to grow. In some states, such as California, over half of new special educators entering the field are not fully prepared for the job⁵.
- The turnover of practicing special education teachers is reported to be about twice that of general education teachers, as much as 15% per year.
- The number of candidates completing programs for initial licensure in special education declined by 16% between 2011-12 and 2019-20. In traditional comprehensive preparation programs, the decline was 27%.
- Only 18% of special education teachers are from diverse backgrounds; in schools with the greatest concentration of students of color, special education teachers are 80% more likely to turn over than in schools with the lowest concentration of students of color⁶.
- Key contributors to the shortage are the cost of college and taking on student debt, working conditions -- including lack of support from administrators -- and low compensation.
- The shortage of special education faculty in higher education is fueling the shortage of special education teachers; since 2009 there has been a 19% reduction in the number of special education doctoral programs.
- In states which have more teacher preparation programs, there is less of a shortage of special education teachers.

As states are scrambling to find special education teachers, many schools have no other choice but to hire unqualified teachers to fill these vacancies. States and districts have had to

respond immediately to address the shortage – in ways that are unsustainable and over time and will exacerbate the problem rather than solve it. Lowered standards for certification, an increase in the use of long-term substitutes, and the expansion of short-term programs which place people as teachers without the needed skills and knowledge will keep the schools open but will not generate the results that we want for students with disabilities nor expand the qualified workforce.

In desperation, some states have taken unprecedented action. In February, in New Mexico, 78 members of the New Mexico National Guard were called up to serve as substitute teachers in February. They responded to a call from Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, who also asked state employees to volunteer in an effort to keep schools open during an acute shortage of teachers exacerbated by the omicron wave of COVID-19⁷. And they are not alone. In January Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt issued an executive order allowing state employees to work as substitute teachers while retaining their regular jobs. In Texas, California, Minnesota, and beyond parents without any prior experience or training in education were asked to serve as substitute teachers. We find ourselves in an untenable situation where our students with the greatest needs and vulnerabilities are being served by totally unprepared personnel⁸.

The shortage leads to larger caseloads for special educators — with less time for students with complex needs. And stretched too thin, special educators burn out and students are underserved⁹. The situation in Vermont is unfortunately not unusual. Families with students who receive physical and occupational therapy or who benefit from hands-on learning were highly anticipating the return to in-person learning after a period of remote instruction and services that left many students behind. “When we started coming back in person, suddenly, there were not enough service providers,” said Karen Price, the director of family support for the

Vermont Family Network. The result was shortened school days due to a lack of personnel, or staff without training stepping in to fill roles reserved for specialists. In some cases, students did not receive services at all.

In contrast, consider the following. A parent recently shared with me her journey with her son with dyslexia which was presenting great obstacles to him in learning to read, resulting in tremendous frustration. When he gained access to fully prepared teachers with expertise in reading instruction, he blossomed. Today, at age 27, having completed a BA with academic honors in botany, he is applying to a doctoral program in forestry and ecology. And now he reads all the time. This is the difference that highly trained teachers make.

A GAO report found a positive relationship between the percent of inexperienced teachers and the likelihood that students would receive a range of disciplinary consequences, including suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement¹⁰. In addition, students with disabilities are overrepresented in suspensions and expulsions, particularly when they are students of color.

We know preparation matters. Generally, teachers who are underprepared -such as those entering teaching through emergency and alternative pathways that do not offer student teaching and a full curriculum for teaching- are 2-3 times more likely to leave than those who are fully prepared. Comprehensive preparation is an effective antidote to high teacher turnover¹¹.

Research shows that fully prepared and credentialed educators are more likely to stay in the field and best equipped to deliver results for students¹². Teacher preparation and experience in special education serve to enhance achievement in reading and math for students with disabilities¹³.

Without the qualified personnel, student outcomes suffer.

Multiple innovative solutions are in place across the country. The [University of Central Florida](#) partners with schools to employ teacher candidates as substitute teachers, providing them

with credit toward program completion and intense supervision while they meet the district needs for substitutes, thus building a pipeline. Intensive induction and mentoring programs for new special educators are effective in retaining inexperienced teachers who otherwise might leave¹⁴

- Teacher residency programs, such as the [Richmond Teacher Residency](#) program run by Virginia Commonwealth University and Richmond Public Schools, are effective in attracting a diverse set of teacher candidates and placing and retaining new special education teachers.
- Innovative recruitment strategies, such as concurrent enrollment partnerships between teacher preparation programs and high schools like the one at the [University of Northern Colorado](#), are promising.
- Grow Your Own programs, such as the [Michigan State University](#) program which supports working special education teacher aides to become fully credential special education teachers are demonstrating success.
- Dual certification programs, such as the one at [Bowling Green State University](#), prepare candidates to serve as both general and special education teachers, thus equipping teachers to be effective with all students.

Two federal programs have solid and proven track records in carrying out the solutions described above, and a newly funded one will make an important contribution in diversifying our workforce using strategies which impact retention and student success¹⁵.

Increase Funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Act Part D Personnel Preparatio.

IDEA Personnel Preparation Program is designed to increase the pipeline of well-prepared special education teachers, early interventionists, administrators, specialized instructional support personnel, and higher education faculty. Part D programs are often referred to as the "backbone" of special education, supporting an infrastructure that serves as a quality assurance mechanism for the provision of mandated services to students with disabilities. In 2016, 1,593 scholars completed programs. In programs where scholar stipends are authorized, 73% of the grant funds directly supported students. This program is an essential component of IDEA, investing in a foundation of deployed special educators to ensure the provision of a free appropriate public education for all eligible students. All scholars who are prepared with IDEA Personnel Preparation funds have a service obligation of two years for every one year they are supported by IDEA funds.

Increase Funding for the Teacher Quality Partnership Program

The Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant program funds comprehensive educator preparation programs at institutions of higher education in partnership with high need school districts. TQP grants pair intensive student teaching under the supervision of an expert mentor teacher with coursework in children's learning and development, as well as research based instructional strategies, including how to differentiate instruction. TQP funds a range of comprehensive educator preparation programs including teacher residencies, school leader preparation, and undergraduate and graduate preparation programs. Residencies offer financial support that helps underwrite the cost of preparation in exchange for a service commitment of teaching a high-need subject in an underserved school for at least 3 years. Grow Your Own programs, including paraprofessional teacher training programs, 2+2 programs, and applied baccalaureate programs, recruit and train teacher candidates from nontraditional populations that

are more likely to reflect the local communities they plan to teach in¹⁶. Increased investments in TQP would help expand teacher residencies and Grow Your Own programs.

Increase Funding for the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers for Excellence Program

The Augustus F. Hawkins Centers for Excellence program is specifically designed to support comprehensive teacher preparation programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) of higher education including Alaska Native-serving or a Native Hawaiian-serving institutions, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Native American-serving nontribal institution, and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Teacher preparation programs at these institutions are a long-standing source of well-prepared and diverse teachers¹⁷. For example, despite making up just 3% of institutions of higher education, HBCUs prepare 50% of the nation's Black teachers. This is a critical program that must be well funded to support a well-prepared, diverse, and stable educator workforce.

In summary, students with disabilities need access to a well-prepared, diverse, experienced, and stable special educator workforce. Special educator shortages are widespread and severe and have critical equity implications. Underprepared teachers do not have adequate training to meet the significant and wide-ranging needs of students with disabilities and are more likely to leave the profession. Improving access to comprehensive preparation pathways -- in addition to addressing student debt, workplace conditions, and compensation -- is imperative. There is a direct link between well prepared special educators and ensuring that students with disabilities receive the services they are entitled to under IDEA. ***Federal policy can and must help support and stabilize the workforce. The level of investment needed is much greater than***

current federal support. Increases to the longstanding bipartisan programs I outlined above can be achieved through the annual appropriations process.

In closing, I would like to note that for the last 8 years I have taught special education doctoral students from universities all over the country, helping them to connect research and practice to policy. I never cease to be astounded by the vast experience, skill, knowledge, and motivation of these scholars. They are our future – our special education leaders, researchers, and new faculty who will train future generations of teachers. They leave me with optimism and inspiration. The only problem is that there simply are not enough of them.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on this pressing issue today, I look forward to your questions.

¹ Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446, U.S.C § 1400 et seq. (2004). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/1350>

² Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (2021, February). *The shortage of special education teachers and higher education faculty*. HECSE.

³ National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). Table 204.70: Number and percentage of children served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by age group and state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1990–91 through 2017–18. In U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Ed.), *Digest of Education Statistics*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_204.70.asp?current=yes

⁴ <https://cef.org/cef-budget-book/>

⁵ <https://edsources.org/2020/amid-shortages-schools-settle-for-underprepared-special-education-teachers/621656>

⁶ Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/02/1077056059/new-mexico-national-guard-substitute-teachers>

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/13/schools-parents-substitutes-omicron-shortage/>

⁹ DiNapoli, M.A., Jr. (2021, February 10). Eroding opportunity: COVID-19's toll on student access to well prepared and diverse teachers [Blog post]. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-eroding-opportunity-student-access-prepared-diverse-teachers>

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- ¹⁰ Nowicki, J. M. (2018). K-12 education; discipline disparities for Black students, boys, and student with disabilities (GA)-18-258). U.S. Government Accountability Office.
- ¹¹ Cardichon, J., Darling-Hammond, L., Yang, M., Scott, C., Shields, P. M., & Burns, D. (2020). *Inequitable opportunity to learn: Student access to certified and experienced teachers*. Learning Policy Institute
- ¹² Billingsley, B.S. & Bettini, E.A. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research* 89(5), 697-744
- ¹³ Feng L. & Sass, T.R. (2010) *What makes special education teacher special? Teacher training and achievement of students with disabilities*. Working Paper 49, National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.
- ¹⁴ Cornelius, K.E., Rosenberg, M.S. & Sandmel, K.N. (2019). Examining the impact of professional development and coaching on mentoring of novice special educators. *Action in Teacher Education*.
- ¹⁵ <https://hecse.net/resources/professional-resources>
- ¹⁶ Guha, R., Hyler, M.E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *The teacher residency: An innovative model for preparing teachers*. Learning Policy Institute.
- ¹⁷ Gasman, M., Castro Samayoa, A., & Ginsberg, A. (2016). *A rich source for teachers of color and learning: Minority serving institutions*. Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions.