

A Field at Risk:

THE TEACHER SHORTAGE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

A shortage of special education teachers existed in 1983, and the problem persists today. The authors emphasize that there is a pressing need not only to recruit and retain qualified special education teachers but also to diversify the special education teaching force.

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FOR DECADES, the supply of qualified special educators has been critically low. In 1983, the shortage of special educators was highlighted in *A Nation at Risk*. It is still with us 25 years later and shows no signs of disappearing, and in the coming decades it could well worsen.

Although the production of teachers in special education increased during the 1990s, the most recently available data indicate that just .86 teachers were prepared for each available position in special education, while more than twice as many teachers were produced for each available position in elementary educa-

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tion.¹ This limited production has clearly contributed to the overall shortage of special education teachers in the United States. An analysis from the late 1990s showed that because there were so many positions to be filled, some 10% of special education teachers were less than fully licensed in the area of their primary assignment.² Consequently, some students have never been taught by fully licensed special education teachers.³ While the shortage of qualified special educators is evident, it is exacerbated by the need to diversify the field.

DIVERSITY ISSUES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

An adequate pool of ethnically diverse, high-quality educators is needed in all fields, but that need is particularly acute in special education. The reason is that minority students, in particular African American and Hispanic males, are overrepresented in special education.

Teachers influence children's attitudes toward school, their academic accomplishments, and their views of their own and others' worth. The members of a teaching force that is ethnically diverse can serve as role models of successful, contributing members of society for all students, not just students who share a particular teacher's ethnic background. The very presence in the classroom of teachers from racial and ethnic minorities

reflects the growing diversity of professionals and authority figures throughout society and lets all students know what is possible. Finding such teachers in the required numbers is a problem, and finding them among qualified special educators is an even more serious problem.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING THE LACK OF QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Providing a high-quality education for students is an enormous undertaking, which increases in difficulty when less than fully prepared teachers assume this responsibility. William Sanders and June Rivers found large differences in achievement between students taught by high-quality teachers and those taught by low-quality teachers for a period of successive years.⁴ Thus teacher educators and district administrators must make every effort to provide training for unlicensed special education teachers so that they may acquire the knowledge and skills they need to meet the educational and societal demands of teaching.

Two strategies are frequently adopted to address the lack of qualified teachers.

Alternative licensure. In response to the need for larger numbers of qualified teachers, as highlighted in *A Nation at Risk*, the alternative teacher licensure movement grew rapidly. New Jersey's plan, for example, was first announced in September 1983. Many other states and private organizations subsequently moved to develop programs of this kind.

While there is tremendous variation among current alternative licensure programs, one of the most common is the fast-track program, which delivers all pre-service preparation in one summer. These programs are intended to accommodate individuals from other careers who want to become teachers. Such summer programs include abbreviated coursework and a field experience that involves either student teaching or classroom observations. Participants in fast-track programs are attracted by the fact that training is brief and inexpensive and offers rapid entry into a paid teaching position. Despite the premium they put on efficiency, however, candidates still expect programs to provide them with focused preparation in pedagogy, including generic teaching strategies, subject-specific methods of instruction, and a useful practice teaching experience. And all of these items are important if teaching is ever to become the rewarding and respected profession that those who wrote *A Nation at Risk* sought.

While most states have some form of an alternative licensure program, there is minimal research — espe-

cially data-based studies — published on the topic. And much of what has appeared cannot be generalized because of the small sample sizes and other methodological issues. Often, studies do not compare teacher training programs within the same district, choosing instead to compare in-district teachers with state or national samples. The array of definitions of alternative licensure also makes it difficult to compare alternative licensure to other forms of licensure.⁵ More research is clearly needed, and at least some should focus specifically on the development of special education teachers.

Inclusion. Alternative teacher preparation programs have developed over the past 25 years in response to teacher shortages, but changes have taken place in the way instruction is provided as well. Inclusion was not a concept that was being discussed when *A Nation at Risk* appeared. While inclusion was not designed as a way of solving the shortage of special education teachers, many administrators, without fully understanding the theory underlying inclusion, grasped at the chance to help ameliorate their shortages of special education teachers by creating a range of consulting and co-teaching situations, often without adequately preparing their teachers. Such arrangements allowed a single qualified special education teacher to serve more students — usually with fewer supports — than would be possible under the then-standard resource-room model.

When done effectively, inclusion entails a true partnership between the special education teacher and the general classroom teacher. When not done well, inclusion can stretch a special education teacher too thin and at the same time overburden the general teacher — both outcomes that do not bode well for solving the problem noted in *A Nation at Risk* of attracting high-quality teachers and keeping them in the profession.

LEGISLATION

Legislative changes since 1983 have also exacerbated the shortage of special educators. The 1997 and 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the 2002 implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act have combined to make the shortages even worse.

The reauthorization of IDEA both increased the number of individuals eligible to receive special services and extended the range of services available. NCLB put in place new guidelines governing accountability for students and teachers, as well as new definitions of highly qualified teachers that required, among other things, that teachers be licensed in their areas of instruction. For special education, this posed confusing problems.

Was a special education license sufficient for teachers to teach in an inclusive setting, or did they need content licenses for all subjects they taught? Interpreting this mandate has been largely left to the states, but they have not settled on a single approach.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

In addition to these legislative changes, what are the actual barriers standing in the way of recruiting and retaining special education teachers? And what can administrators and teacher educators do to remove them?

For many reasons, educators in training might choose not to focus on special education. Just as administrators have difficulty hiring highly qualified special education teachers, special education teacher educators encounter difficulties in recruiting the best preservice students to be teacher candidates in special education. Sometimes the system impedes its own progress and is a part of the problem. For example, scheduling conflicts and inflexible guidelines prohibit some individuals, such as para-educators, from participating in special education teacher education programs. A range of other concerns that prevent potential candidates from pursuing careers as special education teachers include: the low graduation rates in the preparation programs, students' lack of respect

for teachers, significant discouragement about entering the field from counselors and middle-class parents, the low status of teachers, five-year teacher education programs, low salaries, and the physical condition of schools.

A more specific problem is the one of attracting a more diverse teaching force into special education. Already students of color are choosing not to enter teaching, much less special education teaching. Some of this shortfall, according to a study by June Gordon, is no doubt the result of a lack of active recruitment and community partnerships in ethnically diverse neighborhoods.⁶

Special education teacher educators and state and local administrators need to adopt recruitment strategies specifically targeting individuals with related background experience, such as psychology majors; they need to advertise in media designed to attract people of color; and they need to devise longitudinal plans that begin to recruit in middle schools and high schools.

REMEDIES FOR THE SHORTAGE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

We need to come up with strategies that address the immediate barriers associated with recruitment and retention, as well as strategies for the longer term. For example, leaders can begin to address the diversity issue by seeking new faculty members who have previous experience working with ethnically diverse individuals. They also need to actively follow up initial contacts with promising candidates. And forming a permanent committee for the recruitment and retention of education

students, faculty members, and staff members could be helpful. Application deadlines should remain open for faculty positions as long as possible in order to increase the chance of diversifying the faculty. Recruiters should actively seek nontraditional applicants, and faculty positions should be advertised in media that serve communities of color.

Once a qualified special educator has been located and employed at any level, a number of follow-up activities can be important in keeping that person on staff. Universities should conduct follow-up contacts. The hiring schools should make use of mentoring programs to see that each new faculty member is assigned a mentor who is a senior member of the faculty. Orientation should include such factors as networking assistance, extensive written materials, and workshops. Loan-forgiveness programs are an option for states to help retain highly qualified special education teachers, and school districts can provide relocation allowances to help attract new special educators.

These and a range of other strategies are necessary if the teaching force is to attract and retain the best individuals. Moreover, some of the special strategies mentioned above that can increase the diversity of the teaching force will need to be applied with real purpose if the diversity of the teaching force in special education is ever to approach the diversity of the student population it serves.

Our failure to address these issues, which *A Nation at Risk* alluded to a quarter of a century ago, will mean that the most vulnerable individuals, children with special needs, are the ones who are likely to suffer most.


1. See Erling E. Boe et al., *Productivity of Teacher Preparation Programs: Surplus or Shortage in Quantity and Quality of Degree Graduates, Data Analysis Report No. 1999-DAR2*, ERIC ED 434107.

2. Erling E. Boe et al., "The Shortage of Fully Certified Teachers in Special and General Education," *Teacher Education and Special Education*, vol. 21, 1998, p. 1.

3. Mary C. Esposito and Shirley Lal, "Responding to Special Education Teacher Shortages in Diverse Urban Settings: An Accelerated Alternative Credential Program," *Teacher Education and Special Education*, vol. 28, 2005, p. 100; and Lanna Andrews et al., "An Internship Model to Recruit, Train, and Retain Special Educators for Culturally Diverse Urban Classrooms: A Program Description," *Teacher Education and Special Education*, vol. 26, 2003, p. 74.

4. William L. Sanders and June Rivers, "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement," Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, University of Tennessee, 1996, available at www.coe.ohio-state.edu/ahoy/Sanders%20and%20Rivers.pdf.

5. Marci Kanstoroom and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *Better Teachers, Better Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Education Leaders Council and Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999), available at www.edexcellence.net.

6. June A. Gordon, "Why Students of Color Are Not Entering Teaching: Reflections from Minority Teachers," *Journal of Teacher Education*, November/December 1994, p. 346. 

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