

Research Evidence Against Dismantling the U.S. Education Department: How to Support Students with Disabilities

IMPLICATIONS OF LOOSENING FEDERAL OVERSIGHT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION

Fact Sheet

Key Takeaway

Research shows that the use of alternative teacher preparation routes can help reduce chronic shortages of special education staff, but success is dependent on the quality of the programs and the ability of school districts to improve workforce conditions to improve retention.

The Issue

States are confronting significant and persistent special education teacher shortages. To fill these gaps, many states invest in alternative teacher preparation routes to accelerate pathways for nontraditional pathways towards certification. These alternative pathways must still conform to federal law, which sets clear teacher licensure requirements through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The current federal policy context prioritizes state flexibility over federal oversight. If federal accountability mechanisms through IDEA diminish, states may face increased pressure to relax certification and licensure requirements to address special education workforce shortages. State policymakers may feel pressure to pursue waivers of federal requirements to help fill the special education teacher gap.

The 2024 [School Pulse Panel](#), a survey administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, found:

- 34% of public schools reported special education teaching vacancies ahead of the 2024-25 school year;
- 72% of public schools with vacancies in special education had difficulty filling the position with a fully certified teacher for the upcoming school year.

The Evidence

As states weigh strategies to address educator shortages and respond to shifting federal oversight, grounding policy decisions in rigorous evidence is more critical than ever. A review of the evidence finds:

- Candidates who complete longer, well-supervised student teaching experiences, work with effective cooperating teachers, and experience clear alignment between coursework and fieldwork tend to demonstrate stronger early-career performance and are more likely to remain in the profession.
- Many alternative routes compress or omit key elements of preparation, including limited coursework, minimal supervision, and little attention to evidence-based instruction, that the broader literature identifies as important for effectiveness. Many alternatively certified special education teachers feel that their programs did not equip them with the skills needed to meet classroom demands.
- Alternative pathways are associated with higher teacher attrition compared to traditional preparation.
- “Learn while you work” pathways, such as teacher residencies or apprenticeships, have mixed or limited evidence, but both show promise for addressing teacher shortfalls if programs are well-designed, well-implemented, and properly funded.
- Addressing working conditions is a critical component of retaining special education teachers. Research on special education teacher attrition consistently identifies working conditions—including role ambiguity, administrative support, resources, and workload—as stronger predictors of retention than teacher preparation characteristics.

Evidence-Based Policy Considerations for States

1. Protect core, evidence-based components of effective teacher preparation.
2. Prioritize high-quality clinical placements and cooperating teacher qualifications.
3. Ensure preparation programs teach and assess evidence-based practices (EBPs).
4. Maintain licensure safeguards for special education to comply with IDEA.
5. Consider apprenticeship models as experimental and mandate relevant data collection to establish effectiveness.
6. Ensure certification reforms are coupled with equally robust investments in working conditions.

Read the full research brief [here](#). Visit our [website](#) for more resources on strengthening support for students with disabilities, including a webinar recording, summaries of research evidence, and an FAQ on IDEA.