

**The Statewide
Study of
Special Education
Professionals'
Personnel Needs**

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Recognizing the need to examine special education personnel issues in Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) selected Region IV Education Service Center (ESC) to conduct a statewide study of personnel needs. The purpose of the study was to explore:

- The current status of special education personnel needs,
- Critical issues for maintaining an adequate supply of qualified special education professionals, and
- Professional development needs of special education professionals.

Study findings were to guide recommendations for state action to ensure an adequate supply of special education professionals in the future. Results also informed recommendations for the creation of an annual statewide system for collecting personnel needs data.

Over two years (1999-2000), Region IV ESC staff first gathered information through focus group discussions with special education stakeholders and then contracted with the Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) to conduct the study. In collaboration with special education stakeholders and the state education agency, researchers designed two surveys. In summer 2000, more than 300 special education directors across the state completed pilot pencil-and-paper surveys, and 184 participated in in-depth telephone surveys. Using information gained from the pilot study combined with additional stakeholder input, researchers revised the survey instruments and broadened the sample to include both special education and human resources directors.

Methodology

In May 2001, researchers distributed 608 surveys to all special education directors, shared service arrangement (SSA) administrators, and charter school administrators in the state. In addition, researchers distributed 1,201 surveys to all human resources directors and charter school administrators. A total of 263 individuals responded to the special education director survey, for a response rate of 44%. The human resources director survey had a similar response rate—491 directors (41%) responded. Overall, the sample tended to represent expected distributions of districts and SSAs across student enrollment size categories. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of objective and open-ended survey items were conducted. Selected responses from special education and human resources directors regarding special education teachers and other special education professionals are reported. With many survey items, responses are rank ordered from the highest to

lowest priority identified by directors. Major differences between single districts, SSAs, and charter schools are noted.

Major Findings

Special Education Positions

Special education teachers

- The majority of single districts and SSAs have special education teachers for children ages 3-5 (96% and 89%), students with severe disabilities (93% and 92%), and students with visual impairments (74% and 82%). SSAs (57%) are less likely than single districts (77%) to have teachers for students with emotional disturbance.
- Small percentages of single districts and SSAs employ specialized teachers for students with auditory impairments and limited English proficiency (12% to 36%).
- Charter schools most commonly identify “other” special education teachers (96%), such as non-specialized or generic special education teachers, resource teachers, multi-age teachers, and adapted physical education teachers.

Other special education professionals

- Almost all single districts and SSAs have speech language pathologists (SLPs), paraprofessionals, and educational diagnosticians (97% to 99%).
- Less common positions include occupational therapists, licensed specialists in school psychology (LSSPs), and physical therapists (57% to 77%). Orientation and mobility specialists, sign language interpreters, and various bilingual positions are infrequently mentioned.
- Charter schools most frequently employ educational diagnosticians (58%), SLPs (46%), bilingual diagnosticians (27%), and paraprofessionals (26%).

Special Education Vacancies

Evaluators calculated percentage vacancy rates as the number of FTE positions vacant divided by the total number of FTE positions. The following are important trends reported by special education directors.

The highest vacancy rates are for positions serving bilingual and limited English proficient (LEP) students. For special education teachers, the highest vacancy rates are for teachers of LEP students (11% to 18%). For other professionals, bilingual educational diagnosticians (10% to 12%) and bilingual SLPs (9% to 16%) have higher vacancy rates.

Vacancy rates are higher for specialized teaching positions. The highest teacher vacancy rates in single districts and SSAs are for specialized positions, including teachers of students with emotional disturbance (9%, 14%), severe disabilities (7%, 17%), and, for SSAs, auditory impairments (14%).

Vacancy rates in SSAs are generally higher than rates for single districts. Teacher vacancies, with one exception, and vacancies for other special education professionals are higher in SSAs when compared to single districts. Some differences are minor (rates 1% to 3% higher); however, large disparities exist for specialized teaching positions, including LEP, emotional disturbance, severe disabilities, and auditory impairments (rates 5% to 12% higher).

For other special education professionals, vacancy rates vary by position and local education agency (LEA) type. Vacancy rates were higher for educational diagnosticians, SLPs, LSSPs, and physical therapists, with shortages more critical in SSAs.

Charter schools have critical special education vacancies. The highest vacancy rates were for special education teachers (23%), educational diagnosticians (25%), and paraprofessionals (67%).

Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention

Most effective strategies for recruiting. Human resource directors most commonly reported the following as most effective in recruiting special education personnel:

- Post positions on the Internet and
- Contact colleges or universities.

Strategies were used more frequently to recruit special education teachers rather than other special education professionals.

Barriers to hiring. Human resources directors are more likely than special education directors to report no difficulties hiring personnel. The most commonly identified barriers to hiring special education teachers and other professionals include:

- Insufficient supply of candidates with required certification or licensure and
- Better salaries, benefits, or incentives in other LEAs.

Strategies used to address shortages. LEAs use a variety of methods when confronted with personnel shortages. Special education and human resources directors most commonly identified the following as strategies used to address personnel needs:

Single districts and SSAs

- Use more paraprofessionals,
- Contract for services,
- Use personnel working toward full credentials, and
- Use alternative certification program (ACP) interns.

Charter schools

- Contract for services,
- Use personnel working toward credentials,
- Use retired personnel, and
- Blend funding to create inclusive settings.

Barriers to retaining special education personnel. Special education and human resources directors most commonly identified the following as barriers to retaining special education teachers and other professionals.

Special education directors cite

- Burnout or job stress and
- Amount of paperwork.

Human resources directors cite

- Better salaries, benefits, and/or incentives in other LEAs;
- Better salaries, benefits, and/or incentives in other professional settings; and
- Geographic location of the LEA.

Incentives used to improve retention. Overall, fewer SSAs use incentives to retain qualified special education personnel compared with single districts. Incentives tend to vary by LEA type.

- Single districts most frequently fund professional development and support mentoring for inexperienced employees.
- SSAs fund professional development and improve salaries and benefits.
- Charter schools use incentives to improve salaries and benefits and fund professional development to address CEU requirements.

Destinations upon leaving. Human resources directors in single districts, SSAs, and charter schools report that when special education personnel leave a LEA, they typically:

- Take a special education position in another LEA,
- Take a non-special education position in same LEA (particularly single districts),
- Take a non-special education position in another LEA, or
- Make a family move or retire.

Recommendations to Improve Recruitment and Retention

Special education and human resources directors provided recommendations to policymakers for improving the recruitment and retention of qualified special education personnel. The most frequently cited suggestions centered around four areas.

Financial support. The greatest percentage of comments focused on financial support, including increased salaries, the provision of stipends, and increased or improved benefits. Respondents cited the need for higher salaries to improve recruitment and retention of qualified personnel, wages that are more competitive with private industry, and wages competitive with other LEAs. Others noted that higher salaries or stipends

might compensate for special education job stress. Respondents also believed salaries should reflect degree and certification requirements, experience, and job requirements in order to encourage new individuals to enter special education and qualified personnel to remain.

Non-financial support. Respondents suggested other support mechanisms, such as professional development, reduced class size or caseload limits, and professional recognition, to encourage recruitment and retention. Advice concerning professional development opportunities included the provision of funding and release time to enable more personnel to participate in training and the provision of mentoring for novice personnel. Reduced class size and case loads were recommended to alleviate the frustration, stress, and poor job satisfaction that cause teachers to leave special education. Other support issues included the need for recognition and improved perceptions of the value of special education personnel.

Paperwork and legal issues. Directors identified paperwork as a major barrier to recruitment and retention of special education personnel, and they believed the state should streamline the paperwork process to eliminate redundancies that cost instructional and planning time. Respondents also recommended changes in special education rules and regulations, including changes in discipline control, red tape, confusing laws, and ARD requirements. The threat of litigation was cited as a barrier to attracting and retaining special education personnel as well.

Teacher preparation and certification. Overall, fewer suggestions emerged for changes in teacher preparation and certification. General comments suggested a need to improve the quality of ACPs and traditional training programs, support ACPs as an alternative source of personnel, increase the number of state preservice programs, and provide special education training for all preservice teachers. A few respondents urged policymakers to review the current certification system, with most expressing a desire for more flexibility. Respondents also suggested financial support to encourage preservice students to enter the special education field and enable current educators to pursue certification or licensure in special education.

Professional Development Needs

Extent of professional development need. Special education directors responded to survey items related to professional development needs and priorities. Ratings for the extent of special education professional development need were on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (great extent), and ratings for single districts and SSAs revealed:

- Greater professional development need for first-year special education and general education teachers (3.5-3.6), ACP interns in special education (3.5), and special education teachers trained out of state (3.1-3.3);
- Moderate professional development need for experienced special education and general education teachers (2.7-3.0); and
- Generally lower professional development need for instructional support professionals and related service providers (2.8-3.1), except for paraprofessionals (3.3-3.4).

Professional development priorities for novice teachers. Findings for novice teachers, including first-year special education and general education teachers and ACP interns in special education, revealed both shared and unique needs.

Shared needs for all novice teachers include

- General knowledge and skills in teaching students with disabilities,
- Specialized knowledge and skills related to specific types of disabilities,
- Positive behavioral intervention strategies, and
- ARD committee process.

Unique needs for particular novice teachers include

- IEP development and TEKS scope and sequence (special ed., ACP interns) and
- Federal and state laws and regulations (general education).

Professional development priorities for experienced teachers. Results also revealed shared as well as distinctive needs for experienced special education and general education teachers.

Shared needs for all experienced teachers include

- Positive behavioral intervention strategies,
- Specialized knowledge and skills related to specific types of disabilities, and
- Federal and state laws and regulations.

Unique needs for experienced special education teachers include

- TEKS scope and sequence,
- IEP development, and
- ARD committee process (charter schools).

Unique needs for general education teachers include

- General knowledge and skills in teaching students with disabilities,
- ARD committee process,
- Knowledge of how to use special education professionals to support students, and
- IEP development (charter schools).

Professional development priorities for instructional support professionals. Special education directors selected the most important professional development areas for instructional support professionals, such as diagnosticians, LSSPs, and SLPs. Results revealed the following trends.

Shared needs for all instructional support professionals include

- Federal and state laws and regulations,
- Specialized knowledge and skills related to specific types of disabilities, and
- IEP development.

Unique needs by LEA type

- Single districts need strategies for providing services in inclusive settings, ARD committee process, and general knowledge and skills in teaching students with disabilities.
- SSAs need determination of student eligibility, TEKS scope and sequence, and assistive technology.
- Charter schools need determination of student eligibility, federal and state laws and regulations, and strategies for providing services in inclusive settings.

Professional development priorities for related service providers. Special education directors also selected the most important professional development areas for related service providers, such as occupational therapists and physical therapists. Results revealed the following shared and unique needs.

Shared needs for all related service providers include

- Federal and state laws and regulations,
- Strategies for providing services in inclusive settings,
- IEP development,
- ARD committee process,
- Specialized knowledge and skills related to specific types of disabilities, and
- General knowledge about the educational system.

Unique needs by LEA type

- SSAs need determination of student eligibility.
- Charter schools need federal and state laws and regulations and assistive technology.

Recommendations to Improve Professional Development

Special education and human resources directors provided recommendations to policymakers for improving special education professional development. Comments primarily centered around three areas: quality and scope of inservice professional development, nature and quality of teacher preparation, and important professional development topics.

Professional development designed for particular needs. Comments related to the design and delivery of professional development identified a need for training that was more practical, relevant, hands-on, and high quality. Directors identified a need for sessions facilitated by experienced special education teachers and other professionals currently in the field, and several encouraged ESCs to provide opportunities responsive to specific needs and interests.

Release time for professional development and collaboration. Directors identified a need for release time to enable personnel to attend professional development sessions and to collaborate; in many instances, special education personnel often must use their personal time to attend training during the school year. Directors also reported that special education and general education teachers need shared time for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Special education training for general educators. Directors suggested that training general educators in areas such as inclusion, modifications, rules and regulations, and general special education issues would enhance the efforts of the special education department. With the move to inclusion, general education teachers are now held accountable for the performance of all students.

Required special education training. Some directors suggested that an annual minimum number of hours of special education training be mandatory for all educators, while others noted that mandatory requirements should be instituted for special education personnel.

Teacher preparation programs. Directors cited the need for more accountability and standards in preparation programs. Other suggestions related to requiring special education training for all preservice teachers and instituting internship requirements to ensure preservice special education teachers and other professionals have “actual” classroom experience prior to entry into the special education field.

Professional development topics. The most frequently identified topics included instructional issues (including effective strategies, learning styles, and content area training), behavior and classroom management, laws and legal issues, inclusion issues (including modifications and transition issues), and information on specific disabilities.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

Recommendations and policy implications are based on study findings as well as input from special education stakeholders and Texas Education Agency staff.

Adequate Supply of Special Education Professionals

Ensuring an adequate supply of special education personnel depends on attracting a larger pool of candidates, offering financial incentives, improving job conditions, promoting professional rewards and recognition, and addressing certification issues.

Special education candidates

- Enhance recruitment of secondary students and career changers through exposure campaigns, information dissemination, and financial incentives, such as grants, scholarships, tuition reimbursement, and loan forgiveness
- Attract minority candidates to meet increasing bilingual demands by providing financial incentives and academic support
- Promote special education as a desirable career choice by exposing potential candidates to special education experiences, such as tutoring, service learning projects, or dual credit courses related to special education
- Conduct campaigns to disseminate educational and employment information through job fairs, the Internet, and college and university contacts

Financial incentives

- Seek legislative support to ensure teacher salaries are competitive and reflect degree and certification requirements

- Provide signing bonuses and annual stipends for educators serving in critical special education shortage areas
- Promote business partnerships, (e.g., home mortgage assistance) to provide financial support for teachers working in rural areas
- Develop stipend and bonus plans to recognize advanced degrees, additional certifications or credentials, and professional development achievements
- Offer attractive benefit packages, including comprehensive health care benefits, flexible spending accounts, and district-supported child care facilities

Job conditions

- Address legal complexities by supporting federal- and state-level initiatives to streamline rules and regulations
- Provide clerical support for targeted paperwork responsibilities
- Purchase computers and software management programs to streamline paperwork requirements and provide technology training to support use
- Provide adequate classroom space, textbooks, instructional materials, and equipment
- Support collaborative and individual planning time as part of the regular school schedule
- Provide mentoring programs for novice teachers and support peer coaching programs for experienced teachers
- Match assigned roles and responsibilities to teacher qualifications

Professional rewards and recognition

- Provide career-path options that enable teachers to move into leadership or master teacher positions
- Increase overt district and campus recognition and support for special education services and personnel

Certification issues

- Promote uniform state-to-state certification standards
- Develop different types of certifications for defined job roles and responsibilities (i.e., categorical, multicategorical, generic; preschool, elementary, and secondary)

Professional Development

Ensuring appropriately trained and knowledgeable special education personnel relies on altering teacher preparation programs, improving inservice professional development, and utilizing existing organizational structures to deliver training based on identified needs.

Teacher Preparation Programs

- Infuse field-based experiences into teacher preparation programs
- Increase university support for field-based internships and promote strategic partnerships with LEAs to build field-based experiences that prepare special education teachers for real-world classroom needs and demands

- Revise preservice course requirements to reflect current classroom needs for positive behavior interventions, specialized knowledge and skills, IEP development and evaluation, and the ARD committee process
- Explore implications of generic certification given the identified need for specialized training and skills and the highly complex, diverse needs of students with disabilities in Texas public schools
- Provide financial resources to assist in attracting a qualified pool of candidates
- Require special education training for general education candidates in research-based practices and collaboration to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings

Inservice professional development

- Provide funding for research-based professional development and require schools to document implementation results
- Provide personnel with financial support and incentives for professional development, additional special education certifications, or advanced degrees
- Ensure release time for professional development with adequate campus-level support and provide mentors to support implementation of new practices
- Design or provide access to traditional and non-traditional professional development activities to meet particular campus, classroom, or professional needs
- Develop collaborative partnerships with ESCs and higher education institutions to support distance learning and online courses in addition to traditional staff development programs
- Utilize existing TEA decentralized functions in a planning and capacity-building role to address identified professional development needs statewide (i.e., ESC capacity building to build capacity at the district, campus, and individual levels)

Professional development design and delivery

- Incorporate identified statewide professional development needs into the Texas Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) to ensure that the state has qualified and appropriately trained professionals and paraprofessionals
- Provide professional development opportunities based on identified priorities—specialized knowledge and skills, positive behavior intervention strategies, IEP development and evaluation, legal requirements including the ARD committee process, and general skills pertaining to educating students with disabilities
- Develop and implement statewide collaborative communication systems between higher education, TEA, and ESCs to disseminate information on research-based practices to LEAs

Annual Statewide Personnel Needs Data System

Maintaining an adequate supply of well-qualified special education personnel will require ongoing monitoring through an annual statewide survey of personnel needs.

Survey of personnel needs, shortages, and professional development needs

- Conduct an annual statewide survey of special education directors and human resources directors to gather information on personnel needs, to determine critical shortage areas, to assess current professional development needs, and to assess progress toward meeting previously identified needs
- Conduct the survey annually in February to establish continuity and improve response rates
- Design specific surveys for single districts, SSAs, and charter schools to capture the unique personnel configurations and resulting personnel needs for each LEA
- Include TEA decentralized functions in the needs assessment process
- Address professional development needs for paraprofessionals

Dissemination of survey results

- Provide timely feedback on survey findings and recommendations to survey respondents and stakeholders
- Provide data for the CSPD and TEA decentralized functions with leadership responsibility for identified needs

Stakeholder Group Representation

Alternative Certification Program of Texas A&M International

Abilene Christian University

Collaborative Professional Preparation Project in Visual Impairments

Continuing Advisory Committee (CAC)

Family to Family Network

Regional Day School Program (RDSPD)

State OT/PT Board Examiners

Texas Association of School Personnel Administrators (TASPA)

Texas Association of School Psychologists (TASP)

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP)

Texas Council for Exceptional Children (TCEC)

Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education (TCASE)

Texas Educational Diagnosticians Association (TEDA)

Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA)

Texas School Alliance

Texas Speech and Hearing Association (TSHA)