



# WHERE ARE THE SPECIAL EDUCATORS?

By: Katherine Taylor

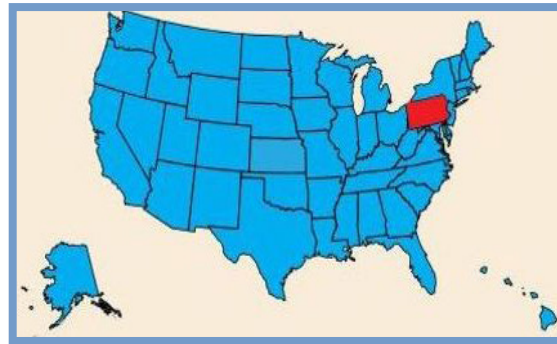
## Key Background:

For many years, students with disabilities were given no rights at all. In 1918, compulsory education laws were passed that required children to attend school, not accounting for special needs students. By 1933, advocacy groups were being formed and in 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* laid the educational foundations for special needs students. In 1965, Congress created a Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. In 1970, what is now the Individuals with Disabilities Act was passed, mandating that special needs students are entitled to a Free Appropriate Education.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, focusing on importance of teacher quality and quantity, including in special education classes.<sup>2</sup>

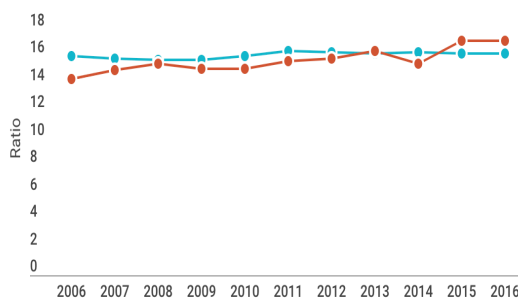
## The Problem?

Special Education turnover is **high**, teachers are leaving, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract new teachers. This results in underqualified or uncertified teachers, which does not align with policy.

- 49 out of 50 states have special educator shortages.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2007, of about 300,000 positions, 33,000 were filled by uncertified teachers and 6,000 were left vacant.<sup>4</sup> 31% of public schools found it difficult to fill the vacancies.<sup>5</sup>



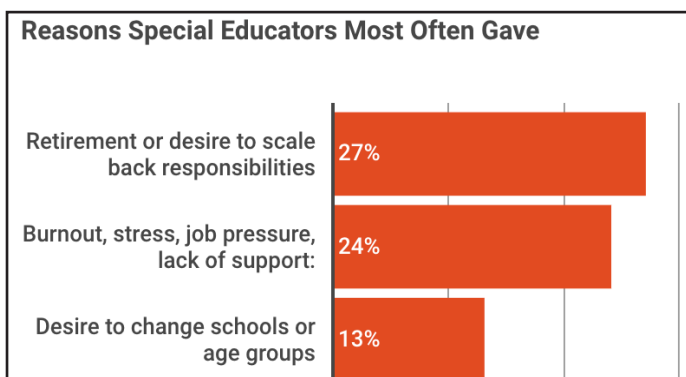
Via <https://www.usatoday.com/story/college/2015/12/14/special-education-teacher-shortage-creates-opportunity-for-students/7409427>



- there is a 17:1 student to special educator ratio.<sup>6</sup>
- 12.3% of 13.6 million special educators are not certified. If the average case load is 16 students, 800,000 students are

served by uncertified teachers<sup>8</sup>.

- About 9.3% of special educators leave after their first year and 7.4% move to general education.<sup>9</sup>



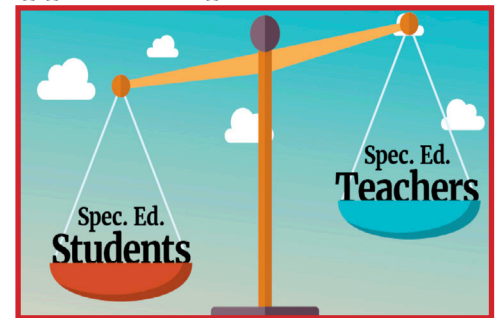
Via <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/01/24/why-special-educators-really-leave-the-classroom.html>

“When facing these shortages, principals often resort to filling special education vacancies with underprepared teachers. This could mean hiring a teacher certified in a field other than special education, an intern with just a few weeks of training, or—in the most extreme cases—a teacher on an emergency credential who has no training whatsoever.”<sup>7</sup>

## WHY DOES

## IT MATTER?

This directly affects teacher preparedness and attraction to the profession. Teachers are **not adequately prepared** if they believe their job does not involve real teaching and they are **not being attracted to the field, and motivated to remain in the field**. This exhibits the unawareness of teaching candidates, and current teachers, and speaks for the failure of University programs in properly educating these candidates. They also convey the failure of the education system to support and provide for future and current teachers.



## Misconceptions:

- It is assumed by many going into the field that it is a low profile job and does not involve any real teaching.<sup>13</sup>
- Others think that having this job would be a waste of time, energy, resources, and intelligence as a university graduate.<sup>14</sup>

This contributes to the already existing shortage of special educators due to the reasons above, and leaves schools short-handed, forcing them to fill vacant spots with unqualified candidates. As a result, classroom quality and experience is suffering, **resulting in an absence of an equitable education for all**.

## Potential Solutions?

- The first step is to forge collaborative projects between the U.S. Department of Education and state governments that addresses teacher pay and working conditions to develop a national system to monitor and address identified needs in the teacher labor market.<sup>15</sup> This will lay the foundational policy to then:

To **decrease** the shortage; the pool of special educator candidates needs to be **increased**, **mentoring and support need to be provided** to special educators through **proactive leadership**, and there needs to be **more opportunities for professional development**.



Via: Google Images

- » Provide more opportunities for collaboration between all staff.<sup>16</sup>
- » Provide clear expectations.<sup>17</sup>
- » Support for high-quality programs to prepare highly-qualified educators.<sup>18</sup>
- » Improve funding- focusing on urban and rural areas so there is sufficient supply across the United States.<sup>19</sup>

## Considerations:

Critics could bring attention to the potential cons and argue that some of the causes of special educator attrition are uncontrollable and therefore no policy will change it.<sup>20</sup> In regard to certification of educators, they could argue that the preparedness and awareness of educators is not guaranteed by a certification. Finally, they could argue that it is not realistic to improve widespread funding or to fund improvement programs.

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