



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
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George Mason University®

Addressing Special Education Teacher Shortages

in Virginia

Research Brief

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Introduction

Teachers are the most important in-school determinant of student success,¹ but **shortages threaten the promise of effective public education, particularly for students most in need of support.**² Special education reports high teacher shortages, manifested in vacant positions and the employment of undercertified teachers. In 2023-24, almost every state reported a shortage of special education teachers (SETs).³ Special education shortages and stop-gap measures to alleviate them translate into larger caseloads for existing teachers, lower quality of instruction, and increased challenges in meeting federal requirements for providing free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities.

This brief summarizes the latest research on the causes of SET shortages as well as on evidence-based solutions, with a focus on solutions that local school division leaders can use to help address shortages in their communities.

In 2023-24, almost every state, including Virginia, reported a shortage of special education teachers (SETs).³



Background

The Importance of Qualified Special Education Teachers

Special education teaching requires specialized skill sets distinct from general education. SETs are trained to develop individualized education programs (IEPs), implement behavior intervention plans, and use specialized instructional strategies to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities.^{iv} There is an existing achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.^v This gap is likely to widen if special education teacher shortages are not addressed. SET shortages are more extreme in low-income rural and urban areas—communities that can least afford to cope with reduced instructional quality.^{vi} The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to provide students with disabilities access to a free and appropriate public education in their least restrictive environment. Additionally, IDEA mandates highly qualified teachers to implement effective instruction. Shortages in paraprofessionals and related service personnel, such as speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists, further compound the issue.

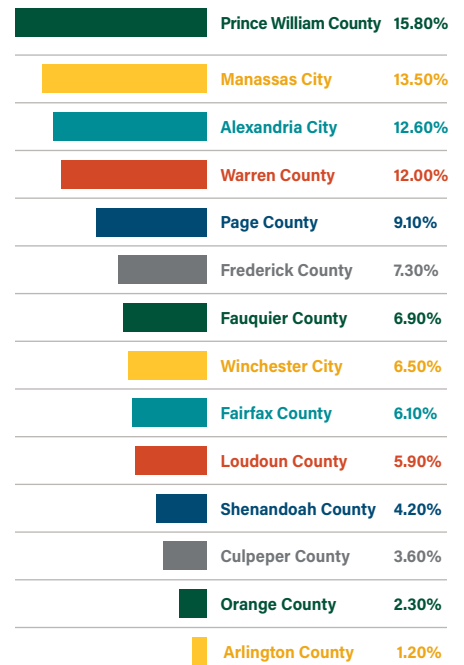


Special Education Teacher Shortages in Virginia

In Virginia, 4.5% of all teaching positions were vacant at the start of the 2023-24 school year, up from less than 1% prior to the pandemic.^{vii} The figure was even higher — 6.1% — for special education positions (amounting to 381 unfilled SET positions), with some divisions much higher still (see Figure 1).

Unfilled positions are only one facet of the SET shortage: “Divisions are having difficulty not only hiring and retaining enough teachers but are also having difficulty finding and keeping enough qualified teachers.”^{viii} The threat of unfilled SET positions results in the employment of out-of-field, not-yet-certified, or provisionally certified teachers who have not completed a traditional education preparation program, which is particularly prevalent and problematic in special education. In a recent survey, 46% of VA school divisions indicated that provisionally licensed teachers generally are inadequately prepared, whereas only 3% voiced similar concerns about teachers from traditional education programs.^{ix} These shortages translate into real-world impacts on students who require special education services and their families.

Figure 1:
Percent of SET Positions Unfilled by Division, 2023-24
(Virginia Region 4)



Districts with No Vacant SET Positions:

- Clarke County
- Falls Church City
- Manassas Park City
- Madison County
- Rappahannock County

Causes Of Special Education Shortages

The fundamental cause of teacher shortages is the inadequate supply of qualified teachers to meet the demand.^x Demand increased in recent decades as more students are now identified as in need of special education services.^{xi} Meanwhile, traditional education preparation programs are graduating fewer special education teachers.^{xii} High attrition rates exacerbate this deficit. Attrition can occur for various reasons, including retirement, but job-related factors also drive teachers away, especially in their first few years. In a recent survey, nearly half of responding teachers who left positions in Virginia public schools left because they were unhappy being a teacher. Of those, 75% cited inadequate support for teachers, 70% reported the workload was too high, 64% noted the school leadership was ineffective, and 55% mentioned an insufficient salary.^{xiii} Researchers across the U.S. have found similar job-related factors affecting attrition.^{xiv}



Job-Related Factors Contributing to Attrition



Job Attractiveness - Societal views on special education and compensation.



Burnout - Driven by student age, special education type (particularly emotional and behavioral disorders), role ambiguity, role conflict, and lack of administrative support.^{xv}



Workload and Role Ambiguity - Unique administrative responsibilities like scheduling IEP meetings, writing IEPs, tracking progress toward IEP goals, communicating progress to families, and managing and implementing behavior intervention plans.



Inadequate Pay - Particularly given the extra hours required to meet workload demands.^{xvi}



Insufficient Administrative Support - Especially in working with families, developing IEPs, and managing student behavior.^{xvii}

Research-Based Solutions

Attracting Special Education Teachers

Grow-Your-Own programs are successful in transitioning paraprofessionals, or others with education experience, into SET roles. These programs provide direct and indirect support, such as tuition assistance, textbooks, stipends, virtual support, and recruitment sessions. Florida successfully implemented a special education Grow-Your-Own initiative that could serve as a model for other states.^{xxviii} Grow-Your-Own programs can also seek to cultivate an interest in teaching in high-school students and can have positive impacts on students' understanding about the financial benefits of teaching, counter to the common perception of teaching as a low-wage profession.^{xxix} A notable example is the Teachers for Tomorrow (TfT) program, which aims to foster interest in teachers to high school juniors and seniors and introduce them to the fundamentals of the profession.^{xxx} Fairfax County Public Schools currently provides this course at certain high schools.^{xxxi}

Paid residencies or registered apprenticeship programs offer another effective pathway into special education teaching. These programs, such as the residency program at Virginia Commonwealth University,^{xxxii} provide aspiring special education and other teachers with paid clinical experience, allowing them to gain practical skills while completing their education. With the help of state funds and bolstered by strong division-university partnerships, **teacher apprenticeship programs** targeting SETs are beginning in divisions across Virginia, including in Prince William County Schools.^{xxxiii}

Supports for provisional licensees can play an important role. Divisions that out of necessity are employing increasing numbers of not-yet-certified teachers can improve the quality and effectiveness of alternative licensure routes and increase teacher retention by funding high-quality preparation programs for provisional licensees, offering opportunities for supervised experiential learning, and implementing rigorous induction programs, including mentors.^{xxxiv} Effective programs incorporate field experiences or supervised clinical practice,^{xxxv} meaning teachers have the opportunity to practice delivering instruction in a low-stakes and supervised environment with timely feedback from an expert teacher or supervisor.^{xxxvi}

Financial Incentives and Loan Forgiveness can make a difference. Financial incentives such as differential salaries or starting bonuses for SETs can be expensive but may pay off in the long run.^{xxxvii} Helping both applicants and returning teachers take better advantage of existing federal loan forgiveness programs through awareness campaigns and application assistance may be an affordable alternative.

Retaining Special Education Teachers

Positive school climates, effective mentorship programs, school-university partnerships, and strong administrative support are crucial factors that contribute to teacher retention. Improving working conditions by providing more relevant professional learning experiences, increasing uninterrupted planning time, and enhancing support systems can mitigate burnout. The interaction of environmental factors such as support, positive school climates, and satisfactory working conditions significantly influences SETs' decisions to remain in the profession, regardless of their years of experience.^{xxxviii}

Effective mentorship provides comprehensive support, helping new SETs integrate into the profession and persist. School/division-university partnerships can facilitate professional development, clinical experiences, and coursework, strengthening preparation and retention.^{xxxix}

Increasing administrative and collegial support is another crucial strategy for improving retention.^{xxx} Listening to and resolving SET concerns, ensuring administrators are well-versed in special education policies and procedures, and providing emotional and instrumental support may significantly reduce attrition rates.

Reducing workload, particularly non-instructional duties, is also essential. Large caseload sizes and the complexity of student needs can contribute to negative working conditions and increase attrition rates.^{xxxi} Providing teachers with leadership opportunities and professional growth can also enhance retention, as SETs who feel valued and supported are more likely to remain in the profession.

Financial incentives such as retention bonuses have proven effective. Studies found that a \$1,800 annual bonus program over a three-year period resulted in a one-sixth reduction in turnover rates among SETs^{xxxii} and that teachers eligible for a one-time \$1200 bonus had a 32.5% lower probability of leaving than other teachers.^{xxxiii} In Hawaii, the proportion of vacant SET positions or positions filled by uncertified SETs fell by 35% after a \$10,000 one-time bonus for SETs.^{xxxiv}

Practical Recommendations to Implement Now



Implement strong mentorship programs



Use available funds for loan forgiveness, hiring and retention bonuses, and more



Recruit paraprofessionals to become SETs



Ensure school leaders are well-versed in special education



Leverage federal Teacher Quality Partnerships (TQP) grants to co-create supervised clinical experiences, PD programs and more with university partners



Promote teaching as a respectable and accessible profession to high school students



Hire additional administrative support for SETs and create teacher schedules with greater flexibility

Resources

CEEDAR Center (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform):

<https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/>

National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services:

<https://specialedshortages.org>

Journal of Special Education Preparation- Creating New Pathways into the Profession:

<https://openjournals.bsu.edu/JOSEP/issue/view/334>

Journal of Special Education Preparation- Strengthening Existing Pathways into the Profession:

<https://openjournals.bsu.edu/JOSEP/issue/view/331>

If your school or district is interested in adopting or adapting one of the interventions presented, or if your organization has implemented the intervention discussed without realizing the expected benefits, EdPolicyForward welcomes the opportunity to problem solve collaboratively. Please reach out to us at epf@gmu.edu.

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