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Briefing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights
On the impact of teacher shortages on students with disabilities
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Introduction

Chair Garza, Vice Chair Nourse, and Members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to participate on this panel and for your attention to a topic that has been the focus of my professional career and that I believe is of critical importance.

I am Amanda Levin Mazin, Senior Lecturer and Practicum Coordinator of the Programs in Special Education: Intellectual Disability/Autism at Teachers College, Columbia University. My role as a teacher educator, preparing special education teachers, began 20 years ago. Prior to this work, I was a classroom teacher in Washington Heights, NY, in a self-contained classroom, in a self-contained school for students with complex autism. I am a certified special education teacher in New York and a Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the Doctoral Level. For the past 20 years, my scholarship and practice has focused on preparing special education teachers in the knowledge and skills needed to increase self-efficacy and decrease teacher burnout. This task has become increasingly more challenging after COVID. A confluence of factors, including devaluing the teaching profession, have led to a decrease in the number of candidates in preparation programs and the number of special education teachers in classrooms. This has significantly impacted access to referral and special education services for students with disabilities.



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The purpose of this brief is to examine how teacher shortages, exacerbated by the 2020 pandemic, have impacted the quality of education received by students with disabilities. This brief will be divided into sections: teacher shortage and under certified teachers; impact of COVID on teaching students with disabilities; summary of the issues; and recommendations. Each section will use current research and trends to support the claim that teacher shortages in special education have a devastating effect on students with disabilities in schools. The lack of qualified, certified, and prepared special education teachers in schools teaching students with disabilities, and the direct impact this has on learning will be presented by examining the factors contributing to attracting and retaining special education teachers.

Teacher Shortage and Under Certified Teachers

Interest in teaching as a career is on the decline and has dropped nearly 40% since 2010 (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). As of July 2024, there were 589,655 pre-service teachers in initial certification preparation programs nationwide (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). In 2023, K-12 teachers were earning an average of \$68,000 a year, 8 percent less than the average for all U.S. workers (Nezaj, 2024). In the U.S., 17% of teachers hold a second job and 36% are paying off student loans (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Teaching conditions in the U.S are rooted in factory-model school structures designed a century ago, including heavy workloads; school schedules offering little time for relationship building with students and families or for collaboration with other teachers; standardized curriculum that fails to meet the needs of diverse learners; extensive testing; and the hiring of teachers with little training who come and go quickly, adding to staff instability and depressing student achievement (Darling-Hammond, DiNapoli & Kini, 2023). High attrition rates relate to dissatisfaction with teaching, with contributing

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variables ranging from salaries and working conditions to lack of decision-making input. Special education teachers' already unmanageable workloads have increased since COVID (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; Doan et al., 2022), including paperwork related to the education of students with identified disabilities, demands which are estimated to have at least doubled (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). While all teachers' workload is constituted in part by administrative paperwork, special educators in particular experience stress and burnout related to these demands (Jones et al., 2022; Kartika et al., 2017). This is especially problematic because researchers have found that the problems of burnout, turnover, and attrition are more pressing among special education teachers than their general education counterparts (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Many teachers report there is a never-ending pile of paperwork, from Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to report cards and evaluations (Bettini et al., 2023). Attrition is a huge driver of teacher shortages, as roughly 9 of 10 teachers hired each year are replacing colleagues who left, most for reasons other than retirement (Nezaj, 2024). At this rate, there is no way to catch up. The shortages will remain. By way of example, I worked closely with a special education teacher in New Jersey who decided to leave teaching after many years to be an eyelash technician because she made more money and had less hassle. State initiatives, seemingly coming from a good place, perpetuate the shortage. New York State recently passed legislation, signed by Governor Kathy Hochul in September 2022, that established new, smaller class size limits for kindergarten through 12th grade. While this is needed, to comply with the new requirements, the NYC Department of Education (DOE) would need to hire almost 17,700 teachers over the five years of the bill's implementation (Konrad & Roy, 2023). There just aren't enough teachers in the pipeline to meet this need. Initiatives aimed at providing more

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learning opportunities for students with disabilities cannot be fulfilled because most, if not all, rely on increasing the number of special education teachers.

Ninety-eight percent of the nation's school districts report special education teacher shortages (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). In 2020–21, more than one third (34%) of newly entering teachers were not certified for their assignments—a reflection of shortages, since state rules allow such teachers to be hired only if fully qualified individuals cannot be found (Darling-Hammond, DiNapoli & Kini, 2023). Thirty states plus the District of Columbia had published data on vacancies, with 41,920 unfilled teacher positions, representing about 1 in 8 of all teaching positions nationally (Tan, Arellano & Patrick, 2024). Under certified and newly certified teachers are often placed in classrooms with students with disabilities. The lack of preparation is perpetuating the already visible issues in access to education for all students, whereas a highly qualified teacher should be the baseline and not the exception.

Teacher self-efficacy is correlated with teacher effectiveness, meaning teachers who report feeling prepared are more likely to be prepared (Darling-Hammond, Chung, Frelow, 2002; Lee et al., 2012). Teachers' higher levels of self- and collective efficacy are positively associated with student achievement and teachers' enhanced wellbeing and commitment to their profession (Lauermann & Butler, 2021; Ryan & Hendry, 2022).

Higher teacher efficacy, in turn, has been linked to a series of positive outcomes including (a) increased student achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Hoy, 2000; Ross & Bruce, 2007), (b) heightened student self-efficacy (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988), (c) higher teacher persistence and motivation (Bandura, 1997), and (d) stronger teacher beliefs in inclusive practices (Soodak & Podell, 1993). Teachers' sense of



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preparedness is also related to teachers' long-term commitment to the field. Teachers who completed less extensive preparation programs reported a lower sense of preparedness and expressed less commitment to remain in the education field (Boe et al., 2007).

Research shows that special education teacher certification is directly connected to the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. Student teaching experiences of teacher candidates in particular can be linked to the achievement of their students after they enter the workforce (Theobald et al., 2021). Preparation and mentoring prior to entering the profession has an impact. To be a certified teacher, candidates must complete an approved and accredited preparation program and pass a series of competency exams. This process matters. It matters for the professionalization of teaching and the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. Teachers are widely regarded as the most important influences on student's academic development.

Impact of COVID on Teaching Students with Disabilities

The impact of COVID on prek-12 schools was devastating. Quarantines and the intense stresses created by the pandemic drained teaching staff. In the U.S., the special education teacher shortage has been well recognized by the special education research community and state and local education agencies as one issue that negatively affects outcomes for special education students (García & Weiss, 2020; CEEDAR Center, 2020). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has served to intensify the already critical special education teacher shortage. Exodus from the classroom has changed the complexion of teaching and exacerbated the already dire need for more qualified special education teachers. The inequalities in access to quality education were



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spotlighted. This was even more so for students with disabilities, who could not access supplemental support, modified curriculum, and adaptive technologies guaranteed under their IEPs. The increased special education teacher attrition, exacerbated by COVID-19, directly threatens equitable learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Monin et al., 2021).

Teachers of students with disabilities struggled to implement IEPs and experienced heightened levels of generalized anxiety disorder and depression during the pandemic (Cormier et al., 2021). Similarly, in addition to this stressful situation experienced by teachers in particular, the stress symptomatology brought on by the pandemic itself has to be considered. Teachers were suffering significant levels of depression, anxiety, and stress during this pandemic (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Moreover, families of students with disabilities scrambled to support their children's learning and also experienced higher rates of stress (Brown et al., 2020). In addition, students with disabilities faced an unexpected change in their routines that increased challenging behavior and anxiety, cumulatively disrupting their education (Hurwitz, Garman McClaine & Carlock, 2021; Latzer, Leitner & Karniele-Miller, 2021).

The skills of special education teachers are vast, but COVID and the subsequent barriers to access, made teaching impossible. The focus of preparation and practice is unique for special education teachers. Special education teachers are essentially magicians, taking a standardized curriculum and creating accessible goals is nothing short of magic. This was taken away, focus was no longer placed on individual instruction, access to the curriculum, or skill development. While this switch may have been necessary, the blame for inadequacy was unfairly placed on teachers.



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Students with disabilities have inherent rights, including that of FAPE, a free and appropriate public education. This has been guaranteed since November 29, 1975, when President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142; US DOE, 2020). now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). In adopting this landmark civil rights measure, Congress opened public school doors for millions of children with disabilities and laid the foundation of the country's commitment to ensuring that children with disabilities have opportunities to develop their talents, share their gifts, and contribute to their communities. While the difficulties brought on by COVID have been challenging for all children and their families, these challenges may be greater for 14% of U.S. public school students (US DOE, 2023) with disabilities who are particularly reliant upon the special education services mandated by IDEA (Sonnenschein et al., 2019; Hill, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Children with disabilities were less likely to be officially diagnosed during the pandemic (and become eligible for services) (Barnett & Jung, 2021). Even for children who were identified as needing special education services, they were less likely to receive them or even receive their IEP than prior to COVID (Murphy et al., 2021).

At the end of the 2024 school year, across all grade levels, researchers estimated that the average student will require the equivalent of 4.8 months of additional schooling to catch up to pre-COVID levels in reading and 4.4 months in math (Lewis & Dworkin, 2024). This is for learners who were anticipated to be on grade level. Imagine the amplified impact for students with disabilities. Achievement disparities that predate the pandemic have been starkly exacerbated over the last four years, and data show that marginalized students need much more support to get back on track.

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The impact of COVID on teaching and learning is deeply rooted in special education teacher shortages and interruption of special education services. The short and long term effects of these issues will be felt in schools for a long time.

Summary of the Issues

The largest issue is a lack of qualified, certified, and prepared special education teachers in schools teaching students with disabilities. Contributing to this issue are factors such as lack of interest in education, low pay, lack of respect for the work of special education teachers, a focus on administrative duties, all leading to low self-efficacy and burnout resulting in higher teacher turnover.

Teacher issues are student issues. Higher class size, violations of FAPE and IEPs, underdiagnosis, and delayed classification are directly related to the lack of special education teachers. More specifically, issues with curriculum, academic supports, accommodations, and modifications can be attributed to special education teacher shortages resulting in students with disabilities not getting the services they are entitled to by law.

Recommendations

Special education teacher shortages are a pervasive issue, exacerbated by decreased professionalization, underpayment, and the mental health effects of COVID. Learning loss is significant, especially for students with intersecting, oppressed identities (Annamma & Morrison, 2018), students with disabilities who are also students of color, experience poverty, and/or who do not speak English as their first language. The question, years after school closures, a return to perceived normalcy, and with the long



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term impacts of COVID, is what can be done? The obvious answer is funding. Support for initiatives to directly address areas of recruitment, retention, and respect for teachers would change the landscape of quality special education. This is not to say that these opportunities don't exist, because they do on a small scale. To make a meaningful difference in the landscape of teacher education and positive outcomes for students with disabilities, there needs to be a substantial commitment to teaching and schools. This starts with funding teacher preparation. Teachers don't enter the classroom for the money. It is widely known that teachers are underpaid. It is the associated undervaluing of the teaching profession when pay is so low. What is the worth of a special education teacher? What is the worth of a special education teacher to the millions of children with disabilities who the country committed to ensuring have opportunities to develop their talents, share their gifts, and contribute to their communities. Quality special education teacher preparation and support in the classroom can change outcomes for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

(1) Recruitment

- (a) Scale up and replicate financial support and incentives for pre-service special education teacher preparation programs (e.g. Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP); Empire State Residencies; Attract, Prepare, Retrain, OSEP, 2020).

(2) Collaborative and Innovative Preservice Preparation

- (a) Creating communities of practice between special education and other teaching fields to promote professional learning communities to highlight



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the value of special education (Mazin, 2017; Ashley et al., 2024; Gribovskaya et al., 2024; Mazin, 2024)

(b) New Teaching Induction Support (Mazin & Riccio, 2024; Mazin & Riccio, 2023)

(c) Inservice mentoring

(d) Meaningful Continuing Education (Professional Development Opportunities)

(e) Professional Learning Communities (Mazin & Riccio, 2024; Mazin & Riccio, 2023)

(3) Support for Teachers Mental Health

(a) Improving the emotional state of teachers in the post-pandemic era has a direct impact on society, as it would directly influence the quality of education and the emotional state of students and future generations (Mondragon et al., 2023). Increasing teacher self-efficacy improves student outcomes.

Respectively Submitted,

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