

FROM *the*
EDITOR

**Strengthening Existing
Pathways in Special Education
Teacher Preparation:
An Introduction from
the Guest Editor**

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All students deserve great teachers. Students with the most intensive needs, such as students with disabilities, need great teachers. Yet we do not have enough great teachers to meet the needs of every student with a disability. Since 1990, the U.S. Department of Education has published the national listing of teacher shortage areas (found here tsa.ed.gov), and special education has chronically topped the charts. In fact, since the historic passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (also known as Public Law 94-142), the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004), which mandates access to a free and appropriate public education for all student with disabilities, the demand for special education teachers has outpaced the supply (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Year after year, almost every state reports a shortage of special education teachers (Department of Education, 2021).

To over simplify the exceedingly complex special education teacher shortage, we are falling short on attracting enough special education teacher candidates, we are falling short on preparing special education teacher candidates in a manner that leads to profession-readiness, and we are falling short on retaining the existing workforce. In response, many states have changed existing policies in an attempt to remove perceived barriers to the profession. Relaxing licensure requirements may create short term solutions by ensuring an adult is in every classroom, but the ‘warm body’ approach only exacerbates long-term complications. Placing fully-prepared special education teachers in classrooms results in teachers who are more likely to stay

in the profession, are better equipped to implement evidence-based and high leverage practices, and are able to positively influence academic achievement for students with disabilities (Ondrasek et al., 2020). On the contrary, placing underprepared or unprepared special education teachers with a provisional license, emergency license, or no license in high needs classrooms results in attrition rates that are two to three times higher and can lead to negative effects on student achievement (Podolsky et al., 2016). In fact, the difference between students who learn from great teachers and students who learn from ineffective teachers is around one grade-level equivalent in annual achievement growth each year (Hanushek, 2011; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006).

Unfortunately, ‘lowering the bar’ on special education teacher preparation requirements is becoming common practice. For example, in California, more than one in every five teachers in special education schools left their positions between 2015 and 2016 and in the following academic year (2016-2017), two out of every three special education teachers who entered the field did so without having completed a preparation program (Ondrasek et al., 2020). In Nebraska and Pennsylvania, hiring agencies are offering undergraduate students long-term substitute teaching positions to fill vacant classrooms (Iasevoli, 2018). Oklahoma and Utah are among the states hiring individuals with any college degree and a passing grade on a subject matter exam (Grier et al., 2017). The New York Board of Regents removed the literacy exam requirement for prospective teachers because too many people were failing it (Taylor, 2017), and one large school district in Arizona is no longer requiring formal

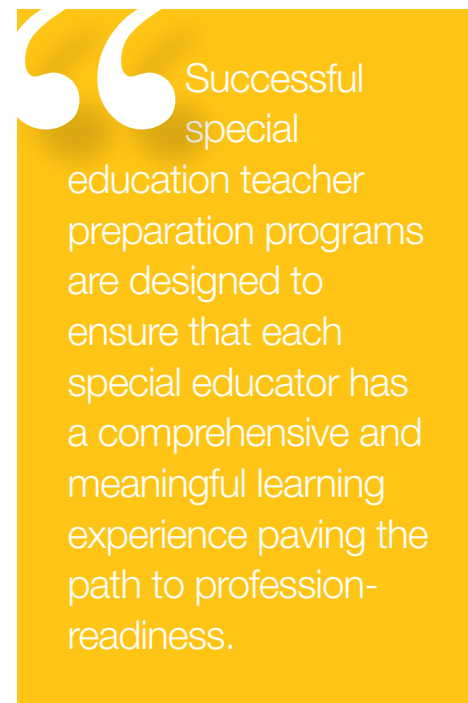
teacher training and is instead hiring parents (Strauss, 2017). Alabama “adjunct instructors” can teach secondary education with as little as a high school diploma and a clear background check (Klass, 2016). Despite the every-growing list of states moving away from profession-ready preparation, we know formal preparation is closely associated with teacher retention and student success (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

Teacher and P-12 student success can be achieved when special education teacher candidates are fully prepared in a way that leads to profession-readiness. Successful special education teacher preparation programs are designed to ensure that each special educator has a comprehensive and meaningful learning experience paving the path to profession-readiness. Such preparation results in special educators who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to plan and deliver specialized instruction, develop and implement individualized education programs (IEPs), assess and monitor student progress, provide behavior support, collaborate with colleagues, families, and leadership, advocate for students, and engage in ongoing professional development and reflection. Highly impactful special education teacher preparation programs equip teacher candidates with the ability to adapt to student needs in-the-moment by drawing upon prior knowledge and acquired experience. Such level of skill is acquired through practice-based learning opportunities that are supported by modeling, feedback, and reflection and scaffolded from simple to more complex over time (Leko et al., in press; Nagro, 2022). It is no surprise that teachers who complete teacher educa-

tion programs feel significantly better equipped across most dimensions of teaching when compared to underprepared teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Jang & Horn, 2017), but not all preparation programs are designed equally.

The criticism has been special education teacher preparation is scattered, disjointed, and lacking in consistent opportunities for practice (Leko et al., 2015; Nagro et al., 2022; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017). Teacher candidates that graduate from less successful teacher preparation programs feel shocked by the realities of the field further perpetuating the cycle of teacher turnover and warm-body syndrome solutions. Focusing on any one aspect of attracting, preparing, and retaining special educators will not provide a comprehensive solution to systemic problem, but given the complexity of this crisis, finding concrete solutions for any one area can lead to lasting positive change. In this two-part special issue, we aim to share concrete solutions for individual special education teacher educators as well as special education teacher preparation programs more collectively as we work towards our field’s most pressing issue, the special education teacher shortage. Specifically, the first part of this two-part series will focus on strengthening existing pathways into the profession. The second part of this series will focus on creating new pathways into the profession. Collectively, we hope to exemplify how special education teacher educators can mitigate the special education teacher shortage from our perch.

First, Rock and her co-authors present a systems-thinking framework to support an intentional shift in perspectives and approaches to addressing the chronic spe-



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Sarah A. Nagro, Ed.D. is an associate professor of special education at George Mason University where her research focuses on preparing profession-ready teachers through meaningful field-based experiences that emphasize reflection, video analysis, self-evaluation, and professional buy-in. Sarah is interested in understanding how to help teacher candidates and novice teachers find success when educating students with disabilities with the goal of retaining high quality professionals.

cial education teacher shortage without inadvertently replicating or intensifying the problem in their article titled, “Ameliorating the Special Education Teacher Crisis: Systems Thinking and Innovative Approaches.” The framework is centered around a collective ‘big idea’ with a focus on shared responsibilities within the systems of teacher preparation, districts and schools, and society. Rock and team describe action steps and a four-stage process for engaging in systems thinking. Additionally, innovative strategies and first-hand examples of solutions from within education and other professions are shared as recommendations for strengthening pathways to the profession.

Second, O’Brien and her co-authors share their first-hand experiences as teacher educators designing an undergraduate special education teacher licensure program by redesigning a graduate-level licensure program in their article titled, “An Undergraduate Program to Address the Teacher Shortage: What We Thought We Knew.” The article describes their enlightening program revision activities, including building an advisory board, conducting a needs assessment, developing a curriculum map, creating an action plan, and reviewing ongoing activities for continuous improvement. O’Brien and her team explain the broader implications of using data-based program revisions, systematic prioritization through a Q-Sort Activity, and program review activities that other programs might follow to make program improvements as we strive for preparing profession-ready special educators and addressing the special education teacher shortage.

Third, Sallese and her co-authors propose five professional dispositions that correspond with profession-readiness and special educator success that can be targeted during formal preparation. The authors go on to explain how the development of such dispositions can

be achieved through a teacher preparation-multi-tiered system of supports (TP-MTSS) in their article titled, “Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Teacher Preparation: A Framework to Attract, Retain, and Prepare Special Educators.” The article highlights the incorporation of an MTSS framework in an undergraduate special education teacher preparation program, including interventions, data-based decisions, and explicit instruction of core competencies, and suggests that expanding the MTSS framework into higher education can be an innovative approach for attracting, retaining, and preparing profession-ready special educators.

Fourth, Massey and Strong take a deep dive into the promising practices for adopting a blended learning model within special education teacher preparation practices in their article titled, “Innovative Approaches for Preparing Special Education Preservice Teachers.” In this article, Massey and Strong propose a flipped-classroom model that is supported through instructional technology. These authors detail many online instructional resources for (a) creating and facilitating asynchronous assignments, (b) designing student-centered, collaborative, and interactive learning opportunities, and (c) supporting practice-based supervision activities. Massey and Strong’s *Active Learning Tool at a Glance* makes for a helpful reference tool when planning high impact special education teacher preparation classes.

Fifth, Macedonia and her co-authors discuss the challenges of special education teacher shortages in rural areas of the United States, including geographic barriers, isolation, and limited resources, and emphasizes the need for innovative partnerships to recruit and retain special educators in their article titled, “Forging Partnerships to Address Teacher Shortages in Rural Settings: Engaging Key Players.” Macedonia and her team of

co-authors describe a partnership between the CEEDAR Center, Mississippi Department of Education, Education Preparation Programs, and special education directors in rural Mississippi that use *The Educator Shortages in Special Education Toolkit* to develop a Special Educator Mentoring Framework. This mentoring framework focuses on a cyclical process for planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating efforts to address the special educator shortage and strengthening teaching practices in rural regions.

Finally, Chang and Drescher focus on the importance of supporting new special education teachers as they transition into the profession in their article titled, “Addressing Attrition: Multi-level Mentorship Model.” Chang and Drescher outline the role of special education teacher educators and teacher education programs during teacher induction. Specifically, they discuss the importance of mentorship in retaining early career special education teachers and proposes a model where early career teachers are supported by a network of alumni who are mentored by university faculty to address gaps in administrative roles. This approach aims to improve attrition rates of early career special educators and promote leadership roles for in-service special educators to address the shortage of special education teachers and fill critical administrative roles with special education expertise.

Taken together, this collection of articles offers concrete strategies for reviewing, directing, enhancing, supporting, and extending existing pathways into the profession. I would like to conclude by thanking Dr. Andy Markelz and his associate editors for allowing me to be part of this special issue series. Thank you to the authors for their high impact contributions. I also want to thank the awesome JOSEP reviewers and copyediting team for their support

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