

FROM *the*  
**EDITOR**

**Creating New Pathways into  
 the Special Education Teaching  
 Profession: An Introduction  
 from the Guest Editor**

**Sarah A. Nagro**

*Guest Editor of JOSEP,  
 George Mason University*

**T**here are approximately 7.2 million students identified with disabilities in P-12 schools across the United States, or 15% of the total public-school enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2022) this equated to 476,300 special education public school jobs in 2021. Who are the special education teachers providing a free and appropriate public education to these students in their least restrictive environments as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004)? Well, it depends on who you ask.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), there are approximately 442,000 special education public school teachers in the United States making up 10% of the teaching workforce. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs' Director Williams, all special education teachers should hold at least a bachelor's degree, have obtained full state certification, and none should be teaching with an emergency, temporary, or waived certification or license (Williams, 2022). According to a spokesperson from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), due to the shortage of fully-qualified teachers, school districts are often reduced to simply hiring someone with a pulse (Gaines, 2022). According to local school district leaders, there are no special education teachers because there are hundreds of vacant positions (Wilkins et al., 2023).

The discussion around the special education workforce and pervasive shortage can become very complicated as there are several factors at play. One key factor is the pipeline of new teachers. According to Dr. Laurie Vander-

Ploeg, the Associate Executive Director of Professional Affairs with the Council for Exceptional Children, we are facing a significant decline in teacher candidate enrollment (Wilkins et al., 2023), and according to Title II data, this issue is further compounded by the significant decline in the number of special education teacher preparation program completers (Day et al., 2023). Yet, the number of students requiring special education services has increased year over year (Day et al., 2023). The bottom line is, regardless of what we have tried, our pipeline is not supplying the special education workforce at the rate necessary to adequately meet the needs of our students with disabilities. This is our call to action. As leaders in the field of special education teacher education, we can make a difference. Because, as one father asked, "If [my son's] not getting the help and support now, what does that mean for his future?" (Wilkins et al., 2023).

In this two-part special issue, we aim to share concrete solutions for individual special education teacher educators—and 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 focused on strengthening existing pathways into the profession (Nagro, 2023). The second part of this series, and the content of this issue, is focused on creating new pathways into the profession.

Collectively, this issue emphasizes the pressing need for innovative strategies to alleviate the shortage of special education teachers while diversifying the teaching workforce. Collaborative efforts between educational institutions, school districts, and community organizations emerge as a key approach.

The development of alternative route programs including “Grow Your Own” programs and Paraeducator-to-Teacher programs stand out as pivotal solutions. Across many examples, authors in this special issue commonly underscore collaboration, targeted recruitment, effective and flexible preparation, and ongoing support and development opportunities as critical components in addressing the shortage of special education teachers and cultivating a diverse and adept teaching workforce. Finally, authors draw clear connections between recruitment, preparation, and retention efforts.

First, Day and her co-authors emphasize the pervasiveness of the special education teacher shortage despite the increased presence of alternative route programs and highlight the need for effective recruitment, preparation, and retention strategies in their article titled, “Strategies for Attracting, Preparing, and Retaining Special Education Teachers through Alternative Route Programs.” In terms of recruitment, Day and her co-authors recommend identifying funding agencies to support alternative route enrollees, publicizing recruitment efforts, and implementing recruitment initiatives specifically intended to attract culturally and linguistically diverse candidates. Additionally, the authors explain the importance of sustained collaboration between teacher educators, local education agencies, and state education agencies to ensure effective preparation and retention of alternative route special education teachers where coursework, mentorship, and licensure requirements focus on best practices and provide a sense of continuity and stability for teacher candidates.

Second, Cuccio-Slichko, Ihle, and Gish discuss a wraparound approach

to recruitment and retention of teachers across elementary, secondary, and special education fields especially in high-needs districts in their article titled, “Build the Teacher Pipeline Initiative: A Four-Pronged Approach to Address the Teacher Shortage.” Cuccio-Slichko and her co-authors discuss four main strategies that include offering free housing for undergraduate students majoring in teaching-related programs, providing grants for career changers pursuing graduate education degrees, optimizing delivery models to increase flexibility for teacher candidates, and offering timely professional development opportunities to educators. The authors also discuss their new program structure as they respond to the changes in New York State where special education certification now includes all grades P-12.

Third, Brown and Riden outline the process of developing and implementing “Grow Your Own” programs to address shortages in special education teachers and diversify the teaching workforce in their article titled, “Increasing Enrollment and Diversity in Special Education Preparation Through Grow Your Own Programs.” In this article, Brown and Riden emphasize the need for collaboration between local school districts and neighboring institutions of higher education with particular focus on identifying specific needs, forming partnerships, employing targeted recruitment strategies, and providing comprehensive supports for success. The authors highlight the potential pathways into the special education profession for high school students and paraprofessionals and underscore the positive implications of diversifying the workforce, including improved outcomes for diverse students and inspiring more individuals of color to pursue teaching careers.



In this two-part special issue, we aim to share concrete solutions for individual special education teacher educators — and teacher preparation programs more collectively — as we work towards our field’s most pressing issue, the special education teacher shortage.

Fourth, Stansberry Brusnahan and Neilsen Gatti describe district-serving pathways to address teacher shortages and increase diversity within the teaching workforce by recruiting and preparing local community members to become teachers in their article titled, “Collaborative Grow Your Own Partnerships to Address Persistent Teacher Shortages and Remove Barriers to Becoming a Special Educator.” Two models are described in the article: the Teacher Residency Model, where pre-service educators have a year-long apprenticeship alongside experienced mentors, and the Work and Learn Model, which adapts the residency model by allowing candidates to serve in paid paraprofessional or provisional teacher roles. Stansberry Brusnahan and Neilsen Gatti emphasize the importance of partnerships, preparation strategies, and financial support to impact recruitment, training, and retention of teachers.

Fifth, Shelton and Cruz discuss approaches to transitioning paraeducators to certified special education teachers in their article titled, “Leveraging the Paraeducator-to-Teacher Pipeline to Attract and Prepare Special Education Teachers.” Shelton and Cruz share details about partnering with neighboring school districts to offer paraeducators an alternative pathway into the profession that includes tailored coursework, internships, and job-embedded assignments as well as ongoing professional development to support paraeducators during their transition to teaching. Ultimately, Shelton and Cruz point to these types of alternative route programs as a successful approach to diversifying the teacher workforce and addressing the special education teacher shortage.

Finally, Mason and Choate explain two grant-funded projects focused on addressing the shortage of qualified special education teachers and enhancing their skills in using assistive technology



Collectively, this issue emphasizes the pressing need for innovative strategies to alleviate the shortage of special education teachers while diversifying the teaching workforce.

to support K-12 students with disabilities in their article titled, “A Tale of Two Grant-Funded Special Education Recruitment and Training Projects Focused on Assistive Technology.” Mason and Choate discuss both teacher preparation and professional development options that can improve special education teacher skills and confidence with the integration of assistive technology into teaching practices, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes in special education programs. Ultimately, the authors recommend improved assistive technology training and implementation as a way to increase student independence and reduce special education teacher workload concerns which can lead to teacher burnout.

Taken together, this collection of articles offers concrete strategies for creating new pathways into the special education teaching 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 for their support of this issue. Finally, I would like to thank OSEP funded doctoral students Gino Binkert, Christopher

Claude, Margret Gerry, Kevin Monnin, and Katherine Szocik for their copyediting and APA expertise.

## REFERENCES

- Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 697- 744. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022, October). *Occupational outlook handbook*, special education teachers. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/special-education-teachers.htm>
- Day, J., Nagro, S. A., & Mason-Williams, L. (2023). The Nationwide Trends and Preparation Requirements of Alternative Route Programs in Special Education. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064231172525>
- Gaines, L. V. (2022, April 20). Students with disabilities have a right to qualified teachers—But there’s a shortage. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/20/1092337446/special-education-teacher-shortage>
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004) <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>
- Nagro, S. (2023). Strengthening existing pathways in special education teacher preparation: An introduction from the guest editor. *Journal of Special Education Preparation*, 3(2), 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JO-SEP.3.1.4-7>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Digest of education statistics* (NCES 2021-009). U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Students with disabilities. Condition of education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *All States* [Data set]. Title II Reports. <https://title2.ed.gov/Public/Home.aspx>
- Williams, V. C. (October 4, 2022). Personnel qualifications under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/OSEP-Memo-22-01-Personnel-Qualifications-under-IDEA-10-04-2022.pdf>
- Wilkins, T., Leslie, K., Jones, S., & Piper, J. (2023, April). *Educators, families worry about state of special education with hundreds of unfilled jobs*. NBC Washington, NBC Universal Media. <https://www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/educators-families-worry-about-state-of-special-education-with-hundreds-of-unfilled-jobs-in-local-public-schools/3328710/>

