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EDITORS

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Policy and Advocacy in the Journal of Special Education Preparation

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We are not in a "business as usual" moment—not for special education, and certainly not for those of us working alongside the educators and faculty preparing the next generation of special education professionals. This special issue comes at a time of deep uncertainty—and, frankly, substantial and real threats to the systems we have spent decades building. Since January, federal policymakers, at the urging of President Trump, have taken deliberate steps to dismantle key federal agencies. The U.S. Department of Education has been a primary target. The very infrastructure that supports education research, teacher preparation, civil rights enforcement, and data transparency has been slashed or, in some cases, eliminated altogether. On March 20, 2025, President Trump signed an Executive Order directing Secretary Linda McMahon to "take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Department of Education and return authority over education to the states and local communities" (Executive Order No. 14147, 2025, sec. 2). Since then, the anxiety within the special education community has been palpable—and with good reason.

For more than a century, families, educators, and advocates have fought for the rights of students with disabilities to access a free and appropriate public education. That advocacy has driven real, measurable progress, from simply gaining entry into classrooms to ensuring access to highly qualified teachers using evidence-based practices. So when the federal system that underpins these rights is placed on the chopping block, we are right to ask: What comes next? Will the Office of Special Education Programs still exist? Will federal funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) survive? Will students with disabilities be protected under civil rights law—or not?

These questions are not abstract. They are urgent, deeply personal, and pressing. But we also know this: in moments like this, advocacy does not get paused. It gets louder. It gets smarter. It gets more strategic.

That is why this special issue is so timely. Within these pages, you will hear from faculty members across the country who are stepping into this moment by offering tools, strategies, and expertise to help strengthen the systems that support children with disabilities, their families, and the professionals who serve them. Some contributions reflect hard-earned wisdom; others offer fresh takes and bold ideas. All are rooted in a belief that the future of special education depends on all of us showing up and speaking out.

Each article takes a slightly different approach, but they are tied together by shared values: a commitment to policy as a lever for justice, a deep respect for the history of the field, and a recognition that educator preparation must include meaningful advocacy training. Whether it is embedding policy in coursework, mentoring doctoral students into advocacy roles, building relationships with school boards and legislators, or leveraging social media to amplify real stories—these strategies remind us that advocacy is not a one-time event. It is a way of doing the work.

Faculty play a critical role in shaping this future, not just as teachers but as policy

“This issue provides strategic, actionable tools to help amplify the voices of those too often left out of policy conversations and to empower all of us, across roles and systems, to be more intentional and effective in advocating for meaningful change.”

actors, mentors, and community connectors. The scholars in this issue are doing just that, and in doing so, are modeling what it looks like to prepare teachers who are not just ready to enter classrooms, but ready to lead. This issue provides strategic, actionable tools to help amplify the voices of those too often left out of policy conversations and to empower all of us, across roles and systems, to be more intentional and effective in advocating for meaningful change.

We are deeply grateful to Dr. Andy Markelz for inviting us to co-lead this special issue and to the incredible faculty members of the Teacher Education Division (TED) Policy Committee who shared their time, insight, and heart with us. Your work is deeply needed—and exactly what this moment calls for.

## REFERENCES

Executive Order No. 14147, 3 C.F.R. (2025).
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1400.

# Introduction to Special Education Policy for Higher Education Faculty

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## ABSTRACT
Policy plays a crucial role in shaping special education practices. It is essential that special education professionals, particularly those in higher education, understand the policies that shape programs and practices and take an active role in their ongoing development. This article will provide historical context for special education law and policy. The authors also emphasize key components at the local, state, and federal levels. Finally, the article will highlight the critical role of higher education faculty engagement in policy development and implementation, including actionable steps for faculty to undertake.

## KEYWORDS
**Higher education faculty, policy, special education policy, special education laws, teacher preparation**

Policy plays a crucial role in shaping the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities and significantly influences the implementation of special education**.** To effectively prepare all educators for their roles in this area, it is essential that faculty members not only understand special education policy but also grasp how it impacts the broader landscape of higher education. Special education policy encompasses a wide range of laws, regulations, court cases, and practices that directly affect the education, services, and support provided to students with disabilities. These policies operate at the federal, state, and local levels, each contributing to a complex system that determines how and where special education services are provided to students with disabilities.

At its core, special education is designed to address the specific educational needs of students with disabilities by ensuring appropriate services and support. In the United States, legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) serve as cornerstones of these policies. IDEA (2004) mandates that public schools provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE) to all eligible students with disabilities, while Section 504 protects all individuals with disabilities from discrimination in programs that receive federal funding. These legal structures are not only foundational but also drive the evolution of special education practices.

Special education policy is rooted in inclusion (Kirby, 2017) and emphasizes diversity, equity, and equality (Nelson, 2024; see definitions in Table 1). These principles are central to the legal framework and guide the broader educational mission of striving for an inclusive environment where all students can succeed. Faculty in special education programs typically come to the table with a basic understanding of these principles, as well as their connection to policy. It is their professional responsibility to support future educators' ability to navigate the relationship between policy and practice. This will ensure they have adequate preparation in order to advocate for and implement inclusive practices in their own classroom. In the following sections, we will explore how policy comes to be, the key policies and laws that shape special education, the various levels of policy implementation, and the role these policies play in higher education.

**TABLE 1:** Key Special Education Policy Terms

| TERM | DEFINITION |
|---|---|
| **Diversity** | "In special education policy, diversity refers to recognizing and addressing the wide range of differences among students, including their abilities, cultures, languages, races and socioeconomic backgrounds. It emphasizes inclusive education, culturally and linguistically responsive practices, and addressing disproportionality such as the overrepresentation of certain racial groups in special education. Federal laws like IDEA and Section 504 mandate that all students, regardless of background, receive equitable access to education and services." (Nelson, 2024) |
| **Equity** | "Equity means ensuring that students with disabilities receive the individualized support and resources they need to access the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers." (Nelson, 2024) |
| **Equality** | "…equality, which treats all students the same, equity focuses on addressing each student's unique needs through tools like the Individualized Education Program or IEP and fair distribution of resources. It aims to eliminate disparities in areas such as identification, placement and discipline, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds." (Nelson, 2024) |
| **Inclusion** | "Inclusion refers to their practice of educating students with disabilities in general education in classrooms alongside their peers to the greatest extent possible. The goal of inclusion is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the same academic curriculum, social experiences and extracurricular opportunities as other students, while receiving appropriate supports and services to meet their individualized needs." (Nelson, 2024) |

## THE FORMATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY

Special education policy is in play at local, state, and federal levels. However, given that states are bound to meet the minimum federal policy requirements and local policy agents must adhere to both state and federal requirements, faculty must have a clear understanding of how federal education policy is created. Thus, this section will examine how policy comes to be at the federal level. Such policy historically developed from a need to provide policy solutions when critical needs emerged nationally. For example, in the 1970s, policymakers put forth Public Law 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), which was later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), in response to advocates' demands for the integration and inclusion of students with disabilities in public education settings. Despite the pivotal role federal policy plays in driving the nation's initiatives, an understanding of how policy comes to be remains elusive for many agents responsible for enacting policy, or for those affected by policy, at the state and local levels.

When faculty provide explicit instruction in policy, teacher candidates have opportunities to increase their knowledge base and their preparedness to navigate tensions they will undoubtedly experience between policy and practice. Faculty and teacher candidates must understand that federal policymaking involves three key sectors: Congress (i.e., the House of Representatives and Senate), the executive branch, and interest groups. They should also recognize that proposed policies are shaped by affected individuals, the political climate, and the policy's content (West, 2023). For example, imagine a congressman's constituents and/or interest groups raising concerns. Depending on the political climate, these concerns might prompt the congressman to sponsor a bill addressing the issue of concern. Once sponsored, this policy may or may not be put to a vote in the House of Representatives. If the policy should pass the vote, it then must also pass the vote in the Senate before being considered in the executive branch. Although this example provides a 20,000-foot overview, it does not dive into all the influences behind the discussions at each step that can either contribute to the policy-making process or serve as a barrier on the journey a bill takes to become a law. Understanding the processes and influences at play allows constituents, including faculty and preservice teachers, to act both individually and collectively to generate relevant messaging and requests for their respective congressmen and contribute to the policy-making process.

Having established a basic understanding of how policy is developed, it is important to clearly define what is meant by policy in the specific context of special education. In general, special education policy includes legislative acts, court rulings, and administrative rules that define the rights and responsibilities of students, parents, and educational institutions. Such policies focus on identification, evaluation, placement, and the provision of services for students with disabilities. For instance, the IDEA (2004) guarantees access to special education services and emphasizes the importance of procedural safeguards to protect the rights of students and their families. By promoting equity and accountability, special education policy

**TABLE 2:** Timeline of Major Milestones in Special Education Policy

| YEAR | POLICY/EVENT | SIGNIFICANCE |
|---|---|---|
| 1954 | *Brown v. Board of Education* | Established the principle that "separate but equal" is inherently unequal, laying groundwork for inclusion. |
| 1973 | Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act | Prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities in federally funded programs. |
| 1975 | Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) | Mandated free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and introduced the concept of the individualized education program (IEP). |
| 1990 | Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) | Expanded civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities across various sectors, including education. |
| 1990 | Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) | Reauthorized EAHCA with added provisions for transition planning and inclusive practices. |
| 2001 | No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) | Emphasized accountability and high standards for all students, including those with disabilities. |
| 2004 | IDEA Reauthorization | Enhanced accountability measures and introduced Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks. |
| 2015 | Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) | Replaced NCLB, providing greater flexibility to states while maintaining accountability for students with disabilities. |

serves as a foundation for creating inclusive and effective learning environments. These policies aim to eliminate disparities and provide opportunities for all learners to succeed.

The evolution of special education policy in the United States is marked by significant legislative and judicial decisions. These milestones reflect society's changing attitudes toward individuals with disabilities and highlight the transition from exclusion to inclusion. Advocacy for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms has its roots in civil rights movements, parent activism, and progressive legislative measures:

1. **Civil Rights Movement and Brown v. Board of Education (1954):** Although this landmark case primarily addressed racial segregation, its central principle—that "separate but equal" is inherently unequal—provided a basis for challenging the exclusion of students with disabilities. Advocates drew parallels between racial and disability-based segregation, emphasizing the need for inclusive educational opportunities (Smith & Kozleski, 2005).
2. **Parent Advocacy Groups:** In the 1950s and 1960s, parents of children with disabilities began organizing to demand better educational access. Organizations like the National Association for Retarded Children (now The Arc of the United States) emerged as powerful advocates for systemic change. Parents were instrumental in raising awareness about the challenges faced by their children and in lobbying for legislative action.
3. **Legislative Progress:** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 marked a turning point by prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities in federally funded programs. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 followed, mandating FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities. This act also introduced individualized education programs (IEPs), formalizing the individualized approach to special education.
4. **Shifting Societal Attitudes:** The mid-20th century saw a broader cultural movement toward equity and inclusion. Efforts to deinstitutionalize individuals with disabilities and integrate them into community and educational settings further reinforced the push for inclusive classrooms.

These developments and others (see Table 2) have marked shifts in how society views disability and education, fostering systemic efforts to support the needs of all learners through individualized and inclusive practices. Understanding special education policy is essential for educators, administrators,

and policymakers to ensure compliance with legal requirements and to promote effective practices. These policies serve as a blueprint for creating inclusive environments, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and advocating for the rights of students with disabilities.

## LEVELS OF POLICY

Policy in special education happens at multiple levels, mainly the federal, state, and local level. However, at each level, policy may look different. While at the federal level this includes laws and nationwide policy, policy at the local level could be as small as allocation of teaching positions among schools or teacher salaries. See Figure 1 for a summary of policy at each level.

### Federal Policy

Most often, when people think about special education policy, they are considering the federal level, specifically the requirements of the IDEA (2004) as the overall governing statute of the field. IDEA is the "national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities" (IDEA § 601(c)(1)). At its core, the IDEA is civil rights legislation that requires all public schools to provide a meaningful education for all students aged 3-22, regardless of disability. It is broad and far-reaching to provide protections for as many eligible students as possible.

It is important to remember that the U.S. Constitution does not specifically mention education. Because of this, the administration of education falls under the 10th Amendment, which states, "the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people" (U.S. Const. Amend. X). The main roles of the U.S. Department of Education are to provide funding, leadership in national programs, and regulatory guidance regarding the provisions outlined in the law. In essence, the federal government is not meant to have authority over education initiatives; rather, it only advises. The U.S. Department of Education does not develop curriculum or determine education standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a). This is left up to the individual states and school districts. Since IDEA is a national policy, the U.S. Department of Education (as of the writing of this manuscript) is the entity that oversees state compliance with the law. This occurs specifically through its Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Notably, although OSEP can monitor compliance, it does not determine compulsory implementation rules.

One method of communication that OSEP regularly uses to provide policy guidance to states and local education agencies (LEAs) is Dear Colleague Letters (DCL). These letters are generally written in response to an area of policy in which data has shown a problem in implementation and/or student outcomes. DCLs often reiterate the language in IDEA, share data that demonstrate any disparities, and supply resources and guidance documents for states and LEAs to consider using to better implement IDEA. Recent topics of DCLs include inclusive educational practices, transition and post-secondary access, special education personnel retention, and use of restraints and seclusion in schools. To view the full text of these and other DCLs, visit https://sites.ed.gov/idea/policy-guidance.

*The principle of LRE is a useful example of policy as it travels through the different levels (i.e., federal, state, local) from creation to implementation. According to IDEA (2004), LRE is defined as:*

> *To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...are educated with children who are not disabled and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.*

*This language in federal statutes is purposely vague in order to allow individual states the authority to interpret and implement this provision; therefore, each state's implementation may depend on its context.*

### State Policy

If the federal government's role is to provide overarching federal special education policy that protects the rights of students and teachers, the states' roles are much more inclusive. States provide the day-to-day implementation of and oversight for all IDEA provisions, including, but not limited to, teacher training and qualifications, graduation requirements, and eligibility criteria for disabilities (Obi, 2015). State laws cannot contradict IDEA, nor can they offer *less* than what is guaranteed under federal law. States can, however, choose to require *more* than is indicated in IDEA. For example, the IDEA mandates that postsecondary transition services must be included in the IEP no later than when a student turns 16 (IDEA, 2004). However, several states require that transition services begin by the age of 14, which is above and beyond the IDEA mandate. Another example is state-level interpretation of the 13 disability categories named in IDEA. Some states have created additional categories, sometimes splitting a single category into multiple categories (e.g., dividing speech or language impairment into sound system disorder, voice disorder, and language

impairment; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023).

States communicate their policy requirements to LEAs, the federal term for school districts, through state administrative codes. Such codes are written by staff at state departments and, hopefully, in consultation with school personnel throughout the state. These documents outline in greater detail each of the provisions under the IDEA as the particular state department wants it to be undertaken in practice. The method by which these documents are authorized, however, is dependent upon the structure of state level governance in each individual state constitution. According to a report by the Education Commission of the States, although all 50 states have constitutional language outlining the educational authority of state legislatures, the details after that differ greatly (Evans et al., 2020). Some states appoint leaders while others have elected positions. For example, in states like Oregon, Kentucky, and Florida, the governor appoints the state board of education, who then appoints a chief state school officer (CSSO). Yet, in states such as Alabama, Colorado, and Utah, the state board of education members are elected and then appoint a CSSO. In other states, including California, Georgia, and Indiana, the governor appoints the state school board, but the CSSO is elected. Finally, in states such as Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, the governor appoints both the state school board and the CSSO. Additionally, states may confer authority to state school boards, or those entities may have advisory capacities only. As a result, individual states can each view and implement IDEA quite differently.

*There is a fair amount of variability in the regulatory LRE language across states' administrative codes. Seventeen states have made changes to the language of the federal regulations around LRE (White et al., 2018). Some of these changes include clarification of the necessity of policies and procedures for LRE implementation and compliance or revision to the statement that students with disabilities should be "educated with children who are nondisabled" (White et al., 2018, p. 11). While the majority of changes provide guidance or clarification and are not substantive, each modification could potentially create distance between the IDEA and the implementation of the policy, as well as gaps between states.*

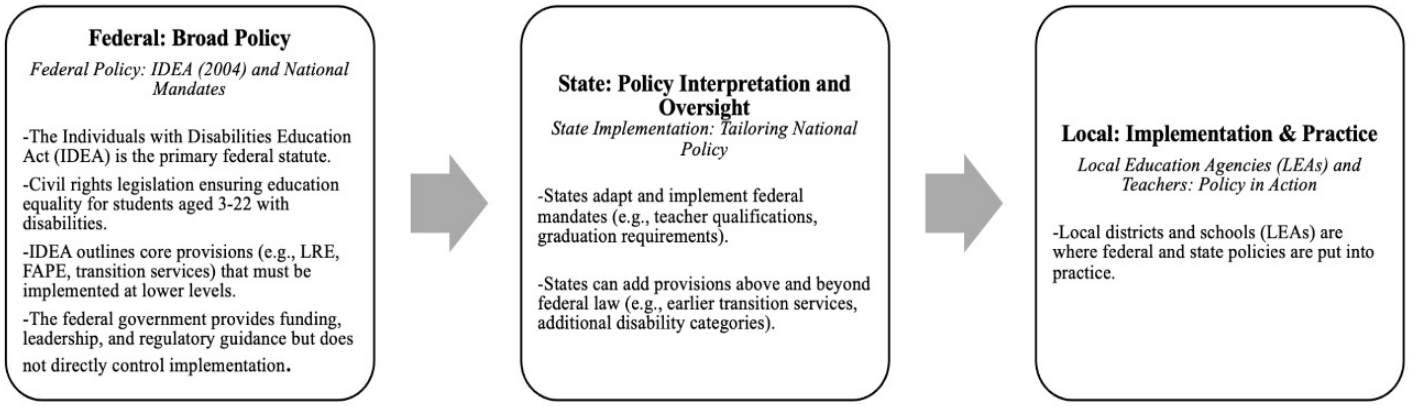
## Local Policy

Perhaps the most influential level for educational policy is the local level, as this is where policy is implemented by LEAs, and, more specifically, administrators and teachers. None of these entities are passive receptors of these initiatives; rather, they construct the policy messages that will eventually become practice in local schools. LEAs must determine how to execute policies that have been mandated at the state and federal levels. Therefore, building-level personnel are the ultimate policymakers. Given the evident policy differences among states, implementation at the district and school levels has even more variety. Principals and teachers draw on their own conceptions of education and understandings of their local context to determine what policies and parts of policies should be implemented (Spillane, 2004). Principals have more direct access to policy messages, as they usually attend state and district-level meetings where policy is initially discussed. They are often the first people within LEAs to have the opportunity to practice sensemaking (Hill, 2001) around new policy initiatives, which provides them with the occasion to decide how the message will be presented to teachers. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2017) describe sensemaking as "when there is a gap between what one expects and what one experiences, it leads individuals or groups to ask what is going on and what they should do next" (p. 684). In other words, although the state may expect a policy to be carried out in a certain manner, principals often scrutinize the policy for their own school and student needs, leading them to select and implement only the parts that currently fit with their "worldview" (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Hill 2001). Additionally, these administrators must consider their current access to resources, including financial and personnel resources. This adds to the variability in execution of policies that require additional actions by schools who may be operating with limited resources.

Lastly, teachers are the ultimate interpreters of policy, as the classroom is where policy is actualized. It must be noted, however, that by the time a policy reaches teachers, it has already been strained through several filters. Think of the childhood game of telephone—by the time a policy reaches teachers, it may look quite different from how it started. Often, teachers draw on their existing knowledge to interpret new initiatives and reconstruct policy messages in ways that can either reinforce preexisting practices or usher in incremental change (Coburn, 2005). Since this can happen at the school, grade, and individual level, the 'sense' of a policy may diverge in multiple places. The culture of an individual school may also influence the ways that teachers implement policy (Coburn, 2005), as social interactions with colleagues and local workplace norms certainly shape teachers' responses to policy messages.

*Returning to the example of LRE, although schools in a district may have the same expectations, each individual school has its own culture that may re-*

**FIGURE 1:** Policy at the Federal, State, and Local Levels




*flect different values in relation to inclusion. A school that prioritizes inclusion will likely have a greater proportion of students with disabilities being educated in a meaningful way in the general education environment. Conversely, a school whose culture reflects a perception of special education as a place that students "go to," students with disabilities will likely spend less time receiving services in an inclusive environment. In this scenario, individual teachers may advocate for students with disabilities to remain in the general education classrooms for instruction, while others may balk at this, believing that those same students cannot be successful in their classes.*

*Finally, the availability of resources can affect how LRE might be enacted. For example, if a rural elementary school has only one special education teacher serving all its students, IEP teams may feel the need to make placement decisions based upon staff availability and schedules. Even if teachers want to offer a full continuum of placements, the realities of their contexts may prohibit them from doing so. In this way, although policies remain the same, their implementation can be wildly different, affecting the type and quality of education students with disabilities receive.*

## POLICY IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION

Policy has a significant impact on the content within preservice preparation programs. Faculty and staff are held accountable to follow and implement the policies as adopted by the federal government, the department of education in their own state, and their individual university. Federal and state policies influence the structure and content of special education teacher preparation in terms of licensure types, IEP formats, definitions of high-quality educators, adopted strategies for instruction, curricular content, and achievement standards. All of these can look different from one state to another. For example, each state determines what types of teacher licenses will be offered in the area of special education. Subsequently, universities develop teacher education programs to meet those identified licensure standards. These programs must prepare teacher candidates to understand the 13 disability categories eligible for special education, which are named in IDEA but have specific eligibility criteria determined by state policy. Assessment of students with disabilities provides another illustration of the impact of policies at every level. Teacher preparation programs must prepare candidates to understand and support the administration of assessment systems within the state. While federal policy creates flexibility for establishing alternate achievement standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities, each state decides if they will employ those types of standards and associated assessments. If the state policy includes alternate achievement standards, the state must create the standards and teacher preparation programs must include content surrounding these policies and standards in their coursework.

Another example of how policy has impacted teacher preparation programs is the concept of high-quality teachers and the development of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*. This report kicked off numerous reforms in education in response to the idea that American children were falling behind other countries in the development of their knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, the authors of the report challenged the idea that American children and the workforce were "mediocre". One subsequent reform was the development of the NBPTS in 1987. This organization was tasked with identifying what good teachers know and do in their classrooms and,

**TABLE 3:** Resources and Activities for Special Education Candidates

| LEVEL | RESOURCES | EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES |
|---|---|---|
| **Undergraduate** | Rude, H., & Miller, K. J., (2018). Policy challenges and opportunities for rural special education. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 21-29.<br><br>Sacks, A. (2018). *Special education: A reference book for policy & curriculum development* (3rd ed.). Grey House Publishing.<br><br>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (n.d.) *Education policies and strategies.* | Discuss the challenges and promising practices identified in Rude & Miller (2018) and how those interact with the policy recommendations. |
| **Masters** | Mitchell, D. E., Shipps, D., & Crowson, R. L. (Eds.). (2017). *Shaping education policy: Power and process* (2nd ed.). Routledge.<br><br>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2020). An implementation framework for effective change in schools. OECD *Education Policy Perspectives*, 9. OECD Publishing.<br><br>Thorius, K. A. K., & Maxcy, B. D. (2015). Critical practice analysis of special education policy: An RTI example. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36(2), 116–124. | Use the critical analytic framework proposed within Thorius et al. (2015) to study other topics related to equity issues. |
| **Doctoral** | Nagro, S. A., Shepherd, K. G., West, J. E., & Nagy, S. J. (2019). Activating policy and advocacy skills: A strategy for tomorrow's special education leaders. *The Journal of Special Education*, 53(2), 67–75.<br><br>Peyton, D. J., Acosta, K., Harvey, A., Pua, D. J., Sindelar, P. T., Mason-Williams, L., Dewey, J., Fisher, T. L., & Crews, E. (2021). Special education teacher shortage: Differences between high and low shortage states. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 44(1), 5–23. | After reading Peyton et al. (2021), work in groups to generate ideas for why every state is not a low shortage state. Brainstorm ideas to rectify teacher shortages and solutions to barriers for those ideas. Craft policies that could be implemented. |

in turn, creating standards and a system to certify high-quality teachers. While the organization engaged in this work, each state had to determine its own policies regarding the implementation and support for NBPTS certification. These policies varied by state. For instance, states developed different incentivization policies and pay scales for NBPTS-certified teachers depending upon state funding. On a larger scale, discussions about identifying effective teaching practices and evidence-based practices continue to evolve today. The creation of high-leverage practices (HLPs) by teacher educators under the charge of the Council for Exceptional Children and the CEEDAR Center continues those efforts to outline what effective teachers know and do. Policies at the federal, state, and local levels articulate that teachers must use evidence-based practices within their instructional efforts. The landmark educational report, *A Nation at Risk,* and subsequent reform efforts continue to impact policy more than 40 years later and directly impact the work of teacher preparation programs.

Because policy impacts so much of the work done in special education, it is critical that faculty explicitly teach candidates at every level (i.e., undergraduate, graduate, doctoral) about policy. Candidates need to engage with policy not only to implement it as practitioners but also to understand the process of policy creation and adoption at various levels. Faculty should provide guidance to undergraduates beyond naming the laws surrounding special education. It is the policies associated with those laws that directly impact the work of a special educator. For example, Lewis and Young (2013) outlined education policy around teacher accountability and its measurement. The authors applied Kingdon and Stano's (1984) multiple-streams framework related to policy formation to teacher accountability in order to understand the three streams: the problem, the policies, and the politics. This framework can be applied to any policy to understand the problems and politics surrounding the content

and adoption of the policy. Actively engaging candidates at each level to understand, apply and evaluate policy and the policy development process is necessary. Using the Lewis and Young (2013) publication as context, states continue to implement teacher accountability models with policies that frame what effective teachers do. As a result, higher education must be acutely aware of how teacher evaluation works and ensure candidates have the necessary skills to be evaluated as effective teachers. Graduate candidates may be part of the mentoring or evaluation process as teacher leaders. Doctoral candidates could be involved in writing and interpreting policy at local, state or national levels. By applying policy frameworks to existing special education policies within course content, faculty can support special educators, leaders, and experts as they engage in the policy work that frames our field.

There are several ways faculty can help candidates understand policy in action. Table 3 provides some resources for use with candidates at each level. At the local level, policies are represented in various tangible avenues. Undergraduate candidates might engage with student and teacher handbooks for schools and school districts. Candidates could select a notable topic within the state or region and examine how different schools or districts articulate the policy surrounding that topic. For instance, they might compare the policies surrounding the implementation of a multi-tiered system of support across schools and districts. Graduate candidates might research inclusive education for students with disabilities, such as the belief systems and implementation of inclusive practices, the politics of inclusive education (e.g., funding, resources, community perceptions), or the policies of the state or local district regarding inclusion. Using a theoretical framework, candidates could discuss which factors influence policies and practices. At the doctoral level, candidates might statistically evaluate the effects of specific policies on teachers, students, families and communities. Or, they might examine how federal laws are interpreted into specific policies in different states or how state laws are applied across school district or organizational policies. Regardless of the level of the candidate, faculty must invest time and effort to facilitate discussions and discovery surrounding policy within coursework.

Special education policy plays a crucial role in higher education, especially in preparing future teachers to work with students with disabilities. These policies set the stage for addressing equity, inclusion, and individualized instruction, but their interpretation and implementation can vary widely across states and universities, leading to unique challenges and opportunities.

States often build on federal guidelines, creating differences in teacher preparation programs. As previously noted, while the IDEA mandates transition services from age 16, some states require these services to start earlier, which affects how programs must teach transition planning (U.S. Department of Education, 2025b). Recall also that states can use different definitions for disability categories, which influences how future teachers will learn to identify and support students with disabilities. For instance, one state might have more detailed categories for speech and language impairments than another, leading to varied emphases in coursework and practical training.

At the university level, policy interpretation can differ based on institutional priorities, faculty expertise, and resources. Some universities emphasize hands-on experiences in inclusive classrooms, while others focus more on theoretical knowledge and policy analysis for shaping the skills and perspectives of their graduates. Funding mechanisms and accreditation standards can also play a significant role in shaping programs. Personnel preparation grants, primarily those administered through OSEP, are vital in supporting higher education institutions in their efforts to prepare qualified special education teachers. These grants aim to address critical shortages in the special education workforce and enhance the quality of teacher preparation programs. They provide financial support for developing and implementing innovative training programs that align with federal priorities. For example, grants may fund programs focused on evidence-based practices, culturally responsive teaching, or specialized training for working with students with significant disabilities (Bateman, 2025). Additionally, these grants often support research initiatives, curriculum development, and faculty professional development, ensuring that teacher preparation programs remain at the forefront of best practices. Institutions receiving federal personnel preparation grants must align their curricula with specific policy objectives (Bateman, 2025). These requirements can drive program innovation but can also introduce challenges to maintaining consistency across institutions.

The variability in policy interpretation underscores the importance of providing future teachers with a comprehensive understanding of special education policy and its practical applications. Teacher preparation programs must equip candidates with the skills to navigate differences in state and local implementation, ensuring they are adaptable and well-prepared to meet the needs of all students. Faculty play a critical role in bridging the gap between policy and practice. By

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integrating policy analysis into coursework, they can help candidates understand the underlying principles of equity and inclusion that guide special education laws. Additionally, exposing future teachers to diverse educational settings allows them to see how policies are enacted in practice, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexities of special education.

## ENGAGING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY

While the focus of this article is on understanding special education policy, it is equally important to address the necessity of involvement in the development and implementation of such policy. Special education policy is critical to the lives of those with disabilities and could not happen without stakeholders' involvement. Educators, families, community members, policymakers and others all play a crucial role in the success of these policies. The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Teacher Education Division (TED) offers many resources for staying informed and actively engaged with policy developments. CEC's TED suggests the following action steps:

1. Receive Weekly Washington Updates
2. Attend Virtual Washington Updates
3. Access the Legislative Action Center
4. Attend the Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS)
5. Read Policy Agenda and Position Statements
6. Review Children and Youth Action Network (TED CEC, 2024).

These resources are an excellent starting point for faculty seeking to become more involved in policy work. However, just accessing resources is not enough. To create meaningful implementation of policy, it is essential that faculty stay engaged. There are numerous ways to engage with policy, several of which are articulated in articles within this issue. Engagement can occur through following regular updates regarding policy initiatives at any level, collaborating with colleagues, or embarking in advocacy efforts. This is not a one-time activity; it is an ongoing process of engagement to make a long-lasting impact not only on children with disabilities, but also on all children and the professionals that serve them.

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# Empowering Educators to Advocate Locally, Statewide, and Nationally

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## ABSTRACT

Advocacy is important in educator preparation programs, equipping future teachers with the knowledge, skills, and mindset to support students, schools, and communities. Educators are critical in driving policy change and supporting students with disabilities. This article explores how educator preparation programs can engage in advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. The authors share strategies and insights for involving undergraduate and graduate students in advocacy work within communities and local school districts and building relationships with key stakeholders at the state and federal levels. By prioritizing advocacy, educator preparation programs encourage future teachers to actively engage with the broader educational ecosystem, collaborate with stakeholders, and become change agents in schools and communities.

## KEYWORDS

**Advocacy, educator preparation programs, policy, special education policy**

*Dr. Taylor is a special education professor at a small liberal arts college in a rural southern community. One of the topics she will cover in her undergraduate course this semester is advocacy in education. To invest her students in policy and advocacy, she invites students to brainstorm current issues in education. As the students worked in groups to identify topics, it became clear that her pre-service teachers were interested in learning more about one of the most significant challenges facing schools today: the teacher shortage. Several students expressed concern about the low enrollment in their classes, the low pay of teachers, and the financial burden of unpaid student teaching. One student suggested that student teachers should receive a stipend from the local school district in return for a commitment to teach in the district if offered the position. Dr. Taylor thought this was a great idea because, during a recent meeting with the school district, the superintendent expressed a concern about the vacant teaching positions across the district. Dr. Taylor wanted the students to be the leaders of this initiative to advocate for their idea; therefore, she assigned them to research teacher recruitment and retention to educate themselves on the topic.*

Advocacy is an essential component of educator preparation, empowering future teachers to be effective educators and proactive advocates for students, schools, and communities (Roberts & Siegle, 2012). As key figures in the educational system, teachers can influence student outcomes, school culture, and broader educational policy (Bradley-Levine, 2018). In today's educational and political landscape, teaching alone is not enough; teachers must advocate for students and the future of education in the United States (Hoyle, 2017). While Colucci (2013) noted that many teachers believe politics is not their responsibility, this view is no longer sufficient. Educator's active participation in political advocacy is essential for shaping sustainable educational policies and ensuring the viability of the edu-

cation system (Watkins, 2022).

The complexity of educational needs continues to grow, increasing the need for educators to be equipped to advocate for systemic change. Advocacy goes beyond supporting individual students or classroom practices; it includes advocating for policies that enhance educational equity, improve access to resources, and ensure inclusive environments for all learners.

Advocacy goes beyond supporting individual students or classroom practices; it includes advocating for policies that enhance educational equity, improve access to resources, and ensure inclusive environments for all learners.

Advocacy is "the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal" (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Educators are uniquely positioned to advocate for causes important to schools because their expertise and experience in regularly interacting with students gives them direct insight into the challenges students face, including accessibility barriers, educational inequities, and social stigma. They understand how systemic gaps negatively impact students' academic and social skills outcomes. By the training they receive and the nature of the job, educators are skilled communicators who are accustomed to engaging in conversations with and about student needs, whether through individualized education plans (IEPs), Section 504 plans, or through parent and administrator communications to strategize best methods for student success. Whether advocating for increased inclusion and equitable opportunities in education for students or better pay and working conditions for themselves, educators can leverage their knowledge, empathy, and influence in a community to drive meaningful dialogue that champions a more inclusive society.

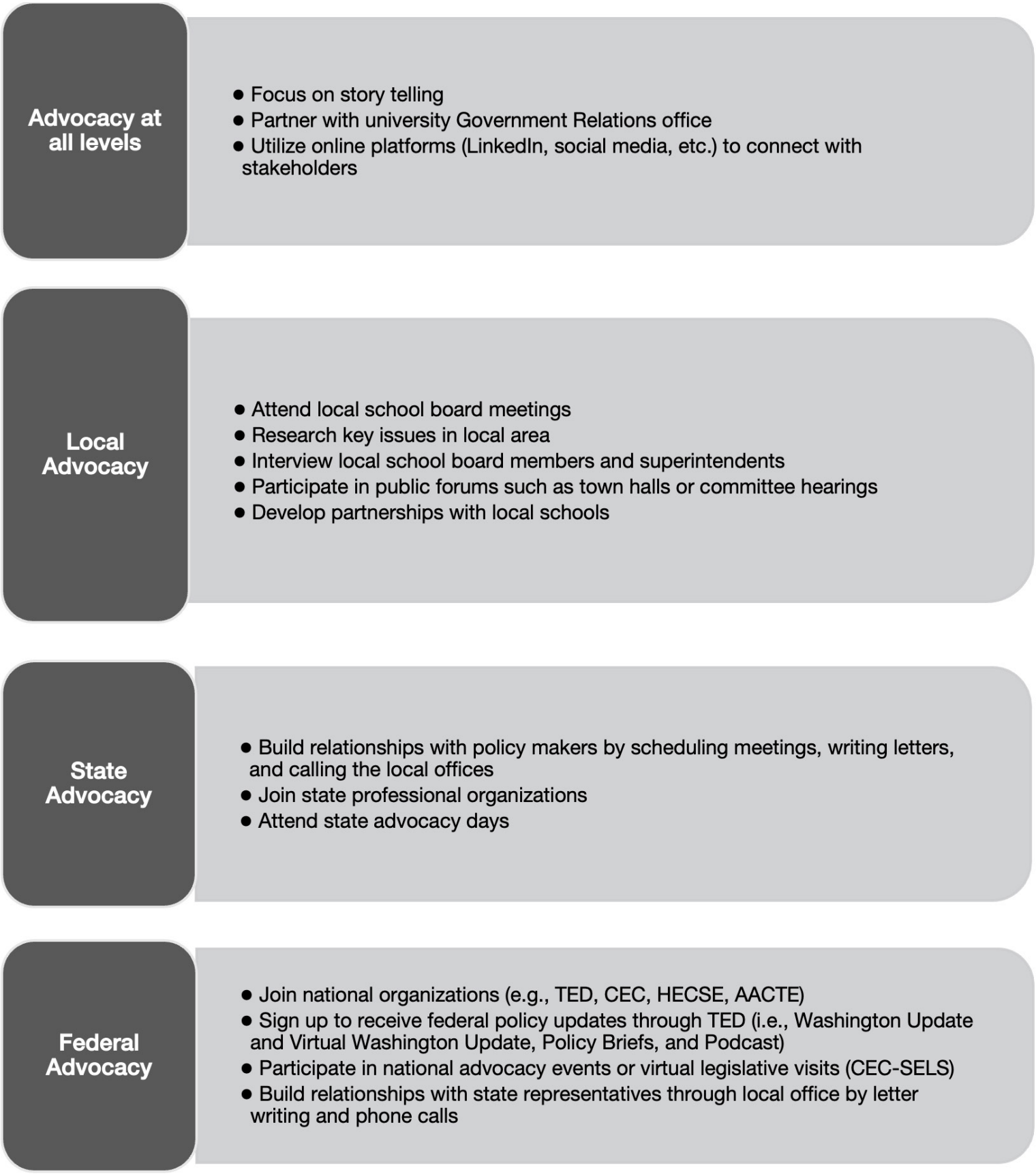
The importance of integrating advocacy into educator preparation programs (EPPs) has recently become more apparent (Mangin, 2020). These programs are tasked with preparing students for the classroom and cultivating the skills, knowledge, and mindset necessary to engage in broader advocacy efforts at the local, state, and federal levels. Educators gain firsthand experience navigating the challenges within the educational system, such as the results of inadequate funding, lack of resources, policy constraints, and the diverse needs of students. Because of this, they must become well-equipped to engage in advocacy efforts that address these disparities and influence policies that benefit students, school staff, families, and communities.

Although advocacy work is often seen as efforts led by seasoned professionals or policy experts, there is growing recognition that future teachers—those currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate educator preparation programs—must also be equipped to engage in these efforts (Howell & Marshall, 2023). Undergraduate students preparing for careers in education are often deeply immersed in the field through coursework, field experiences, practicum placements, and student teaching. These experiences provide them with direct exposure to classroom dynamics, instructional challenges, and systemic barriers that affect students and educators. Additionally, undergraduate programs typically emphasize contemporary educational theories, policies, and best practices, equipping students with both foundational knowledge and critical perspectives on issues such as student success. As a result, they are well-positioned to recognize areas in need of reform and advocate for change. Educator preparation programs can harness this by integrating advocacy skill development into their curricula, which can, in turn, foster undergraduate students' beliefs about the importance of advocacy (Massengale et al., 2014).

Similarly, graduate students in education programs are often practicing educators who bring firsthand experience from working directly with students, managing classrooms, and navigating the complexities of the education system. Their roles as teachers, interventionists, or administrators provide them with direct exposure to the challenges and inequities that exist in schools, such as disparities in funding, resource allocation, and student support services. This practical engagement positions them to critically analyze policies and advocate for reforms that improve educational equity and student outcomes.

However, the extent of their firsthand experience depends on the type of graduate program they are enrolled in. For instance, Master of Arts in Teaching and professional licensure programs typically serve in-service teachers already embedded in school environments. In contrast, research-focused programs, such as a doctoral-level degree in education, may include students transitioning from other fields or focusing more on policy and academia rather than direct classroom instruction. Nonetheless, all graduate students engage deeply with theoretical frameworks, policy analysis, and educational research, positioning them to advocate

**FIGURE 1:** Advocacy Activities in Educator Preparation Programs



for evidence-based improvements in education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In academic and professional settings, graduate students are frequently invited to take on leadership roles, preparing them to organize and lead advocacy efforts. EPPs can prepare students to be agents of change for the educational system, encouraging active involvement with key stakeholders, such as policymakers, community leaders, and families (Hoyle, 2017). This article explores how EPPs can integrate advocacy into curricula, strategies for involving future teachers in advocacy work, and the benefits of cultivating an activist mindset that extends beyond the classroom. By prioritizing advocacy, EPPs can shape the upcoming generation of teachers to become skilled in pedagogy and committed to creating positive change within schools, communities, states, and the nation.

## ADVOCACY AS A BRIDGE TO MAKING CHANGE

Educators possess a unique and powerful tool for policy advocacy: storytelling. Storytelling is a vital tool for advocating for change that benefits teachers, teacher educators, and students with disabilities. Personal narratives allow advocates to highlight the lived experiences of these individuals, bringing to light challenges that statistics alone cannot fully convey. Stories from teachers about the lack of resources or support for inclusive classrooms illustrate the gaps in current policies and demonstrate the need for systemic change that can be discussed at the local, state, and federal levels. Similarly, stories from students with disabilities and their families can reveal the barriers they face in accessing equitable education, fostering greater empathy and understanding among policymakers.

Moreover, storytelling humanizes policy issues and shifts the focus from abstract legislation to the real people it impacts. It has been said by a member of Congress that "the most effective way to influence a lawmaker is for a constituent to talk to a legislator about how the policy will affect the person or a particular group" (Rubenstein et al., 2024). By sharing specific examples of how improved funding, accommodations, or teacher training can transform outcomes for students with disabilities, advocates can make a compelling case for reform. These stories build bridges between educators, families, and decision-makers, creating a shared sense of purpose and urgency to act. By centering these voices, storytelling can inspire policies that are more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the diverse needs of all students.

Sharing firsthand experiences, specifically from pre-service teachers in the classroom, allows policymakers to see the real-world impact of their decisions (Hollingsworth et al., 2016). These personal accounts focus on the individuals directly impacted, such as funding shortages or curriculum changes, and create a compelling case for action. By framing challenges through the lens of individual stories, educators and students can inspire empathy and drive meaningful dialogue in their communities (Kimball et al., 2016). Advocacy can also serve as a bridge to connect local efforts to state and federal policies.

A key approach to bridging the gap in advocacy across all levels is leveraging social and online platforms to organize, inform, and engage stakeholders. Platforms like social media, LinkedIn, and professional blogs allow educators to share stories, highlight successes, and call for action. Educators and pre-service teachers can use these platforms to develop a storytelling narrative by sharing their experiences in the classroom. By combining traditional advocacy with digital outreach, teachers and teacher educators can build broader coalitions and exert meaningful influence on policies that shape education systems.

As teacher educators, it is important to collaborate with the Government Relations office within your university. University Government Relations or External Affairs offices can serve as a resource for faculty to collaborate with elected officials and understand the university's policy and initiatives with advocacy. By partnering with the Government Relations office, faculty and students can ensure advocacy efforts meet university guidelines and are aligned with university priorities. See Figure 1 for a list of suggested strategies for advocacy across the local, state, and federal levels.

*After the first few weeks of class, student excitement was building in Dr. Taylor's class, and several students decided to continue this work outside of class. Students attended a local town hall with area superintendents and shared the idea of giving stipends to student teachers. To the students' surprise, one superintendent was interested and suggested that the students develop a proposal. Dr. Taylor's students developed a partnership proposal in which the school district would provide a small stipend for student teachers. In turn, the student teachers would commit to teaching in the district for at least one year upon graduation. During the development of the plan, the students met with other faculty members and local school board members for their feedback. They practiced their pitch before meeting with the superintendent and school administrators. The superintendent was impressed with the student's attention to detail and potential solution to the school district's problem. After the meeting, the superintendent recommended that the students present their ideas at the next school board meeting for approval.*

## Local Advocacy Efforts

Policy advocacy is essential for teachers and educators who seek to shape policies impacting the profession, students, and local communities (Smith et al., 2024). Teachers and teacher educators may often feel intimidated by advocacy work, specifically at the state and federal levels. However, advocacy at the local level can be just as impactful, if not more, because teachers and teacher educators may have a direct connection to the local issues. Teachers, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators have firsthand experience with the challenges and needs of classrooms, making their voices invaluable in crafting effective and equitable policies. Policy advocacy aims to prompt a policy solution (West, 2024). As educators and teacher educators, we are experts in our respective fields and can provide guidance, knowledge, and expertise to shape local policies within higher education institutions and communities. By engaging in advocacy, we can ensure that our perspectives are heard and help bridge the gap between policymakers and the realities of education.

One strategy for getting involved in local policy advocacy is building strong relationships and partnerships with colleagues, local school district board offices, and school administrators within the local education agency (LEAs). The LEAs are responsible for understanding and directing the implementation of policies determined at the federal and state levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Advocacy at the local level can be one of the most impactful and meaningful ways to support teachers and students with disabilities. Building administrators and classroom teachers directly implement the policy by drawing on their expertise and experience (Coburn, 2005). EPPs can get involved with local advocacy work by attending local school board meetings, developing partner schools within the local LEA, and attending local town hall meetings. EPPs have an investment in local schools as they serve as a pipeline for future teachers. This partnership is essential for both parties, as LEAs provide an avenue for pre-service teachers to develop their expertise, and EPPs serve as a resource for LEAs to recruit and retain high-quality educators.

Although it is the LEA's responsibility to implement and execute state and federal policies, some policies can also begin at the local level. Initiatives and priorities directly impacting local schools may not be applicable across an entire state and may be centralized to specific communities. For example, the recruitment and retention of teachers is a priority in Dr. Taylor's rural community. While the declining enrollment in EPPs may impact districts across the state, it is critically important in rural communities with less access to EPPs (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Therefore, rather than waiting for policies to come from the state and federal levels, Dr. Taylor's class began a grassroots effort to advocate for the unique needs of the class, which mutually benefited the local school community.

Another strategy to impact policy locally is to stay informed with the local school district. School district board meetings are often open to the public and serve as an avenue to understand LEA priorities, current initiatives, and challenges the local community faces. Instructors in EPPs can assign students to attend a board meeting, interview board members, or even attend a family or community night within the district. Staying informed about current policy discussions and aligning advocacy efforts with broader educational priorities can enhance the impact of your efforts. EPPs can also build relationships by partnering with LEAs and developing partner schools. Partner schools can serve as a source of collaboration between LEAs and EPPs and provide professional development and research opportunities.

*The students presented the proposal to the local board of education, and the plan was approved. Dr. Taylor's students were excited; however, they knew this was only a small step in the larger issue of recruitment and retention of teachers across their state. As a part of their research, the students learned about a statewide advocacy day at their state capital called "The Day on the Hill," where they had the opportunity to meet with their state representatives. The students decided to take their idea to the next step: the state level. In preparation for their visit to the capitol, Dr. Taylor invited local representatives to speak with her students about current legislation across the state. To continue their research on the topic, the students researched their state representatives, including understanding how policy changes at the state level. When the day arrived, the students participated in the advocacy event, meeting with representatives from their districts to share their experiences and plan to support the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural communities. The students proudly shared their pilot plan as a model for other districts across the state.*

## Advocacy at the State Level

Both state and federal governments have important roles to play in the areas of educational policy. Though the federal government, including Congress and the United States Department of Education, facilitates important educational policies, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), many important educational policies and policy enactment

is deferred to the state level (West, 2024). Because state governments play significant roles in educational policy decisions, advocating at the state level is imperative. Approaches to state-level advocacy are similar to the approaches of advocacy at the local and federal levels. One way to understand advocacy at the state level is to imagine it as a bridge between the local and federal levels of government and legislation. Moreover, educators and professionals have expert experience and knowledge to inform policy as experts in their fields at all levels (West, 2024). It is important to remember that state representatives work for the constituents of that state. Constituents have the unique ability and power to advocate for educational policy in ways that outsiders to the state do not have. This section discusses four ways to integrate state-level advocacy for special education policy in undergraduate and graduate-level teacher-educator preparation programs.

The first method to integrate state-level advocacy into the higher education classroom is by including policy and advocacy in class curricula. This might include exploring state legislation and new bills being introduced or case studies on state hearings in special education. Instructors could also include presentations, group discussions, and papers on these topics. It is important to consider that one educational policy that may vary across the states and can directly affect the training and placement of teachers in schools is the policy for preparing pre-service teachers and state implementation of the IDEA's standards for special educators (Rodriguez & Murawski, 2020). Learning about the educational policies of the state where one lives, especially how federal policies impact that state, can challenge students to think critically about the specific needs of the communities across the state and how state policy addresses the needs of their state's students, families, and teachers. Becoming familiar with state educational policy, interpretation, and enactment may also reveal areas of need within policy and, thus, areas of advocacy.

The second method to integrate state-level advocacy in educator preparation programs is communicating with state legislators via email, phone, letters, and social media. This directly involves future teachers with hands-on advocacy experience. Once students are aware of state educational policies and needs, maybe even including their own needs, they can begin to use their voices to speak and educate state legislators within these areas. This is a simple but effective way to become involved in advocacy efforts. Educators may encourage students as individuals or as a group to reflect on a personal or collective educational issue for which they may like to advocate individually and/or as a group. Another method of incorporating state-level advocacy into the higher education classroom is inviting state legislators to class to speak about specific policies, practices, or the overall educational pulse of the state. Again, state representatives are "motivated to represent the needs of their constituents, as the number of constituents they represent is far smaller than for elected officials at the federal level" (Miller & Roup, 2022, p. 36). These speaking opportunities, either in person or virtual, can increase student understanding of current educational legislation and provide opportunities for students to interact with state-level representatives in a low-stakes environment. They can also provide opportunities for students to ask questions and present issues important to them and their communities to state representatives. Inviting state policymakers is a great way to build connections and rapport with state legislators and can be helpful for future advocacy efforts. University Government Relations offices can help facilitate these visits.

Finally, educators may also arrange meetings with state legislators as a class and/or visit the state capitol during state advocacy days. Meeting with state representatives may be integrated into class as part of an assignment or as a final project, or it could even be an extracurricular activity built into the class syllabus. Teacher educators may lead students to advocate for a broader need or interest in your state or a more specific need or interest within your district, but either way, your state representatives are accessible and want to hear from you (Miller & Roup, 2022). Teachers and pre-service teachers can also participate in statewide advocacy efforts by visiting the state capitol or meetings with state legislators and connecting with state-level organizations, including university and student organizations. State-level organizations often have advocacy days at state capitols and help to navigate meetings with state legislatures and key stakeholders in the community. Visits with state representatives and partnerships with statewide advocacy groups can educate students on state legislation processes and how to navigate advocacy and education efforts at the state level. This can encourage students to advocate at the federal level, which has many similar processes regarding requesting meetings and having conversations with representatives in Washington, DC.

## Advocacy at the Federal Level

Advocacy at the federal level mirrors much of the advocacy efforts at the state level. Again, one of the most effective ways to teach about federal education policies and advocacy efforts is to include advocacy efforts in class curricula. This could include student or

**TABLE 1:** Professional Organizations with a Focus on Advocacy

| Organization | Policy Statement on Educator Preparation | Resources for Educators | Level of Support |
|---|---|---|---|
| Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)<br><br>https://exceptionalchildren.org/ | The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is a professional association of educators dedicated to advancing the success of children with exceptionalities. We accomplish our mission through advocacy, standards, and professional development.<br><br>CEC has a long history as a leader in advocating on behalf of children and young adults with exceptionalities for the human and fiscal resources necessary to enable each individual to attain their highest level of education and employment and life success.<br><br>Our influence in shaping the policies that support publicly funded education, special education, and early intervention is well-recognized and valued by legislators and other policymakers as well as other professional organizations throughout the field. | CEC provides members with up-to-date policy information, opportunities for advocacy, and resources for members at the state and federal levels. CEC also supports local Child and Youth Action Network (CAN) coordinators. CEC's CAN is an organized group of volunteers that support CEC policy initiatives by building a strong grassroots network capable of effectively communicating policy priorities.<br><br>CEC also offers state units and special interest divisions. | CEC supports at the federal, state, and local levels. |
| Teacher Education Division of Council for Exceptional Children (TED)<br><br>https://tedcec.org/ | Teacher Education Division is a diverse community of professionals who lead and support teacher education on behalf of students with exceptional needs and their families. We accomplish this through professional development, advocacy, research, and collaboration. | TED policy initiates reflect CEC's legislative priorities through support from the TED Policy Committee. The TED Policy Committee meets virtually every month, to discuss happenings and events that impact the special education teacher workforce, including preparation, professional learning and development opportunities, and retention efforts. Many members of the TED Policy Committee actively engage in workgroups to develop Advocacy Briefs (https://sites.google.com/view/ted-policy-toolkit/home), create content for our TED & CEC Collaboration Podcast, provide professional development for TED members regarding advocacy, and identify award and fellowship recipients. | TED supports at the federal and state levels. |
| Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE)<br><br>https://hecse.net/ | We have been the primary advocates for the interests of institutions of higher education with personnel preparation, leadership preparation, and research programs in special education since 1982. | HECSE members are from large universities with national reputations for preparing teachers, related service providers, administrators, teacher educators and researchers. HECSE members have access to up-to-date legislative and policy development information, professional development and funding opportunities, and assistance with faculty and scholarship searchers. | HECSE supports advocacy at the federal level. |
| American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE).<br><br>https://aacte.org/ | AACTE and its members advocate for policies that are dedicated to building and sustaining high-quality preparation of teachers and other education professionals that ensure our graduates are profession-ready.<br><br>Through cutting edge research, innovative practice, and advocacy, AACTE and its members advance the field of educator preparation. | AACTE offers members resources and such as policy updates and advocacy guides on topics related to educator preparation quality. | AACTE supports advocacy at both the federal and state levels. |

educator-led discussions or presentations on federal special education laws, such as the IDEA, or important topics to your students, such as providing a stipend for student teachers as Dr. Taylor's students proposed. You might also facilitate group work to explore possible case studies of court cases from the United States Supreme Court involving your topic. Another way to integrate advocacy into your curricula is to ask students to facilitate the presentation of various advocacy resources on a desired topic, such as podcasts, important research articles, Dear Colleague letters, federal legislation, etc.

One critical piece of advocacy at the federal level is developing relationships with key stakeholders across your state. As a voting constituent, your voice, experiences, and perspectives can impact the policy mindsets of your elected representatives, and fostering these relationships is essential. One strategy to develop relationships is regularly communicating with your representatives' local office by writing letters and inviting the legislators to local events or even your classroom. By sharing stories about the impact of your work, you can develop meaningful relationships with staffers and stakeholders who are local to your area. Another way to involve future teachers in advocacy from university classrooms is by engaging with state Senators and Congress members in Washington, DC, via phone calls, social media, letters, and emails.

Though state legislators on Capitol Hill want to hear from their constituents, they are less available for individual meetings. However, you could connect with state and national-level organizations and join their efforts to meet with your state representatives on Capitol Hill (West, 2024). There is power in numbers! One great example you might consider joining is the annual Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS) held by the Council for Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) each summer. At this advocacy event, educators, including CEC members from across the country, learn about updates in Washington related to education and learn strategies to become effective advocates. Then, educators visit Capitol Hill to meet with their respective members of Congress and advocate for priorities aligned with CEC and CASE.

Another benefit of advocacy at the federal level is the network of professional organizations that can influence policy nationally. For example, the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the CEC has pre-written letters on existing issues which are updated throughout the year and can be signed and sent to legislators via mail or email (they can be found here: https://tedcec.org/policy-and-advocacy-portal). Other national advocacy organizations include the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). HECSE and AACTE are national organizations that focus on advocacy and education of educator preparation programs. HECSE and AACTE provide opportunities for higher education faculty to network, engage in advocacy work, and provide resources to its members on important issues facing schools and preparing educators. A description of these organizations, including their statements on policy and the levels of advocacy they support, can be found in Table 1.

*As an advocate herself, Dr. Taylor knew this project would be great to share nationally, too. Dr. Taylor had previously participated in the SELS as a TED member and looked for an opportunity for her students to have the same experience. She reached out to her state CEC board members and expressed an interest in taking her students to Washington, DC, to provide the opportunity to advocate at the federal level. Leading up to the summit, her students attended professional development events offered by TED, read advocacy briefs, and listened to the TED policy podcast. The students also learned about committees and the vital role their representatives had on policy at the federal level. Three of Dr. Taylor's students met with their state representatives during their time in Washington and shared their stories. In addition to visiting the capitol building, the students met other students across the country who had similar experiences, and they began a network of support for pre-service teachers. Upon returning to their state, Dr. Taylor's students learned their proposal was approved, and they would receive funding for student teaching at their local school district. The students shared their experiences by writing letters to their local and state legislators, hoping to expand this project across the state.*

## The Collective Power of Advocacy

Advocacy also elevates the voices of teachers as professionals and experts in education, whether at the local, state, or federal level. Teachers, including teacher educators, who share their experiences and insights with federal policymakers can help shape decisions that align with the actual needs of schools and students. This can lead to implementing policies that provide more resources, enhance teacher training programs, and improve working conditions, such as addressing teacher shortages or reducing class sizes. By engaging in policy discussions at every level, teachers advocate for their profession and contribute to creating an educational system that values and supports both educators

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### Alison N. Kearley

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### Jaime Nelson

*Jamie Nelson, MAE, serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor at William Penn University. With a background spanning general education, special education, literacy, and building leadership, she brings a rich background from her years in K-12 public education into her role in higher education. Her scholarly interests include neurodiversity, literacy, and advancing social justice and equity in education. She is dedicated to advocacy within the field of education, empowering teachers to make meaningful change.*


and students (Derrington & Anderson, 2020). This collective effort can lead to transformative change that has a lasting impact on the future of education in the United States. Encouraging students to become involved in advocacy at the federal level may be daunting, but it can also cultivate an activist mindset that can extend well beyond the classroom.

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# Empowering Our Future: Integrating Advocacy into Special Education Coursework

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## ABSTRACT

Becoming a special education teacher encompasses more than just learning how to teach. A large component of this position requires advocacy at the local, state, and national levels. Therefore, special education teachers need to be prepared to effectively advocate across all levels. This article examines the integration of advocacy into an undergraduate special education course and provides actionable recommendations. Implications for further integrating advocacy into special education teacher preparation programs are also discussed.

## KEYWORDS

**Advocacy, policy, special education, undergraduate education**

*It is the first day of classes at her university, and first-year undergraduate student, Madison, is excited! She has always dreamed of becoming a teacher, and has recently decided to pursue a credential in special education. Madison found a passion for working with students with disabilities when she volunteered with her high school's Best Buddies program chapter. Through this experience, Madison realized similarities and differences in her educational experience versus that of other students both with and without disabilities. She is curious how this will be represented in her coursework.*

*Meanwhile, Dr. Harper is putting the finishing touches on her materials for the first day of class. This term, Dr. Harper was tasked with creating the first undergraduate course focused on inclusive special education at her institution. Housed in the School of Education, this course was open to students within the School of Education as well as students with majors throughout the university. Dr. Harper is excited because there is a diverse population of majors and years of students, most of which are planning on careers in education. She hopes this course will instill the importance of advocacy to all students.*

The field of special education was born out of advocacy— an activity used by individuals or groups to influence policy and practice — and it is the professional responsibility of all special education teachers to continue to advocate (Fisher & Miller, 2021; Nagro et al., 2018). Special education teachers face challenges rooted in inequities based on race, socioeconomic status, and disability (Bettini et al., 2024). As such, special education teachers are required to enact advocacy efforts to challenge these deficit views and meet these challenges. The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) professional ethical principles and practice standards call for special educators to advocate for high expectations, inclusive education, safe, supportive, and culturally responsive learning environments, equitable policy, appropriate and supportive working environments and resources, professional development, the use of evidence-based practices, and opportunities to collaborate (CEC, 2015). To meet these advocacy needs, special educators must have a strengths-based perspective of their students, knowledge of their local education system's policies and practices, awareness that these contexts are malleable, and a belief in their own capacity as an agent of change (Li & Ruppar, 2020). In order

**FIGURE 1:** TED Talk Assignment Instructions

**Final Paper & Presentation – TED Talk: Inclusive Education Utopia**

Your final project for this class is to develop a TED Talk in which you make an argument about what constitutes an ideal inclusive classroom or school community and why this is good for kids with disabilities. The script you construct for your TED Talk is your final paper for this class and your TED Talk is your final presentation.

It is imperative that you have a thesis and make an argument in your TED Talk. You should not just be summarizing - what is your **novel idea** about inclusion? How does it benefit students with disabilities?

Guiding questions:

- What do you believe are the key components of an effective inclusive school community, and why?
- What are beliefs, policies, instructional practices, etc. that are harmful to an inclusive school community?
- How does inclusion contribute to a more equitable learning community and society?
- Who does inclusion serve? How does it do so?

This is an opportunity to synthesize the information you've learned and the discussions you've had to create the ideal inclusive educational environment, whatever that means to you. What you write and speak about should be based in theory and/or research– please utilize the resources we discuss in class! You should also feel free to utilize resources outside of our class content. Please refer to both the Presentation rubric and the Paper Rubric consistently as you develop your project.

Some example thesis statements (we will discuss thesis writing more in class!):

*Note: These are purposefully outrageous or about topics we didn't discuss much so as not to inadvertently limit the topic of your thesis statements*

- Effective parent collaboration and teacher professional development initiatives are essential components in the successful implementation of inclusive education.
- The implementation of daily, timed assessments in curriculum and classroom instruction is fundamental to creating an inclusive education system that holds all students accountable to the highest academic and behavioral standards.
- Leaders of a truly inclusive educational environment must ensure reliable and high-quality technology access for all students. Additionally, teachers must receive continuous and adequate professional development in order to effectively harness AT, AI, and other technologies to enhance instruction, not replace it.

The one thing all TED Talks have in common is that they are delivered by people who are passionate about and believe in what they are saying. Make sure that comes across in your TED Talk!

**TED Talk Paper Guidelines**

Your TED Talk script should be 6-8 pages, double-spaced, using a sans serif font (approximately size 12). Use APA formatting and include a References page. Please reach out to me if these guidelines are not accessible to you!

Your paper **must** make an argument about what constitutes an ideal inclusive classroom or school community and how this enhances the education for students with disabilities. You must have relevant and quality evidence and/or theory to support your thesis statement! If your thesis centers around instruction, you might use evidence related to EBPs, UDL, and/or co-teaching, but maybe not the transition to college, for example.

Other components you may want to address depending on your argument:

- Qualities of an inclusive teacher and/or qualities of an inclusive classroom community
  - What do you see and hear in an inclusive classroom?
  - What should students feel?
- Strategies to create an inclusive classroom community
- Explanation of the 3 UDL principles and how you plan to use them consistently
- Curricular materials and instruction
- Disrupting ableism on a whole-school level
- Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline for students with disabilities
- Policy and Advocacy work
- Considerations for specific populations (e.g., Black boys with autism)
- Proposed Physical layout of the classroom and/or school building
  - Provide a visual (not included in page count), as well as a description in words

**TED Talk Presentation Guidelines**

Your TED Talk should be between 6-8 minutes. You will assume the role of an invited speaker at a TED conference, and your classmates will be your audience.

*Please refer to both the Presentation rubric and the Paper Rubric consistently as you develop your project. These rubrics are both on BruinLearn*

to uphold these ethical principles and practice standards and effectively advocate, special education teachers need to be adequately prepared.

Encouraging special educators to enact change through advocacy dictates that university coursework, especially within teacher preparation programs, be explicit in advocacy instruction. Coursework should be intentional in the provision of advocacy related practice-based learning opportunities for pre-service teachers. This article provides one such example of advocacy integration and practice-based learning opportunities in an undergraduate course, actionable strategies to build pre-service teachers' advocacy knowledge and skills, and implications for incorporating advocacy into teacher preparation coursework.

## ADVOCACY IS A THEME, NOT A LESSON

Similar to advocacy work, developing a higher education course can be arduous. As demonstrated in the following course example within this article, synthesizing the most important concepts, strategies, tools, and lessons on inclusive special education into a quarter or semester can be a challenge but it is important to center advocacy in the course. In this example five-credit undergraduate education course, entitled "All Means All: Inclusive Teaching for Students with Disabilities," only one week is devoted to policy due to time constraints. This course meets once a week for three hours over the 10-week term, and satisfies both a general education requirement and an advanced writing requirement. Mini-lessons on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) are sprinkled throughout the course, with advocacy remaining as a consistent theme each week. In turn, advocacy was effectively a theme throughout the course rather than a standalone lesson or experience.

Having advocacy centered in the course should not only be reflected in content, but also in course structures, such as establishing learning goals indirectly or directly related to

**FIGURE 2:** Rubric for TED Talk Presentation

**Inclusion TED Talk - Presentation Rubric**

| Criteria | Effectively Accomplished 5 4 | Partially accomplished 3 2 | Not accomplished 1 0 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Attention Getter | Effective use of attention getting strategy (quote, statistic, question, story, etc.) to capture listeners' attention and to introduce topic. Attention getter is relevant and meaningful and seemed to gain the desired response from audience. | Use of relevant attention getting strategy, but did not seem to adequately capture audience attention and/or lead to desired outcome. | No attention getting strategy was evident. No clear or relevant connection to topic and/or speech purpose. |
| Thesis Statement | Speaker clearly formulated and stated thesis statement during the speech introduction. Thesis statement identifies topic and encompasses/previews main points. | Thesis is clearly implied, although not explicitly stated. Topic is clearly identified, but main points are not clearly previewed. | No thesis statement (implied nor explicit). Main points are not clearly identified, audience unsure of direction of the message. |
| Connection w/Audience | Thoughtful audience analysis reflected through language, tone, and interaction with audience. Clearly stated the relevance of topic to audience. | Some audience analysis reflected through language and tone. Topic seems somewhat relevant to audience, but not explicitly stated. | No attempt made to connect to audience OR ineffective tone and/or language for a TED Talk |
| Subject Knowledge | Depth of content reflects knowledge and understanding of topic. Main points adequately substantiated with timely, relevant and sufficient support. Provided accurate explanation of key concepts. | Provides some support for main points, but needed to elaborate further with explanations, examples, descriptions, etc. Support is relevant, but not timely. | Provides irrelevant or no support. Explanations of concepts are inaccurate or incomplete. Listeners gain little knowledge form presentation. |
| Organization | Uses effective organizational pattern for speech purpose. Main points are clearly distinguished from supporting details. Signposts are effectively used for smooth and coherent transitions. | General structure/organization seems adequate but some blurring between main points and supporting details. Logical flow, but no clear signposts for smooth transitions. | Lack of structure. Ideas are not coherent and transitions are forced or blurred. Difficult to identify introduction, body, and conclusion. |
| Logical appeal | Presents sound arguments to support major claim. Arguments are supported with sufficient, relevant and valid evidence. Reasoning is free of fallacies. | Some arguments are sufficiently supported but some unsupported assertions are also present. Minor reasoning fallacies. | Arguments lack relevant and valid evidence. Information is incorrect and/or outdated. Many fallacies are present in the reasoning. |
| Emotional appeal | Effectively and ethically appeals to audience emotions (anger, fear, compassion, etc.) to achieve the persuasive goal. Vivid and emotive language effectively used to create imagery to engage audience emotionally. | Appeals to audience emotions (anger, fear, compassion, etc.) to achieve the persuasive goal, but fails to observe ethical responsibilities. Creates some effective imagery through language. | Fails to appeal to audience emotions. No attempt to use vivid or descriptive language to capture audience emotions. |

advocacy and assignment criteria. The learning goals for this example course are listed below:

1. Demonstrate dignity towards disabled students and people.
2. Critique the social institution of special education using critical disability studies theories and frameworks.
3. Analyze sources and data by evaluating them for their positionality, significance, reliability, and validity.
4. Apply critical reflection and thinking practices through multi-modal and traditional methods of written expression.
5. Understand writing as a recursive process that facilitates deep critical thinking and strengthens communicative practices.
6. Communicate effectively by writing clearly in an appropriate style and organizing relevant evidence in support of an argument.
7. Synthesize research, theory, and lived experience to argue for an ideal inclusive educational environment for students with and without a variety of disabilities.
8. Explore your unique role in the fight for educational equity and disability justice, while creating lasting relationships with and continuously learning from other allies.

Although not all of these learning goals are directly related to advocacy, many of them reflect the skills and mindsets needed to be an effective advocate in the future.

Beyond the course learning goals, ensuring aspects of advocacy were included in each lesson ultimately prepared students to create successful final projects. Instead of a traditional research paper, focusing on the history, descriptives, or implementation of a particular teaching method or model, students were asked to create a TED Talk-esque presentation and write a corresponding

**FIGURE 3:** Rubric for TED Talk Paper

**Inclusion TED Talk - Paper Rubric**

| Criteria | Effectively Accomplished 5 4 | Partially accomplished 3 2 | Not accomplished 1 0 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Thesis Statement | Writer clearly formulated and stated a novel thesis statement during the introductory portion of the paper. Thesis statement identifies topic and encompasses/previews main points. | Thesis is clearly implied, although not explicitly stated. Topic is clearly identified, but main points are not clearly previewed. Thesis may be a summary of a commonplace argument. | No novel thesis statement (implied nor explicit). Main points are not clearly identified, audience unsure of direction of the message. |
| Attention to Audience | Thoughtful audience analysis reflected through language and tone. Clearly stated the relevance of topic to audience needs and interests. | Some audience analysis reflected through language and tone. Topic seems somewhat relevant to audience, but not explicitly stated. | Ineffective tone and/or language for a TED Talk that hinders the reader's ability to buy into main argument. |
| Subject Knowledge | Depth of content reflects knowledge and understanding of topic. Main points adequately substantiated with timely, relevant, and sufficient support. Provided accurate explanation of key concepts. | Provides some support for main points, but needed to elaborate further with explanations, examples, descriptions, etc. Support is relevant, but not timely. | Provides irrelevant or no support. Explanations of concepts are inaccurate or incomplete. Readers gain little new knowledge. |
| Organization | Uses effective organizational pattern for argumentative paper purposes. Main points are clearly distinguished from supporting evidence. Logical and coherent transitions. | General structure/organization seems adequate, but some blurring between main points and supporting details. Logical flow but lacks smooth transitions. | Lack of structure. Ideas are not coherent, and transitions are forced or blurred. Difficult to identify introduction, body, and conclusion. |
| Argument and Evidence | Presents sound arguments to support major claim. Arguments are supported with sufficient, relevant, and valid evidence. | Some arguments are sufficiently supported, but some unsupported assertions are also present. | Arguments lack relevant and valid evidence. Information is incorrect and/or outdated. |
| Counter Argument/Refutation | Balances a variety of perspectives and recognizes opposing views. | Fails to substantially acknowledge opposing perspectives. | One-sided argument. No other perspectives are considered. |
| Sources + Citations | Sources of information are clearly identified and properly cited. Contains both scholarly work and lived experiences as evidence. | Most sources are clearly cited. Contains both scholarly work and lived experiences as evidence. | Fails to identify and cite sources. May lack scholarly work or lived experience as evidence. |
| Attention to Editing | Few spelling, grammar, syntax, or diction errors. | Spelling, grammar, syntax, or diction errors are not uncommon. This may impact the readability of the TED talk. | Many spelling, grammar, syntax, or diction errors. This impacts the readability of the TED talk. |

paper in which they were tasked with arguing a position (any position) about inclusive education. Specific assignment instructions can be reviewed in Figure 1. Students had separate rubrics for both the TED Talk assignment and the related paper (as seen in Figures 2 and 3, respectively).

To ensure students were prepared to write high-quality papers and give persuasive TED Talks, the final assignment was scaffolded in smaller, intentional assignments throughout the course. Some of these assignments are explained in more detail in the following section about class lessons and assignments to build advocacy skills.

Scaffolding assignments in this way provides the instructor an opportunity to check for student understanding during each step of the writing process, enabling the instructor to make changes to instruction for the following week, if needed. This structure also allows for students to receive meaningful and timely feedback on every piece of their paper, empowering them to incorporate instructor feedback for the next stage of the writing process.

*When considering how to frame this course, Dr. Harper knew advocacy had to be infused in both macro- and micro-level ways. In this way, students were engaging in advocacy processes while learning about the significance of advocacy in education.*

*Madison is enrolled in Dr. Harper's class and excited to engage in content focused on inclusive special education. As she looks over the syllabus, she notices a focus in class content on advocacy. Madison wonders how advocacy skills will support her in becoming an impactful special education teacher.*

## CLASS LESSONS AND ASSIGNMENTS TO BUILD ADVOCACY SKILLS: A MODEL COURSE

Advocacy is a skill that must be taught, and previous research has demonstrated that advocacy skills can be taught to pre-service teachers (Holmes & Herrera, 2009). Some students are already effective orators, skilled in persuasion. Others, however, are initially uncomfortable with taking a stand on an issue or are unclear on how to best support their position. In this section, we detail a model course in which students

delved into advocacy. To both support students in developing an effective TED Talk and providing them with generalizable advocacy skills beyond the classroom, the course's syllabus contains several scaffolded opportunities for students to learn, practice, and refine their advocacy skills.

## Recurring Assignments

One of the ways student learning was scaffolded in this course was by providing recurring assignments that offered structure and familiarity to students while grappling with new concepts. For example, for each week of the course students were encouraged to watch a recommended TED Talk on topics such as restorative justice in juvenile courts to "making stress your friend." Although the subject of each TED Talk varied, they all contained a clear argument with the necessary evidence, credibility, and delivery to be persuasive. Not only would watching these talks help students better understand the structure and tone of a TED Talk, but this recurring assignment also supported students in better understanding key elements of advocacy – a clear position on a meaningful cause or policy and effective evidence supporting the argument - and the persuasive actions one can take to convince others to support their position.

Although the weekly TED Talk recommendations were just that, students were required to watch and analyze Edie Cusak's TED Talk entitled, "College - possible for students with intellectual disabilities" (TEDx Talks, 2017) as a class assignment during the eighth week of the course. Students dissected Cusak's use of visuals, explored the types of evidence she utilized, and ultimately determined how compelling her argument was. Finally, they identified what elements of her TED Talk they wanted to incorporate into their own.

Over the 10-week course, students were required to turn in five reflection assignments as after class post-work. Two of the five reflection assignments required students to develop and support an argument based on the class content for the week. The first of these reflections was assigned after Week Two's class and the second was assigned after Week Three's class. While the task for each reflection changed, the assignment directions remained largely unchanged throughout the term. The directions – "students should write 2 thoughtful pages (unless noted otherwise), double spaced, using a sans serif font (approximately size 12)" – were clear and simple to further illustrate the low-stakes nature of these writing exercises. Both in class and on their syllabus, students were told reflections are best completed soon after class, when the class material, discussions, and activities are still fresh in their minds. However, due to competing demands on their time, students had until the start of the next week's class to turn in their reflections through the university's learning management system.

All students received feedback on their reflections and were consistently encouraged to read the comments the instructor left. Students earned full points on reflection assignments if they followed the directions and answered the questions posed. It has been demonstrated that low stakes, write-to-learn assignments, such as the reflections described above, can lead to improved learning and retention of concepts (Gingerich et al., 2014; Stevenson, 2020).

*When developing this course, Dr. Harper acknowledged that the content could, at times, be uncomfortable for students. She decided to embed a familiar assignment structure along with frequent feedback in order to encourage participation from students and support their learning.*

## Special Education Law and Policy Assignment

During the third week of class, students were introduced to disability and special education law through a modified jigsaw activity. Active learning activities, such as the jigsaw, have been found to enhance critical thinking skills in college students (Rossi et al., 2021). As they entered class for the day, students were given a fidget of one of three colors (i.e., red, blue, or green). Students were allowed to self-select their groups, as student-selected groups perform on par with instructor-selected groups (Pociask et al., 2017). While students had autonomy in creating their groups, the instructor was also able to maintain some control by requiring groups to have three people with three different color fidgets.

Once in their jigsaw groups, students had a few minutes to collaborate and select one of five important cases in the history of special education law. Students were provided the following options: P.A.R.C. v. Pennsylvania (1972), Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia (1972), Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley (1982), Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon (1993), and Smith v. Los Angeles Unified School District (1993). After selecting their desired case, groups were shown an example from which to model their work after, and the class reviewed various helpful resources, such as the Oyez.org and Disability Rights California websites. Equipped with assignment directions and appropriate resources, each group then researched their case and answered the required questions. The questions included the following: What was happening in society at this time? What was the context? What conditions led to this suit being brought? Who stood to gain and lose power in this case? Imagine what consequences/

**FIGURE 4:** In Class Debate Graphic Organizer

**Inclusive Education Debate Prep**

**Debate Format**

Team Affirmative opening statement (4 minutes)

Team Negative opening statement (4 minutes)

Team Affirmative rebuttal (5 minutes)

Team Negative rebuttal (5 minutes)

Team: _____

**Opening Statement**

| Thesis/Argument: | | |
|---|---|---|
| Key Evidence For:<br><br>Citation: | Key Evidence For:<br><br>Citation: | Key Evidence For:<br><br>Citation: |

**Rebuttal**

| Potential Counterargument: What do you think the other side will argue? How can you refute their argument? | | |
|---|---|---|
| Potential Counterargument<br><br>How will we refute it?<br><br>Citation: | Potential Counterargument<br><br>How will we refute it?<br><br>Citation: | Potential Counterargument<br><br>How will we refute it?<br><br>Citation: |

ramifications there could be for either side if the judge sided with the plaintiff. What about with the defense? How did the outcome of this case change individual lives? Education? Society? What tropes and/or common beliefs about disability are challenged by this case and its ruling? In what ways do you see the impact of this case's decision in today's society?

Towards the end of class, students dispersed from their jigsaw groups and joined a group with classmates who were given the same color fidget as they were (i.e., all students with red fidgets now became a group). In this group, every student represented each of the five different court cases and were able to report out to the other students in their group about their selected case.

## In Class Debate Activity

Debate instruction has shown to improve college students' critical thinking skills (Li et al., 2020; Oros, 2007), as well as improve students' self-perceptions of their communication skills (Chikeleze et al., 2018; Zare & Othman, 2015). As such, Week Five was centered around an in-class debate on inclusive education. In preparation, students read and annotated an article arguing against full inclusion using the social annotation tool, Perusall, before coming to Week Five's class. Perusall allows instructors to upload course readings to an online platform and then annotate the readings with comments or questions, directing the students to a particular concept or idea in the text. Instructors and students can see each other's comments, questions, and responses in real time, so students are able to build off of their classmates' ideas. The use of Perusall has been demonstrated to motivate students to engage with curriculum-based reading (Li & Li, 2023).

For this assignment, students were required to answer four questions that were posed about the article, paying particular attention to the argumentative structure and evidence the author used to argue her claim. The questions included the following: What elements of argumentation (discussed in Week 4) do you

see in this article? What evidence does the author use in this paragraph? What types of evidence does the author use or draw upon to sway her readers? (e.g., personal experience, empirical data, anecdotal stories, laws/legal precedence, etc.) In your own words, what is the author's stance/thesis on inclusive education? What were the author's best and worst pieces of evidence? How effective was the author's argument? After reading the article, how do you feel about inclusive education for students with disabilities?

At the start of class, students had an opportunity to review and summarize the article with their peers before engaging in a whole class discussion about it. This was done to help students recall the key arguments of the article before engaging in the debate. Students were then given the structure and rules of the debate, as well as the two positions: in favor of full inclusion (Team Affirmative) and against full inclusion (Team Negative). The latter position carried various meanings, including advocating for half-day inclusion or full inclusion only for certain populations. Students were randomly divided into two teams and provided a graphic organizer (see Figure 4 above) to collaborate on the evidence for their position, potential counterarguments the other team might utilize, and how to effectively rebut those counterarguments. In the debate, teams gave opening statements and rebuttal statements before the online contingent (students who were ill and participating in class via Zoom) determined a "winner."

During the debate debrief, students answered questions about the utility of the debate for their TED Talks and final paper, but also about the strength of the evidence each team presented and how well the evidence supported the claim. For example, students were asked to identify the strongest pieces of evidence from each team and explain why these specific pieces of evidence were so integral to the overall argument. The debrief highlighted the dissatisfaction of some students on the negative team with this activity, as they felt they had less evidence from which to draw on as compared to the affirmative team and were arguing against their personal principles. However, the majority of students recognized the value of the debate in developing their advocacy skills. That is, most students generally agreed that the debate activity supported the development of the skills necessary for effective persuasion.

*Madison was struck by the debate activity in Dr. Harper's class. She had been assigned to debate with a position she did not agree with. However, she felt that by doing this it helped push her out of her comfort zone and forced her to think critically. She realized these skills will be crucial moving forward in her role as a special education teacher in order to advocate for students and compromise with stakeholders with opposing perspectives.*

## Wrapping and Stepping Up

Instruction for Week Nine was focused explicitly on special education policy and advocacy. The relevant learning outcomes for the week were as follows:

1. Students will be able to identify various key players and moments in disability advocacy history.
2. Students will be able to empathize with stakeholders in disability or special education advocacy and policy work.

For their pre-work to be completed before the start of the week's class, students were required to read, comment on, and answer questions about the article, "When to Hold 'Em and When to Fold' Em: Lessons Learned from Enacting the Americans with Disabilities Act" (Wright & West, 2002), using Perusall. In answering the instructor-posed questions, students identified strategic actions they thought were most impactful for the eventual passage of the ADA, such as sharing the lived experiences written about in diaries and the importance of bipartisan support and champions on both sides of the aisle. Additionally, students were asked to envision life as a lobbyist and reflect on what organization or policy issue was important enough to them to consider a career in this field. They wrestled with the three principles the ADA coalition agreed to and whether they would have made the same decision. The reading provided students both important historical information on the passage of the ADA, but also demonstrated what successful advocacy could look like. In addition to the reading, students were also required to watch videos of the CEC Senior Advisor on Policy and Advocacy, Kuna Tavalin, explaining advocacy and the legislative process ahead of Week Nine's class.

Week Nine's class included a mini-lecture with an accompanying slide deck on the key moments and players in special education and disability advocacy. This included Judy Heumann's legacy, the 504 sit-ins, and the Capitol Crawl for ADA, in addition to the relevant committees, structures, and leaders in Congress. Students learned about the interplay among lobbyists, coalitions, advocates, and advocacy organizations. To demonstrate their understanding of these concepts, students wrote a short diary entry from the point of view of a disability advocate, congressperson, or special education lobbyist. The prompt for this in-class writing assignment is as follows: Write from the point of view of a disability advocate, congressperson, special education lobbyist, etc. in any time period you want, in any place you want. Who are you? What is your connection to disability? What views do you hold on disability rights?

**TABLE 1:** Ten Steps for Legislative Advocacy for Special Education Teachers

| STEP # | STEP DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 1 | Develop an advocacy mindset |
| 2 | Take a stance |
| 3 | Be active in advocacy organizations |
| 4 | Join social media groups |
| 5 | Connect with other special educators |
| 6 | Communicate effectively |
| 7 | Contact policy makers |
| 8 | Develop strong leadership skills |
| 9 | Stay informed |
| 10 | Stay engaged |

*Note. Adapted from "Legislative advocacy for special educators" by Fisher, K., & Miller, K. M. (2021), Teaching Exceptional Children, 53(3), 244-252.*

What is going on in this time period in terms of disability rights? What is your involvement in disability rights? What role do you play? What are your responsibilities? What challenges are you facing? What successes are you having? What keeps you going?

### Final Project and Paper

During the final week of instruction, students in this course presented their TED Talks to their classmates and professor. During each presentation, students filled out Google Forms asking them to share a takeaway from the presentation, as well as positive feedback for the presenter, while the instructor graded the student based on the rubric (Figure 2). In this way, students received another round of feedback from both their peers and their instructor on the persuasiveness of their argument - a key element of advocacy. The TED Talk paper was due the following week, in lieu of a final exam, providing students one final evaluation of their ability to present a persuasive argument.

### Learning About Advocacy is the Beginning, Not the End

Advocacy in the field of special education is, and has always been, a necessity. The course described in this article provides strategies and ideas for lessons that can be implemented into any special education credential or degree coursework. Further, while these lessons are not only important, they contain skills pre-service teachers *want* to learn. Advocacy, therefore, is not just important to teach for the future of the profession and for PreK-12 students with disabilities, but also because higher education students, including pre-service special education teachers, enjoy learning the skills needed to enact their agency and advocate for a better future.

Special education teachers can use their skills to engage in advocacy at different levels including their classrooms, schools, local communities, and states, as well as federally. Fisher and Miller (2021) provide insight for how to engage at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as ten steps for legislative advocacy for special educators. These steps are provided in Table 1, and are a helpful framework for in-service special education teachers and instructors responsible for creating courses in special education teacher preparation. The steps provided by Fisher and Miller (2011) help promote agency within special education teachers. Relatedly, special educator teacher agency is a driving influence of teacher advocacy (Li & Ruppar, 2021). Taken together, agency and being well-equipped with skills and resources drive meaningful advocacy in special education, as they empower educators to take initiative, influence policy, and create positive change across various levels of the educational system.

*Leaving Dr. Harper's final class, Madison feels empowered to enter the special education teaching profession. In this course, she was reminded of the marginalization that students with disabilities often experience, and has begun to consider ways to mitigate and eventually eliminate this marginalization. Madison also feels that her argumentative writing and speaking skills have greatly improved as a result of this class, setting her up to be a successful advocate for her students in the future.*

*As the last students trickle out of her classroom, Dr. Harper can't help but smile. She is proud of the work students have done in her class this term. From learning about special education history and the policies that came out of it, to practicing argumentative writing and debating, and so much more, they are well positioned to begin advocating beyond her classroom and instead out into the world.*

## IMPLICATIONS

If knowledge and training on advocacy is not provided in preparation programs, special education teachers must rely on their innate abilities. Special education teachers, especially novice ones, already report their workloads as being unmanageable (Bettini et al., 2017). Providing adequate training and preparation in advocacy for special education teachers is one less thing that they would need to navigate on their own in the field. Relatedly, by integrating advocacy into coursework,

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this helps better prepare pre-service teachers to navigate systemic barriers that could impede on their work or their students' progress.

The course described in this article uses many interactive strategies to mirror real-world circumstances pre-service special education teachers may encounter. By using these strategies rather than ones that would be more traditional and potentially passive, this allowed students to practice and refine their skills in a structured, supportive environment. As such, the design and instruction within the course modeled instructional techniques that they could carry into their own practice along with the advocacy skills they were developing. Overall, coursework that is advocacy focused presents an opportunity to bridge the research-to-practice gap by having evidence-based practices, such as those showcased in this course, incorporated and used to influence school-based decision making along with corresponding policies. In addition, emphasizing that advocacy work takes time and meaningful relationships (Fisher & Miller, 2021) are important lessons that must work in tandem with evidence-based practices.

*After finishing her undergraduate degree and earning her special education teaching credential, Madison accepts a special education teacher position at a local elementary school. As the school year progresses, Madison finds herself having to advocate for her students to administrators who seem to lack knowledge about special education. Madison also feels like she is the only one continuously advocating for these students, despite the students interacting with multiple teachers. It is clear to Madison that these other teachers have not been prepared to advocate like she was in Dr. Harper's class, making her feel somewhat alone in the fight. She remembers she is not, and Madison emails Dr. Harper seeking advice.*

*Just as she is about to close her laptop for the evening, Dr. Harper receives an email from her former student, Madison. In her email, Madison details the conundrum she is in with advocating for her students and feeling somewhat isolated in doing so. Dr. Harper is thankful Madison has reached out, and she recommends connecting with other special education teachers at their upcoming school district professional development day. It may be these other special education teachers have similar grievances to what Madison is feeling at her school, and Dr. Harper thinks in their shared community they can brainstorm solutions together and further organize advocacy efforts that may need to be taken to the school board. Dr. Harper also recommends that Madison reach out to her local and state chapters of the Council for Exceptional Children to engage with other special education professionals and gain access to more resources for both advocacy and knowledge building. Madison could bring these resources to her administrators to help them gain further understanding regarding special education, which seems like a need. Dr. Harper believes with increasing her connections both within her school district, local community, and state, as well as adding to the resources and information she has available to her and her school, Madison will effectively bolster her advocacy efforts.*

## CONCLUSION

Advocacy is intertwined in every facet of special education, including, importantly, how pre-service special education teachers are prepared. Coursework needs to have pre-service teachers actively engage in skills such as argumentative writing, debate, and policy analysis in order to cultivate advocacy and teacher agency. If this is not accomplished in a preparation, degree, or otherwise credentialing program, special education teachers enter the workforce without these crucial skills and knowledge that they need on the first day of their jobs to effectively advocate for their students. This article showcased an undergraduate class that can be used as a model for programs on integrating advocacy in their coursework. Ultimately, advocacy can and should be incorporated in every pre-service special educator course. While the topic of inclusive special education lends itself well to concurrent advocacy instruction, the primary content in the course described in this article was inclusive education and not about policy or advocacy. This distinction underscores that advocacy is not a standalone skill but an essential thread that can and should be seamlessly woven into the fabric of every course in a special education preparation program.

**For access to the full syllabus of the example course described in this article, please contact the first author.*

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# From Classrooms to Capitol Hill: Special Education Doctoral Students in Advocacy and Policy

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## ABSTRACT
As experts that have recently transitioned from practicing in the special education field, special education doctoral students are crucial levers that can influence special education policy and advocacy initiatives. This article details the unique role doctoral students play in this work, ways doctoral students can familiarize themselves with advocacy and policy information and resources, and how they can navigate opportunities related to advocacy and policy within their institutions and externally. Action steps for doctoral students are included. Implications for training and including doctoral students in special education policy and advocacy work are also discussed.

## KEYWORDS
**Advocacy, doctoral students, policy, special education, teacher education**

There is an ongoing need for new faculty and other leaders in special education (Smith & Montrosse, 2012), especially those that are trained in policy and advocacy (Nagro et al., 2019; 2020). The path to meeting this need begins with doctoral students. Yet, their individual paths to becoming well-informed, skilled advocates may differ depending on their own knowledge and skills, coursework, and relevant opportunities to engage in advocacy (Frake et al., in press). Nevertheless, doctoral students in special education or adjacent programs (e.g., reading) are uniquely positioned as inherent advocates given not only their areas of research, but also, and perhaps more importantly, their lived experiences in the field. These experiences are powerful currency when it comes to advocacy. This article aims to contextualize the role doctoral students can play in advocacy and policy, to provide initial information and further resources doctoral students can use to familiarize themselves with the basics of advocacy and policy, and to discuss how they can effectively navigate and advocate within both internal and external systems. Action steps for doctoral students are provided at the end of each section to facilitate the integration of recommendations into practice. The authors of this article, as both current and former doctoral students themselves, hope to inform and empower doctoral students as well as the institutions they are a part of.

## THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DOCTORAL STUDENT

Doctoral students are uniquely positioned to engage in special education advocacy due to their blend of practical experience, developing research expertise, and aspirations to influence change. Many enter doctoral programs with backgrounds as special education teachers, administrators, or related service providers, bringing with them first-hand knowledge of the challenges facing students with disabilities and those who serve them. This foundation not only shapes their identities as future teacher educators and researchers but also provides a powerful lens through which to understand the role of policy in special education. While policymakers often seek input from those with direct classroom experience, doctoral students can extend

**TABLE 1:** Key Terminology in Special Education Policy and Advocacy

| Term | Description | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B | IDEA Part B Grants provide significant funding for states to support personnel development, including preparing and training special education teachers. These grants are allocated based on a formula considering child population, poverty levels, and prior IDEA appropriations. | https://sites.ed.gov/idea/ |
| Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) | Title I of ESSA targets resources at low-income students, and funds can be used to support professional development for teachers serving these students, including those with disabilities. | https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/laws-preschool-grade-12-education/every-student-succeeds-act-essa |
| U.S. Department of Education (ED) | ED is responsible for the equitable education of all students, with all abilities, and in all states. This includes students with disabilities and gifts, as well as students needing adult education or correctional education. | https://www.ed.gov/about |
| Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) | OSERS plays a larger role in the development and enactment of policy for people with disabilities. | https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/osers |
| Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) | OSEP "administers the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which authorizes formula grants to states under Part B, grants to lead agencies for the infants and families program under Part C, and discretionary grants under Part D to institutions of higher education and other non-profit organizations to support grants for state personnel development, technical assistance and dissemination, technology, personnel development, and parent-training and information centers." | https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/osers/osep#about-osep |

their impact beyond policy meetings. Advocacy at this level often involves writing about policy implications in manuscripts, shaping teacher preparation curricula, presenting at conferences, and contributing to grant proposals. By actively pursuing policy-rich learning opportunities, engaging with mentors, and recognizing that policy is deeply woven into all areas of educational research, doctoral students can embrace advocacy as a core part of their professional identity.

As developing scholars and future leaders in the field, doctoral students play a multifaceted role in special education advocacy that extends far beyond direct policy engagement. Their previous professional experiences grounds their advocacy in the day-to-day realities of schools, classrooms, and related communities, allowing them to speak with both credibility and empathy. Through their research, doctoral students contribute to knowledge that can inform legislation, influence educational practices, and advance equity for students with disabilities. In their roles as teaching assistants or instructors, doctoral students have the opportunity to embed advocacy within teacher preparation, modeling how future educators can speak up. The doctoral journey provides a space to develop the knowledge, voice, and confidence needed to advocate effectively. Whether through community partnerships, data-driven storytelling, or research, doctoral students in special education are positioned not only to understand intricate policy landscapes, but also to actively shape education and related systems.

*Action Step: Write out your story. Include your personal experiences as a former special education teacher or other professional in the field and how they can tie to advocacy efforts. Read your story to people both in and outside the field of special education to seek their recommendations to refine your story for clarity and maximize impact.*

## GETTING FAMILIAR WITH ADVOCACY AND POLICY AS A DOCTORAL STUDENT

Understanding the field of special education's specific terminology and related concepts, especially those related to advocacy and policy, is necessary yet can be overwhelming. Though doctoral students need not memorize all of the organizational structure, laws, or history of special education in the United States, it is important that they are familiar with the existing vocabulary, acronyms, and foundational concepts of special education policy and advocacy that are fundamental across governmental and higher education institutions. Importantly, each state also has its own department of education and additional acronyms and policies that are essential

**TABLE 1:** OSERS Funding Sources for Doctoral Students

| Funding Source | Description |
|---|---|
| Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant Program | This program provides grants to individuals who agree to teach in high-need fields, including special education, in elementary and secondary schools. |
| Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant Program | SEED grants support states in developing or refining comprehensive, evidence-based systems for educator preparation, recruitment, and support. This can include initiatives to attract and retain special education teachers. |
| Special Education Training and Improvement (SETI) Grants | SETI grants support higher education institutions in developing and implementing innovative programs to improve the quality and effectiveness of personnel preparing to serve children with disabilities. |
| Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program | This program provides scholarships to individuals who agree to teach STEM subjects, including in high-need schools, potentially serving students with disabilities. |
| Higher Education Act Title II, Part A- Institutional Aid Programs: | Institutions with high poverty rates can potentially utilize these funds for activities like strengthening teacher preparation programs, including those that prepare special education teachers. |
| HEA Title IV Grants | These grants provide various forms of student financial aid, including Pell Grants and Federal Work-Study, which can indirectly support students pursuing special education teaching programs |
| HEA Title VI, International Education Programs | Funds for certain programs may support faculty development or exchange programs related to special education. |
| HEA Title VII, Bilingual Education Programs | Funding for bilingual education programs could be used to support training special education teachers to work with students with disabilities who are also English language learners. |
| Research Grants | The Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) awards grants to support research on effective practices for preparing and training special education teachers. Findings from these studies can inform future funding initiatives. |
| ESSER Funds | ESSER Funds provide significant funding to state and local governments to address issues created by the COVID-19 Pandemic, including staffing issues. |

to institutions as well as local and state-based advocacy efforts. Knowing these concepts, vocabulary, and acronyms can help doctoral students to effectively participate in current conversations, research, and advocacy efforts. As such, we will briefly review key terms of organizations and entities that are important to this field and the policy therein below and in Table 1. Although there are many critical concepts within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), we do not have space to cover them all here. We encourage doctoral students to review core aspects of this legislation including, but not limited to, *free and appropriate public education (FAPE)*, *least restrictive environment (LRE)*, and *individualized education programs (IEPs)*. These play a vital role in special education advocacy and are made up of people, politics, process, and policy.

First, at the time of the writing of this article, the highest federal office of education is the United States Department of Education (ED). Under ED is the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), which is responsible for the support of all people with disabilities, including children, youth, and adults. OSERS provides funding opportunities for educators and researchers and is a resource for potential scholarships and support for doctoral students (See Table 2). Next, under OSERS is the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which is responsible for leading and supporting the education of all students with disabilities from birth through 21 years of age. OSEP is particularly important for doctoral students in special education because it helps to fund the training of special educators through its grant programs. It also provides grants for training, research, and community efforts to support students with disabilities, their families, and their larger communities. These three nested entities (i.e., ED, OSERS, and OSEP) work together to create, support, enact, and uphold policy, funding, and supports for special education. They administer equitable education for students with disabilities in accordance with IDEA.

Advocacy and policy inherently involve people of various cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds (West, 2023). This will mean that doctoral students may advocate and learn alongside others who may not believe or uphold the same values or politics that they do. For example, although people may agree that the equality of educational opportunity for students is important regardless of ability, some components of IDEA's

implementation—such as how much funding is allotted to students with disabilities—remain a source of contention within the field of special education policy and advocacy (Barnard-Brak et al., 2023; Kolbe et al., 2022). As doctoral students become immersed in the world of special education policy and advocacy, we recommend they embrace this diversity of beliefs as a part of their policy journey, continuing to read, learn, and ask questions, even from those who may hold differing beliefs.

## The 4P Framework

When first getting acquainted with educational policy and advocacy measures, Jane West's (2023) book, *Advocating for the Common Good: People, Politics, Process, and Policy on Capitol Hill*, provides a comprehensive yet approachable introduction. This book, as indicated by the title, explores the four "Ps" of policy, aptly named the *4P framework*. Understanding the 4P framework can help orient new doctoral students to policy analysis and policy advocacy (West, 2023). The 4P framework is an analytical method for translating actions of policymakers for accessibility purposes for the public (West, 2023). This framework reflects four components: (a) the *people* involved in policymaking, (b) the *process* that transforms an idea into a policy, (c) navigating the political *landscape* while advocating, and (d) a holistic understanding of *policy* itself. By systematically analyzing these four dimensions, the 4P framework equips educational stakeholders of various policy backgrounds with a comprehensive toolkit for making informed decisions, fostering transparency, and enhancing the accessibility of policy-related information. It offers a structured approach for breaking down the complexities of policy development and implementation, making it an invaluable tool in the realm of public policy analysis and communication for doctoral students.

### *People*

There are multiple parties involved in the development of policies. Outside of policymakers, one must consider the role of other stakeholders such as local education agencies (LEAs), state education agencies (SEAs), and outside organizations. With this comes competing initiatives and conflicts of opinion, but also opportunities for compromise. On the policy side, one must understand the role of policymakers and provide a problem and solution equation for consideration. Policymakers are also involved in balancing competing priorities, commonly resulting in give-and-take type decisions (West, 2023). Collaboration amongst education stakeholders (e.g., SEAs, LEAs, teacher preparation programs) can create a mutual understanding of how a policy's implementation will impact individuals and groups from multiple perspectives. Additional potential allies for advocacy efforts include parents, students, and professional organizations such as the Higher Education Consortium of Special Education (HECSE) or the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). As doctoral students become involved in policy-related work, they should consider the full extent of potential partners. This can open opportunities for collaboration and lead to the creation of advocacy teams consisting of multiple stakeholders representing various aspects of special education. Additionally, learning the perspectives of others that may reflect conflicts of opinion or competing initiatives can help doctoral students craft their message in a way that shows consideration of the broader advocacy community.

### *Processes*

There are two subsets of processes that are critical to the advocacy process. First, there are general timelines within the policymaking process during which policymakers and their staff are actively involved in developing new policies. Secondly, there are processes associated with existing funding sources and their historical allotment to support programs and enrollment in special education teacher preparation programs. Understanding both is critical in identifying successful allocations and advocating for future funds. For example, IDEA has been the primary funding stream for special education for the last 50 years. IDEA contains four components: (a) General Provisions (Part A), (b) Assistance for Education of all Children with Disabilities (Part B), (c) Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (Part C), and (d) National Activities to Improve Education of Children with Disabilities (Part D). Each component has a specific purpose to financially support access to FAPE for students with disabilities. IDEA financial allocations are included within the federal budget process and are completed on an annual basis. Therefore, understanding the direct connections between potential funding implications of the four components of IDEA and developing an advocacy plan that follows the federal budget cycle is critical at specific times of the year. The federal budget cycle begins with the president's budget proposal early in the fiscal year. This sets the initial funding recommendations and identifies the priorities of the executive branch. Through the spring and summer, Congress engages in the appropriations process where crucial decisions are made on the upcoming fiscal budget. Sometimes, Congress fails to pass appropriations bills by the start of the new fiscal year. When this happens, there are further opportunities to influence decision making through continuing resolutions or budget negotiations. Consistent advocacy during these periods, coupled with compelling data and personal stories, is essential to

**TABLE 3:** Special Education Advocacy Resources for Doctoral Students

| Books | Podcasts | Websites |
|---|---|---|
| *Advocating for the Common Good: People, Politics, Process, and Policy on Capitol Hill* by Jane E. West<br><br>*Special Education Law and Policy: From Foundation to Application* by Jacqueline Rodriguez and Wendy W. Murawski<br><br>*Wrightslaw: Special education law* (3rd edition) by Peter W.D. Wright & Pamela Darr Wright | The TED and CEC Collaboration Podcast, Available on Spotify and Apple Podcasts<br><br>Have You Heard Podcast: https://www.haveyouheardpodcast.com/ | CEC Learning Library: https://exceptionalchildren.org/learninglibrary<br><br>CEC Policy and Advocacy portal: https://exceptionalchildren.org/policy-and-advocacy<br><br>TASH Advocacy Tools & Resources: https://tash.org/advocacy-tools-resources/ |

ensuring adequate support for students with disabilities.

### *Politics*

West (2023) argues that politics cannot be removed from the process of policymaking regardless of circumstances. This includes both the inner politics of doctoral programs and more traditional politics amongst government officials. Advocates must understand these politics in order to determine the necessary steps for navigating the political landscape of their own universities and programs, K-12 schools, and policymakers at all levels. Although not as simple as presented here, understanding the political parties of policymakers and their historic stances on issues can help to craft a message that is more likely to be received positively. Additionally, understanding the logistics of doctoral programs will help to establish policy-related ideas that can be sustainably implemented with fidelity.

Outside of policymakers themselves, education stakeholders must also consider other levels of policy. This includes the political dynamics that SEAs must navigate, university-level politics that impact teacher preparation programs, and local level politics faced by LEAs. For example, state departments of education exist under the controlling executive power in each state. Therefore, political influence may introduce suggestions, barriers to approval, or expedited processes for policies that match the goals of the administration. Teacher preparation programs may further face internal political struggles based on school administration and their beliefs on strategies to support needs. For example, faculty may need to obtain multiple layers of approval from different administrators to implement a program. Procedures may require departmental decisions related to key program components and faculty involvement. Finally, LEAs may need to have initiatives approved by the superintendent, other administrators, and/or the local school board.

### *Policies*

Policy development is complex and often reflects diverse stakeholder perspectives. As a result, policy development also includes considerations of competing initiatives. Each group, informed by its own internal processes and political beliefs, contributes unique needs and ideas to the solution-finding process. Constructing policies that genuinely address the multifaceted needs of these stakeholders is important for creating effective and sustainable change. Collaborative efforts are essential in aligning diverse interests, fostering a shared understanding, and building consensus. By aligning needs and developing comprehensive solutions, doctoral students, constituents, and other interested parties can amplify their advocacy efforts and present a compelling case to policymakers.

Doctoral students' work can contribute to the development and support of policy solutions. These students are often engaged in synthesizing research literature within their doctoral programs. Therefore, they are uniquely positioned to uncover critical data that can inform and bolster potential policies. Their work can provide the research foundation necessary to advocate for effective interventions and practices. Furthermore, through the intentional integration of policy implications into their scholarly work, doctoral students can influence and educate other advocates, further expanding the reach and impact of their research.

*Action Steps:*

- *Know the popular acronyms and terms (see Table 1) that are widely used across governmental and higher education institutions (e.g. ED, OSEP, OSERS).*
- *Learn more about the history of special education law through books, podcasts, and other resources. See Table 3 for suggested resources from the authors.*
- *Examine aspects of your own work where each aspect of the 4P framework could apply.*

## NAVIGATING WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

Within doctoral programs, there are occasions to intentionally pursue an interest in education policy. While most doctoral students will follow a set

course of study for the majority of their program, there may be elective opportunities to study outside of one's own field by enrolling in courses with a direct policy connection that can be broadly applied across disciplines. Engaging with other scholars interested in policy can deepen understanding. Additionally, applying knowledge in varied contexts can further generalize these concepts. Although some doctoral courses may not explicitly include policy opportunities, students might find ways to incorporate policy literature, make connections to chosen research topics, and consider policy implications in class discussions and assignments. These examples are opportunities for doctoral students to practice and grow in their understanding of advocacy and policy during their coursework.

Beyond the doctoral classroom, there are many other avenues for practicing and applying policy and advocacy skills in real-time within institutions. Each student's research topic(s) is likely a problem of practice, and there will likely be other faculty members at the institution that share an interest in the same area. Connecting with these faculty members can be key for locating additional opportunities for teaching, research, and service. Some doctoral students will benefit from having a policy expert as part of their future research team. Like-minded faculty members can offer connections to an often vast group of individuals that can help doctoral students build a professional network with an intentional focus on overall policy and advocacy goals.

In order to develop their skills as future policy and advocacy experts, doctoral students must purposefully create and capitalize on opportunities within both the classroom and institution. However, it is important to note the need for balance. This is crucial for doctoral students to ensure that their skills are holistically developed and reflected through their research, teaching, and service. Many skills develop simultaneously during doctoral studies through these three outlets. Some examples include obtaining, reading, and synthesizing literature; curriculum development and teaching; understanding a variety of research methods; and public speaking. Finding ways to develop each of these collectively can help to streamline the process. Each of these areas might include an explicit policy focus, but this is not necessarily a prerequisite for a doctoral student's future policy and advocacy work. For example, a student's development of general writing skills will ultimately impact their ability to disseminate policy-focused work in the future. Developing as a writer will likely include many opportunities to write about topics unrelated to policy. Balancing work to include a policy focus, where applicable, while also developing the general skills required of higher education faculty can lead to a well-rounded professional skillset that is backed up by knowledge of the policy and advocacy world.

*Action Step: Identify one upcoming course assignment, institutional opportunity, or research activity where you can integrate a policy or advocacy component. Document how this experience contributes to your growth as both a scholar and an advocate.*

## A Call to Action for Institutions: Integrating Advocacy into Doctoral Coursework

Institutions need to effectively prepare doctoral students in advocacy and policy (Nagro et al., 2019; 2020). To meaningfully prepare the next generation of special education scholars and leaders, institutions must embed advocacy skill development as a deliberate and integrated component of the doctoral experience. This requires a shift in how programs conceptualize the roles and responsibilities of emerging scholars. That is, doctoral students are not only budding researchers and teacher educators but also influential agents in relation to the policies and systems in which they operate. As such, programs should provide structured opportunities for doctoral students to develop and apply advocacy competencies across their coursework, research, and service experiences. Programs might consider introducing formal coursework or seminar series focused on education policy, legislative processes, and stakeholder engagement.

Faculty involvement in such program efforts is crucial. Even in the absence of dedicated policy courses or opportunities to incorporate such courses into a course of study—which was the case for two of the three authors in their own doctoral coursework—faculty can find ways to embed advocacy-relevant assignments into existing classes. Further, mentorship is another critical lever for building advocacy capacity. Faculty can model advocacy by sharing their own policy engagement work and inviting students to participate in these efforts, whether through committee work, collaborative writing, or public scholarship. Additionally, faculty members can support doctoral students in building their own professional networks. For instance, faculty may be more informed on the broader field of professionals who are involved in specific research and policy work. Facilitating an introduction to these individuals can initiate doctoral students' involvement with policy-related activities.

Some doctoral students may find limited opportunities to engage in policy work based on program opportunities and faculty priorities. However, these students may be able to pursue program electives by asking about policy-related courses that fall outside of the traditional program track but may still meet requirements. There might be policy-focused courses designed for programs and majors outside of education. Such

courses could allow doctoral students in special education to learn about competing initiatives while engaging with other students that view policy through have a lens that goes beyond education. This also presents the opportunity for doctoral students to represent the field of education amongst peers of other disciplines, mimicking future spaces where faculty engage in advocacy efforts focused toward individuals without a special education background.

Research is needed to more fully understand the impacts of these institutional shifts on long-term outcomes of advocacy training in doctoral education, including how graduates engage with policy, influence systems change, and mentor the next generation of advocates. Furthermore, efforts across the field need to complement those of institutions. By envisioning and enacting these changes, the field of special education can ensure that doctoral students are not only prepared to generate knowledge but also to leverage it in the service of equity, access, and justice for students with disabilities and their families.

## NAVIGATING OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONS

One of the most helpful ways to navigate opportunities related to advocacy and policy external to the institution(s) doctoral students are a part of is to seek local, state, and national organizations and associations with similar advocacy interests. First, if a doctoral student is interested in a specific topic or need (e.g., student mental health) or population (e.g., students with intellectual and developmental disabilities), we recommend searching online to find local and state organizations who support those specific needs or populations. Organizations and associations who educate the public and support individuals with disabilities may also have advocacy and policy initiatives. Additionally, a doctoral student might locate other higher education institutions, faith-based organizations, or research agencies across their state that are involved in the causes and populations they care about. Students might explore such possibilities by reaching out to local schools or faith-based groups for information on becoming involved in their policy and advocacy support, especially if located in a rural or less populated area. Lastly, doctoral students might connect with state units or chapters of national organizations, such as their state's unit of CEC, to learn more about local, state, and national special education policy and advocacy efforts.

Students can also become involved in policy and advocacy outside of their own institution by building their knowledge of their state's special education policies and practices along with their district and state representatives. As policy and advocacy becomes a more integral role of special education faculty members, "doctoral students prepared to fill special education faculty positions will likely need to expand their roles and responsibilities to include an emphasis on advocacy across research, teaching, and service" (Nagro et al., 2020, p. 234). Advocacy, at its heart, is about "communicating a viewpoint for or against a particular policy or issue and taking the necessary steps to achieve that change" (Miller & Roup, 2022, p. 35). Without knowledge of state and federal policies, it is difficult to speak to the problems and solutions related to a specific research area, population of interest, or other need. Further, policy expertise is not required to meet with representatives or advocate for an issue. State representatives are motivated to hear about their constituents' needs and viewpoints and desire to understand the issues that are important to them (Miller & Roup, 2022; West, 2023). Doctoral students are constituents as well as experts in their area of research, and they often have lived experiences related to their work. Many representatives will acknowledge this expertise and welcome the opportunity to learn from them (West, 2023).

State organizations and agencies are another resource doctoral students can explore to navigate outside of their institution. Organizations and agencies often offer policy and advocacy training workshops, advocacy summits at state capitals, and pre-written letters that can be sent to representatives to facilitate advocating for specific issues or policies. We recommend doctoral students take advantage of these resources within their states and interact with their representatives through phone calls, written communication, and meetings. Similarly, doctoral students can apply these same resources and actions when engaging with their federal representatives.

Larger advocacy summits via state-based or national organizations and agencies can present excellent opportunities for connecting with state representatives on Capitol Hill. For example, doctoral students might attend summits such as the annual Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS) organized by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and CEC. Attending SELS is an opportunity both to learn about special education policy and to advocate for individual state-level needs on Capitol Hill. This experience also allows doctoral students to meet other special educators from their state and across the nation who are passionate about advocating for students with disabilities and their families. Additionally, the Summit is a chance to network with and learn from leaders within the CASE and CEC organizations who have advocacy experience. Yet, the most crucial part of attending SELS is visiting Congressional members on Capitol Hill. During these visits, constituents from each state visit their elected officials in teams to advocate for policies

**TABLE 4:** Non-Profit Organizations with Policy Internships, Opportunities for Doctoral Students

| Organization Name | Description | Contact Information |
|---|---|---|
| Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) | CEC is the largest professional organization for special education educators, which advocates through research, professional development, and public awareness campaigns. | Kuna Tavalin<br>ktavalin@exceptionalchildren.org<br>Laurie VanderPloeg<br>LVanderPloeg@exceptionalchildren.org |
| The Arc | The Arc advocates for the rights and inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including education policy. | https://thearc.org/about-us/contact-us/ |
| Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) | HECSE as an organization supports its members in engaging in dialogue with national leaders in both houses of the US Congress, in federal agencies that oversee research and training programs related to education and human services, and in professional organizations and advocacy groups that focus on topics and issues in special education and disability services. | Kuna Tavalin<br>ktavalin@stridepolicy.com |
| National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) | NDRN is a consortium of advocacy agencies working to protect the civil and legal rights of people with disabilities, including education policy advocacy. | https://www.ndrn.org/team/cheryl-bates-harris/ |
| Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) | LDA is the largest non-profit organization supporting individuals with learning disabilities and advocating for their educational needs. | https://ldaamerica.org/contact/ |
| Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) | AUCD is a network of universities across the US working to improve the lives of people with disabilities through research, leadership development, advocacy, and technical assistance. | Denise Rozell<br>drozell@aucd.org |
| National Council for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) | NCLD is a non-profit organization focused on building community and shaping policy to help individuals with learning and attention issues | https://www.ncld.org/teams/jacqueline-rodriguez/ |
| American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education<br>(AACTE) | AACTE is the voice of U.S. educator preparation and maintains a constant presence on Capitol Hill to influence federal policies and funding on behalf of the profession. | Marta Perez Drake<br>Chief Operating Officer<br>Phone: 202-478-4507<br>mdrake@aacte.org |
| Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) | DCDT is a division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) that focuses on secondary transition research and positive postsecondary outcomes. | Josh Taylor<br>josh.taylor@wsu.edu<br>https://dcdt.org/ |

and legislation related to specific issues within the field of special education. Prior to these visits, state teams determine who will speak on which issue, prioritizing those who have pertinent stories or experiences. Adding in this personal touch further emphasizes the significance of the policy the state team is advocating for and can be influential for policymakers. Overall, SELS provides a unique hands-on experience to learn about the people, politics, and process(es) involved in creating policy, and we recommend doctoral students participate in the Summit as often as they are able.

For an even deeper understanding of policy and advocacy, doctoral students might choose to take part in the HECSE Short Course, originally conceptualized by Jane West. For the last decade, when offered, the Short Course has taken place in January ahead of the annual meeting of HECSE members in Washington, D.C.. The Short Course objectives are:

- To expose students to the organizational structure and key players in special education-related policymaking in the nation's capital, including governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and coalitions

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- To provide a working knowledge of the legislative process
- To empower students with the skills and knowledge to be effective advocates on behalf of students with disabilities, special education and equity
- To understand the history, purpose and impact of HECSE (HECSE, 2022)

A cohort of up to ten doctoral students from HECSE-member institutions works towards these objectives during the Short Course. The Short Course has documented positive outcomes in both the short-term, by influencing the work of doctoral students (Nagro et al., 2020), and the long-term, by motivating doctoral students to pursue policy-focused career options or opportunities, including research (HECSE, 2022).

A final way to learn about and participate in policy and advocacy is to join a committee or division within a national special education or disability-focused organization. For example, the Teacher Educator Division (TED) is a special interest division of the CEC that champions policy and advocacy efforts. One specific branch of TED is the TED Policy Committee. This committee consists of higher education faculty and staff as well as doctoral students in special education or adjacent specialties. The committee meets at least monthly to coordinate advocacy initiatives, such as translating policy information through infographics known as Advocacy Briefs or inviting experts to dissect concepts and share experiences related to advocacy on the TED CEC Collaboration Podcast. Additionally, the TED Policy Committee offers opportunities for doctoral students to serve as Policy Fellows for one year. During this fellowship, the Policy Fellows focus on their advocacy-related research interests by conducting projects, developing resources to support the committee's advocacy initiatives, and receiving exclusive mentorship from the TED Policy Committee Member-At-Large and TED Policy Advisor. We recommend that any interested doctoral students who are TED members consider applying to this fellowship. Moreover, Table 4 lists other organizations that provide internships and other opportunities to learn and engage in policy and advocacy endeavors.

*Action Step: Choose one local, state, or national organization aligned with your advocacy interests and take a concrete step to engage with it (e.g., subscribe to their emails, attend a webinar, join a committee). Track how this connection deepens your understanding of policy and advocacy and expands your professional network.*

## IMPLICATIONS

Doctoral students are influential to special education advocacy and policy in many different ways. First, they have often recently transitioned from the classroom and are emerging researchers. This position supports their ability to translate complex concepts and relevant research to both school-based professionals and policymakers. This allows them to effectively advocate across different levels and can also provide direction for their own research endeavors. Relatedly, by conducting research that aligns with current legislative and policy priorities, doctoral students have the potential to influence systemic change.

In addition to translating their knowledge and experience and conducting pertinent research, doctoral students can further develop their advocacy skills by building relationships and connections within their institutions and professional organizations. Institutionally, working with policy-focused doctoral students and/or faculty members who share

similar research interests allows doctoral students to capitalize on advocacy development during the limited time of their doctoral programs. Outside of their institutions, actively participating in organizations such as CEC and its divisions provide opportunities to build relationships with other professionals and to further engage in advocacy by serving on committees or even taking on leadership roles. By establishing these networks and receiving training and development from different organizations, special education doctoral students can create a throughline rooted in advocacy and policy to carry throughout their careers.

## CONCLUSION

Doctoral students are integral agents in special education policy and advocacy. Positioned at the intersection of research, practice, and policy, doctoral students bring unique insight and potential to shape the future of the field. By translating research into actionable policy, aligning their work with legislative priorities, and participating in advocacy-oriented organizations, doctoral students can contribute meaningfully to systems-level change. To support this potential, doctoral programs and their faculty must move beyond passive encouragement to instead intentionally embed advocacy into doctoral preparation. This includes offering policy-focused coursework or modules, providing mentorship in advocacy and public scholarship, and creating structured opportunities to engage with advocacy organizations and policymakers. Programs should treat advocacy not as optional, but as a core competency for emerging scholars in special education. At the same time, doctoral students can take their first steps in advocacy work by identifying a policy issue connected to their research, joining professional organizations like CEC, and seeking mentorship or field experiences that expose them to advocacy in action. Even small steps such as writing about policy implications as part of a coursework assignment can contribute to building advocacy skills that will be utilized throughout their careers. While each doctoral student's path with advocacy and policy will be different, their collective efforts have the potential to transform the special education landscape and improve outcomes for students, teachers, and families alike.

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