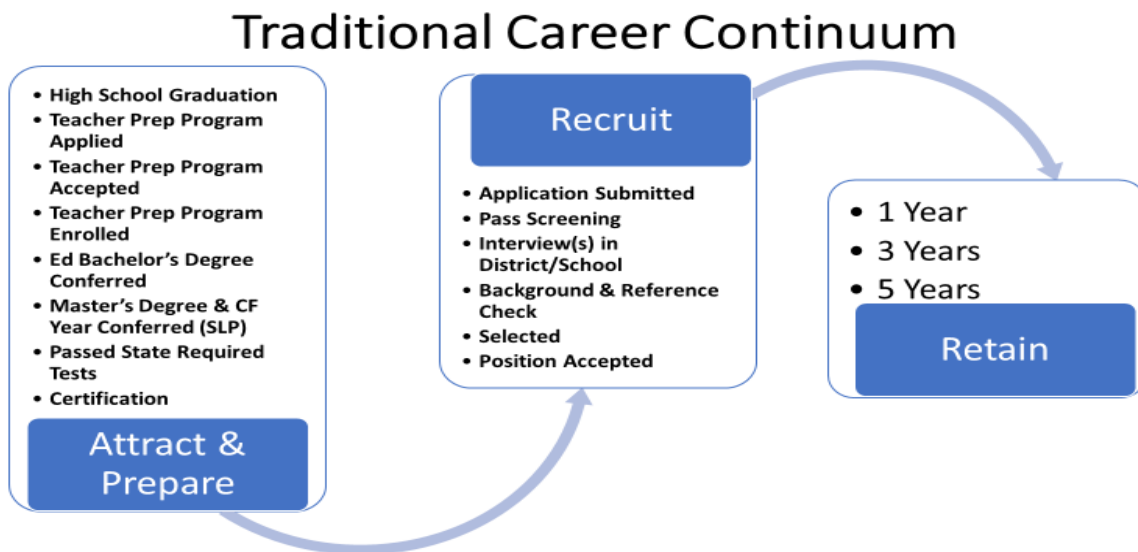


Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Attract Prepare Retain Special Educators and Related Services Providers
Summary of Findings and Recommendations

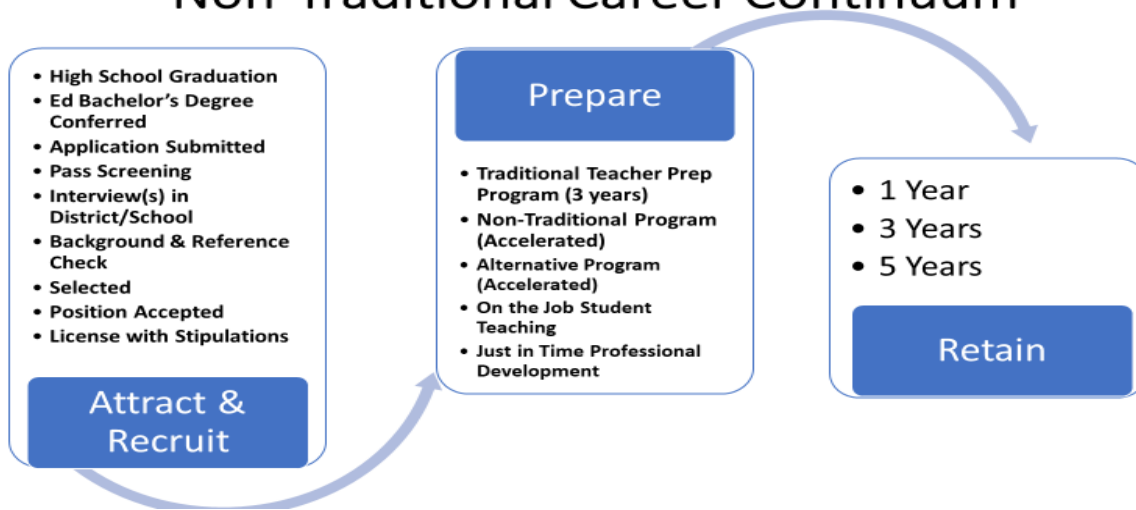
Wisconsin is one of forty-eight states reporting special education teacher and related services provider shortages. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is focusing on strategies to attract, prepare, and retain special educators and related services providers. The Special Education Team at Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has identified staffing challenges as a focus area and has allocated \$2 million of IDEA Discretionary Funds to address the issue and remove any subsequent barriers. Input from stakeholders closest to the issue is critical in determining how to maximize these funds. The following information includes common themes that emerged from the conversations with stakeholders and recommendations.

Many future educators embark in a traditional pathway to licensure and employment in special education and related services. The following visuals depict that journey:



However, an increasing number of teachers entering the field of special education or related services take a non-traditional pathway and receive a license with stipulations (LWS). The non-traditional pathway shifts preparation from before the recruitment phase to after. Resulting in the need to provide alternative pathways and just in time learning.

Non-Traditional Career Continuum



Staffing challenges are exacerbated by high rates of attrition of special education teachers found to be 2.5 times more likely to leave the profession as teachers in general education (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). New special educators are more likely than are experienced teachers to leave their jobs. Some estimates suggest that up to 50% of new teachers leave in the first several years. Teachers who have received extensive preparation are more likely to use effective practices and to stay in their positions than are those who have minimal preparation.

Methodology

Regional Focus Groups

To garner input, the Special Education team conducted seven regional focus groups during the months of April and May, 2022 in order to learn more about the greatest challenges, what has worked well, and how DPI can assist by removing barriers and designating resources. There were between 8-12 participants from urban, suburban and rural school districts and charter schools that were identified and invited to participate. Each focus group was 90 minutes in length, held virtually, and conducted at the end of the school day. Participants included:

- Directors of Special Ed/Pupil Service
- Principals
- Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) Public and Private Teacher Prep
- Candidates in Prep Programs
- Alternative Pathway Representatives
- Special Ed Teachers (active)
- Special Ed Teachers:attrition/transfer/migration*
- Special Ed Teachers (active charter)
- Related Services Representatives

- Ed Assistants
- Human Resources

Focus group questions included:

- Select three points along the career continuum that create the most significant challenges in the traditional and non-traditional pathways.
- What are the reasons special ed teachers and related service providers, particularly educators of color, stay in the profession? What are the reasons they leave the profession?
- What has worked well to address staffing challenges in general and specific to educators of color?
- If DPI were to remove barriers to staffing challenges, what would be most helpful?
- If DPI were to designate resources to staffing challenges, what would be most helpful?
- Is there anything else you would like to share that would be relevant to the Staffing Challenges Focus Group Discussion?

In addition, discussions were held with critical professional organizations and affiliations, including Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services, Association of Wisconsin School Administrators, Wisconsin Educators AC, “Big 5” Directors of Special Education/Pupil Services, “Big 6” Speech/Language Program Support Teachers, and representatives from the fields of Orientation & Mobility, Educational Interpreters, and Occupational and Physical Therapy; and the State Superintendent’s Council on Special Education.

Summary of Findings: Common Themes

Common themes emerged from the participants of the regional focus groups and the conversations from professional organizations and affiliations. The summary of findings organizes these common themes according to OSEP’s categories of attract, prepare, and retain.

Attract:

Special Educator and Related Services Pipeline - Districts report high school graduates are not choosing education as a career and IHEs report fewer candidates entering the field of education in general, and in special education. One participant shared that despite providing a grant offering paid tuition, the program was not able to meet its quota for participating candidates. Many referenced a lack of respect for the field, citing the fallout of Act 10, the pandemic, polarizing political rhetoric as possible reasons for the decline. Districts need to be innovative in their recruitment strategies, casting a wider net for candidates.

Grow your own (GYO) Programs - Districts report that GYO programs have shown the most promise in addressing teacher shortage.

“Non-traditional career continuum has resulted in some of our best and most stable hires for the following reasons: People come in with more life experiences and clarity about what they want to do. People are experiencing on the job learning while they are doing their formal learning so they are able to apply skills and knowledge right away. People engaged in these pathways tend to be more stable in where

they are living and we are more likely to be able to keep them. We have funding opportunities that we have put in place to support this with a commitment to stay for some time after receiving certification.”

Paraprofessionals and others support staff already working in the district with students with IEPs are likely candidates for GYO programs. However, barriers continue to exist. For paraprofessionals quitting their jobs to go back to school is often not an option due to financial hardship on families and dependency on benefits. Tuition, time off of work and balancing family commitments are financial constraints. A bachelor's degree is needed to enter accelerated programs and there is no credit for work they are already doing on the job.

Financial Constraints/Considerations

Participants reported migration as an issue, citing higher wages among neighboring or larger districts and in the medical field making it challenging to be competitive. Some districts utilized ESSERS funds to provide substantive raises and reduce workloads making them more attractive to new hires. While IDEA entitlement dollars allow some costs associated with special education teacher recruitment and retention, small rural districts may not have the flexibility within their budget to offer loan forgiveness, signing bonuses, et cetera. Continual changing of positions or districts causes interruption to learning and doesn't allow teachers to perfect their craft.

Prepare:

Availability and Accessibility of Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) - Various sections of Wisconsin are considered an IHE desert, impacting small rural districts when seeking candidates to hire. Some existing program structures at IHEs make it difficult for career changers to pursue a degree, which often requires a hybrid model or weekend and evening classes. For some low incidence program areas, such as Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Blind/Visually Impaired, Wisconsin candidates need to leave the state for school and often do not return to Wisconsin. While there are Wisconsin based IHEs currently taking the necessary steps to offer low incidence programming, student numbers are small and qualified faculty are difficult to secure. Wisconsin's statutes offer financial assistance from the Higher Education Aids Board (HEAB) for BVI, but does not include other areas of shortage. Districts noted candidates with LWS are in need of just in time professional learning, particularly in the areas of compliance, High Leverage Practices in Special Education, Trauma Sensitive Schools, Culturally Responsive Practices, Mental Health, and challenging behaviors, in addition to traditional coursework.

Flexibility - Wisconsin recognizes a cross categorical (K-12) license and most IHEs offer dual certification in general and special education. Districts value the flexibility this offers. However, districts also report a lack of preparedness for specific areas of special education.

“Often special ed prepared candidates are cross-categorical, but may end up being hired and placed into a specialized program (i.e., Autism, Behavior classrooms). Additional professional development is necessary.”

Many dual licensed teachers may begin their career in special education as a “foot in the door” and then transfer to general education in their first few years causing a disruption to programming.

Certification requirements - A common theme across all stakeholders identified passing the Foundation of Reading Test (FORT) as a barrier and noted the portfolio equivalency is not always a viable option.

This is particularly challenging for those using an alternative pathway and for those where English is not their first language. Teachers working with a License with Stipulations (LWS) are working during the day, taking classes at night and then preparing for the FORT exam. Districts shared the need for more alternatives to demonstrate reading competency. In addition to test requirements, others noted on the job student teaching can be challenging and that non-traditional students often miss critical methodology in their preparation. While the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) was identified as a low cost option, stakeholders recognized the lack of preparedness of the candidates. Teachers with LWS are often in the most challenging classrooms for their first years on the job. They come to the job with little to no experience and without “tools in their toolkit” to support students with IEPs.

“Special ed teachers need to be best teachers in school; but many are the least prepared teachers in school”

In addition to passing the FORT, participants shared the need for greater reciprocity for Out of State and International teaching candidates. Focus group members recognized the three year completion requirement for any provisional license in Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) but noted that not all candidates can complete the requirements in this timeframe due to family commitments, et cetera.. The pandemic also created a barrier in successful completion in three years.

Many IHEs report a lack of cooperating/supervising staff for practicum, clinical, student teaching, and intern placements. Some district staff reported an interest in accepting pre-service teachers but required administrative permission to do so. Others noted the need for incentives to do the extra supervision work. Many Cooperative Education Service Agencies (CESAs) offer alternative and accelerated licensure programs. This is an often utilized option particularly in rural areas for LWS teachers. However, alternative licensure programs do not qualify for federal loans, leaving teachers of districts to pay the costs upfront.

The area of related services provides a unique set of circumstances and concerns when addressing staffing challenges. As mentioned, there are no low incidence/related service preparation programs in the state or in some regions of the state. Orientation and mobility (O&M) is an example where Wisconsin does not have a preparation program and there are not enough nationally certified O&M specialists to supervise practicum students. While there are three educational interpreter preparation tradition programs in the state, the number of candidates remains small. Candidates currently working are not able to access the coursework during the work week and more options are needed. The doctoral requirement for OT/PT creates a barrier and often those with a doctorate will enter the medical profession instead of providing school based therapy. The preparation of speech/language pathologists (SLP) presents a number of licensing challenges. Candidates require a 3.4 GPA to enter graduate school and many often choose the medical versus school based services route. SLPs coming from out of state may require additional coursework and student teaching depending on the state they are coming from. Previous work experience is not recognized for certification. Wisconsin offers SLPs a LWS by getting a Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) license, but school based SLPs often do not hold a DSPS license and therefore, can not supervise those with a LWS.

Retain:

Lack of coaching, mentoring and just in time professional development. While growing your own programs have shown promise, many teachers enter the classroom with a license with stipulations and must complete their certification within three years. Participants regularly cited that coaching and just in

time learning is needed for success once on the job. Participants also shared that administrators do not have time to coach and provide needed support for new and LWS staff. Without the proper preparation, many new and LWS teachers are not ready for the complexities of the job and do not have the necessary skills to be effective. This is particularly true for mental health needs and challenging behaviors. Without successful initial teaching experiences, many leave the profession within the first year or two, creating a cyclical disruption in staffing. Participants cited the need for better induction; onboarding, continued support through coaching and mentoring; and a network of support. Teachers with LWS need just in time professional learning in addition to their traditional or alternative preparation program. Participants from rural settings cited a lack of connection to the profession and job alike for professional growth. Participants from urban settings cited a lack of authentic representation in the teaching field. A common theme among all participants was the increase in mental health needs and challenging behaviors. Participants cited a need for more professional development and establishing or re-establishing proactive behavioral intervention structures following the pandemic.

Caseload and Workload -

A consistent reason for the departure of special educators and related services personnel was caseload and workload expectations. Many participants referenced the differences between caseload (number of students assigned) versus the workload (the actual amount of time for direct and indirect services needed). Often the number of students on a special educator's caseload does not reflect direct student services; evaluations; IEPs; preparation time; indirect services; directing paraprofessionals; consultation with general education and other assignments. Factors contributing to the stress of an educator's workload included the amount of paperwork and meetings, shortage of substitutes and paraprofessionals, and an increase in referrals following the pandemic. Attrition and lack of funding or viable candidates - vacancies go unfilled and work transfers to others caseloads. Novice and LWS teachers often struggle to manage the dual expectation as a first year teacher and full time student.

Climate and Culture

The climate and culture of a school building, district, and the community is critical in the job satisfaction of its members. When responding to reasons why special educators and related services providers leave the profession, participants identified a number of factors. Some participants listed a lack of administrative understanding and support for special educators. Many special education teachers and related service providers report to two supervisors, the director of special education/pupil services and the building principal which add to the stress of the job. Many new educators are trained to support inclusive environments, but often do not find their philosophies matching the service delivery model in their new district. In some situations, there is not an "ours" or collective responsibility belief upheld. Many participants also cited parental demands, social media, and polarizing rhetoric as impacting their desire to remain in the profession.

Recommendations

The Special Education team has established staffing challenges as a focus area. Stakeholder input was gathered across Wisconsin to identify barriers and allocate resources to address teacher shortage. The Special Education team has allocated \$2 million dollars of statewide set aside IDEA funds to offer

discretionary grants to address staffing challenges. The following recommendations are a result of extensive stakeholder input:

Attract: Provide fiscal support to:

- Establish middle and high school student opportunities to work with students with IEPs; (e.g., youth programs, Special Olympics; Best Buddies, ASL courses, etc.)
- Provide scholarships to high school graduates to participate in coursework related to the field of special education or related services. (i.e. Project PARA, Intro to Ed, ASL Classes) or to high school students pursuing careers in special education or related services.
- Provide stipends to experienced educators or pay for national certifications (O&M, SLPs, etc.) of experienced related services providers to have the necessary qualifications to accept student placements for practicum, clinical, affiliations, student teachers, and interns.
- Provide scholarships or loan forgiveness; paying for tuition for coursework, course textbooks, release time, or degree completion for currently employed paraprofessionals and others to pursue a career in special education or related services.
- Provide signing bonuses or salary advancements to cover tuition costs accrued prior to initial pay period for first year special educators or related services providers.
- Offer housing assistance and relocation reimbursement for candidates.
- Provide fee payments or reimbursement for costs associated with securing a substitute license.
- Purchase software (Diversity Catalyst/CIRCA) or contract with recruitment agencies to expand opportunities to make community and IHE connections representing candidates of color to diversify the workforce.
- Costs associated with participating in job fairs; utilizing teacher Websites and national publications (e.g., CEC); using technology (e.g., social media sites, virtual job fairs, electronic bulletin boards); hiring an external recruiter or advertising in local newspapers, radio, and television.

Prepare: Provide fiscal support to:

- Provide scholarships or loan forgiveness; paying for tuition for coursework, course textbooks, or degree completion for new special educators or related services providers.
- Establish a tuition free agreement or tuition reimbursement with local IHEs for those pursuing a teaching degree or adding certification.
- Offer paid release time (substitute) to pursue licensure or other professional development (e.g., attend classes, meet with a mentor or coach, attend just-in-time professional learning opportunities).
- Provide fee payments or reimbursement for alternative licensure programs (CESA, etc.) during the first year of employment prior to District Led Pathway or expenses related to pathway to licensure (e.g., CCCs for speech/language pathologists)
- Reduce caseload/workload for new and LWS teachers by providing an extra preparation period per day to do coursework or work on “just in time” professional development.
- Provide funds to special education and related services preparation programs to expand options for accessibility and availability in low incidence programs, in IHE deserts, etc. Expansion

options include the development of hybrid models, hire additional faculty, offer evening and weekend courses.

Retain: Provide fiscal support to:

- Develop and implement a statewide model induction program using a multi-level system of support based on the needs of special educators and related service providers in their nascent years.
- Develop and implement multi-day train-the-trainer sessions and materials to develop the capacity of CESAs and others to deliver “just in time” training to new special education teachers and related services providers on the use of [High-Leverage Practices in Special Education](#), Trauma Sensitive Schools, [DPI Comprehensive Evaluation](#), [DPI College and Career Ready IEPs](#), and [DPI Monitoring Progress of IEP Goals](#). Provide regional and urban just in time training throughout the school year.
- Develop and implement a coaching structure to support both instructional and compliance elements of the training. Provide monthly coaching sessions for the training participants.
- Develop and implement a support and networking cohort for beginning special educators and related service providers. Provide monthly/quarterly support and networking sessions to address real time needs based on [compassion resiliency](#).

Other Recommendations (not requiring funding)

- Develop statewide guidance on caseload vs. workload. Consider the six elements (direct student services; evaluations; IEPs: preparation time; indirect services; directing paraprofessionals; consultation with general education and other assignments) of a special educator’s workload rather than number of students when determining caseloads. [Workload Considerations for Effective Special Education](#)
- Leverage existing resources and reboot Comprehensive Evaluation and CCR IEP training for all special educators and leadership to appropriately determine eligibility, disability-related needs and how/who can best deliver the required services.
- Continue to address barriers to certification and licensing requirements for special educators and the unique circumstances of related services personnel, including viable options to the FORT, supporting in-state preparation programs for low incidence areas, eliminate DSPS requirements for supervision of SLPs, create pathways for international candidates, etc.
- Initiate a statewide marketing/public relations campaign to attract individuals to the field of education. Collaborate or partner with professional organizations. Highlight positive educational stories.
- Assist districts to leverage existing IDEA Entitlement dollars to address recruitment and retention efforts in special education by revising the document [Allowables Costs for IDEA Formula Grants](#).

Resources:

Short Term Strategies for Dealing with Shortages of Special Education Teachers

Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers

**Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions: A Policy Brief.* Prepared by: The CEEDAR Center & The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders