

Short-Term Strategies for Dealing With Shortages of Special Education Teachers

Margaret Kamman and Paul Sindelar
University of Florida

Lindsey Hayes and Amy Colpo
American Institutes for Research

Schools and districts facing teacher shortages often have few options for filling vacant special education teacher positions. Although the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that special education teachers be fully licensed when beginning to teach, many special education teachers receive their certification through fast-track routes that do not fully prepare them with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective. Research has demonstrated that special education teachers who have gone through a full preparation program are more likely to provide effective instruction, increase student achievement, and remain in the classroom. However, when vacancies occur and fully-prepared special education teachers are not immediately available, what can schools and districts do to ensure that students are served and teachers are supported? This brief outlines short-term strategies that, when paired with long-term comprehensive strategies, can be employed to hire, prepare, and support teachers in schools and districts facing special education teacher shortage crises.

Talking Points on Trends in Special Education Teacher Supply and Demand

- During the Great Recession, special education teacher shortages declined, falling below 5% in 2011. Shortages re-emerged in 2012 concurrent with the economic recovery and reached 8% by 2016-17 (Sindelar, 2019).
- The number of fully-certified special education teachers employed in U.S. schools has declined since the end of the Great Recession. The number of special education teachers peaked in 2005 at more than 420,000 but dropped below 350,000 in 2012. By 2016-17, the number had fallen to 318,000, lower than it had been since the mid-1990s (Sindelar, 2019).
- Declining numbers of special education teachers have led to increases in student-to-teacher ratios in special education, from 14 to 1 in 2005 to 17 to 1 in 2016 (Sindelar, 2019).
- Additionally, teacher preparation program enrollment declined by 35% from 2009 to 2013 (Aragon, 2016). In California alone, teacher preparation program enrollment has dropped by more than 75% from 2001 to 2014 (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Schools and Districts Need Teachers Right Now

- Resurgent demand for special education teachers combined with inadequate supply from a dwindling teacher preparation pipeline has created a shortage of crisis proportions.
- Unfortunately, schools and districts with vacancies and an obligation to serve students often have no choice but to hire individuals who have not completed a full special education teacher preparation program and lack an appropriate credential.
- Hiring underprepared teachers comes with a unique set of challenges. These teachers require more resources and support than their fully-prepared counterparts do. Additionally, these teachers are more likely to leave the profession and are less likely to provide effective instruction to students with disabilities.
- Although comprehensive systemic solutions are necessary to address the root causes of shortages, schools and districts can't wait for long-term strategies to bear results. Schools and districts need just-in-time strategies to hire, prepare, support, and ultimately retain individuals who demonstrate potential to be effective special education teachers.

Short-Term Strategy #1: Hire Candidates With the Most Potential

Special education shortages have made hiring a challenge for school and district leaders. When hiring teachers certified through fast-track or alternative routes, school leaders and hiring managers can look for certain characteristics and experiences that can provide valuable insight about whether the candidate will be suited to a job as a special education teacher. The following look-fors and characteristics to consider with caution are based on Human Capital Theory (Dai, Sindelar, Denslow, Dewey, & Rosenberg, 2007).

Look-Fors When Hiring Candidates:

- **Experience as a paraprofessional.** A capable paraprofessional understands students, curriculum, and instructional strategies. Paraprofessionals are also likely to live in the community the school serves.
- **Experience with children.** A candidate who has had some prior experience with children likely has developed some skills and knowledge in child/adolescent development, which will be helpful in a teaching role.
- **Experience with individuals with disabilities.** A candidate who has some prior experience with individuals with disabilities will likely have some social awareness and facility engaging with diverse populations.
- **Experience in schools.** A candidate who has some prior experience in schools, either in an alternate employed role (e.g., lunch room, janitor) or as a volunteer, will likely have some knowledge about the systems and cultures of schools.

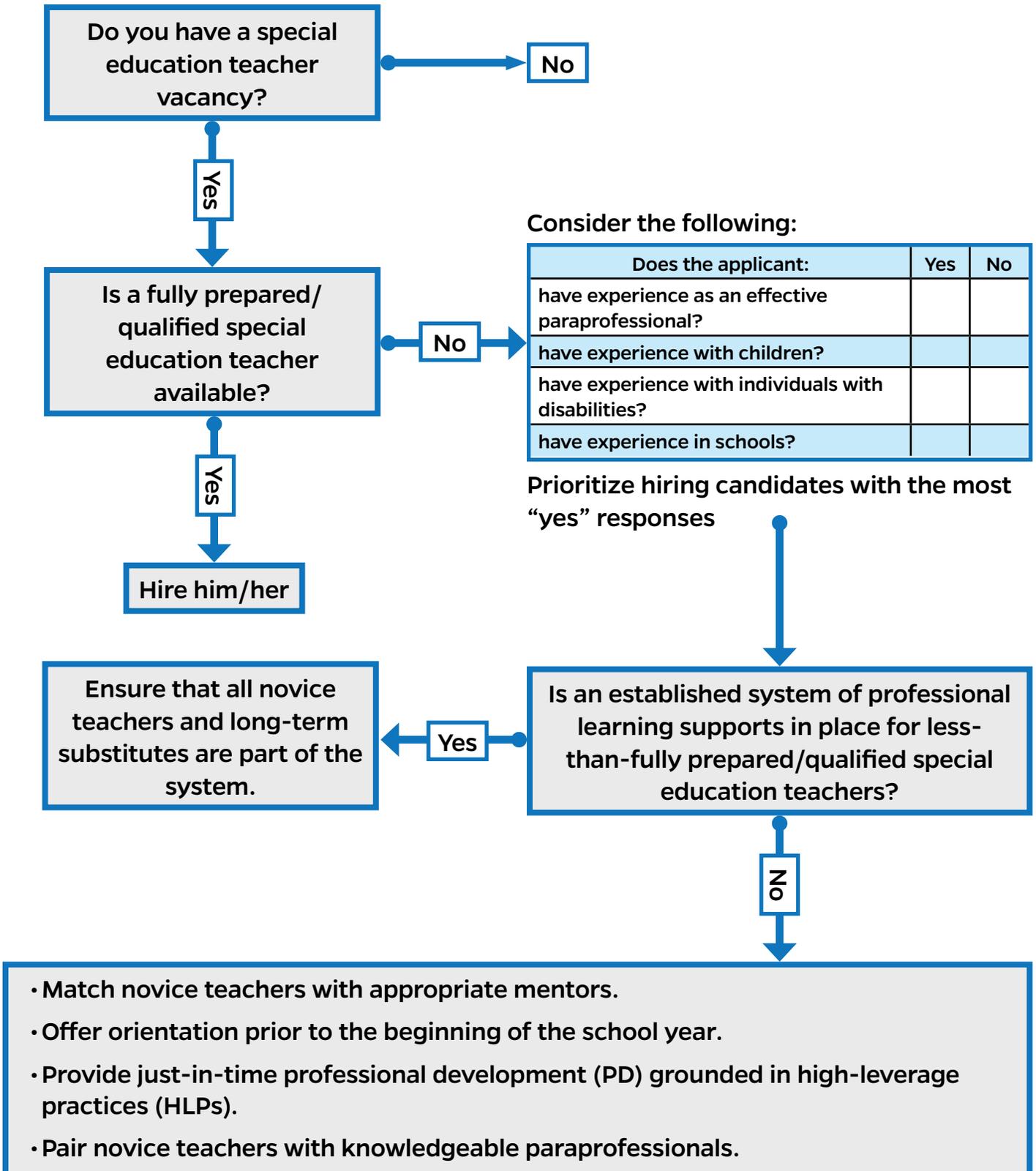
Characteristics To Consider With Caution:

- Among mid-career changers, people who will make less money as a teacher than they made in their previous careers are less likely to persist in teaching.

The Decision Guide for Short-Term Strategies to Fill Special Education Teacher Vacancies (Figure 1) summarizes the decision points that can help school and district leaders make informed choices about hiring and supporting the best possible candidates.

Decision Guide for Short-Term Strategies to Fill Special Education Teacher Vacancies

Figure 1



Strategy #2: Provide New Hires With Intensive Professional Learning Supports

Hiring individuals who received their special education certification through fast-track or alternative routes comes with a unique set of challenges. All novice special education teachers, regardless of their preparation experience or path to certification, will need on-the-job support to learn the instructional and non-instructional responsibilities of being a special education teacher. However, teachers certified through fast-track or alternative routes are more likely to have gaps in their knowledge and skills that need to be addressed, requiring more time and resources to support than fully-prepared teachers.

Strong induction and professional learning supports can help address these gaps and contribute to long-term teacher retention. Effective induction programs provide systematic professional learning opportunities and use well-trained mentors in a collaborative, supportive, and positive school culture (Billingsley, Griffin, Smith, Kamman, & Israel, 2009). The following section outlines four components of a high-quality induction and professional learning system to support novice special education teachers.

Considerations for Implementation:

Research examining novice special education teachers' satisfaction with mentoring suggests that successful mentors have the following:

- have three or more years of successful teaching experience in special education;
- have taught students who have similar disabilities, taught at the same grade, and/or taught the same content as their mentees;
- have knowledge of the school, district, and special education contexts; and
- have interest in their own continuous learning and a history of successful collaboration with other professionals in their schools (Billingsley et al., 2009).

When mentors with these characteristics are not available, consider the following creative solutions to provide teachers with both special-education-specific support and context-specific support:

- virtual mentoring with an experienced teacher with a similar teaching assignment who works elsewhere in the district (Gentry, 2016; Smith & Israel, 2010); and
- a contextual mentor on campus who does not need to be a special educator but who has knowledge of the school context and can provide immediate support (Israel, Kamman, McCray, & Sindelar, 2014).

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibilities
School Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select experienced special education mentors.• Match novice special education teachers with appropriate mentors.
Districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assist school leaders in matching with virtual mentors when school-based mentors are unavailable.
States	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide funding for mentors.
Educator Preparation Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide recent graduates follow-up mentorship support.

Resources and Program Examples:

- [Mentor Handbook: Supporting Beginning Special Education Teachers](#)
- [District Induction Manual: Supporting Beginning Special Education Teachers](#)
- [Professional Learning Module: Mentoring & Induction for Educators of Students With Disabilities](#)

Offer orientation prior to the beginning of the school year.

Overview:

Providing district and school-based orientation before school begins helps prepare novice special education teachers for their first weeks in the classroom. Special education teachers often feel overwhelmed by role ambiguity due to the many roles they must play. In addition to their instructional role, they must also write individualized education programs (IEPs), run meetings, and consult and co-teach with other teachers. Orientation prior to the beginning of the school year can help clearly define the roles and responsibilities of special educators. It can also help them establish relationships with district and school leaders whose support is critical in retaining teachers (Holdheide & Demonte, 2016).

Considerations for Implementation:

Suggested components of orientation are as follows;

- orient participants to school and district policies and procedures;
- familiarize participants with instructional expectations;
- begin establishing relationships with mentors and administrators;
- offer first-day/week strategies and lesson planning; and
- provide an overview of specific special education procedures (Billingsley, Brownell, Israel, & Kamman, 2013).

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibilities
School Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organize and ensure that novices receive school-level orientation.
Districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organize and ensure that novices receive orientation at the district level.
States	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide resources that can be utilized for district- and school-level orientation.• Provide funding for orientation.
Educator Preparation Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assist districts in planning and implementing orientation for novices.

Resources and Program Examples

[District Induction Manual: Supporting Beginning Special Education Teachers](#)

- Chapter 4: Developing Orientation Programs

Program Descriptions

- [Special School District of St. Louis County](#)
- [Cincinnati Public Schools](#)
- [Olathe Unified School District](#)

Provide just-in-time professional development (PD) grounded in high-leverage practices (HLPs).

Overview:

Novice special education teachers with little teacher preparation need ongoing, intensive, and systematic PD to help them navigate their new roles (Billingsley et al., 2009). Not only do PD experiences need to be structured in a way that is good for underprepared teachers (e.g., ongoing, intensive, systematic), but they also need to focus on the right content. PD experiences should be coordinated and aligned with mentor and principal support and provide novices with multiple opportunities to practice.

Considerations for Implementation:

HLPs provide a common language for core instruction and a foundation for effective teaching for students with disabilities that cut across content areas and grade levels. HLPs that are used to provide content for induction and shared language for discussion send coherent messages across the pre-service to in-service career continuum about new teachers' roles and instructional responsibilities (Billingsley, Bettini, & Jones, in press). To reinforce HLPs, we must make sure a coherence of messages exists across the career continuum: from teacher preparation to specific induction components for new teachers to the instructional conditions in school. Aligned professional learning and support structures that promote using core instructional practices have the potential to result in improved instructional practices, higher retention, and stronger student outcomes. The 22 HLPs in special education are provided across four components of teacher practice: collaboration, assessment, social-emotional behavioral practices, and instruction. The PD should include not only an opportunity to learn about HLPs, but also an opportunity to practice HLPs in instruction.

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibilities
School Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up with novices on implementing HLPs after participating in PD. • Observe novice teachers to identify areas of strengths and needs. • Provide supports for novices' areas of need.
Districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide district-organized and implemented PD on HLPs.
States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a statewide structure for PD on HLPs for all novices. • Provide funding for novices to attend PD.
Educator Preparation Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate with the state and/or district in creating content and practice opportunities for PD sessions focused on HLPs.

Resources and Program Examples:

- Website: [High-Leverage Practices in Special Education](#)
- Report: [High-Leverage Practices in Special Education](#)

- Video Series: [High-Leverage Practices](#)
- Brief: [High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices: A Promising Pair](#)
- Professional Development Guide: [Introducing High-Leverage Practices in Special Education: A Professional Development Guide for School Leaders](#)
- Book: [High-Leverage Practices for Inclusive Classrooms](#)

Pair novice teachers with knowledgeable paraprofessionals.

Overview:

Paraprofessionals can be helpful resources to novice special education teachers. They often have been working in schools and classrooms for years and have information on specific students and school contexts.

Considerations for Implementation:

Schools often employ multiple paraprofessionals to support teachers and ensure student success. However, paraprofessionals vary greatly in their experience, skills, and knowledge. Paraprofessionals with experience and knowledge often have existing relationships with students, the community, and strategies that may be effective for working with particular students. Matching such a paraprofessional can be invaluable to a novice teacher and can reduce teacher stress; increase teachers' job satisfaction; and facilitate key connections with students, parents, and the community (Alborz, Pearson, Farrel, & Howes, 2009). Novices will also need PD on effectively utilizing paraprofessionals in their classrooms and instruction.

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibilities
School Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match experienced paraprofessionals with novices. • Provide PD for novices on utilizing paraprofessionals.
Districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match experienced paraprofessionals with novices. • Provide PD for novices on utilizing paraprofessionals.

Resources:

- [Supercharging Student Success: Policy Levers for Helping Paraprofessionals Have a Positive Influence in the Classroom](#)
- [Teachers Coaching Paraprofessionals](#)

Conclusion

All students need effective teachers. However, the unfortunate reality is that sometimes fully-prepared special education teachers are not available, and school and district hiring options are limited. In these situations, school and district leaders need to be ready to make informed choices about hiring the best possible candidates and provide these new hires with intensive just-in-time supports to become effective special education teachers.

Although short-term stop-gap solutions are sometimes necessary to address immediate vacancies, states and districts must also invest in longer-term systemic strategies to address the root causes of special education teacher shortages. The next brief in this toolkit, *Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions*, discusses how policymakers, preparation providers, and state and district administrators can work together to ensure that short-term strategies are part of a long-term comprehensive plan to address special education teacher shortages.

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