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All Classes of Spec. Ed. Teachers In Demand Throughout Nation

By Joetta L. Sack

Across the Nation

This is the third installment of a five-part series about the nation's supply of and demand for qualified teachers. Read ["About This Series,"](#) below.

HELP WANTED:
2 Million Teachers

Read our story, ["Report Charts Rise in Spec. Ed. Enrollment,"](#) March 17, 1999.

The 25-year-old California teacher has a bachelor's degree in special education, two years' experience in an "inclusive" classroom, and a passion for teaching students with disabilities.

This, though, will likely be her last year in special education. "I'm burned out already," she said recently.

["Special Educators Fault Workload,"](#) April 29, 1998.

Like many other special education teachers, she's frustrated and disillusioned by the job, which comes with more time-consuming duties and legal responsibilities than teaching in other fields--usually without additional pay. Those demands are driving thousands of special education teachers to transfer into regular education or leave the profession each year, at a time when schools are seeing increasing numbers of students needing special education.

["Role of Spec. Ed. Teacher Changing,"](#) March 25, 1998.

"We bring people in, burn them out early, then bemoan the fact that we have this high turnover rate," said Richard Mainzer, the assistant executive director for professional standards and practice for the Reston, Va.-based council. "Meanwhile, the kids are hurting."

["IDEA To Give States More Leeway in Spec. Ed. Staff,"](#) June 4, 1997.

Recent research indicates that the attrition rates of special education and general education teachers are about equal, said Lynne I. Cook, a special education professor at California State University-Northridge. But the data do not factor in the number of special education teachers who switch to general education, she noted.

According to early results of a 10-year study by Ms. Cook and other researchers, about 7.2 percent of

Part 1: ["States' Uneven Teacher Supply Complicates Staffing of Schools,"](#) March 10, 1999

Part 2: ["New Teachers Abandon Field at High Rate,"](#) March 17, 1999

Part 3: March 24, 1999

- "All Classes of Spec. Ed. Teachers in Demand Throughout Nation";

- ["Burgeoning Nevada District Concentrates on 'Growing' Its Own";](#)

- ["Prospective Teachers in Rural Areas Tune In to Satellite Classes."](#)

Part 4: March 31, 1999

- Otherwise qualified teachers are routinely assigned to teach subjects for which they have little or no academic preparation, a practice under fire nationwide.

Part 5: April 7, 1999

teachers in special education switch to general education each year. But fewer than 1 percent of general educators switch to special education.

- As standards for students go up, schools are under pressure to reduce the number of people without professional training who are hired to teach.

Overwhelming Requirements

The paperwork and documentation related to the "individualized education plan," or iep, the legal document that spells out the educational services a student with disabilities must receive, has become a disincentive to entering special education, administrators say. The IEP process, along with requisite meetings with parents, administrators, specialists, and other teachers, has taken away much-needed time for individual instruction and lesson planning, contributing to teachers' stress and the burnout rates, they say.

"We can't keep teachers," said Pat Guthrie, an assistant superintendent of the 11,000-student Warren County district in Bowling Green, Ky., which is also the site of one of the state's largest teacher-training institutions, Western Kentucky University. "It's gotten to a point where teachers would rather have 30 students in a regular classroom," she said, "than 10 in special education, because [those students] are so time-consuming, with the paperwork and legal issues."

"You have to document, document, document," said Susan Kellam, who teaches emotionally and behaviorally disturbed students at Occahannock Elementary School in Northhampton County, Va. "I live with the fear that I'm going to screw up, with all the changing laws."

Working conditions that fray a special education teacher's emotions--including a feeling of isolation from other school staff members--can be tough to overcome as well. And special education students' progress is often more difficult for inexperienced teachers to gauge, making the teacher feel ineffective, said Stephen W. Tonelson, a professor of early-childhood and special education at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va.

"The gratification tends to be slow," he said. "In some ways, [special education] can be more satisfying, but the cost-benefit ratio leans more toward general education."

Ms. Burnette, who team-teaches a class of 30 regular and special education students in the Pasadena Unified School District, said many of her colleagues feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to handle their students' emotional and behavioral problems.

"Some special education teachers feel all they're doing is disciplining," she said. "It's hard to get any academics in."

'Innovative Incentives'

Complicating the shortages are certification requirements that vary widely among states. For instance, California requires a master's degree

in education plus additional coursework in special education to become fully certified, while Kentucky and other states have created systems that allow experienced teachers to get full certification without additional coursework.

Of a field of some 330,000 special education teachers, more than 30,000 are not fully certified, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Without a qualified teacher, practitioners and researchers say, disabled students are unlikely to be receiving high-quality educational services mandated by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Moreover, Mr. Mainzer said, the data show as many as 6,000 positions unfilled. "These positions are simply vacant," he said. In such instances, other teachers have to pick up the workload on top of their own.

Some states and districts are experimenting with alternative-licensure programs to put paraprofessionals and teachers from other fields on a fast track to certification in special education. The quality of those programs is highly uneven, researchers say.

Even with fewer restrictions on certification and licensing, research suggests that there simply aren't enough graduates to recruit.

Studies show the demand for qualified special education teachers outstrips the supply of those coming out of colleges each year. The Education Department says about 28,000 new teachers are needed annually.

Yet, higher education institutions produced about 18,000 new special education teachers in 1993--the latest year for which such data were available--according to the Education Department. But 6,000 of them were already employed in the schools. In addition, about 7,000 teachers who have not completed certification will be hired, the department says.

In its "20th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the IDEA," released this month, the department said that part of the blame lies with colleges that are not recruiting and producing enough graduates to meet the demand. "The annual supply of degree graduates of teacher-preparation programs in special education has been exceptionally low in comparison with general education," the report says.

"Universities are going to have to come up with some really innovative incentives," said Brenda L. Townsend, an associate professor of special education at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

With a federal grant and university funds, Ms. Townsend has created scholarships and support systems for minority students who study special education. One 4-year-old program is devoted exclusively to black men; about 25 students have graduated so far. Another program,

created this year, seeks African-American and Hispanic men and women as well as white men. Through a partnership with the local Hillsborough County school system, the students are guaranteed jobs.

Lawnmower Man

Many administrators say that qualified candidates can be found--if the recruiters keep an open mind and are creative.

"My special ed hat is on all the time," said Donna di Grazia, the principal of Punta Gorda Middle School in Charlotte County, Fla. She recently learned that a man who was mowing lawns in her neighborhood happened to be certified in elementary education but couldn't find a job.

He was a "kind of big, bruisy guy, but I saw a potentially good teacher," Ms. di Grazia said. She hired him to teach 7th grade special education, and now, "he's becoming a fabulous teacher."

On the Web

["Facts About the Teaching Profession,"](#) including data on teacher shortages, from Recruiting New Teachers.

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