



Examining the Supply of New Special Educators

Variations by Institutional Characteristics and For-Profit Status

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POLICY ISSUE

Special education teacher shortages have been a consistent problem around the U.S. for decades and have only grown since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, reports of declining interest in special education among prospective teachers are especially concerning.¹ In this study, the authors examined the supply of new special education teachers into the workforce and the institutions that are supplying them. Findings shed light on the increasingly prominent role of for-profit alternative certification programs in the preparation of special education teachers nationally.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

The authors use data from two national data sources: the Integrated Post-Secondary Data System that contains information on the number of students receiving special education degrees or credentials from institutions of higher education (IHEs) across the public and private sectors, and Title II that contains yearly completion data for traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs (TPPs). Each data set provides an imperfect measure of the number of new teachers supplied into the workforce each year, but together they paint a useful picture of national trends in special education teacher production over time.

Using these two data sets, the authors found:

- The annual potential supply of new special education teachers peaked around 2012-2013, declined through 2016-2017, and then leveled off through 2019-2020 (Figure 1).
 - There was an 11% decline in the number of students awarded special education degrees/credentials from 2013 to 2018 and a 20% decline in the number of TPP completers in special education from 2012 to 2018.
 - These patterns varied by institution size: small and mid-sized institutions experienced substantial declines in new special education teacher production, while large institutions remained mostly stable over time.
 - The number of new potential special education teachers from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) has also been declining over the past decade. In 2010, over 300 HBCU students earned a degree or credential in special education; in 2020, less than half that many did so.

KEY FINDINGS

- The annual potential supply of new special education teachers has substantially dropped off in the past decade, from a high of between 32,000-34,000 in 2012-2013 to around 28,000-30,000 in 2020.
- For-profit institutions have substantially increased their production of new special education teachers in recent years and are now the top suppliers of special education teachers nationally.

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- In contrast to declining special education teacher preparation at non-profit institutions, for-profit institutions have dramatically increased their production of new special education teachers (Figure 2).

- In recent years, 1-2 of the top 3 suppliers of potential new special education teachers nationally have been for-profit institutions, namely A+ Texas Teachers, Grand Canyon University, and the University of Phoenix (Figure 3).
- Just two for-profit institutions—A+ Texas Teachers and Grand Canyon University—produced 8% of all new prospective special education teachers nationally. A+ Texas Teachers prepared 37% of new prospective special educators in Texas.

Figure 1: Potential Supply of New Special Education Teachers Over Time

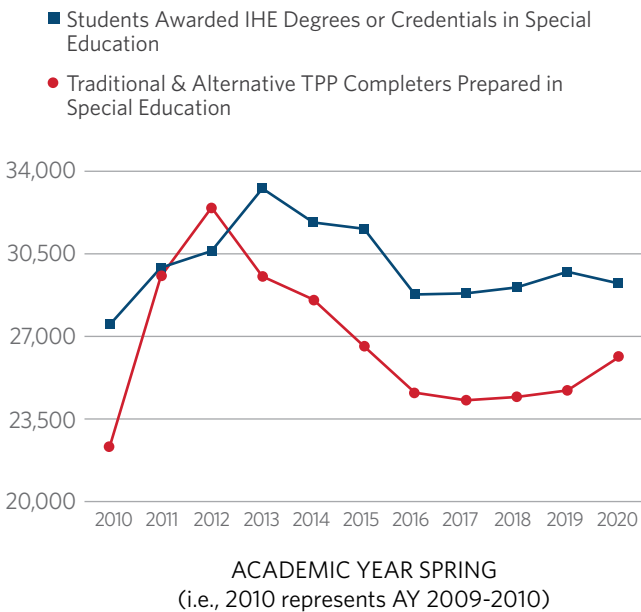
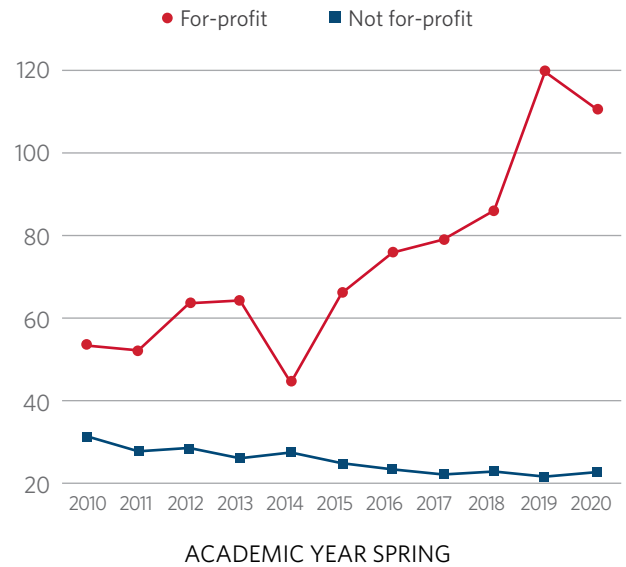


Figure 2: Average Number of TPP Completers in Special Education Per Institution



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A robust special educator workforce is essential for ensuring all students who require specialized services are being served by qualified and effective special education teachers. The U.S. education system is not currently meeting this demand. Using over a decade of national data, this study confirms that the supply of new special education teachers has been declining over the past decade, particularly from small and mid-sized institutions, many of which are facing significant financial difficulties and some of which are even closing their doors as a result.² Given that teachers tend to teach in schools near their preparation program,³ these patterns raise serious concerns for rural districts, which are already less likely to have a TPP nearby and which therefore may be disproportionately affected by the declining supply of

Figure 3: Top Suppliers of Potential New Special Education Teachers (For-Profit Institutions Highlighted)

2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2022
Touro College Manhattan	NJ DOE Alt Cert	NJ DOE Alt Cert	NJ DOE Alt Cert	A+ Texas Teachers	A+ Texas Teachers
A+ Texas Teachers	Grand Canyon University	A+ Texas Teachers	A+ Texas Teachers	Grand Canyon University	Grand Canyon University
University of Phoenix	Touro College Flatbush	Touro College Manhattan	Mercy College	NC RALCs	NC RALCs

new special education teachers graduating from the smaller institutions in these regions. The small and declining number of HBCU graduates with special education degrees also does not bode well for efforts to improve the racial diversity in the special educator workforce.

This study also reveals a growing dependence on for-profit alternative certification programs for producing new special education teachers, which raises questions about the quality of preparation these new teachers are receiving. Although there is some research evidence that alternatively certified teachers are not less effective than traditionally certified teachers,⁴ those findings may not extend to the for-profit programs that have begun dominating special educator preparation. For instance, several of the most popular for-profit programs are completely online, and there is almost no research to date on the effectiveness of on-line teacher preparation programs. And notably, A+ Texas Teachers—which supplied 37% of all new special education teachers in Texas in 2020—has been audited and placed on probation by the state for systemic programmatic failures and is at risk of losing its accreditation.⁵ Moreover, alternatively certified teachers tend to turn over more frequently than traditionally certified teachers,⁶ which could exacerbate rather than resolve staffing churn and instability in schools.

Based on these findings, policymakers may want to consider the following strategies for addressing special education teacher shortages within their state and local contexts:

1. Bolster TPPs at small and mid-sized institutions, especially when they are the only TPP in the region.
2. Incentivize student teaching placements in hard-to-staff districts that are not located near any TPPs by, for example, providing supplemental transportation funds or other financial benefits.
3. Support high-quality distance education programs (e.g., paraprofessional pathway programs, Grow Your Own programs) that support people living in hard-to-staff districts to pursue teacher licensure without having to move.
4. Proactively monitor the extent to which the district or state relies on for-profit programs to supply new special education teachers, as this has real implications for both the stability and quality of educators who work closely with some of the most marginalized students.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example: Hawkins, B. (2022, September 15). Yes, there's a shortage of special education teachers. And that's nothing new. The 74. <https://www.the74million.org/article/yes-theres-a-shortage-of-special-education-teachers-and-thats-nothing-new/>; Jones II, A. (2023, May 11). Why there's a special education and STEM teacher shortage and what can be done. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/states-facing-special-education-stem-teacher-shortages/story?id=98775708>; Mason-Williams, L., Bettini, E., Peyton, D., Harvey, A., Rosenberg, M., & Sindelar, P. T. (2020). Rethinking shortages in special education: Making good on the promise of an equal opportunity for students with disabilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 43(1), 45-62.
- 2 Churchill & Chard, 2021; Eide, 2018; Gardner, 2023; Kelchen, 2020
- 3 Engel & Cannata, 2015; Reiningger, 2012
- 4 Whitford et al., 2018; Nougaret et al., 2005; Sindelar et al., 2004
- 5 Donaldson et al., 2022; Richman, 2018
- 6 Nguyen et al., 2020; Redding & Smith, 2016; Wojcik et al., 2022