

PERFORMANCE AUDIT



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy

Strategies to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Special Education Staff

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State Auditor's Office contacts

State Auditor Pat McCarthy

564-999-0801, Pat.McCarthy@sao.wa.gov

Scott Frank – Director of Performance and IT Audit

564-999-0809, Scott.Frank@sao.wa.gov

Justin Stowe – Assistant Director for Performance Audit

564-201-2970, Justin.Stowe@sao.wa.gov

Tania Fleming – Principal Performance Auditor

564-999-0823, Tania.Fleming@sao.wa.gov

Sohara Monaghan – Senior Performance Auditor

564-999-0824, Sohara.Monaghan@sao.wa.gov

Kathleen Cooper – Director of Communications

564-999-0800, Kathleen.Cooper@sao.wa.gov

To request public records

Public Records Officer

564-999-0918, PublicRecords@sao.wa.gov

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Executive Summary

State Auditor's Conclusions (page 29)

Special education is as complex a topic as it is a vital service. As a school board member early in my public service career, I can recall the very real challenges of identifying the wide range of special education services needed across the district. Today, legislators continue to work to ensure every child in Washington receives the maximum benefits of a public education. For example, a child with disabilities cannot reach their potential without the support of dedicated teachers, paraeducators, psychologists and others. Legislators expressed interest in identifying successful recruitment and retention strategies for special education staff. In this report, we review the approaches and successes of other states in attracting and retaining these frontline workers.

This performance audit also fits into a wider constellation of studies intended to address the interests of policy makers. In 2025, we plan to review the prevalence of disabilities requiring special education services across Washington. And in 2026, we plan to conduct a performance audit of the authorization, monitoring and investigation of non-public agencies that provide special education services.

Taken together with reviews that will be conducted by our colleagues, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, these special education reports will form a solid factual basis for ongoing improvements to special education in our state. We at the State Auditor's Office are proud to be part of that effort.

Background (page 6)

Of the more than 1 million Washington students enrolled in K-12 education, almost 150,000 are eligible for special education services. Each eligible student receives an individualized education program that establishes the services the student is eligible to receive based upon specific needs and development goals. Special education services can include lessons to develop study or basic life skills, speech or physical therapy, behavior management, vocational education and travel training. Having an adequate and stable supply of qualified special education teachers and support staff is essential if the state is to assure quality instruction for these students and help them achieve educational goals.

Like most states, however, Washington reports shortages of qualified special education staff. This hampers school districts' ability to hire qualified teachers to fill special education vacancies. The shortfall also reflects the problem of retaining staff, as people leave special education for other public teaching roles or abandon the profession entirely. Either way, students with the most complex educational needs can be left without the properly trained staff to meet their needs. School districts are responsible for providing special education services to students, but Educational Service Districts (ESDs) and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) also play a key role. This audit identified strategies to help school districts improve recruitment and retention of special education staff. We also considered the challenges districts face in those efforts, and how districts might collaborate with OSPI and ESDs if they wish to implement or scale up recommended strategies.

Washington lacks qualified special education staff, but does not know the full extent of the shortage and attrition in the field (page 11)

Research studies and school districts report shortages of special education staff, particularly in rural and high-poverty districts. Inexperienced teachers and paraeducators are also common in special education settings. Moreover, attrition also reduces the supply of available, fully qualified teachers and staff. Washington's shortfall and high turnover in special education may be greater than studies suggest.

School districts described multiple challenges they face in recruiting and retaining special education staff (page 16)

Various factors can complicate school districts' recruitment and retention efforts, among them unfavorable working conditions – including heavy caseloads, administrative responsibilities and lack of leadership support. Districts that can pay higher wages, even within the same region, may better attract and retain qualified staff. The quality of preparation and mentorship programs can affect teacher preparedness for the job and lead to turnover. Finally, community factors also create barriers to recruitment and retention.

School districts may be able to improve recruitment and retention practices but will need regional and statewide support to do so (page 20)

We identified five areas of practice that can enhance school district efforts to recruit qualified special education teachers and support staff, and improve the likelihood districts will retain those they hire. These five areas are:

1. Create alternative pathways into the profession
2. Take advantage of newly reduced credentialing barriers
3. Provide financial incentives for special education roles
4. Promote manageable workloads
5. Establish supportive workplaces

Recommendations (page 30)

This audit does not make formal recommendations to the school districts interviewed or other educational agencies mentioned in the report. However, we consider the audit results so broadly applicable that it is in the state's best interest for all school districts, Educational Service Districts and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to consider the strategies highlighted in this report.

Next steps

Our performance audits of state programs and services are reviewed by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) and/or by other legislative committees whose members wish to consider findings and recommendations on specific topics. Representatives of the Office of the State Auditor will review this audit with JLARC's Initiative 900 Subcommittee in Olympia. The public will have the opportunity to comment at this hearing. Please check the JLARC website for the exact date, time, and location (www.leg.wa.gov/JLARC). The Office conducts periodic follow-up evaluations to assess the status of recommendations and may conduct follow-up audits at its discretion. See **Appendix A**, which addresses the I-900 areas covered in the audit. **Appendix B** contains information about our methodology. See the **Bibliography** for a list of references and resources used to develop our understanding of this topic.

Background

Almost 150,000 Washington students with disabilities are eligible for special education services

Students with disabilities have distinctive social, emotional and functional needs that can affect their ability to learn. They may need extra help with basic elements of schoolwork, studying in a classroom, interacting with other students or adults, moving between classes, or using technology. Both federal and state laws (the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and RCW 28A.155, respectively) require that students with disabilities who are eligible for special education services receive a free and appropriate public education. An “appropriate education” is defined as one directed to the unique needs, abilities and limitations of disabled children who are enrolled either full time or part time in a school district.

Of the more than 1 million Washington students enrolled in K-12 education in the 2021-2022 school year, almost 150,000 are eligible for special education services. Each eligible student receives an individualized education program that establishes the services the student is eligible to receive based upon specific needs and development goals. Special education services can include lessons to develop study or basic life skills, speech or physical therapy, behavior management, vocational education and travel training. In addition to describing students’ academic and behavioral goals, the individualized education program describes the amount of time a student will spend receiving special education and any related services the student will receive.

Special education teachers and related staff are essential to fulfilling student education plans

Special education teachers play a foundational role in ensuring these students succeed in school, not least because they are responsible for writing the individualized education program for each eligible student they teach and for designing and monitoring the specialized instruction that other staff – such as paraeducators and general education teachers – can help provide to serve students. They also have specialized roles within a school that other teachers do not. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) acknowledges this in its publication Standards for Beginning Educator Induction:

“Teachers of special education have unique roles and responsibilities. In addition to classroom teaching, [they] serve as case managers for students. They also work with more adults and in more ways than most other teachers. As teachers, they

often use curriculum from multiple grade levels and multiple subjects. They may have to find or create their own curriculum materials. As case managers, they may track data from other classrooms, work with students they do not teach, and devise interventions based on classroom structures and routines of other teachers. Working with other adults is a significant part of the work for special education teachers. They direct the work of paraeducators, meet with parents and advocates, coordinate with specialists (nurses, speech therapists, audiologist, etc.), work regularly with district and building administrators, and are often called on to assist other teachers in designing interventions for students not currently in a special education program. Woven through all of this are legal responsibilities related to special education and development of their voice to advocate for their students within the school, the district, and the local community. These multiple demands and roles can contribute to teachers feeling overwhelmed and may limit their development of personal and professional relationships.”

Washington’s educational authorities report shortages of special education staff

Having an adequate and stable supply of qualified special education teachers and support staff is essential if the state is to assure quality instruction for these students and help them achieve educational goals. The roles of special education staff are listed in the sidebar. But nationally, these educators are in short supply. For example, according to the Council for Exceptional Children, the District of Columbia and all but one state reported shortages in special education in 2021.

The full extent of Washington’s shortage and turnover in special education is unknown, but both OSPI and the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board have reported shortages. In a supplemental operating budget decision package issued in 2024, OSPI stated that the vacancy rate for special education teachers was much higher than for general elementary teaching positions. Furthermore, many special education teachers had three or fewer years of experience in the classroom. The Professional Educator Standards Board reported in 2024 that special education had the largest share of instruction provided by teachers without a special education endorsement on their teaching certificate, or with only a limited certificate, meaning they have not yet met full certification requirements in special education.

Roles of special education staff encompass:

- **Special education teachers** who develop and manage a student’s individualized education program and modify general education curriculum and activities in a way that each student can learn it. They also design and monitor the specialized instruction that other staff—such as paraeducators and general education teachers—can help provide to serve students.
- **Paraeducators** who assist special and general education teachers in the classroom to carry out instructional activities.
- **Specialized instructional support personnel** (such as speech language pathologists, audiologists or psychologists) who assist special education teachers with identifying specific strategies and accommodations to help students learn. Specialized instructional support personnel may also be a member of a student’s individualized education program team and directly identify and provide the supports and services a student needs.

These reports offer compelling evidence that Washington has fewer teachers qualified to provide instruction in special education compared to other instructional areas. This hampers school districts' ability to hire qualified teachers to fill special education vacancies. The shortfall also reflects the problem of retaining staff, as people leave special education for other teaching roles in the same or a different district or abandon the profession entirely. Either way, students with the most complex educational needs can be left without the properly trained staff to meet their needs.

School districts, Educational Service Districts, OSPI and the Professional Educator Standards Board play essential roles in the state's special education system

Four layers of organizations play different but essential roles in supporting special education staff and students in Washington.

School districts provide special education services to students. To fulfill this responsibility, districts are required to take measurable steps to recruit, hire, train and retain qualified special education teachers and staff to serve students.

Educational Service Districts (ESDs) are authorized to provide special education services to school districts, but the law does not require them to do so. ESDs may provide some free services to some school districts in their region, such as coordinating meetings for special education directors to share problems and solutions and providing special education teacher trainings; they also help districts access grants that fund teacher development. Other services are available for a fee, depending upon local demand and funding resources within the ESD; such services include supplying part-time special education specialists for districts in the region that do not need a full-time specialist on staff.

As the state educational agency, *OSPI* is responsible for supervising the special education program in individual school districts to improve educational results and functional outcomes for students and to ensure compliance with federal and state requirements. OSPI responsibilities include, but are not limited to, establishing the eligibility criteria districts use to determine if a student qualifies for special education services and offering guidance to districts to help them develop and deliver special education to students. The agency is also required to coordinate with the Department of Social and Health Services, county and regional offices to help students access needed services. More details about OSPI's responsibilities can be found in Washington Administrative Code 392-172A.

The *Professional Educator Standards Board* is responsible for establishing policies and requirements for the preparation and certification of educators. Such policies and requirements are intended to provide standards for competency in professional practice and knowledge in the areas of certification, and a foundation of skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary to help students meet or exceed learning goals.

This audit identified strategies to help school districts improve recruitment and retention of special education staff

Those with an interest in student learning and special education issues have sought to identify strategies that can help improve recruitment and retention of special education staff. In the 2024 legislative session, the Legislature considered bills to examine various aspects of special education, including this topic. Additionally, OSPI sought funding from the Legislature to implement strategies aimed at improving recruitment and retention of teachers and other special education staff.

This audit examined leading practices and interviewed staff and managers at OSPI, ESDs and selected school districts to identify strategies that can help school districts recruit and retain special education staff. We also considered the challenges districts face in those efforts, and how districts might collaborate with OSPI and ESDs if they wish to implement or scale up recommended strategies.

The audit answered the following question:

- What opportunities exist to help school districts strengthen the recruitment and retention of special education staff?

To gain the perspective of school districts, we held meetings with district staff and leadership, representing a variety of district characteristics. We chose 10 districts based on factors such as district size, its geographic location and whether it was rural or urban, and the percentage of district students with disabilities. The selected school districts are listed in the sidebar. One of the 10 selected districts, Soap Lake, did not participate in the interviews. An eleventh district, Olympia, although not originally selected, also offered input for this audit. The districts are also shown in the map in **Exhibit 1** on the following page. See Appendix B for more information about the districts we spoke to.

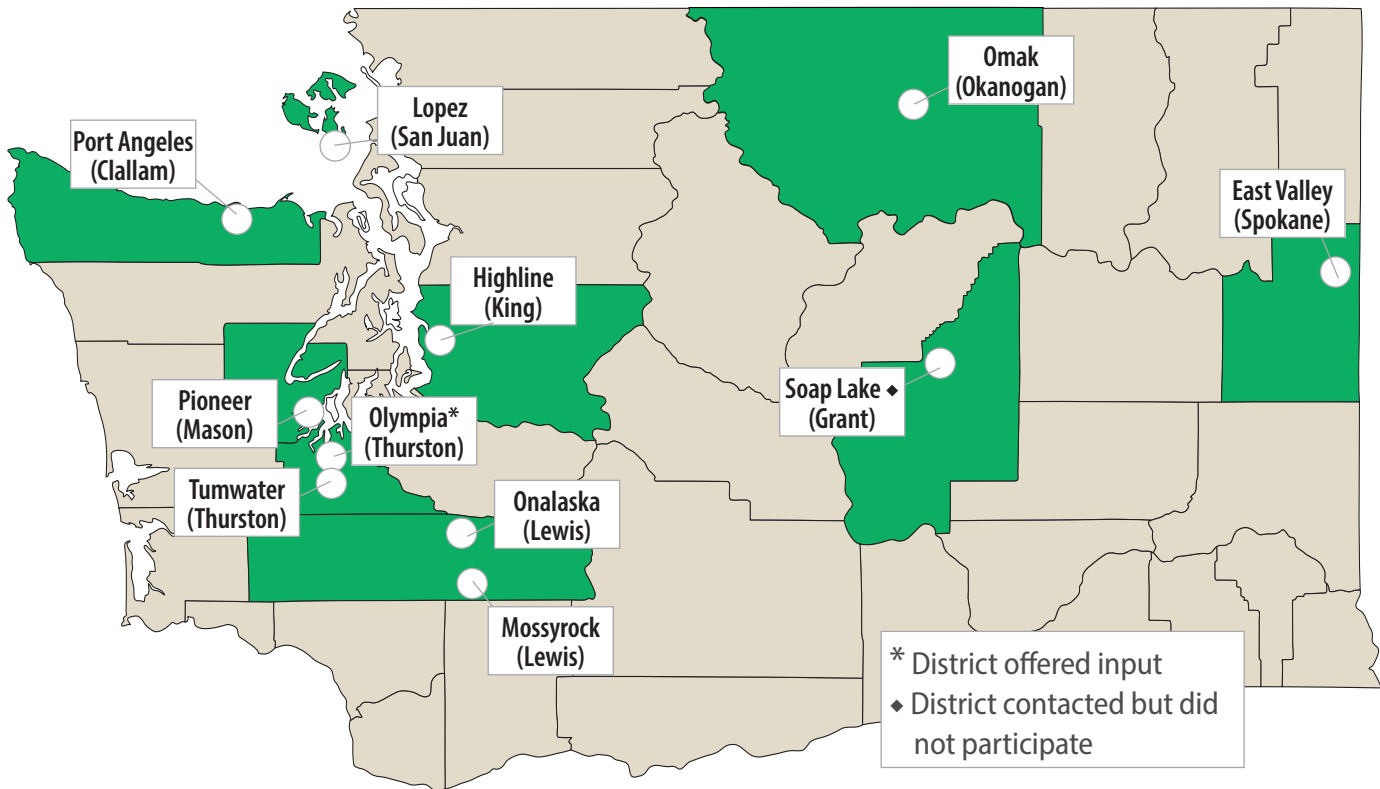
School districts contacted during this audit

East Valley	Onalaska
Highline	Pioneer
Lopez Island	Port Angeles
Mossyrock	Soap Lake [♦]
Olympia [*]	Tumwater
Omak	

* District offered input

♦ District contacted but did not participate

Exhibit 1 – Map of contacted school districts (by county)



Source: Auditor prepared using school district data from OSPI's Washington State Report Card.

Audit Results

Washington lacks qualified special education staff, but does not know the full extent of the shortage and attrition in the field

Results in brief

Research studies and school districts report shortages of special education staff, particularly in rural and high-poverty districts. Inexperienced teachers and para-educators are also common in special education settings. Moreover, attrition also reduces the supply of available, fully qualified teachers and staff. Washington's shortfall and high turnover in special education may be greater than studies suggest.

Research studies and school districts report shortages of special education staff, particularly in rural and high-poverty districts

Shortages of qualified teachers and support staff have troubled public schools across the country for several years. In 2023, the National Center for Education Statistics, the statistical center for the U.S. Department of Education Sciences, said that 86 percent of U.S. K-12 public schools reported challenges hiring teachers for the 2023-24 school year, with 83 percent reporting trouble hiring for non-teacher positions – figures largely unchanged from the previous year. The Center also asked schools about the prevalence of vacancies across subject areas. The most frequently cited teaching positions with unfilled vacancies were general elementary (cited by 71 percent of public schools) and special education teachers (70 percent).

The problem of insufficient special education teachers affects Washington, too. In addition to the high number of vacancies in the field, a significant number of those in the classroom do not hold full teaching endorsements for special education or are comparatively inexperienced in this field. Three recent studies looked into these issues.

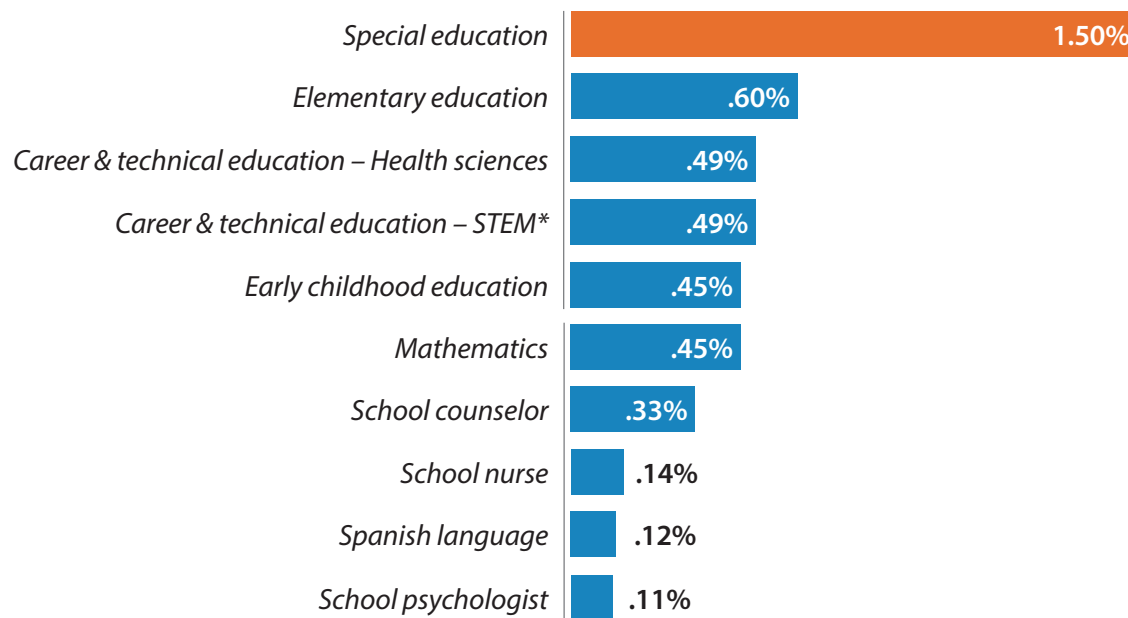
A 2021 University of Washington study found that the number of job vacancies for special education teachers was three times larger than for elementary education teachers. Researchers examined online job postings for about three-quarters of the state's school districts to identify vacant positions in content areas such as special

education and elementary. Their findings show that about 20 percent (155 out of 776) of the vacant teaching positions were for special education compared to 6 percent (70 out 776) for elementary education.

A 2024 study issued by the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board also considered how under-credentialed teachers working in special education settings reflect a shortfall in the profession. The board estimates statewide teacher shortages by analyzing credentialing data for the entire teacher workforce and the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) hours in specific courses these teachers are assigned to teach. Teachers are expected to hold an endorsement on their license certifying they are competent to teach a certain subject. The study found that the statewide share of special education instruction provided by teachers lacking a matching endorsement (or who held only a limited certificate) was almost three times larger than the next highest shortage area, elementary education. Exhibit 2 shows the significantly higher percentage of instruction provided by underqualified special education teachers compared to nine other endorsement areas in teacher certification.

Exhibit 2 – Percentage of instruction statewide provided by underqualified special education teachers in the top 10 content areas

2022-2023 school year



* STEM stands for ‘science, technology, engineering and math’ courses.

Source: Auditor prepared using content area shortage data from Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board.

Further complicating the issue, OSPI staff said that analyzing special education shortages is complex because federal law and Washington’s special education policy allow other staff, such as paraeducators and general education teachers, to help deliver special education to students provided that such instruction is designed and monitored by fully certified special education staff.

Shortages in special education are more acute in rural and high-poverty districts

The University of Washington study findings show the vacancy rate for special education teachers was almost twice as high in high-poverty school districts compared to low-poverty districts. Similarly, the vacancy rate for rural school districts was almost double the vacancy rate of school districts located in urban and suburban areas.

At least five of the ten school districts we interviewed (some in rural areas) said they have difficulties filling all manner of vacant special education positions, not only teachers. While some districts did not report any vacancies, others reported anywhere from two to 10 vacant positions, including teachers, paraeducators and specialists. Some districts said that while they can fill vacant positions with teachers that have limited certificates, doing so raises different problems. For example, districts can assign teachers with limited certificates to fill a special education position temporarily but a fully certified special education teacher must review and monitor the student's individualized education program, which consumes time the fully certified teacher could be spending teaching.

OSPI staff said that the agency has established a pre-endorsement authorization process to allow a teacher who is not fully certified in special education to teach students without supervision. But to obtain this authorization, the potential candidate must complete an application with OSPI and fulfill all endorsement requirements within three years of service as a special education teacher.

Inexperienced teachers and paraeducators are also common in special education settings

Closely related to the problem of under-credentialed teachers are those with correct credentials but much less experience in the classroom. A 2023 study published by the research group CALDER (see sidebar) examined the experience level of special education teachers in Washington and found that many had only limited experience in the classroom. The study found that nearly 30 percent of special education teachers in the state had less than five years of experience.

Attrition also reduces the supply of available, fully qualified teachers and staff

The CALDER study also highlighted the fact that special education teachers have left the profession at a rate of 6 percent to 8 percent annually over the past two decades. Furthermore, it found that turnover is even greater and experience more limited for the paraeducators who assist special education teachers in the classroom. The rate at which paraeducators have left the profession has increased from 10 percent to 23 percent between 1996 and 2022. Nearly 50 percent of paraeducators have less than five years of experience. This suggests that while

The Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) is a joint effort of the American Institutes for Research and 11 universities, including the University of Washington. CALDER uses longitudinal data obtained from multiple states and school districts to examine how policies and practices affect student outcomes in a district or state over a number of years. CALDER states that its partnership with state data providers enables its researchers to study how recent events affect real-time educational outcomes.

some people remain in the profession for many years, there is more “churn” among those with far fewer years in the classroom.

The experiences of interviewed school districts align with the CALDER’s findings. Overall, district staff said that most special education teachers in their district had been employed for less than five years. Additionally, they said the turnover rate – in which people leave the district or the profession, creating a new vacancy – for paraeducators and specialists was higher than for special education teachers. Turnover varied considerably by district, with some having no turnover while others saw a turnover of 50 percent or more during the audit period.

Washington’s shortfall and high turnover in special education may be greater than studies suggest

While some level of teacher turnover can be expected, persistent turnover is problematic because it has an adverse effect on student achievement. The problem also costs school districts time and money to recruit and develop new personnel. Both issues are acute in special education.

For a state to fully understand the condition of full or insufficient employment in education, the U.S. Department of Education recommends it collect the following data points to quantify total unmet need and determine statewide critical teacher shortage areas:

- Vacant, unfilled positions
- Positions filled with teachers who lack a matching endorsement in the content area they have been assigned to teach
- Positions filled with teachers who have only a limited certificate

However, Washington is unable to make a complete estimate on a statewide level because it does not collect and analyze school district data for vacant positions. There might be several reasons why the state lacks this data: first, no one is required to collect it, and second, the state lacks a method – such as a centralized jobs portal that all school districts use – which could facilitate its collection. Collecting and analyzing job vacancy data could help the state identify the school districts with severe staffing needs and deploy resources accordingly to address the shortage. Washington’s current statewide estimate does not account for vacant positions, and for this reason, the special education shortage may be greater than is known.

Furthermore, special education teacher turnover may also be greater than the state knows because available estimates do not account for special education teachers who move within and across school districts – the turnover or “churn” described earlier. Our interviews with school districts suggest there is teacher movement within and across districts. However, the CALDER study – the only one we identified that estimated the turnover rate for special education teachers in Washington – did not account for these movements, but only accounted for special education teachers who left the profession.

School districts described multiple challenges they face in recruiting and retaining special education staff

Answer in brief

Various factors can complicate school districts' recruitment and retention efforts. Among them are unfavorable working conditions – including heavy caseloads, administrative responsibilities and lack of leadership support. Districts that can pay higher wages, even within the same region, may better attract and retain qualified staff. The quality of preparation and mentorship programs can affect teacher preparedness for the job and lead to turnover. Finally, community factors also create barriers to recruitment and retention.

Various factors can complicate school districts' recruitment and retention efforts

People in the teaching profession want to help students succeed. However, significant shortages of both teachers and support staff may lead to higher individual workloads that in turn lead to burnout and ultimately result in turnover. While districts may face these challenges in any educational area, the nature of special education work exacerbates the effect on special education staff. For example, in addition to the routine duties all teachers perform, special education teachers have administrative responsibilities such as writing individualized education programs and coordinating with paraeducators and specialists. Their students also have much more complex educational needs, which can be a source of daily stress. These considerations combine to make special education such a demanding field. Consequently, districts find they need to ensure adequate preparedness, support and wages to attract and retain these specialized employees. Absent these conditions, teachers and support staff are less likely to want to work in high-need areas such as remote, rural districts, or to remain in the teaching profession altogether.

Though school districts use some strategies to help recruit and retain qualified special education staff, they face various challenges that hinder their efforts. The challenges districts described fall into four areas:

- Unfavorable working conditions
- Wages
- Teacher preparedness
- Community factors

These challenges are not unique to Washington. Research and studies at the national level also highlighted how some of these factors affect recruitment and retention of special education staff in other states. The following sections include summarized feedback provided by the school districts we interviewed in each of these four areas.

Unfavorable working conditions – including heavy caseloads, administrative responsibilities and lack of leadership support

If large class sizes or multiple administrative tasks might challenge any classroom teacher, working conditions for special education staff can be especially burdensome. District staff described three areas in particular: heavy student caseloads, administrative tasks and lack of leadership support.

- **Heavy student caseloads.** District staff said that heavy caseloads, involving multiple students in different grade levels and with varying disabilities, can cause teacher burnout and increase turnover. This issue is not unique to Washington; studies elsewhere have also found that higher student caseloads prompt special education teachers to pursue a general education position, a special education position elsewhere, or to leave the profession altogether.
- **Additional administrative responsibilities.** District staff said that special education teachers cited administrative responsibilities as a reason for leaving the job in an exit survey. In addition to the administrative duties all teachers have, such as scheduling meetings with parents or grading tests, special education teachers supervise paraeducators, manage students' individualized education programs, and coordinate with specialists. These additional administrative responsibilities significantly reduce their time for teaching. A report issued by the National Association of State Boards of Education cited an earlier study of teacher time use in special education which found that special education teachers spent only about 40 percent of their time teaching. The remainder of their time was filled with administrative tasks.
- **Lack of leadership understanding and support for the special education role.** Staff at one district said that special education teachers mentioned lack of leadership support for the special education role as a reason for leaving. This sentiment extended beyond school leadership. Staff at another district said that state leaders are disconnected from the current challenges driving special education shortages in schools.

Districts that can pay higher wages, even within the same region, may better attract and retain qualified staff

The generally modest salaries paid to educators, particularly in their first years, can be a significant deterrent to entering or staying in the teaching profession, as they can struggle to afford the cost of living and to pay off student debt. The American

University School of Education reports that new teachers make about 20 percent less than other college graduates just starting their careers.

District staff said that some small schools can rarely pay special education staff the higher wages that larger districts can afford. Small schools may lose staff to a larger school that is in the same region but offers thousands more in salary for the same job. For example, staff at East Valley School District said that special education teachers may be offered \$20,000 more in salary to work in another district that is in the same region. The effect of wages on a district's ability to recruit or retain staff extends beyond the teacher role. Staff at another district said that low wages also affect the district's ability to recruit and retain paraeducators who are needed to support special education teachers in the classroom.

The quality of preparation and mentorship programs can affect teacher preparedness for the job and lead to turnover

The American University School of Education reports that special education teachers with limited preparation are more likely to leave the profession. The experiences of Highline School District illustrate this conclusion. Staff there said the district invested in a preparation program to help paraeducators become special education teachers. Although they completed the program, these employees did not stay in teaching. District officials said this is probably because the people in the program did not understand the administrative tasks that the role entails such as writing individualized education programs.

A lack of or inadequate mentorship may also result in novice special education teachers feeling ineffective in their role and lead to turnover. Staff at one district said that departing special education teachers cited a lack of mentorship as a reason for leaving in their exit surveys. Some district staff said they would like to provide a mentor but lack experienced staff in-house with the capacity to serve in this role.

Community factors also create barriers to recruitment and retention

Various community conditions also pose barriers to recruitment and retention of qualified special education staff, including a district's location or housing, availability of preparation programs and credentialing barriers.

- **Some school districts are in locations that are remote, expensive or lack housing.** District staff said that rural schools, particularly those located far from suburban or metropolitan areas, have more difficulties attracting candidates because the district is not conveniently located to amenities, lacks sufficient housing or is expensive to live in. For example, staff at Lopez Island School District said the district is small but relatively expensive to live in. The district would like to build affordable housing on district property to attract special education staff.

Washington rural schools are not alone in facing challenges with attracting qualified special education staff. The National Coalition of Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services reported there is a limited supply of qualified special education staff willing to work in rural, high-poverty or high-crime communities. The American University School of Education reported the special education instructors that low-income and rural school districts do manage to hire often have less experience than those hired by more affluent schools. These teachers also have less special education training and hold certificates in subjects other than special education.

- **Some school districts have few special education preparation programs in their community.** District staff said that schools located far from metropolitan areas have few teacher certification programs nearby. Staff at Port Angeles School District, for example, said their location, some distance from major metropolitan areas, made it more difficult to incentivize school or community members to pursue certification in special education or to attract candidates who are already going through preparation programs.
- **Credentialing barriers may have limited school districts' ability to recruit qualified out-of-state special education teachers.** The National Coalition of Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services reported that barriers to re-specialization, re-licensure or alternative routes to licensure for otherwise qualified personnel can limit the pool of candidates available for recruitment.

While a few of the challenges districts describe – such as location or lack of housing – are beyond the educational community's ability to solve, a partnership between school districts, ESDs and OSPI can provide a path forward to addressing most challenges. In the next chapter, we describe strategies national organizations recommend and steps these educational agencies can take to improve recruitment and retention efforts.

School districts may be able to improve recruitment and retention practices, but will need regional and statewide support to do so

Answer in brief

We identified five areas of practice that can enhance school district efforts to recruit qualified special education teachers and support staff, and improve the likelihood districts will retain those they hire. These five areas are:

[Practice area 1:](#) Create alternative pathways into the profession

[Practice area 2:](#) Take advantage of newly reduced credentialing barriers

[Practice area 3:](#) Provide financial incentives for special education roles

[Practice area 4:](#) Promote manageable workloads

[Practice area 5:](#) Establish supportive workplaces

Many effective recruitment and retention strategies that school districts might try will benefit from state and regional partners' support

The state's lack of qualified special education staff, with its adverse effects on students, cannot be solved by school districts alone. While we found some districts have taken steps drawn from leading practices to recruit new special education staff and retain those they have, districts face limitations on what they can achieve at the local level. Multiple educational agencies will need to work together to apply those recruitment and retention strategies that can best help Washington's school districts attract and retain qualified special education staff.

This chapter describes five comprehensive strategies recommended by national organizations; in several cases, we describe how other states have applied them. And because many activities require inter-agency resources, collaboration or support to implement them widely, strategies within each area of practice note which Washington organization – school districts, ESDs or OSPI – can take the lead or help make the strategy a plan, and the plan an action.

Note that school district activities mentioned in this chapter were described by district staff during interviews; we did not verify the activity or how it actually affected the district's efforts to recruit or retain special education staff.

Practice area 1: Create alternative pathways into the profession

People pursuing the traditional route into teaching complete their teacher preparation program as part of a bachelor's or master's degree in education, and receive an endorsement confirming they are qualified in the specific content area they want to teach. While appealing to young people embarking on higher education, this can be an expensive and time-consuming pathway into the teaching profession.

Alternative routes to teacher certification and “Grow Your Own” programs can help educational agencies attract and prepare people to become special education teachers. Studies have found that when these nontraditional programs involve comprehensive coursework, strong mentoring and extensive support post-hiring, they can result in special education teachers of the same quality as those trained in traditional programs. Establishing these programs – and ensuring their success – typically involve partnerships between school districts and colleges or universities, as well as experienced special education teachers within school districts who can serve as mentors for prospective teachers.

Examples of alternative pathways include:

- *Alternative certification routes* typically serve people who have an associate's or bachelor's degree in a field other than education but are interested in pursuing teaching as a profession. These programs are effective at attracting people who want to change careers.
- *Grow Your Own programs* help school districts address shortages by focusing on recruitment and preparation of community members to become special education teachers. Grow Your Own programs recruit high school students, career changers, paraprofessionals and other non-teaching school faculty. These programs are especially successful in rural districts, which historically struggle to recruit teachers from outside their communities.

Applying the concept of alternative pathways requires regional and statewide support

Although Washington has some alternative certification and Grow Your Own programs, they are not available everywhere in the state. Two interviewed districts have been able to establish partnerships with colleges and universities to develop these programs. However, some district staff said they lack experienced special education staff in-house with the capacity to serve as mentors or the funding to hire someone for this role.

- **Identify colleges and universities that would work with districts to develop an alternative certification or Grow Your Own program.**

Partner: ESDs.

ESDs are well positioned to identify colleges or universities in their region that are open to working with districts to develop these programs.

- **Work with colleges and universities to develop preparation programs suitable for the district's needs and candidates.**

Partner: School districts.

Highline and Omak school districts have already established partnerships with universities in their regions to develop preparation programs.

- **Offer regional mentoring programs.**

Partner: ESDs.

ESDs can examine the feasibility of providing regional special education staff to serve as experienced mentors for small school districts in the region that lack staff and cannot afford to hire someone.

- **Identify people in the school or community who are interested in becoming special education teachers.**

Partner: School districts.

Highline and Omak school districts encourage general education teachers and paraeducators to obtain a special education certificate through the programs they developed with local universities.

- **Develop a list of grant opportunities that could support preparation programs.**

Partner: OSPI.

OSPI is well positioned to identify grants that could fund both the development of a preparation program and scholarships for prospective teachers that would cover the cost of attending the program. Once it has developed a list of grants, OSPI can distribute the list to all districts and provide guidance on how to prepare a grant proposal for such purposes. For example, OSPI staff said that districts may use funds from the federal Supporting Effective Instruction State Grant (Title II, Part A) to incentivize staff to pursue certification. This grant may be used for tuition costs and test fees for staff completing initial teacher certification as well as add-on endorsements.

Practice area 2: Take advantage of new reductions in credentialing barriers

To increase the pool of qualified teaching candidates, the National Center for Interstate Compacts (part of the Council of State Governments) recommends establishing reciprocal agreements between states that remove barriers to hiring teachers with special education licenses or certifications obtained in another state. Until recently, Washington was among the many states that required teachers with out-of-state endorsements obtain a Washington certificate before being allowed to teach in our public schools.

In the 2024 legislative session, the Legislature passed a bill to join the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact. This interstate occupational licensing agreement is already in place in 11 other states, including Oregon and Nevada, with legislation pending in California, New York and five additional states.

Teachers with an eligible license apply when they enter a member state and receive the closest equivalent license without taking state-specific exams or completing additional coursework. The compact is expected to be especially beneficial to military spouses, who often find an educational certificate issued in their home state is not as useful in gaining a teaching job in their spouse's next assignment.

The main goals of the interstate license mobility agreement include:

- Create a streamlined pathway to licensure mobility for teachers, including special education teachers
- Facilitate the exchange of licensure, investigative and disciplinary information with other member states
- Enable state- and district-level employers to add out-of-state teachers to the pool of qualified, competent candidates
- Support the retention of teachers in the profession by removing barriers to re-licensure in a new state

While districts could previously recruit teachers with out-of-state endorsements, the new interstate license mobility agreement further removes credentialing barriers which in turn can help attract qualified candidates to work in Washington's public schools.

Partner action: OSPI can develop and disseminate guidance to help school districts understand how these changes affect the hiring of special education teachers with out-of-state endorsements and certificates.

Practice area 3: Provide financial incentives for special education roles

Wages and other forms of compensation underpin many decisions about where people decide to work, and under what conditions they are willing to persevere. This can be especially true in the demanding field of special education, for teachers as well as paraeducators and specialist support staff, and school districts might look for ways to improve compensation to help attract qualified special education staff to work in critical shortage areas.

However, matters of pay and compensation require renegotiation of district employment contracts with teacher and support staff unions and bargaining units, and so are unlikely to be unilateral actions an educational agency can undertake on its own. School districts, ESDs and OSPI can nonetheless examine the feasibility of providing financial incentives as recruitment and retention techniques.

Three useful financial incentive strategies include differentiated pay structures, contingency-based incentives and covering tuition costs of gaining special education credentials.

Examples of financial incentives include:

- *Differentiated pay structures*, negotiated at the state level, allow school districts to offer more compensation for special education staff working in critical shortage areas. For example, Hawaii implemented this strategy and reported the initiative resulted in a 45 percent reduction in special education vacancies and a 43 percent increase in teachers entering or transferring to the special education field. Differentiated pay structures can also be applied to compensate special education staff for workload burdens unique to their role, such as their responsibility for writing student individualized education programs. (See Practice #4 on page 25, "Establishing caseload or workload caps," which helps guide districts in quantifying workload burdens that trigger differentiated or additional compensation.)
- *Contingency-based incentives* attract people to the profession by offering scholarships or fellowships if applicants commit to teaching in high-need schools and subjects – such as special education in a rural school – for a set number of years.
- *Paying tuition costs for special education training programs*. Funding tuition outright or forgiving student loan debt can offer potential teachers a significant reduction in the financial burden of obtaining a college degree in education. Funding or loan forgiveness programs that cover a significant portion of tuition or living expenses are most effective at attracting and retaining high quality professionals to the fields and communities in which they are most needed. These programs can be structured to require service in high-risk areas upon graduation.

Applying financial incentives requires regional and statewide support

- **Differentiated pay at school district level.**

Partner: School districts.

District leaders can consult with their budget office and bargaining unit to determine if they can provide additional compensation to special education teachers under certain conditions. For example, Olympia School District's bargaining contract provides additional compensation to teachers for two issues: for writing individualized education programs and if a teacher's caseload exceeds 25 students. Tumwater and Port Angeles school districts give special education teachers extra paid days to write individualized education programs.

- **Differentiated pay established statewide.**

Partner: OSPI.

OSPI can develop a funding package to present to the legislature that would authorize and provide funding for school districts to adopt differentiated pay structures. Such a system could help school districts entice prospective and existing teachers to serve in special education, particularly in areas with significant shortages such as rural school districts.

- **Identify scholarships or fellowship programs districts can use to entice people into the profession.**

Partner: ESDs.

ESDs are well positioned to research professional associations or other organizations that fund programs suitable for districts in their regions. For example, the Washington State Educator Workforce Program offers a conditional scholarship for people who want to earn a teacher certificate in a subject area identified as a critical shortage, including special education. The program offers up to \$8,000 each academic year, for up to four years, towards earning a Washington Residency Teacher Certificate.

Practice area 4: Promote manageable workloads

While all teachers are affected by voluminous paperwork required by modern educational systems, special education teachers may feel particularly overwhelmed. In addition to administrative tasks, they must also complete essential but time-consuming tasks like writing students' individualized education programs and interacting with the many people involved in delivering special education. Research suggests three ways school districts can promote manageable workloads for special education teachers that enable them to spend more of their time teaching. These include establishing specific caseloads, providing administrative support and clarifying roles.

- *Establish caseload or workload caps to help the district assess when a teacher is carrying a greater-than-normal caseload.* Exceeding the cap might warrant additional paraeducator support or compensation. Many states' educational agencies have established statewide guidance or policies on caseloads or workloads for special education teachers. They use a variety of factors to determine a teacher's caseload, including a student's disability category, the student's grade level and the level of support a student needs.
- *Provide administrative support to help special education teachers manage additional administrative tasks the role entails.* Routine activities such as scheduling and documenting meetings, sending notices to parents or obtaining parental consent for an activity, which do not require a teacher to perform them, can be delegated by assigning or hiring an administrative employee to help complete them.

- *Clarify the role of novice special education teachers and protect their time so they can focus on teaching and improving their skills.* For example, school administrators would avoid assigning these teachers additional duties in their first years of employment. School leaders can also ensure general education staff better understand the workload of special education teachers overall.

All those involved in education can take steps to promote manageable workloads for special education staff

- **Alleviate heavy workloads on special education teachers.**
Partner: School districts.
District and school leaders can begin by examining resources and staffing assignments to determine where they can change processes to lift workload burdens for special education teachers. Lopez and Omak school districts hired support staff to assist special education teachers with administrative tasks.
- **Develop criteria for caseload or workload caps.**
Partners: ESDs, school districts.
ESD 113 and Pioneer School District each established caseload caps or criteria to determine when teachers need additional paraeducator support.
- **Statewide guidelines for establishing caseload or workload caps.**
Partner: OSPI.
OSPI can help school districts promote manageable workloads by developing statewide guidelines on factors districts can consider for establishing caseload or workload caps. Lacking this guidance, such decisions are left to the discretion of each school district, which can contribute to inconsistent treatment of teachers from district to district.

Practice area 5: Establish supportive workplaces

According to detailed guidance issued by OSPI, all new teachers should be supported in their first years in the classroom. Once they have been hired, OSPI recommends all schools ensure the new teachers move through a carefully assembled onboarding process known as teacher induction. One distinctive element of induction is the new teacher's relationship with a mentor – an experienced teacher, preferably with the same endorsement area, who guides the new teacher and helps them develop their skills in the classroom.

Mentorship is even more important for new special education teachers, who are called upon to use specialized skills from their first day at work. Yet a district may have difficulty finding an experienced special education instructor with the capacity to take on a mentoring role.

Beyond induction and mentoring, supportive working environments encompass ongoing professional learning opportunities and appropriate recognition of the special education team's contributions to the school.

- *Induction and mentoring.* If all teachers need support as they begin to apply what they learned in pre-service programs to the real world of teaching, induction and mentoring programs are even more essential to help novice special education teachers become acclimated to their new role. Effective induction and mentoring programs that promote retention rely on pairing novice special education teachers with well-trained mentors who understand the needs of the students they are serving, offer ongoing professional learning and encourage collaboration. The National Coalition of Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services recommends that states adopt induction and mentoring programs for at least the first three years of a special education teacher's professional service.
- *Ongoing professional learning opportunities help special education teachers continue to improve their skills and incorporate evidence-based practices in their teaching.* So-called collaborative learning communities or communities of practice are effective at offering ongoing professional learning opportunities to special education staff. These communities provide a forum to share questions, answers, resources and support. An example of an organization that provides a professional learning community for special education staff is the Council for Exceptional Children.
- *Supportive working environment.* All teachers – indeed, all employees – flourish in a workplace that recognizes their contributions and helps them succeed in their jobs. They are more likely to want to remain in a supportive workplace, even if other factors like pay or location are not ideal. The benefits of fostering a supportive working environment are especially important as districts try to retain special education staff.

Research describes many characteristics of supportive workplaces that can be put into action by school leadership. For example, school administrators should encourage special education staff to offer input about decisions affecting them, and provide opportunities for professional development and advancement. Administrators should facilitate the work of special education staff by providing clear expectations to all school personnel about including special education staff and their students in school activities, and promote collaboration between special education and general education teachers.

All those involved in education can take steps to promote supportive workplaces for special education staff

- **Effective mentoring programs for special education teachers.**

Partner: School districts.

District leaders can examine how they select mentors for special education teachers to find the best match. They might consider hiring an experienced special education teacher expressly to serve as an in-house mentor for novice teachers. For example, Highline School District's mentorship program gives novice teachers coaching that addresses instruction, supervising paraeducators, parent meetings and writing individualized education programs. However, some districts were unable to assign a mentor because they said they lacked experienced special education staff in-house with the capacity to serve in this role.

- **Offer regional mentoring programs.**

Partner: ESDs.

ESDs can consider hosting one or more special education teachers to serve as experienced mentors for small school districts in the region that lack staff and cannot afford to hire someone.

- **Grant opportunities to fund mentors and mentoring programs.**

Partner: OSPI.

OSPI can help school districts by identifying state and federal grants that could be used to develop mentorship programs and distributing the resulting list to all school districts. It could also provide guidance to districts on how best to apply for these grants. Tumwater School District used a BEST grant, offered by OSPI, to hire an in-house mentor for its special education teachers.

- **Developing supportive workplace environments.**

Partner: OSPI.

OSPI can help districts gain access to professional learning communities for special education. For example, OSPI might achieve economies of scale by obtaining membership to a professional learning community for all districts in state, which districts would not be able to achieve by signing up on their own. OSPI can also conduct annual assessments of working conditions in schools. OSPI is well positioned to provide leadership training to school administrators to help them learn how to improve working conditions for special education staff.

State Auditor's Conclusions

Special education is as complex a topic as it is a vital service. As a school board member early in my public service career, I can recall the very real challenges of identifying the wide range of special education services needed across the district. Today, legislators continue to work to ensure every child in Washington receives the maximum benefits of a public education.

For example, a child with disabilities cannot reach their potential without the support of dedicated teachers, paraeducators, psychologists and others. Legislators expressed interest in identifying successful recruitment and retention strategies for special education staff. In this report, we review the approaches and successes of other states in attracting and retaining these frontline workers.

This performance audit also fits into a wider constellation of studies intended to address the interests of policy makers. In 2025, we plan to review the prevalence of disabilities requiring special education services across Washington. And in 2026, we plan to conduct a performance audit of the authorization, monitoring and investigation of non-public agencies that provide special education services.

Taken together with reviews that will be conducted by our colleagues, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, these special education reports will form a solid factual basis for ongoing improvements to special education in our state. We at the State Auditor's Office are proud to be part of that effort.

Recommendations

This performance audit identified strategies that can help school districts improve recruitment and retention of special education staff. The audit does not make formal recommendations to the school districts interviewed or other educational agencies mentioned in the report. However, we consider the audit results so broadly applicable that it is in the state's best interest for school districts, educational service districts and OSPI to consider the strategies highlighted in this report.

Agency Response

Note: All audited agencies are invited to send a formal response to the final draft of the audit report, to be incorporated in the published report. In this case, only one agency, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, chose to respond; its response follows on page 32.

Eight school districts declined to provide a formal response:

East Valley	Onalaska
Highline	Pioneer
Lopez Island	Port Angeles
Mossyrock	Tumwater

Two districts did not respond to the invitation:

Omak	Soap Lake
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Although Olympia School District offered input to the audit, it was not formally an audited district, and we did not invite it to respond.

Old Capitol Building
PO Box 47200
Olympia, WA 98504-7200

ospi.k12.wa.us



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
Chris Reykdal, Superintendent

June 25, 2024

Honorable Pat McCarthy
Washington State Auditor
P.O. Box 40021
Olympia, WA 98504-0021

Dear Auditor McCarthy:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the State Auditor's Office (SAO) performance audit on recruitment and retention of special education staff.

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) believes the recommendations in the report are aligned with ongoing efforts across OSPI and other state agencies to support the recruitment and retention of special education teachers:

- The federal Keeping Exceptional Special Educators (KESE) grant, administered by OSPI, is a 5-year project focused on the recruitment and retention of special education teachers. Through a literature review, partner interviews, task force meetings, surveys, and focus groups, KESE developed and refined four recruitment and retention recommendations for special education teachers, each with several sub-recommendations. Broadly, the four recommendations are 1) Support Novel and Responsive Strategies to Special Education Teacher Preparation, 2) Support Special Education Teacher Hiring and Staffing, 3) Enhance Induction and Mentoring for Novice Special Education Teachers, and 4) Address Special Education Teacher Well-Being. KESE will continue to support districts and partners in the knowledge mobilization and scaling-up of targeted action steps that address local needs for the recruitment and retention of special education teachers.
- Federal Title II, Part A funds may be used to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of special education teachers. Since 2022–23, KESE and Title IIA have partnered to offer grants to districts to supplement recruitment, retention, and professional learning efforts for special education staff. These grants support districts to implement the KESE recommendations and provide evaluation reports of their results. In this way these districts partner with KESE to put recruitment and retention strategies into practice. Knowledge from these pilots will further inform the KESE team as they work to implement a statewide plan for special educator recruitment and retention.

Honorable Pat McCarthy

June 25, 2024

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- The Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST) is a competitive grant administered by OSPI that supports the comprehensive induction of novice educators in Washington. BEST offers a two-day academy on mentoring teachers of special education which supports mentors in reflecting on their knowledge and skills to individualize support for novice special education teachers. Additionally, BEST leadership at OSPI hosts monthly Induction Leader Collaboration sessions. Collaboration sessions for 2023-24 have included a focus on the induction needs of special education teachers.
- The Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) incentivizes preparation programs and candidates to pursue certification in shortage areas, such as special education. PESB administers the Alternative Routes Block Grant (ARBG), which is funded by the state legislature and the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC). The ARBG is a competitive grant application process. Awardees use funds to implement innovative “grow your own” teacher strategies that address workforce shortages, recruit support, and prepare diverse teacher candidates. The grant provides funds for candidate conditional loan scholarships and program, district, and mentor supports.
- The Washington State Educator Workforce Program (EWP), managed by WSAC, provides financial aid to attract and retain teachers in shortage areas. EWP includes options for current teachers, student teachers, paraprofessionals, and non-educators hoping to move into the teaching field.

As noted in the report, special education teachers have multiple unique roles and responsibilities, including collaborating with general education teachers and paraeducators who may support the provision of specially designed instruction (SDI) to students with disabilities. Under federal IDEA, all students eligible for special education should have IEPs that are aligned to grade-level learning standards and support access and progress in the general education curriculum. Special education services can be delivered in different ways and are not confined to a specific room, place, or provider. Students with disabilities have a federally-protected civil right to meaningfully access the general education curriculum in their least restrictive environment (LRE).

Unique features of the special educators’ roles also result in challenges with data monitoring and reporting. For example, the report described the challenges quantifying the shortage of qualified special education teachers in Washington. Due to special education teachers’ unique roles, state course data and student enrollment data are not accurate indicators of special education teacher workload or shortage. OSPI continues to support LEAs to ensure that students with disabilities have access to high-quality instruction from educators who are highly-qualified in their content area.

Honorable Pat McCarthy

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In 2018, the Washington state legislature funded the Inclusionary Practices Project (IPP) to increase student access to core instruction and general education settings. IPP resulted in significant progress in LRE data – meaning that many more students with IEPs are now served in general education settings for 80% or more of the school day. For 80 years researchers have consistently demonstrated that all students, regardless of disability type or grade level, benefit from inclusive settings. Washington's shift to more inclusive special education instruction means that a greater number of students are receiving more special education services in the general education classroom. Often this looks like teachers in the general education classroom assisting with the delivery of that instruction which is designed and monitored by fully certificated special education staff. As noted in the report, measuring the scale of special education shortages is complex because special education services are designed and monitored by the appropriate special education staff, but sometimes these services are delivered by other educators and provided in inclusive settings.

OSPI promotes and supports practices that lead to greater levels of inclusion in schools and districts through grantmaking, resource sharing, and knowledge networks. The Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN) is an intentional collective of technical assistance (TA) and support providers working together, in partnership with OSPI and WestED, to increase inclusionary practices for students with IEPs across Washington state. TA providers focus on family and student experiences to showcase the lived impact of meaningful inclusion beyond what traditional methods of data reporting can accomplish alone. IPTN members work both individually and collaboratively to lift up inclusionary practices and needed system changes for students furthest from educational justice.

OSPI has asked the legislature to fund other initiatives to support the recruitment and retention of special education teachers. For example, the legislature continues to invest in innovative approaches to educator preparation including teacher residency. We look forward to continued partnership with legislators, educator preparation program providers, researchers, and agency staff to collaboratively address the workforce challenges we share.

We appreciate the thoroughness of the audit team and their efforts to gather and respond to our feedback throughout the process.

Sincerely,



Dr. Tania May
Assistant Superintendent
Special Education

Appendix A: Initiative 900 and Auditing Standards

Initiative 900 requirements

Initiative 900, approved by Washington voters in 2005 and enacted into state law in 2006, authorized the State Auditor’s Office to conduct independent, comprehensive performance audits of state and local governments.

Specifically, the law directs the Auditor’s Office to “review and analyze the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the policies, management, fiscal affairs, and operations of state and local governments, agencies, programs, and accounts.” Performance audits are to be conducted according to U.S. Government Accountability Office government auditing standards.

In addition, the law identifies nine elements that are to be considered within the scope of each performance audit. The State Auditor’s Office evaluates the relevance of all nine elements to each audit. The table below indicates which elements are addressed in the audit. Specific issues are discussed in the Results and Recommendations sections of this report.

I-900 element	Addressed in the audit
1. Identify cost savings	No.
2. Identify services that can be reduced or eliminated	No.
3. Identify programs or services that can be transferred to the private sector	No.
4. Analyze gaps or overlaps in programs or services and provide recommendations to correct them	No.
5. Assess feasibility of pooling information technology systems within the department	No.

I-900 element	Addressed in the audit
6. Analyze departmental roles and functions, and provide recommendations to change or eliminate them	No.
7. Provide recommendations for statutory or regulatory changes that may be necessary for the department to properly carry out its functions	No.
8. Analyze departmental performance data, performance measures and self-assessment systems	No.
9. Identify relevant best practices	Yes. The audit identified leading practices that can help improve recruitment and retention of special education staff.

Compliance with generally accepted government auditing standards

We conducted this performance audit under the authority of state law (RCW 43.09.470), approved as Initiative 900 by Washington voters in 2005, and in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards as published in *Government Auditing Standards* (July 2018 revision) issued by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The mission of the Office of the Washington State Auditor

To provide citizens with independent and transparent examinations of how state and local governments use public funds, and develop strategies that make government more efficient and effective. The results of our work are widely distributed through a variety of reports, which are available on our website and through our free, electronic [subscription service](#). We take our role as partners in accountability seriously. We provide training and technical assistance to governments and have an extensive quality assurance program. For more information about the State Auditor's Office, visit www.sao.wa.gov.

Appendix B: Objectives, Scope and Methodology

Objectives

The purpose of this performance audit was to answer this audit question:

- What opportunities exist to help school districts strengthen the recruitment and retention of special education staff?

For reporting purposes, the audit results have been organized into the following key findings that address Objective 1:

- Washington lacks qualified special education staff, but does not know the full extent of the shortage and attrition in the field (pages 11-15)
- School districts described multiple challenges they face in recruiting and retaining special education staff (pages 16-19)
- School districts may be able to improve recruitment and retention practices but will need regional and statewide support to do so (pages 20-28)

Scope

This performance audit examined the reported magnitude of Washington's shortage and turnover of special education staff, the challenges districts face in recruiting and retaining special education staff, and the strategies national organizations recommend for improving recruitment and retention of special education staff.

We identified the information in this report through a review of literature reported by national organizations and group meetings with selected school districts. To gain the perspective of school districts, we held meetings with district staff and leadership, representing a variety of district characteristics. We chose 10 districts based on factors such as district size, its geographic location and whether it was rural or urban, and the percentage of district students with disabilities. The selected school districts are listed in the sidebar. One of the 10 selected districts, Soap Lake, did not participate in the interviews. An eleventh district, Olympia, although not originally selected, also offered input for this audit.

School districts contacted during this audit

East Valley	Onalaska
Highline	Pioneer
Lopez Island	Port Angeles
Mossyrock	Soap Lake [♦]
Olympia [*]	Tumwater
Omak	

* District offered input

♦ District contacted but did not participate

Methodology

We obtained the evidence used to support the findings and conclusions in this audit report during our fieldwork period (February 2024 to March 2024), with some additional follow-up work afterward. To address the audit objective, we used two qualitative methods: literature review and group meetings with selected school districts. We have summarized the work we performed to address the audit objective below.

Objective: What opportunities exist to help school districts strengthen the recruitment and retention of special education staff?

Literature review

We conducted online research to identify the reported magnitude of Washington’s special education shortage and turnover. We also used online resources to identify factors that contribute to shortages and turnover in special education as well as strategies for improving recruitment and retention of special education staff. We then analyzed the information to identify common themes. Various national organizations reported the factors and strategies we reviewed, including:

- America University School of Education
- Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER)
- Higher Education Consortium on Special Education
- Learning Policy Institute
- National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services
- National Association of State Board of Education
- TeachPlus
- The CEEDAR Center
- The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders
- The Council for Exceptional Children
- U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs

Group meetings with school districts

We conducted group meetings with selected school districts to gain an understanding of the following:

- Factors that contribute to the shortage and turnover of special education staff in their community
- Challenges districts face in recruiting and retaining special education staff
- Strategies districts use or would like to implement to address challenges in recruiting and retaining special education staff

Evidence limitations for this audit include relying on literature and self-reported information.

Work on internal controls

We did not examine internal control components as part of this audit. We determined that internal control components were not significant to our audit objective because the audit would not involve any assessments of whether school districts were effectively managing recruitment and retention of special education staff or effectively assuring compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

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Washington State Auditor’s Office
P.O. Box 40031 Olympia WA 98504

www.sao.wa.gov

1-564-999-0950



Office of the Washington State Auditor
Pat McCarthy