

Critical Issues in Special Education Teacher Supply and Demand: *Overview*

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The shortage of fully certified special education teachers, which has been described as severe, chronic, and pervasive, threatens the quality of educational services that students with disabilities receive. Over the last decade, researchers have investigated the magnitude of the special education teacher shortage problem and factors that contribute to the imbalance between supply and demand.

This special issue includes research syntheses that critically evaluate the complex range of factors that contribute to teacher shortages in special education. These syntheses present a review of what is known about the supply and demand problem, provide a research base to help inform efforts to address the shortage problem, and suggest research questions needing study.

The Current Policy Context

While there has been a shortage of fully certified special education teachers in the United States for at least two decades, it is only recently that this shortage has received significant attention from policymakers at the national level. This has occurred at least in part as a result of the mandate in the act known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002) that all content area teachers in Title I schools be "highly qualified" by the 2005–2006 school year. This mandate was built upon a recently developed consensus among policymakers and researchers that highly qualified teachers significantly increase student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Sanders & Horn, 1998; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). For example, Sanders and Horn found that the quality of the teacher contributes more to student achievement than any other factor, including student background, class size, or class composition. Although the NCLB mandate does not apply to most special education teachers, it is widely assumed that the imminent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will in-

clude a "highly qualified" mandate that mirrors the intent of NCLB.

NCLB and a related mandate in IDEA have tremendous potential for finally ending the shortage of special education teachers. Indeed, the U.S. Congress is working to align Title II of the Higher Education Act with NCLB, so that states will receive the financial support to address the teacher shortage in the form of loan forgiveness for candidates who plan to teach in shortage areas. If significant funds are available for prospective teachers, this support will likely attract increasing numbers of teachers into special education and other shortage areas.

Although a mandate for highly qualified teachers and related legislation has the potential for increasing the number of certified special education teachers, it also has the potential for exacerbating the teacher shortage. For example, if the content area requirement in NCLB is applied to secondary-level special education teachers, these teachers will be required to hold certification in both special education and the content area they teach (e.g., mathematics, which is also an area of teacher shortages). Although such a mandate would provide increasing assurance that all special education teachers are highly qualified to teach content area subjects, it could also make the shortage of special education teachers worse, unless powerful policy initiatives are enacted to counteract this outcome.

A policy initiative from NCLB has begun to emerge in some states (e.g., Florida, Texas) to address the "highly qualified" mandate, as state-level officials have become aware of the difficulties inherent in ensuring that all teachers are highly qualified (and thus fully certified) by 2005–2006. These states have begun to offer alternative routes to certification that remove certain requirements or lower standards for certification. The most extreme of these alternatives is the route that is included in NCLB and promoted by advocates of deregulation of teacher certification (Paige, 2002; Walsh, 2001). This option allows anyone holding a bachelor's degree to take a test of content and/or pedagogical knowledge and become certi-

Critical Issues In Special Education

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