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Special Education – Not So Special for Some Qualified teachers in short supply for special education students

Special education students make up an important, large and growing segment of California's student population. From about 550,000 students in the mid-nineties, special education students number more than 675,000 students today, nearly ten percent of California's student population. These students face a variety of challenges ranging from attention deficit or hyperactivity disorders to severe mental or physical impairments.

School districts across the state are challenged to meet the needs of these students and employ a variety of strategies to do so. In most public schools, special education students may be taught in self-contained classrooms, in resource rooms for part of the day or, for some subjects, may be taught in general education classrooms alongside their peers.

But while schools may take a variety of approaches to teaching special education students, they face very limited options in meeting the demands of state and federal educational accountability measures. The majority of special education students participate in the state's regular educational assessments, and under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), schools are held accountable for their academic progress. In addition, beginning in 2005-06 special education high school students must take and pass the California High School Exit Exam to receive a diploma. (Under some conditions, however, local school boards may waive the requirement to pass the exam of an individual special education student.)

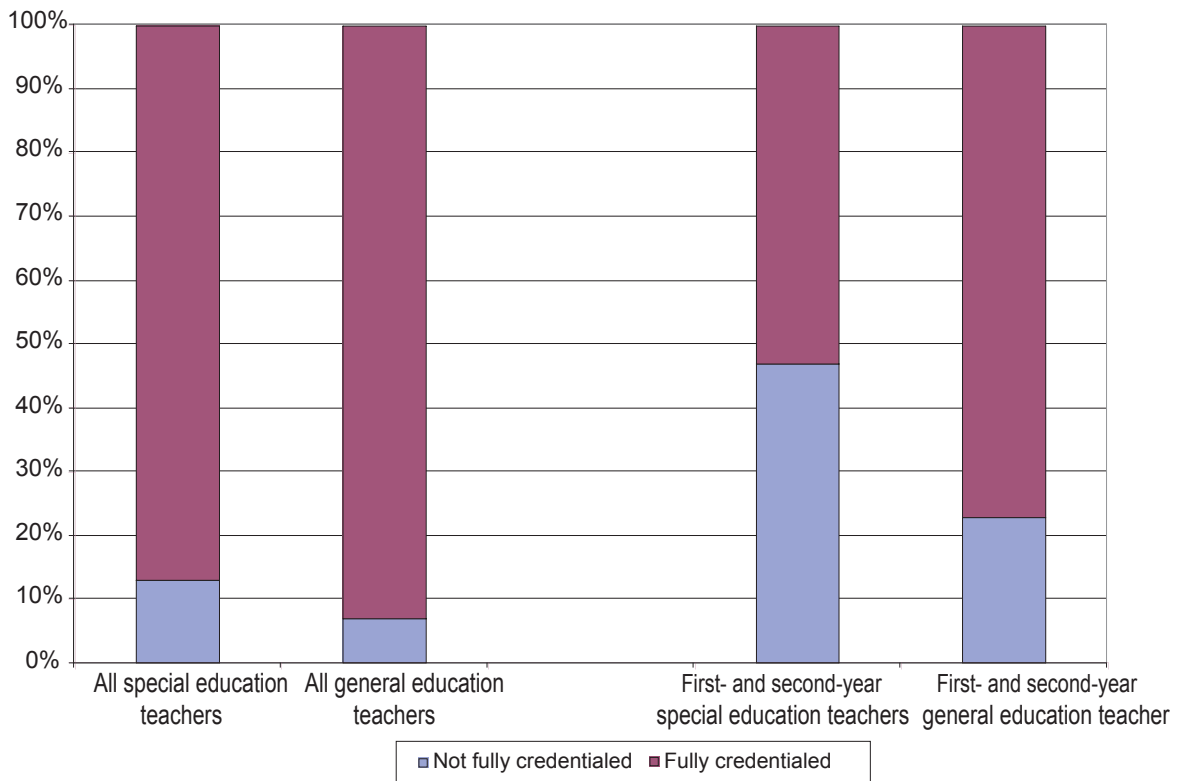
California faces several challenges in providing special needs students with teachers who can help them to achieve these standards. One of the most significant problems is a severe shortage of credentialed special education teachers.

The shortage of special education teachers

By law, special education teachers must complete training and hold Education Specialist credentials that are matched to their students' needs. But California faces a shortage of these teachers. In 2003-04, of the more than 48,000 special education teachers in the state, 13% were not fully credentialed (compared to 7% in general education). Among just first- and second-year special education teachers, 47% were underprepared in 2003-04, compared with 23% in general education (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Credential Status of Special Education and General Education Teachers, 2003-04



Source: CDE, Educational Demographics Unit. CBEDS Professional Assignment Information Form, 2003-04. SRI analysis.

Shortages among both general education teachers and special education teachers have improved in the past year, but the shortage of special education teachers has been more persistent (see Figure 2). While the percentages of underprepared general elementary and secondary teachers have dropped to 6% and 7%, respectively, the percent of underprepared special education teachers is about twice as high at 13%.

Figure 2

Percentage of Underprepared Teachers, by Subject Area 1999-2000 to 2003-04

Subject Area	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Elementary	13%	12%	11%	9%	6%
Secondary	9%	9%	9%	9%	7%
Special education	12%	14%	15%	15%	13%

Source: CDE, Educational Demographics Unit. CBEDS Professional Assignment Information Form, 1997-98 to 2003-04. SRI analysis.

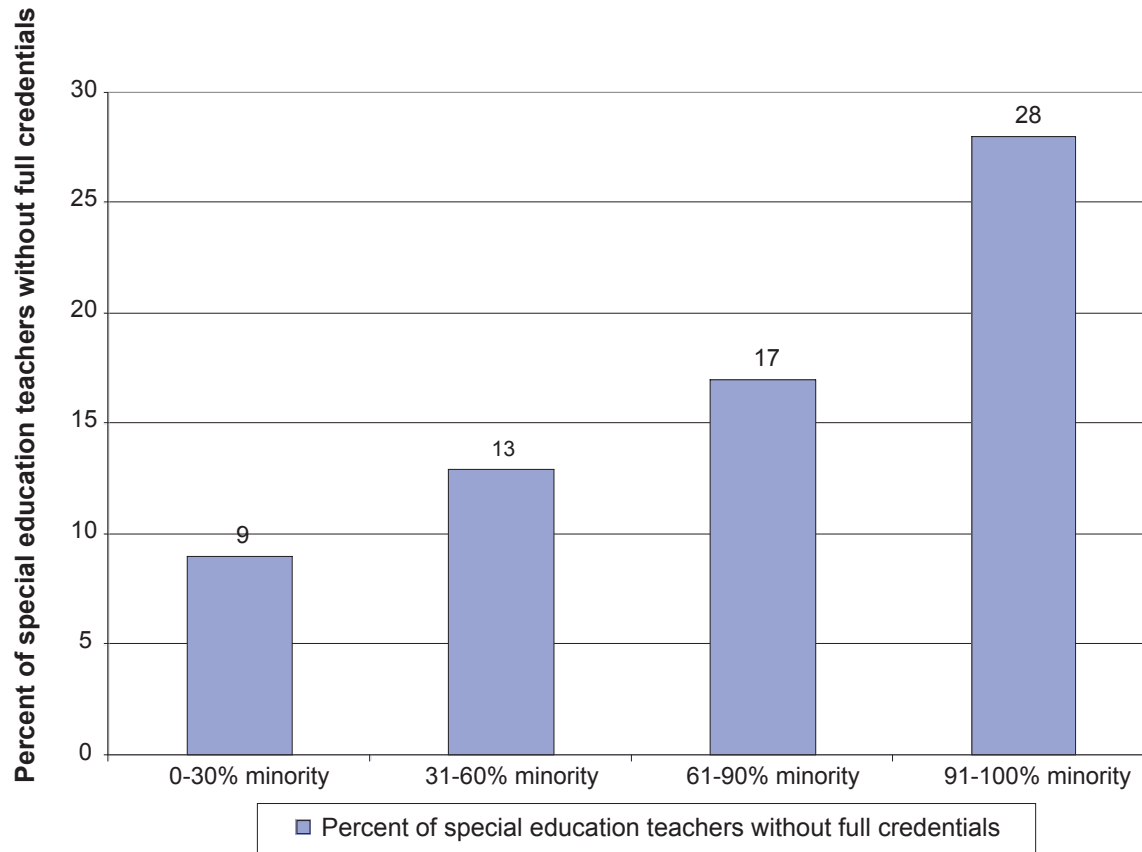
Note: Percentages reflect all teachers in the PAIF database. Previous publications of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning have included only full-time teachers in similar analyses.

Poor and minority students are hit hard by the shortage

The shortage of fully credentialed special education teachers is worse in schools serving high proportions of poor and minority students. For example, in 2003-04, in schools serving 91% to 100% minority students (nearly a quarter of all schools), 28% of all special education teachers were underprepared (Figure 3). By comparison, just 9% of special education teachers in schools with small minority student populations are underprepared. Low-performing schools also tend to have a greater percentage of underprepared special education teachers.

Figure 3

Percent of Underprepared Special Education Teachers, by School-Level Percentage of Minority Students, 2003-04



Source: CDE, Educational Demographics Unit. CBEDS Professional Assignment Information Form, 2003-04; List of California public schools and districts, 2003-04; Enrollment by ethnic group by school, 2002-03. SRI analysis.

Note: Percentages reflect the total percent of special education teachers in each category who are underprepared, not the school-level average of the percent of underprepared special education teachers.

Teacher development system fails to address special education

California’s teacher preparation and recruitment systems have been badly eroded by severe budget cuts in recent years. But even at their best, these systems failed to focus on the increasing demand for special education teachers and fell short of ensuring an adequate supply of fully prepared special education teachers, especially in schools serving poor and minority students and English language learners.

Recruitment

General teacher recruitment programs that once benefited the special education field have been severely impacted by budget cuts, and the state’s specific efforts to recruit special education teachers are limited at best. In fiscal year 2000-2001 there were \$151.6 million available for the state’s teacher recruitment programs, but by 2003-04, funding for all of these

initiatives, except the Assumption Program of Loans for Education (APLE), had been eliminated. The TEACH California Web site specifically recruits special education teachers, but the funding and reach of this program is limited in light of increasing demand. The state also supports a modest effort to assist emergency permit special education teachers to enroll in intern programs. Beyond these programs, there are very few concrete incentives or rewards offered by the state to those who choose a career in special education. One exception is the \$30 million APLE program (2003-04 budget), which assumes student loan payments of up to \$19,000 for those who teach special education for four years in a low-performing school (teachers in other subjects also qualify). In 2002-03, there were just over 1,000 special education teachers participating in APLE, about 14% of all APLE participants.

Preparation and credentialing

California institutions are not keeping pace with the demand for credentialed special education teachers. Most universities that prepare general education teachers (52 universities) also prepare education specialists (44 universities) – they just prepare far fewer. In 2002-03, 2,480 new special education teaching credentials were issued, compared to over 19,000 teaching credentials in general education.¹ The number of special education credentials issued is not making a dent in the number of California classrooms headed by an underprepared teacher (over 6,000 in both 2002-03 and 2003-04).

In 2002-03, more than 1,100 special education internship credentials were issued, a sign that the internship route has become very popular among special education teachers.² Though this number has grown substantially in recent years, it does not reflect an overall increase in the number of individuals who are choosing to pursue teaching special education. Instead, it is matched by a decline in the number of special education emergency permits. The intern route will likely continue to grow since recent legislation allows any district or county to offer a Mild/Moderate Disabilities Education Specialist intern program. In addition, SB 1621 (2003-04, Machado) seeks to pilot a locally-run intern program for Moderate/Severe Disabilities Education Specialists. While a growth of intern programs may help to address the shortage of special education teachers, it will not close the gap. In addition, there may be drawbacks to staffing special education classrooms with interns. Interns by definition have not fully completed their preparation to teach special education, yet are responsible for students who, in turn, will be held accountable for adequate progress on state assessments. Special education interns are also maldistributed: 75% of the special education interns in the state are found in 54% of the schools—those with the most minority students.³

The federal NCLB legislation has also complicated the credentialing equation by requiring that special education teachers who provide instruction in core academic areas meet the same highly qualified teacher requirements as any other teachers, regardless of the classroom setting. The State Board of Education has not yet established the criteria under which special education teachers will be identified as “highly qualified” under NCLB. This is an important decision, given that most special education students participate in the state’s accountability system and are assessed against the state content standards just like their peers.

The Center View

By failing to address special education throughout its system of teacher preparation and support, California has left its exceptionally vulnerable students without the most critical academic support, a fully qualified and effective teacher, necessary to realize their potential. At the same time, both at the state and federal level, these same students are held accountable for reaching high standards of academic achievement. There are several steps the state could take to begin to address this problem. These include:

- Expand the APLE program to provide additional loan assumption for special education teachers.
- Authorize and fund the California State University, in collaboration with the University of California and the private institutions of higher education, to develop a program of financial assistance for prospective special education teachers drawing on its experience with the administration of the Governor's Teaching Fellowship Program. Individual grants under this program should be sufficient to attract candidates by significantly assisting with tuition, materials, and living expenses.
- Provide funding incentives to CSU and UC to offer or expand preparation programs for special educators. Funding should also support efforts to recruit individuals into these new or expanded programs.

At a time when accountability and achievement pressures are mounting for schools, students and teachers, policy-makers must provide fair and equitable opportunities for students with special needs to meet academic standards.

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1. CTC. (2004). *By special request.*
 2. CTC. (2004). *By special request.*
 3. CDE, Educational Demographics Unit. *CBEDS Professional Assignment Information Form, 2003-04; List of California public schools and districts, 2003-04; Enrollment by ethnic group by school, 2002-03. SRI analysis.*