

Grow Your Own Teachers

A Focus on Special Education Teachers

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Often lost in discussions of severe staffing shortages stemming from the pandemicⁱ is the fact that many states, including Michigan, have long struggled with severe shortages in specialty subject areas, most specifically special education.ⁱⁱ Michigan requires special education teachers to hold a regular teaching certificate plus special education endorsements by specialty areas (e.g., emotional impairment, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder). The most recent federal data show over 80% of states were struggling with special education shortages before the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ Michigan has historically reported shortages across multiple special education endorsement areas and recently has experienced shortages in all categories of special education teachers.^{iv}

When looking to fill teaching positions, research indicates that districts and states should implement a combination of strategies that target both general shortages and long-standing shortfalls in high-demand subjects like special education.^v Many schools, districts, and states, including Michigan, have been looking to grow-your-own (GYO) teacher programs as one solution.^{vi} GYO programs promise to shrink local shortages in high-need subject areas and improve teacher quality through better induction, retention, and diversity, while drawing staff from the local community.^{vii} However, GYO programs face a range of common challenges, with those focusing on special education confronting more barriers due to differences in preparation, licensing, and practice.

Grow Your Own (GYO) Special Educators

Regardless of pathway to credentialing,^{viii} all states have specific requirements to become a special education teacher beyond general education certification requirements.^{ix} Special education teacher pathways are more involved in terms of effort, cost, and time,^x which can drive down preparation degree attainment.

GYO programs that aim to produce special education teachers tend to take similar approaches to recruitment, incentives, and supports. For instance, many programs look to prospective candidates who may already possess or are in the process of earning an education degree. Those candidates' steps to a special education license are frequently shorter and cheaper, and they can frequently continue to earn income while in the program.

Paraprofessionals are often the target of successful GYO programs.^{xi} Schools commonly hire paraprofessionals for classroom assistant positions in special education classrooms. Although the local pool of candidates may be smaller, they are often "passionate and eager candidates who are committed to working with children, have already spent significant amounts of time in classrooms, [and] have often developed considerable amounts of expertise in teaching and learning."^{xii}

Depending on the state, students enrolled in GYO programs for special education can access state financial aid or other forms of assistance. Washington State has the most



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robust set of programs to encourage students to enter a teaching career in subject or geographical “shortage areas.” Currently it runs programs along multiple pathways, providing grants and other assistance.

Some states fund teacher preparation partnerships and localized programs through competitive grants, which may or may not go to GYO special education teacher models. When Tennessee in October 2020, for example, announced grants to a variety of GYO partnerships, at least two focused on special education endorsements to general education certificates in designated subject areas.

In Arizona and Oklahoma, for example, the state provides tuition assistance to special education candidates. Virginia’s program provides full loan forgiveness for candidates, which includes paraprofessionals seeking special education certification, among other areas in demand. Massachusetts offers a preparation grant to paraprofessionals with less than two years’ experience if their teacher preparation leads to certification in a “high-need discipline” such as special education.^{xiii}

A comprehensive study of GYO programs developed in large urban districts with severe shortages determined that program candidates were a significant portion of all new hires in the districts, that they positively contributed to the districts’ diversity goals, and that “new hires [who participated in the program] were more likely to teach—and be certified to teach—in high-needs areas,” including special education.^{xiv}

However, the researchers found that replicating and/or sustaining these programs could be challenging.^{xv}

Implications

The following questions and suggestions concern GYO programs that address special education teacher shortages and related workforce challenges.

Key Questions to Consider

- How do special education laws and other policies, particularly those setting special education teacher preparation and certification requirements, shape GYO models?
- How and where should special-education-focused GYO models recruit teacher candidates?
- What supports do special education teacher candidates require to persist in GYO programs to complete and gain employment?
- How might GYO special education teacher programs be developed to address the challenges and opportunities the COVID-19 pandemic has created for special education systems and teachers (e.g., changing special education staffing and administration issues, alternative instructional and assessment models, use of technology)?

Suggested Practices and Policies

Assess current and trending special education staffing needs, preparation requirements, and candidate sources.

Given the nature of special education, decision-making around GYO-model design should be informed by a firm knowledge of the local context over

time. Clear understandings of special education needs, qualified candidates, funding sources, and the policy environment will increase the likelihood that a GYO program will be successful.

Mobilize additional resources and program partners with expertise in, experience with, and commitment to special education as a specialized field.

Given the complexity of special education policy across local, state, and federal levels, it is essential to augment local capacity with expert partners that can navigate the special education space. They can apply their specialized knowledge to help ensure that a special education GYO program provides quality preparation with certification while minimizing student time and cost.

Design and implement GYO special education programs to serve broader staffing efforts. A GYO approach can constitute an especially valuable component of a coherent special education staffing plan. GYO programs have positive effects on quality, supply, and turnover through multiple stages of the employment process: recruitment, certification, induction, probation periods, and retention.

Incorporate quality implementation and outcome evaluation from the start.

Ongoing rigorous and culturally responsive evaluation activities should be planned and conducted throughout program development and implementation. Such activities are essential to documenting program progress, identifying opportunities to improve, and determining program outcomes.

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ⁱⁱ Anne Podolsky, Tara Kini, Joseph Bishop, and Linda Darling-Hammond, *Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, September 2016), accessed October 26, 2021, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/solving-teacher-shortage-brief>; Leib Sutcher, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Desiree Carver-Thomas, *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, September 2016), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606666>; Alyssa Evans, Ben Erwin, Heidi Macdonald, Sarah Pompelia, Stephanie Aragon, and Zeke Perez Jr., *50-State Comparison: Teacher Recruitment and Retention* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 23, 2019), accessed October 26, 2021, <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-teacher-recruitment-and-retention/>; Sandi Jacobs, *In Demand: The Real Teacher Shortages and How to Solve Them*. (Washington, DC: Future Ed, October 2021), accessed October 26, 2021, <https://www.future-ed.org/in-demand-the-real-teacher-shortages-and-how-to-solve-them/>; Thomas S. Dee and Dan Goldhaber, *Understanding and Addressing Teacher Shortages in the United States*. The Hamilton Project Policy Proposal 2017-05 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, April 2017), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/understanding-and-addressing-teacher-shortages-in-the-united-states/>; National Center for Teacher Quality, “Facts to know about teacher shortages: A resource for journalists” (last updated November 2018). Accessed November 30, 2021, https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Shortage_Fact_Sheet.

ⁱⁱⁱ For the 2017-18 school year, 41 states reported a special education teacher shortage, second only to the 42 states reporting a mathematics teacher shortage. Jacobs, *In Demand: The Real Teacher Shortages and How to Solve Them*; Barnett Berry and Patrick M. Shields, “Solving the Teacher Shortage: Revisiting the lessons we’ve learned.” *Phi Delta Kappan* (May 1, 2017), online archive accessed November 30, 2021, <https://kappanonline.org/solving-teacher-shortage-revisiting/>. Originally published in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 98, no. 8 (May 2017): 8-18. See also U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, *Teacher Shortage Areas: Nationwide Listing 1990–1991 through 2017–2018*. (Washington, D.C., dated June 2017; published May 2017), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww2.ed.gov%2Fabout%2Foffices%2Flist%2Fope%2Fpola%2Ftsa.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>.

^{iv} U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, *Teacher Shortage Areas: Nationwide Listing 1990–1991 through 2017–2018*, data for Michigan, pp. 84-90, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/ateachershortageareasreport2017-18.pdf>; see also Yinmei Wan, Max Pardo, and Sarah Assan, *Past and Projected Trends in Teacher Demand and Supply in Michigan*. Regional Educational Library Midwest, Alliance to Improve Teacher Preparation, REL 2019-009 (August 2019), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.air.org/project/past-and-projected-trends-teacher-demand-and-supply-michigan>; Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *Michigan’s Leaky Teacher Pipeline: Examining Trends in Teacher Demand and Supply*, Report 404 (Lansing, MI: Citizens Research Council of Michigan, February 2019), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://crcmich.org/publications/michigans-leaky-teacher-pipeline-examining-trends-in-teacher-demand-and-supply>.

^v See, e.g., Podolsky, et al., *How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators*; Sutcher, et al., *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.*; Jacobs, *In Demand: The Real Teacher Shortages and How to Solve Them*. See also regarding Michigan’s teacher shortages, Yinmei Wan, Max Pardo, and Sarah Assan, *Past and projected trends in teacher demand and supply in Michigan*; and specifically regarding only special education teacher shortages, The Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform (CEEDAR) Center and The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (CGTL) at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), “Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions,” accessed November 30, 2021, <https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CEEDAR-GTL-Shortages-Brief.pdf>; Naomi Ondrasek, Desiree Carver-Thomas, Caitlin Scott, and Linda Darling-Hammond, *California’s Special Education Teacher Shortage* (Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education and Learning Policy Institute, February 2020), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/pace-california-special-education-teacher-shortage-report>; Catherine Fallona and Amy Johnson, *Approaches to “Grow Your Own” and Dual General and Special Education Certification* (Gorham, ME: Maine Education Policy

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^{viii} Some states have responded to shortages by instituting truncated or alternative preparation pathways with lowered standards leading to emergency or temporary certificates. This remedy may prove worse than the disease as it runs counter to teacher and program quality. See CEEDAR Center and The CGTL at AIR, “Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions”; Ondrasek, et al., *California’s Special Education Teacher Shortage*.

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^{xiii} See Garcia, “Grow Your Own Teachers” and the links to state programs.

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^{xv} Ibid.