



The Federal Response to Teacher Shortage Impacts on Students with Disabilities

FACT SHEET

The Commission examined the growing nationwide shortage of qualified teachers and its particularly harsh effects on students with disabilities and other underserved groups. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic magnified the crisis. School closures, shifts to virtual and hybrid learning, and disruptions to routines disproportionately harmed students with disabilities. Many schools lacked the resources to provide necessary accommodations, administer Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), or supply technology and internet access for equitable participation. These disparities were most acute in low-income, high-poverty, and high-minority districts.

This report builds on the work of the Commission's Advisory Committees, which operate in every state, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. territories. In January 2023, the Arkansas Advisory Committee examined the state's compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In January 2024, the Nevada Advisory Committee highlighted unfair learning conditions caused by teacher and staff shortages. In December 2024, the D.C. Advisory Committee released a report on barriers to special education and transportation services for students with disabilities.

As part of this national examination, the Commission held a public briefing in November 2024 in Washington, D.C., where educators, advocates, and families shared their stories and recommendations. The Commission also hosted a virtual listening session in December 2024 so parents, students, and teachers across the country could describe how shortages have affected them directly.

The Commission voted to investigate the impact of teacher shortages on the education of students with disabilities, as well as how the federal government, particularly the Department of Education has responded.

Special education teacher shortages during the pandemic affected students with disabilities in multiple ways

Across the U.S., state education agencies and school districts faced daunting challenges and difficult decisions to determine how to best serve students during the pandemic. Despite the necessity of employing virtual and hybrid instruction, this change posed a myriad of challenges for teachers and students, in particular for students with disabilities.

- Children with disabilities were less likely to be officially diagnosed in this era, delaying their eligibility for services.
- Some students found the shift to remote or hybrid schooling particularly difficult, as normal routines were disrupted.
- School closures led to students losing access to required specialized equipment.

Additionally, the Commission received testimony from a special education coordinator about the increasing difficulty of administering accommodations, meaning that schools were not able to properly implement Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). While this testimony illuminates the lived experience of some educators, students, and parents, the lack of national data on teacher shortages curtails a broader understanding of how these shortages impact students with disabilities.

The use of virtual and hybrid instruction intensified some longstanding educational disparities between school districts across the country

- Many students in school districts with low-income residents struggled to obtain basic educational resources like parental help with at-home assignments and a quiet dedicated work environment.
- These students were further impacted by the shift to virtual classrooms because they lacked updated technology, like web cameras—a necessary tool for virtual instruction and class participation—and stable high-speed internet at home.
- Students with disabilities in majority low income school districts faced additional challenges because there was also a dearth of resources for accommodating their educational needs.

The shortage of special education teachers is a persistent issue

Investigating the impact of teacher shortages is difficult, however, because there is no unified database on teacher shortages and no direct method to determine its magnitude, resulting in a lack of comprehensive national data. The Department of Education (ED) is not required to report data on teacher shortages, so the full extent of teacher vacancies is difficult to determine.

- For the 2021-22 school year, the Institute of Education Sciences found that 43% of public schools reported vacant teaching positions for special education.
- For schools that reported any teaching vacancies (44%), the rate of special education vacancies was about twice the rate of most other teaching position vacancies.
- In June 2022, 47% of public schools anticipated needing to fill special education positions before the start of the following school year, and by March 2024 that number increased to 52% of public schools.

The Commission received testimony from multiple panelists describing the demanding workload and administrative burdens of special education teachers as a main source of stress or a reason they leave the profession. The seemingly untenable workload also compromised the quality of education provided to students with disabilities.

Another issue in this era is that there were too few qualified teachers

Over the past several decades in the U.S. there has been a drop in the number of education degrees awarded and in the number of people completing teacher preparation programs.

Teacher shortages include teaching positions that are held by teachers who are underqualified because they have non-standard certifications or are not certified in the subject area they teach.

The Commission received testimony that recent data suggest there may be as many as 400,000 underqualified teachers in the U.S., making up more than 10% of the existing teacher workforce.

The teacher shortage has serious and far-reaching consequences for students with disabilities. These consequences include inadequate educational experiences for students, reduced student achievement, and lower educational attainment levels that negatively impact future employment prospects.

For more information about this report, visit:

<https://www.usccr.gov/reports/2025/federal-response-teacher-shortage-impacts-students-disabilities>