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# Addressing Special Education Staffing Shortages

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LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE

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On Education Finance  
Hon. Anthony Portantino, Chair





## Special Education Staff



### Two Types of Special Education Staff—Teachers and Specialists

- Teachers provide instruction to students with disabilities and coordinate the services specified in individual education plans. Teachers must hold a special education credential that is specific to the type of students they teach (see figure). Credentials are issued by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing.
  - About 48,000 special education teachers currently serve in public schools in California.

#### Five Types of Special Education Teaching Credentials

Credential	Focus of Credential
<b>Mild/Moderate Disabilities</b>	Teacher instructs students with specific learning disabilities, mild/moderate intellectual disabilities, other health impairments, and serious emotional disturbances.
<b>Moderate/Severe Disabilities</b>	Teacher instructs students with autism, moderate/severe intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and serious emotional disturbances.
<b>Early Childhood Education</b>	Teacher instructs children up to five years old with mild/moderate and moderate/severe intellectual disabilities and traumatic brain injuries.
<b>Deaf and Hard of Hearing</b>	Teacher instructs students with deafness, hearing impairments, and deaf-blindness.
<b>Visually Impaired</b>	Teacher instructs students with blindness, visual impairments, and deaf-blindness.

- Specialists provide specific services, such as speech therapy for students with speech impediments or sign language interpretation for students who are deaf. Specialists typically must hold licenses from professional organizations specific to their field.
  - About 24,000 specialists currently provide such services to students in California.



## Special Education Staffing Shortages

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### **Longstanding Shortages of Special Education Staff**

- The California Department of Education has reported special education staffing shortages nearly every year since the early 1980s. In 2017-18, all but three states reported shortages.
- Teacher shortages are particularly acute for those who teach students with moderate or severe disabilities. In 2015-16, 40 percent of new teachers serving these students lacked the required credential.
- Shortages also are particularly acute for certain specialists positions. In 2015-16, 23 percent of occupational therapists and 16 percent of speech and language pathologists working in schools were employed through temporary staffing agencies.



## Factors Contributing to Shortages

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### Pay Does Not Reflect Unique Demands of Job

- School districts typically pay special education and general education teachers the same. However, special education teachers have additional responsibilities, including: (1) developing individual education plans; (2) coordinating teams of specialists to work with students; and (3) responding to litigation challenges brought by dissatisfied parents.
- Other professions more tightly connect responsibilities with pay, such that employees with greater responsibilities and challenges receive higher pay.



### State-Level Factors

- State education and credentialing requirements necessitate that teachers have five (rather than four) years of postsecondary education. Many other states have programs that allow students simultaneously to work toward their bachelor's degree in education and special education credential, with students in other states able to receive both in notably less time.
- The state has overly narrow credential requirements, with special education teachers needing different credentials to work with different groups of students with disabilities.
- Some graduate-level preparation programs for specialists are highly impacted.



### Local-Level Factors

- Inefficient human resources practices result in some districts taking over six months to hire job applicants.
- Weak professional development and support systems can contribute to high staff turnover.



## **Governor's Proposals**

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### **Provides \$50 Million in One-Time Grants for Teacher Residency Programs**

- One-time Proposition 98 funding would be awarded to schools on a competitive basis to create or expand teacher residency programs for special education teachers.
  - Residency programs pair candidates with experienced mentor teachers and provide more classroom-based training than traditional credential programs.
- Schools could qualify for up to \$20,000 per teacher candidate, with a dollar-for-dollar local match required. At this level, the proposal would support 2,500 candidates.
- Selected schools could use their grants for a variety of purposes, including offsetting teacher preparation costs, providing stipends for experienced teachers to mentor teacher candidates, and providing living stipends for teacher candidates.



### **Provides \$50 Million in One-Time Funds for Local Solutions Grants**

- One-time Proposition 98 grants would fund local efforts to recruit and retain special education teachers. Districts would be selected on a competitive basis.
- Successful schools would receive up to \$20,000 per teacher, with a dollar-for-dollar local match required. At this level, the proposal would support 2,500 candidates.
- Districts would have broad discretion in how they could use their grants.



### **Focus on Special Education Staffing Shortages Has Merit**

- California faces longstanding shortages of special education teachers and specialists.



### **Both of Governor's Proposals Have Shortcomings**

- Neither proposal addresses the ongoing nature of special education staffing shortages.
- Neither proposal addresses underlying compensation issues.
- Neither proposal addresses the core state-level causes of staffing shortages—most notably, overly restrictive education and credentialing requirements.
- Neither proposal addresses specific local-level issues in some districts, including poor human resources practices, unavailable or unhelpful professional development, and lack of ongoing support.
- Neither proposal addresses shortages of speech and language pathologists or occupational therapists.



### **Each Proposal Has Additional Shortcomings**

- The Governor's residency proposal would fund on a one-time basis a small number of teacher candidates. Some of these candidates might have become teachers without the grant funding. Some districts already fund residency programs using their Local Control Funding Formula funding. To the extent that other districts wish to adopt the residency model, they could use the \$1.8 billion in one-time discretionary grants that the Governor also proposes providing in 2018-19.
- The Governor's local solutions proposal gives districts too much discretion without requiring them to address the root causes of their shortages.



## LAO Recommendations

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### **Reject Governor's Proposals**

- Proposals would not result in lasting reductions in special education shortages.
- Instead, pursue strategies that target the underlying issues driving special education shortages.



### **Encourage Districts to Pay Special Education Teachers Commensurate With Their Duties**

- Higher pay would encourage more teachers to pursue special education over general education by compensating them for the additional responsibilities they perform.
- Pay is fundamentally a local decision, but the Legislature may wish to repeal an existing statutory provision that sets a uniform salary schedule as default district policy.



### **Pursue a Package of State-Level Policy Responses**

- We make three recommendations, one that does not have state costs and two that would have relatively minor state costs.



### **Consolidate Two Special Education Teaching Credentials**

- Consolidate the mild/moderate and moderate/severe credentials into one core special education credential.
- To the extent that specific challenges arise while special education teachers are on the job, school districts could provide tailored professional development.



**Create Four-Year Credential Route for Special Education Teachers**

- Amend state law to create a four-year degree option for special education teachers, whereby a candidate could obtain a bachelor's degree in special education and a special education teaching credential within four years of study.
- Provide \$250,000 in one-time startup grants for the California State University (CSU) and potentially other teacher preparation institutions to redesign their curriculum and recruit students. For every \$10 million in one-time funding, the state could fund 40 programs.



**Expand CSU Specialist Training Programs**

- Provide CSU with targeted funding to increase enrollment in its graduate-level occupational therapy and speech and language pathology programs by 5 percent per year for the next few years. In 2018-19, 5 percent growth equates to an increase of roughly 45 full-time-equivalent students. Assuming state enrollment funding of \$15,000 per student, the total associated budget-year cost would be \$675,000.