

## A Framework for Change:

# INVESTING ESSER FUNDS TO PREPARE AND SUPPORT TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

### Purpose

This resource was developed by EALA partners to give an overview of strategies for preparing and developing highly qualified general and special education teachers. It will show how states and districts can invest Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to address the current and growing need for educators to support students with disabilities and their peers. It shares data and research on both current challenges and recommended strategies and outlines recommended actions for states, districts, and educator preparation programs.

### Change Map: Addressing Challenges With Two Strategies

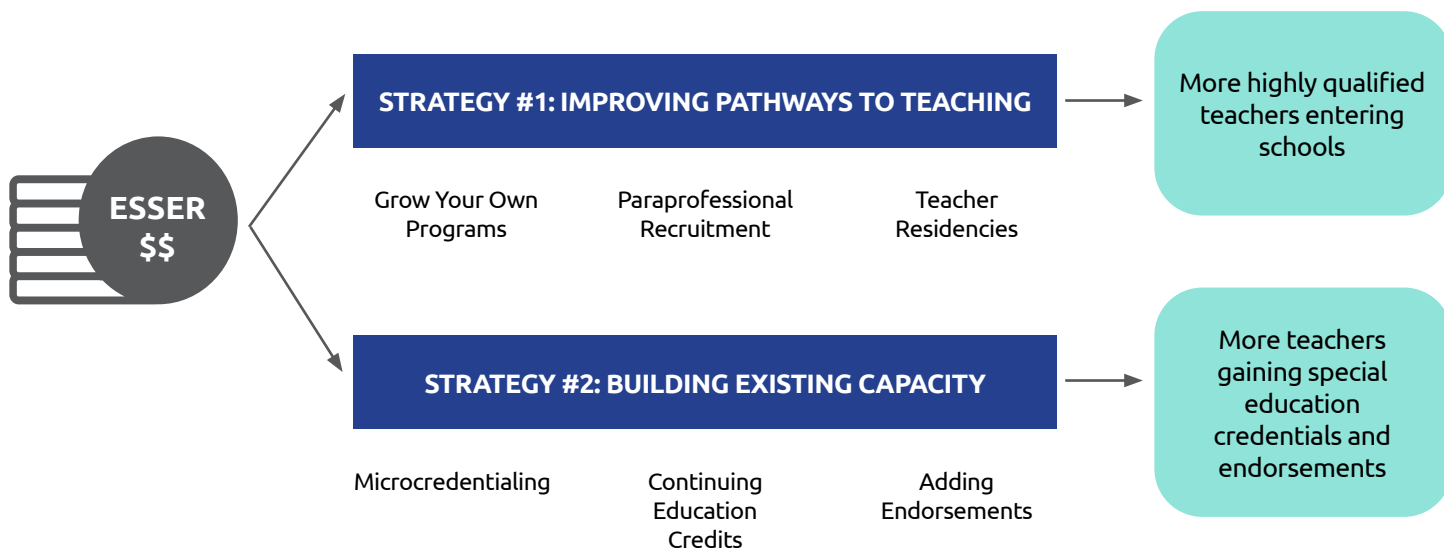
**VISION:** Every child with a disability has access to highly qualified special education teachers AND general education teachers who are well-prepared to understand, support, and educate students with disabilities.

**Challenge #1:**  
Severe and Chronic  
Shortages of Special  
Education Personnel

**Challenge #2:**  
Not all Teachers Equipped  
to Support Students  
with Disabilities

**Challenge #3:**  
Credentialing Barriers  
That Limit Opportunities  
for Re-Specialization, Re-  
Licensure, or Alternative  
Routes to Licensure

**Challenge #4:**  
Incomplete Feedback  
Loops Between EPPs  
and Districts





## **What Are the Key Challenges?**

### ***Challenge #1: Severe and Chronic Shortages of Special Education Personnel***

Data shows that teacher shortages in special education are widespread and worsening over time, resulting in a profound impact on students with disabilities and intersectional identities. A [policy brief](#) from the CEEDAR Center highlights the following research findings:

- Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia currently report special education teacher shortages.
- Certain populations of students are more disadvantaged by shortages — students in high-poverty urban schools, students in remote rural schools, and students with emotional and behavioral disorders.
- Shortages are exacerbated by high rates of attrition: Special education teachers are 2.5 times more likely to leave the profession than are teachers in general education.

### ***Challenge #2: Not All Teachers Equipped to Support Students With Disabilities***

Siloed responsibilities between general and special education personnel in schools are a prescription for frustration — for students, parents, teachers, specialized service providers, and school administrators. Preparing and supporting all educators to work with all children will enable students with disabilities to succeed and give them stronger tools for self-advocacy.

Research from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) and the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) highlights the following about a shortage of special education expertise among general educators:

- NCLD's [survey](#) of 1,350 general education teachers found that only 17% of teachers felt very well prepared to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.
- HECSE's [fact sheet](#) highlights that general education teachers self-report lacking needed skills to effectively instruct students with disabilities.


Moreover, students with disabilities spend most of their time in general education settings. [NCES data](#) shows that 64% of students with disabilities receive instruction in general education classrooms 80% or more of the time. However, many general education teacher preparation programs provide minimal preparation in instructing students with disabilities.

### ***Challenge #3: Credentialing Barriers That Limit Opportunities for Re-Specialization, Re-Licensure, or Alternative Routes to Licensure***

The [National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services](#) cites this as one of the key challenges in addressing shortages in special education. Research, such as this [ECS report](#), has also posited that expanding preparation and licensure pathways can improve workforce diversity, suggesting that rigid assessment and licensure requirements are particularly challenging for teachers of color. In addition, financial barriers prevent entry to strong programs that could prepare teachers to serve all students, as this [Prepared to Teach report](#) makes clear.

### ***Challenge #4: Incomplete Feedback Loops Between Educator Preparation Programs and Districts***

While states and districts have decision-making power to make funding investments, educator preparation programs (EPPs) need to be fully engaged as partners so that strategies for pre-service and ongoing professional development result in gaps being filled and a pipeline of opportunities being created for professionals across a wide range of education settings. Proactive decision-making



between school districts and EPPs has already shown great promise in addressing shortages in highly qualified personnel. For example, colleges of education and other preparation programs can consult with districts and schools about their specific needs, and leaders can be appointed to serve on a “Partnership Advisory Council” that would address specialized needs and challenges that both the district and the EPP are facing.

## **How Can These Unprecedented Levels of Federal Funding Be Leveraged for Greatest Impact?**

States and districts can invest ESSER funds to support the educator workforce with a specific focus on special education. Funds can be spent on any education expense allowed under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), plus a number of other specific uses.

The American Rescue Plan Act stipulates that 90% of a state’s ESSER funds be allocated to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) through subgrants. SEAs and LEAs have until September 30, 2022, to award those funds (see [ESSER Funds FAQ](#)) to its subrecipients, but they have significant flexibility in their use. As a result of this short timeline and competing priorities, district superintendents report being inundated by requests for these resources. It is imperative that both state and district leaders center decisions around strategies that are evidence-based and that will make and sustain meaningful impact.

### **Short-Term Funds With a Long-Term Impact**

Investments in the educator workforce can be more sustainable because these investments in human capital produce high quality educators who will in turn provide high quality instruction for years to come. ESSER funds can also be braided with other funding streams (e.g., IDEA Part D for Personnel Preparation, ESSA Title II funds).

## **Let’s Invest. Here’s How.**

### ***Strategy #1: Improving Pathways to Teaching***

This strategy highlights investments to build models that can have longer-term effects on the educator workforce. With the current nationwide educator shortage, leaders must think innovatively about expanding pathways to create more high-quality opportunities for prospective teachers.

There are also longstanding relationships between inadequate preparation and attrition, especially within special education and for teachers of color. The Learning Policy Institute’s report, [Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color](#), describes research on alternative certification routes that do not provide comprehensive preparation and resulting turnover rates among teachers of color. High-quality opportunities, such as Grow Your Own programs and teacher residencies, are also highlighted in LPI’s report as promising practices.

## Grow Your Own (GYO) Programs

Grow Your Own (GYO) is an educator preparation strategy that focuses on recruiting, developing, and retaining teachers from the local community. GYO models have been effective in both urban and rural areas in addressing shortages and increasing educator diversity, as highlighted in New America's [resource](#). GYO models often recruit future teachers as early as high school at little to no cost. In establishing and developing GYO models, states, districts, and EPPs can consider ways to build in opportunities for earning a special education endorsement.



### Tennessee's Grow Your Own Competitive Grant

In [Tennessee](#), \$2 million has funded GYO partnerships in 37 districts. Tennessee State University has created a pathway to earn a content license with either a special education or ESL endorsement. Lincoln Memorial University's partnerships enable education assistants with a bachelor's degree to receive an M.Ed. degree while receiving initial state licensure in visual arts, physical education, elementary education, or secondary education, as well as a teaching endorsement in special education. Austin Peay State University and Lipscomb University have partnered with their local school districts to increase opportunities for education assistants and high school seniors to enter GYO programs. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville has targeted education assistants with an emphasis on meeting demands for STEM teachers.

## Recruitment of Paraprofessionals or Instructional Assistants

Paraprofessionals are an underrecognized resource of educator talent. These individuals have experience working with students, including students with disabilities. They are also likely to want to stay in the local community — and reflect the diversity of the community. Recruiting paraprofessionals is often a variation or a component of Grow Your Own models, and the model supports paraprofessionals in becoming fully certified teachers. The programs also should include a full year of supported clinical practice, like a residency.

### Field Examples: Paraprofessional Models in Practice

Bank Street College of Education's [resource](#) highlights two GYO models that recruit paraprofessionals in school systems to become teachers.



**University of Colorado, Denver's** NxtGEN program uses cohort models, wraparound social supports, and explicit social justice orientations to ensure that the largely first-generation and underrepresented students in the program succeed in becoming certified teachers.



**North Coast Teacher Residency Consortium's** teacher residency model allows current paraprofessionals to stay in their positions and spend at least 50% of each day learning from a special education mentor teacher.

## Teacher Residencies

Building on a medical residency model, teacher residencies enable teacher candidates to practice their skills in a classroom setting alongside an effective mentor teacher, often in high needs classrooms, while they are pursuing aligned studies in their programs. In this model, teacher residents earn a stipend and commonly are held to a post-residency teaching commitment where they continue to be mentored and supported. Carefully designed, well-supported instructional roles for teacher candidates enable them to be paid while engaging in learning experiences.

While teacher residencies are a strategy designed for longer-term impacts, there are also short-term outcomes, as they provide teachers with additional classroom-level support and capacity to meet students' needs. Students benefit from more personalized and focused attention from both their regular classroom teacher and the teacher candidate, enhancing student outcomes. Teacher candidates can also fill gaps as substitute teachers on a limited basis. In some models, such as the one described in Education First's resource, [Innovative Staffing Models to Sustain Teacher Residencies](#), residents spend part of their time serving as a paraprofessional to provide support to teachers and students.

### Using ESSER Funds to Support Teacher Residencies

This Bank Street College [resource](#) details opportunities for LEAs to leverage ESSER funds to develop teacher residency programs. It details how residencies meet student academic, social, and emotional needs while supporting and stabilizing the teacher workforce, and it highlights first steps for LEAs to create or develop a teacher residency program.

This National Center for Teacher Residencies [resource](#) highlights that LEAs can use funds to support residencies in the following ways:



**Addressing Lost Instructional Time:** Residents can act as tutors in schools to provide additional student-focused support. Additional training or supports should be provided so that residents are equipped to tutor students with disabilities.



**Evidence-Based Summer Enrichment Programs:** Residents can work in schools to provide support in summer programs.

## Strategy #2: Building Existing Capacity

With the influx of funds and current dire teacher shortages, there is also recognition that faster solutions are needed. States and districts can consider ways to invest in the current workforce, enabling teachers to earn additional credentials. Developing these pathways not only addresses shortages but also allows teachers to grow in their practice and feel more prepared to support students with disabilities. While this strategy would yield immediate results as it taps into the current workforce to address shortages, it could also have longer-term benefits for teacher retention. Teachers who feel more equipped and confident in their abilities to support all students are more likely to return year after year, creating better outcomes for their students.



## Micro-credentialing

A micro-credential is a short, competency-based certification to recognize that an educator has demonstrated mastery in a particular area. They are often short, low-cost, and personalized qualifications that can be earned in an online setting to allow teachers to raise their level of expertise. With ESSER funds, states and districts can leverage the potential of micro-credentials by embedding them into professional development models for teachers or by incentivizing the earning of micro-credentials that increase educators' knowledge and expertise to better support students with disabilities.

### Digital Promise: Micro-credentials on Teaching Students With Disabilities

Digital Promise offers more than 450 competency-based micro-credentials on a wide range of research-backed skills. Their micro-credential resources include a [stack on teaching students with disabilities](#), with topics such as co-teaching, increasing engagement during virtual instruction, interdisciplinary literacy practices, and progress monitoring. Another [stack on learner variability](#) includes topics relevant to teaching students with disabilities, such as executive function, working memory, and emotional regulation.

## Continuing Education Units

Like other professionals, teachers often seek opportunities for growth and career advancement. States and districts can explore investing ESSER funds in high-quality professional development opportunities that enable teachers to work toward earning or renewing a license or certification in special education or related areas.

### Council for Exceptional Children's Professional Development Hours (PDHs)


One Professional Development Hour is equivalent to one hour in a planned continuing education experience that is relevant to special education. They are conducted by qualified instructional personnel and designed to reflect best practices in adult education.

Each state's licensure and recertification requirements are different, so leaders should verify if CEC's PDHs are accepted by the state's department of education or certifying body. [Illinois](#) and [Massachusetts](#) have listed their CEC state chapters as approved providers of continuing education credits.

## Incentivizing Adding Credentials and Endorsements in Special Education

Both ESSER and IDEA funds can pay for additional endorsements and certifications for general educators. To address shortages in special education and to equip current teachers with the qualifications to support students with disabilities, states and districts should consider ways in which to fund programs that allow teachers to expand their license endorsement areas.

In state spending plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, a handful of states recognized teacher shortages in high-needs areas, including special education, and stated that they would be targeting federal funds toward supporting teachers in earning additional credentials. Some states had more detailed plans than others.



Examples of state initiatives include:

- Special Education Endorsement Project ([Montana](#))
- A tuition reimbursement program for currently employed teachers to obtain a master's degree in Special Education or an Early Childhood Special Education Endorsement ([Wyoming](#))
- Providing professional learning pathway options for shortages area educators ([Utah](#))
- \$4.25 million for no cost teaching academies that will help teachers get certified to teach special education services and also to obtain a digital learning certificate to be more knowledgeable and competent when teaching virtually ([Arkansas](#))

## **What Can States, Districts, and Educator Preparation Programs Do Now?**

According to an Education Stabilization Fund map created by the U.S. Department of Education, as of August 31, 2021, most states had spent 15% or less of their ESSER funds. Because much of the funding is yet to be spent, there are opportunities to make decisions that move the needle in developing the educator workforce, specifically in supporting teachers to educate students with disabilities. It will take careful planning and collaboration.

### ***States Can:***

- Monitor and collect data on specific educator shortage areas, district and school demographics, and the resources available to those districts. States can provide technical support and assistance to districts and district-EPP partnerships on measuring the efficacy of educator development and workforce stabilization.

### **Data Display: Strengthening the Colorado Educator Workforce Pipeline**

These [interactive maps](#) show data on educator workforce trends across the state. The maps provide district and school-level data and define data collection tools on the status and longitudinal patterns of educator mobility and attrition in districts and schools and the following relationships:

- Hard-to-fill positions and labor market trends
- Teacher incentive programs, district mobility and attrition, and the ability to fill open positions
- Educator preparation program locations and hiring needs
- District and school performance and teacher mobility and attrition
- Working conditions and teacher mobility and attrition

- Engage meaningfully with district and school-level decision makers. Seek to better understand innovative pathways into the classroom and create grant or other funding opportunities to enable those programs to develop.
- Support multi-district or statewide learning communities. Invest in professional learning and development in ways that enable district and school leaders to support one another and share practices as they seek to address the challenges of teacher shortages.
- State plans matter. States can continue to update stakeholders on the progress of commitments made in state plans. Ensure that all eligible participants of programs are aware of opportunities to earn additional certifications or endorsements by investing in marketing and outreach efforts.





### ***Districts Can:***

- Analyze the available data on educator shortages and collect other needs assessment data to determine which model(s) for improving educator capacity would be the appropriate fit for the district.
- Work to develop robust EPP-district partnerships and improve the feedback loop between educator preparation programs (EPPs) and the district's schools. Appoint personnel who can advise EPPs on the distinctive needs and challenges the district is facing so that teacher candidates can fill gaps. Support EPPs in ensuring that program coursework and curricula are culturally responsive to the needs of the local community. AACTE's [ARP Funding Toolkit](#) highlights district prep program partnerships that can be replicated using ESSER funds.
- Incentivize capacity-building professional development opportunities for both special and general educators (micro-credentials, CEUs). This can be investing in trusted partners that can address professional development and educator support needs with high-quality offerings for teachers to earn CEUs. As central district offices are often limited in their capacity to provide high-quality professional development focused on diverse learners, partners such as the Diverse Learners Cooperative can deliver tailored opportunities to schools and teachers.

### **Promising Practice Spotlight: The Diverse Learners Cooperative**

The [Diverse Learners Cooperative](#) works with school districts in Nashville and Memphis to create and implement professional development series focused on co-teaching best practices, paired with follow-up coaching for teachers to generalize skills to their classroom contexts. Their work has extended the capacity of school teams to support diverse learners.

### ***Educator Preparation Programs Can:***

- Consider ways to include more required coursework, including with special education candidates, on educating students with disabilities, and incentivize pre-service educators to add a special education endorsement. Additionally, EPPs can consider ways for pre-service teachers to gain more firsthand experience working with students with disabilities through clinical experiences during their student teaching placements, including opportunities for general and special education candidates to co-teach in their clinical placements.
- Work with districts to improve the feedback loop. Collect data, when possible, on previous teacher candidates to gauge their readiness for the profession and even for particular placements.
- While EPPs are not direct recipients of ESSER funds, they are important stakeholders and have a lot to offer. University program leaders can engage with their state and district officials to communicate how they can partner with and support the development of the educator workforce in key areas such as special education.



## Program Spotlight: AACTE Teacher Preparation

AACTE and the CEEDAR Center identified two exemplary teacher preparation programs that ensure that all of their candidates are ready to work with all students, including students with disabilities.



**Bowling Green State University's** undergraduate Inclusive Early Childhood Education program enrolls approximately 900 students and offers dual certification in early childhood general and special education. More and more, teacher candidates are demanding field placements for all four years of their program — in general education settings, special education settings, and inclusive settings.



**Portland State University's** master's program in Secondary Dual Education features dual certification in both general and special education at the secondary level. Entrants to the program come with an undergraduate degree in a content area and engage in two years of extensive involvement in clinical settings in secondary schools. Learn more [here](#).



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