

Special Education Staffing Tip

February 2022

Districts are facing increasing levels of staffing shortages and disruptions due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some impact on students may be unavoidable, districts and school teams are encouraged to continue to pursue innovative approaches to address educator and staff shortages and to develop plans to decrease the impact of staff shortages on special education services and students with disabilities.

Partnering with Families and Open Communication

To support family partnerships and communication, districts should maintain open communication with families about the staffing challenges districts are facing and the efforts to address those challenges. These efforts should include sharing plans and efforts to minimize the impact on students and prioritize preservation of services and supports for students receiving special education services. Additionally, districts should proactively communicate to families that ongoing disruptions to instruction and special education services will be prioritized and addressed when considering and planning for recovery services¹.

Staffing Innovations

School and district partners across the state and country have shared many innovative approaches to address current staffing shortages and to mitigate the impact of staffing shortages on students. OSPI recognizes that districts are actively exploring innovative solutions to staffing shortages, that every district has unique needs and assets, and that the following must be applied through local context:

General Strategies

- Regularly review Department of Health K–12 school requirements² around test to stay, isolation, and quarantine.
 - Reduced isolation and quarantine requirements may allow staff to return to work sooner.
- Temporarily reallocate staff to address student IEP needs. IEPs must continue to be implemented; however, the location of services may shift (provided placement is not impacted).
 - Assign staff more flexibly across buildings; move part-time staff to full-time; move 1:1 paraeducators if their students are out sick, and consider alternate providers.

¹ [Washington's Roadmap for Special Education Recovery Services: 2021 & Beyond](#)

² See e.g., "[Snapshot of High-level Changes in the January 7, 2022 Update](#)" and the [Department of Health School and Childcare webpage](#)



- Consider students who may have challenges with transitions or unfamiliar staff, and notify students and families of the temporary reallocation of staff as much as possible.
- In extreme need, a Temporary Out of Endorsement Assignment or Pre-Endorsement Waiver could be used to expand special education staffing. See information below.
- Consider temporarily moving to remote instruction utilizing the Continuous Learning 2.0+ (CL 2.0+) model³.
 - For students with IEPs, individualized decision making is required regardless of the instructional model the district is using.
 - For example, the district may temporarily move to remote instruction for all students, while continuing to provide in-person instruction for those students with IEPs that require in person instruction to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) as determined by an IEP team.

If staffing shortages impact the educational placement or provision of FAPE to a student, districts should provide prior written notice of changes to parents. Districts should determine whether communication with families be provided as a school or program notification or a prior written notice. See OSPI's [Q&A, Question H-1](#) for more information on prior written notice.

Service Delivery Options

Districts can also think creatively and differently about how to provide special education services. Districts may want to explore:

- Having other staff temporarily provide specially designed instruction.⁴ Consider having:
 - General education teachers and paraeducators support the delivery of specially designed instruction.
 - SLP, OT, and PT assistants deliver instruction under the direction of the ESA.
 - Remote or telehealth related service providers provide related services.
- Temporarily increasing group sizes or combining groups for small group instruction. Temporarily providing instruction in small groups for students that received one-on-one instruction for portions of the day to conserve staff, when appropriate within the IEP and/or placement based on a student's skills and needs.
- Thinking creatively about when specially designed instruction is provided. For example, addressing reading and writing goals is not limited to an English class, math goals can be addressed in science, math, or technology classes, etc. Districts are reminded that a service area does not equal, necessarily, a class period.

³ [Bulletin No. 076-21](#) and [Bulletin 034-21](#)

⁴ [WAC 392-172A-02090](#) states "Other staff including general education teachers and paraeducators may assist in the provision of special education and related services," as long as the instruction is, "designed and supervised by special education certificated staff...or for related services by a certificated educational staff associate." Additionally, "student progress must be monitored and evaluated by special education certificated staff or for related services, a certificated educational staff associate."

- Reviewing open positions to determine if substitute teachers could be assigned to a school or classroom for a long-term sub position to increase stability and consistency.
- Communicating to case managers that they are supported in taking a step back, reviewing entire caseloads and potentially redesigning what case management look like.
- Evaluating the current practices of assigning and fading paraeducators based on individual student level data to support student independence while having timely information for staffing decisions.⁵

Strategic Planning and Long-Term Solutions

Districts should also simultaneously consider and take steps to address longer-term staffing concerns. Districts can explore the following:

- Expanding the availability of educators, substitute teachers, and paraeducators through targeted recruitment and training. Consider:
 - Recruiting parents to train as paraeducators and substitute teachers.
 - Supporting paraeducators or other staff to gain the education, training, and credentials to be special education teachers or substitutes. Consider:
 - Supporting staff to enroll in a state approved program and meet the requirements for conditional certification while working towards endorsement completion
 - Exploring [workforce grants and pilots](#) such as the [Alternative Route Block Grants \(ARBG\)](#) through PESB to support and fund grow your own teacher strategies
 - Creating a Memorandum of Understand (MOU) for staff retention in exchange for tuition assistance.
 - Hosting job fairs and reducing job application barriers. Allow applicants to fill out applications at a job fair with support from staff and then interview immediately.
- Engaging in early communication and posting for open positions across multiple platforms (for example, NeoGov, school websites, community bulletin boards, social media, and word of mouth) and consider targeted outreach to local educator preparation programs as well as those in neighboring states.
- Exploring the use of American Rescue Plan Act (APR) and ESSER funding to increase staff compensation, offer hiring and retention bonuses, cash incentives for teachers and other staff, or to reduce barriers for staff (pay for ETS tests, study guides, fingerprinting, etc.).⁶
- Exploring ways to “increase the availability of qualified adults and personnel to support educators, students, and staff.”⁷

⁵ See [Best Practices for Planning Paraeducator Support](#)

⁶ [Secretary Cardona's December 16, 2021 letter on staffing shortages](#) and [Department of Education's Using ARP Funds and Other Federal Sources to Address Staff Shortages](#)

⁷ [Secretary Cardona's December 16, 2021 letter on staffing shortages](#)

- Partner with institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to provide additional supports to educators and students through the use of teaching candidates and well-trained volunteers.
- Districts could hire AmeriCorps members to serve as tutors or mentor students, assist with additional administrative responsibilities brought on by the pandemic, and provide creative enrichment support for students.
- Connecting staff to mentoring opportunities and resources. Explore the [Beginning Educator Support Team \(BEST\)](#) webpage for resources.
- Reviewing the [Policy brief from CEEDAR](#) or the [Shortage Toolkit from GTL](#), a recommended resource from OSEP for their recruitment and retention grant.

Special Education Staffing Guidance for the Temporary Out of Endorsement Assignment

The following information is intended to assist districts in understanding options available to them under [WAC 392-172A-02090 Personnel Qualifications](#) when they are unable to recruit and hire individuals who have a special education endorsement. Each of these staffing options also have a quicker processing time than many other educator certification options.

- The Pre-Endorsement Waiver application is processed through the Special Education division of OSPI and is processed within 2 weeks upon receipt of completed application.
- The Temporary Out of Endorsement Assignment is done entirely at the district level and thus does not need additional processing time for OSPI approval.

Pre-Endorsement Waiver

The pre-endorsement waiver is available for a certificated teacher who has completed two hundred forty education credit hours (or the equivalent of 24 quarter OR 16 semester hours) applicable to a special education, early childhood special education, teacher of the visually impaired or deaf education endorsement.⁸ The application process requires that the district submit an [application/request](#) for a pre-endorsement waiver to the OSPI special education division. If approved the teacher, and the requesting school district, are sent an approval letter from the special education division. The pre-endorsement waiver does not appear on the teacher's certificate. The teacher:

- Does not need to be "currently enrolled" in a special education endorsement program at the time of the district's application/request.
- May perform all the duties of a special education teacher.
 - The district is responsible for providing any needed training and oversight to individuals with the pre-endorsement-waiver
- Has five years to complete the endorsement requirements.

⁸ [WAC 181-82-110 School district response and support for nonmatched endorsements to course assignment of teachers](#)

Temporary Out of Endorsement Assignment

This process is done entirely at the district level and is available when a certificated teacher has completed six semester hours or nine quarter hours of coursework applicable to a special education endorsement (special education, early childhood special education, teacher of the visually impaired or deaf education endorsement). The process requires formal approval by the district's school board. The teacher:

- May be assigned to the role of a special education teacher, but a special education endorsed individual within the district must review and monitor the IEPs of the students.

Visit the [Personnel Qualifications Guidance](#) page to access personnel qualification technical assistance resources on this topic and [email](#) if you have any questions on this topic.