

PACE Special Education Webinar Series: Summary and Q&A

Webinar #2: Building Capacity to Teach Students with Disabilities

March 5, 2020

Introduction

How are California students with disabilities being served and educated and what could be improved? On Thursday, March 5, 2020, PACE hosted the second webinar in a three-webinar series addressing these important questions. This document contains a summary of the webinar and includes presenter responses to audience questions that arose in the webinar.

In this second webinar, researchers from the [PACE Policy Research Panel on Special Education: Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities](#) presented studies that related to the instruction that students with disabilities receive and by whom. In inclusive placements, students spend most of their day alongside peers without disabilities under the instruction of general education teachers, and the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings is an important predictor of a range of positive outcomes. Thus, improving the educational experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities hinges on the capacity of both general and special education teachers to meet students' learning needs. This webinar focused on the preparation and development of general and special education teachers in California to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities.

The panelists in this webinar included the following researchers, who discussed how to improve the capacity of teachers to educate students with disabilities in California:

- Rachel Lambert, Assistant Professor in Special Education and Mathematics Education, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, UC Santa Barbara: [Increasing Access to Universally Designed Mathematics Classrooms](#)
- Naomi Ondrasek, Senior Researcher and Policy Advisor, Learning Policy Institute: [California's Special Education Teacher Shortage](#)
- Jacob Kirksey, PhD Candidate, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, UC Santa Barbara: [Preparing Teachers to Educate Students with Learning Disabilities](#)
- Aubyn Stahmer, Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, UC Davis: [Improving Education for California Students Via Professional Development](#)

Increasing Access to Universally Designed Mathematics Classrooms

Rachel Lambert presented findings from her policy brief, "[Increasing Access to Universally Designed Mathematics Classrooms](#)," in which she describes instruction that supports the learning of students with disabilities. Rachel uses the math classroom as the setting to discuss classroom instruction we want to see for all students.

Key Findings

Common Core State Standards in Mathematics are demanding and increasing engagement in problem-solving and discussion, but students with disabilities do not have consistent access to standards-based mathematics. Special education math research is strongly focused on direct/explicit instruction of skills and procedures, however, students with disabilities also show learning gains within multi-modal, inquiry-based curriculum. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is approach to instruction in which a wide range of learners can thrive that can be applied to design around common barriers to learning. UDL addresses the following areas:

- Engagement: the "why" of learning - the feelings, value, or emotions that can influence attitudes toward learning (e.g. classroom climate, relevance);
- Representation: the "what" of learning - how we identify information and categorize what we see, hear, and read (e.g. core ideas, multimodal representations)
- Strategic actions: the "how" of learning - it is through strategic networks that we plan, execute, and monitor our actions (e.g. support for strategy development).

Recommendations

- Provide sustained, research-based professional development in CA Common Core State Standards for Math and UDL for all teachers (focus on special educators) and administrators
- Invest in Tier I instruction using UDL as a design framework
- Connect IEP goals to CA Common Core State Standards for Math, particularly Standards for Mathematical Practice
- Advocate for research on the inclusion of students with disabilities

California's Special Education Teacher Shortage

Naomi Ondrasek presented research from her report, "[California's Special Education Teacher Shortage](#)," which she co-authored with Desiree Carver-Thomas, Caitlin Scott, and Linda Darling-Hammond. Her presentation described the extent of the special education teacher shortage, explanatory factors, and potential solutions California will need to take to develop education specialists prepared to meet the unique learning needs of students with disabilities.

Key Findings

About two out of every three new special education teachers are underprepared, the greatest proportion of any major subject area. Much of the special education teacher shortage is driven by attrition. Factors that impact special education teacher attrition include the following:

- Inadequate preparation and professional learning
- Working conditions (i.e. high caseloads)

- Low compensation

The state has begun to address teacher shortages across subject areas, including special education, through investments such as teacher residencies, local solutions to shortages, and grants for teachers in high-needs fields, however, most of these have been one-time investments.

Recommendations

Recent investments from the state level are promising, but improvement the recruitment and retention of special education teachers will require a comprehensive and sustained policy approach that includes:

- Strengthen the pipeline with recruitment incentives for high-retention pathways
- Improve the quality of and access to preparation
- Expand and strengthen professional development
- Improve working conditions for special education teachers
- Increase compensation

Preparing Teachers to Educate Students with Learning Disabilities

Jacob Kirksey presented findings and recommendations from his report, "[Preparing Teachers to Educate Students with Learning Disabilities](#)," which he co-authored with Michael Gottfried. His presentation addressed teacher preparation to educate students with disabilities in California's teacher preparation programs. He also explored the attributes of pre-service training that prepares general education teachers to educate students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.

Key Findings

More students with disabilities are spending a majority of their school day in general education classrooms than ever before, and consequently, teachers face more responsibility than ever before to facilitate high-quality education in inclusive classrooms for students with and without disabilities. However, traditionally, preparation for teaching SWDs has been isolated for only candidates receiving a special education credential. What program characteristics are associated with better preparation for educating student with disabilities? Teachers who felt their programs were coherent and teachers who felt strongly supported by their university supervisors in their field placements felt best prepared to teach students with disabilities. These results were found to hold among elementary teachers.

Recommendations

- Increase coherence in TPPs (e.g. have faculty speak similar language and use similar artifacts across their courses).
- More research is needed on the implementation of edTPA across programs and states

Improving Education for California Students Via Professional Development

The final presenter on the panel was Aubyn Stahmer, who presented findings and recommendations from her brief, "[Improving Education for California Students Via Professional Development](#)" which she co-wrote with her colleagues Kelsey Oliver and Patty Schetter. She discussed attributes of effective professional development for educators to learn and apply evidence-based practice to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities.

Key Findings

Professional development provides educators with an opportunity to advance their practice by including evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Teachers often report feeling ill-equipped and under-prepared to support students with disabilities in both specialized and inclusive settings. Currently, specific learning disabilities, including dyslexia and dysgraphia, are the most common qualifying disabilities for special education in California (37.8 percent), followed by speech language impairments (20.7 percent), and autism (15.1 percent), and other health impairments (typically ADHD; 13.1 percent). Many students with these high incidence disabilities have the cognitive ability to learn at their grade level when teachers understand and support their learning needs. All educators in California should understand these disabilities as they will inevitably interact with and support these students. Learning the common patterns of strength and areas of need for students with disabilities and understanding associated evidence-based practice will allow educators and administrators to identify and implement the necessary supports.

Recommendations

- Improve attitudes, knowledge and skills across all levels (system, leader, educator)
- Make professional development relevant and linked to goals
- Link evidence-based practices and professional development to state, system, school and educator goals
- Collect data on effectiveness of professional development and evidence-based practice and link to goal progress and student data
- Train leaders in implementation practices

Webinar Q&A

Panelists' Responses to Audience Questions from PACE Webinar: Building Capacity to Teach Students with Disabilities

Q1. Do you have a model completed UDL lesson plan in math that we could have access to? I would like to see how the concepts that you were describing would be worked into a real life lesson (plan).

Rachel Lambert: I don't have a lesson plan that shows all of these factors. I am not sure one single lesson plan could even do so- these elements would need to be designed into classroom community, routines, etc. I think we learn more from descriptions of classrooms that take into account how students engage in lessons. I have a paper that does that (Lambert, R., & Stylianou, D. A. (2013). Posing cognitively demanding tasks to all students. *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School*, 18(8), 500–506. <https://doi.org/10.5951/mathteacmiddscho.18.8.0500>)

In terms of lesson planning and UDL, I highly recommend Ralabate, P. K. (2016). *Your UDL lesson planner: The step-by-step guide for teaching all learners*. Brookes Publishing Company This is the lesson planning model I use for UDL with preservice teachers.

Q2. Do you believe that it is necessary for special education teachers to have a general education credential or that they should be required to have a Master's degree? How do you think changes in the traditional Master's degrees have degraded teacher preparation (9 month- 1 year Masters)? How do you think returning to a traditional 2 year Masters might discourage low income students from becoming a teacher?

Naomi Ondrasek: In our report, we mention that other states require dual preparation in special and general education, with some states requiring a Masters in special education on top of a general education credential. While we don't make a recommendation that California go that particular route, we do emphasize that receiving preparation in both general and special education is important, not only for special educators, but for general educators, because it can give them the content knowledge and the skillsets they need to work with all students. This is especially important as California works to increase inclusion for students with disabilities in general education settings. Research also shows that special educators need support from general education colleagues and administrators who have an understanding of special education, and that inadequate support affects their decisions to remain in the field.

It stands to reason, then, that if we want to improve student outcomes—through effective inclusion practices, and by decreasing special education teacher turnover—then we need preparation and professional development that gives all of our educators some shared understanding of students with disabilities and special education. The good news is that California has taken steps to address

this, through revised Teacher Performance Expectations that include a more extensive common foundation of knowledge for general and special education teachers.

Q3. Why hasn't the state reinstated the bonuses received by special education teachers and the extra bonuses to teachers in title 1 schools? Paying people more for in-demand skills works very well in the rest of the world, why not do that in education?

Naomi Ondrasek: Our report didn't address the issue of bonuses. However, we do mention in the report that in 2018, the state appropriated \$50M for "[local solutions](#)" that address special education teacher shortages, which could include a variety of strategies, including issuance of retention bonuses.

Regarding your second question: fiscal pressure in California's districts may drive them to make tough choices about how to allocate resources across a wide range of demands, including teacher compensation. We acknowledge this issue in the report and mention in our policy recommendations that increased state investments in the special education system, such as those made last year, can help relieve some of this pressure, putting districts in a better position to increase compensation for their special educators.

Q4. In regards to both general and special education teachers, other states have begun to include basic statistics and skills relating to reading and translating research to practice in their curriculum, do you believe this would benefit teachers in California and increase their self-efficacy?

Jacob Kirksey: I think this is a promising suggestion. The key here is how this policy priority is translated into teacher preparation programs. This is perhaps the key challenge that needs to be addressed. There's good evidence that understanding and translating research yields positive results for both students and teachers (efficacy being one).

Q5. Are there any disparities between white teachers and teachers of color in passing the edTPA?

Jacob Kirksey: This is a great question. I emailed a colleague who I know has access to edTPA data to check on this. My understanding is that more structural additions to the preparation process decreases applicants and completers of color, so I would think edTPA might indeed have passage gaps. In the edTPA rollout in NY, schools and programs echoed these concerns that edTPA might exacerbate existing gaps between preparing teachers of color and white teachers.

Q6. There seems to be a lot of emphasis on inclusive classrooms. What about students who require more individualized instruction and their teachers?

Aubyn Stahmer: Your point is a good one! We want to individualize education for each student. However, often times if students have appropriate support they can spend at least part of their school day in inclusive classrooms. Students who need more individualized instruction may need

Tier 3 support. For them to have this type of support their teachers and support staff need adequate training. That likely means specialist trained in the appropriate evidence-based practice could provide training and coaching to teachers, paraprofessional and specialist staff to support the student in the least restrictive environment. If a student needs to receive instruction outside of a mainstream classroom, the same issues apply. The teachers and support staff can use the appropriate evidence-based practices to support the student and those teachers and staff need adequate training, coaching and ongoing progress monitoring.

Q7. We have focused on recruiting teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, how can recruitment of teachers from neurodiverse backgrounds enrich our workforce?

Rachel Lambert: I love this question. I don't think this has been a policy focus anywhere, but I know from experience that it can make a huge difference. I was recently doing a study of a general education teacher who was amazing at including students with disabilities in meaningful mathematics, and found out that she had experience being pulled out for special education services as a child. So I think this should be a policy and a research focus- what strengths do neurodiversity in the teaching profession offer?

Q8. Where could I find the information on the classified school employee teacher preparation program?

Naomi Ondrasek: If you're looking for information on the program's outcomes, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing just released a [report](#) that shows results from two previous rounds of funding. The report includes information on the diversity of program participants, and also shows where those candidates are currently in the pipeline.

Q9. Did LPI's research on special education teacher retention consider the siloes between special and general education as a factor in working conditions/job satisfaction?

Naomi Ondrasek: Our report does explore this issue, primarily by presenting the research—and perspectives from our focus group—that show how working conditions for special educators are impacted not only by overwhelming workloads, but by inadequate support from general education colleagues and administrators who do not have a strong understanding of special education and the needs of students with disabilities. Inadequate support from other staff impacts special educators' decisions to remain in the field, which is why our policy recommendations on improving working conditions include a recommendation on training in special education for general educators and educational leaders.