

A photograph of a female teacher with dark hair, wearing a blue cardigan over a white collared shirt, sitting on the floor and interacting with two young girls. One girl, with long dark hair and bangs, is wearing a red and white striped shirt and looking down at a book. The other girl, with long dark hair and a pink headband, is wearing a pink shirt and is partially visible on the left. They are in a library or classroom setting with bookshelves in the background. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

State of the States

# **Building a Strong Teacher Workforce for Students with Disabilities and English Learners**

September 2025



National Council  
on Teacher Quality

# Table of Contents

<b>Overview of Recommendations and Summary of Key Findings</b>	<b>6 – 8</b>
<b>The Case for Action</b>	<b>9 – 15</b>
<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>16 – 54</b>
Policy Lever 1: Cooperating teachers	17 – 20
Policy Lever 2: Teacher preparation standards	21 – 25
Policy Lever 3: Principal preparation standards	26 – 30
Policy Lever 4: Reading knowledge	31 – 39
Policy Lever 5: Financial incentives	40 – 47
Policy Lever 6: Professional learning	48 – 54
<b>But What About...</b>	
Licensure requirements	36 – 39
Other financial incentives	45
General education teachers	53
<b>Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>55 – 57</b>
<b>Additional Considerations for State Leaders</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Companion Resources</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Citations</b>	<b>61 – 65</b>

# Who is Highlighted in this Report



Students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) represent diverse populations with varied academic needs. This analysis focuses primarily on teachers who are certified or endorsed to work with these student populations.



This analysis mainly centers on teachers who serve students with mild to moderate disabilities, who make up the majority of students receiving special education (SPED) services. These students are typically educated in general education classrooms, often with accommodations or support from a special education teacher. Examples of mild to moderate disabilities include dyslexia, dyscalculia, speech or language impairments, ADHD, and some presentations of autism spectrum disorder.



The term *English learner* is used throughout this analysis to align with federal terminology and available data sources and refers to students acquiring English as an additional language. While we use *English learner* for consistency, we recognize that many stakeholders prefer terms like multilingual learner, which are considered more asset-based.<sup>1</sup> These terms may be used interchangeably where appropriate.

# Meet Lorelei



Lorelei is a seasoned special education teacher with over a decade of experience supporting students with a wide range of needs. But at her previous school, she was assigned nearly 50 students—twice the district’s recommended caseload.



The overload began when one of four special education teachers left midyear. Lorelei, the most experienced teacher on staff, absorbed much of the extra work. The district attempted to fill the vacancy—but despite their efforts, no qualified candidates applied.



# Meet Lorelei



**Why?** The pool of qualified candidates simply didn't exist. What was meant to be a short-term stopgap became Lorelei's daily reality. With too many students and too little time, she couldn't provide the level of support her students needed and deserved. The unrelenting workload led to stress, burnout, and ultimately, her decision to leave.



**Stories like Lorelei's aren't the exception—they're often the rule. And student learning is suffering.**

Far too many students with disabilities and English learners bear the costs when understaffed schools or overburdened teachers are stretched too thin to meet students' needs.

## States should focus on SIX KEY POLICY LEVERS to ensure that special education and English learner teachers are ready to support these growing student populations from day one and stop the revolving door of turnover

1. **Cooperating Teachers:** Require aspiring teachers to complete their clinical practice under a cooperating teacher who is certified in the same subject area(s) for which they are seeking certification.
2. **Teacher Prep Standards:** Set explicit teacher preparation standards for programs that certify aspiring teachers in special education and English learner instruction.
3. **Principal Prep Standards:** Require principal preparation programs to include dedicated training on supporting students with disabilities and English learners.
4. **Reading Knowledge:** Require that all special education and English learner teachers pass an acceptable reading licensure test.
5. **Financial Incentives:** Increase compensation for SPED and EL teachers at least \$5,000 on top of base pay.
6. **Professional Learning:** Provide sustained, high-quality professional learning, with a focus on induction and early career supports, for all teachers serving students with disabilities and English learners, including general education teachers.

# Summary of Key Findings

## NCTQ examined the extent to which states are leveraging six key policy levers to strengthen their teacher workforce for SWD and ELs—and we found significant room for improvement.

---

### 1 Cooperating Teachers

**Half of states** do not require teacher candidates to be mentored by a cooperating teacher who is certified in special education or English as a second language.

### 2 Teacher Prep Standards

**Ten states** do not set explicit special education standards for teacher preparation programs, and **sixteen states** do not set them for future teachers of English learners.

### 3 Principal Prep Standards

Only **24 states** explicitly require leader prep programs to address special education in their coursework, and **just 13** require coursework related to English learners.

### 4 Reading Knowledge

Only **17 states** require special education teachers to pass an acceptable reading licensure test and **just 5 states** have the same requirement for teachers of English learners.

### 5 Financial Incentives

Just **18 states** differentiate compensation for special education teachers, and **only 8** do so for teachers of English learners.

### 6 Professional Learning

**Roughly 3 in 4** states provide professional learning opportunities for special education teachers and teachers of English learners.

Read NCTQ's [Key Findings](#) for more information on why these policy levers matter and see states who are leading the way.

# The Case for Action

# Students with disabilities and English learners face ongoing reading and math academic disparities.

Students with disabilities (SWD) and English learners (EL) make up a growing share of public school enrollment, but they've long faced some of the **most persistent and troubling academic disparities**.

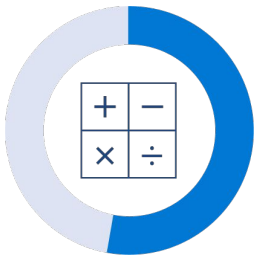
Despite their potential, far too many are not meeting even basic benchmarks in reading and math.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION



70%

of fourth grade students with disabilities score below the basic level in reading.



53%

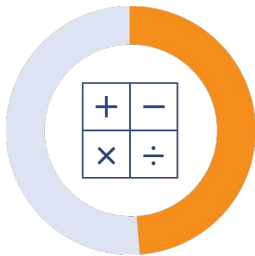
score below the basic level in math.<sup>2</sup>

## ENGLISH LEARNERS



67%

of fourth grade students who are English learners score below the basic level in reading.



48%

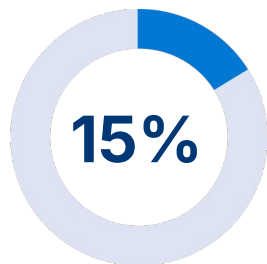
score below the basic level in math.<sup>3</sup>

# The number of students impacted is significant.

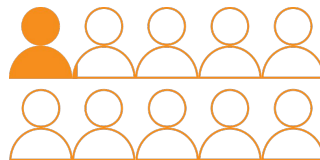


## 7.5 million kids

received special education services in the 2022-23 school year—nearly a 20% increase since 2000.



of all public school students include students with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>



## 10.6% of all students

in public schools are English Learners (5.3 million students)—roughly a 40% increase since 2000.

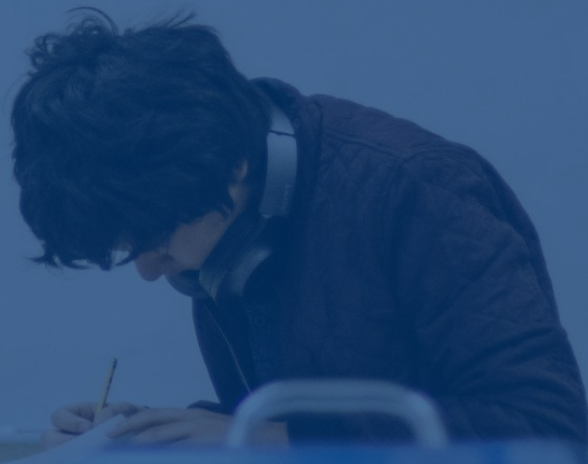


students are English learners in states like Texas, California, and New Mexico.<sup>5</sup>



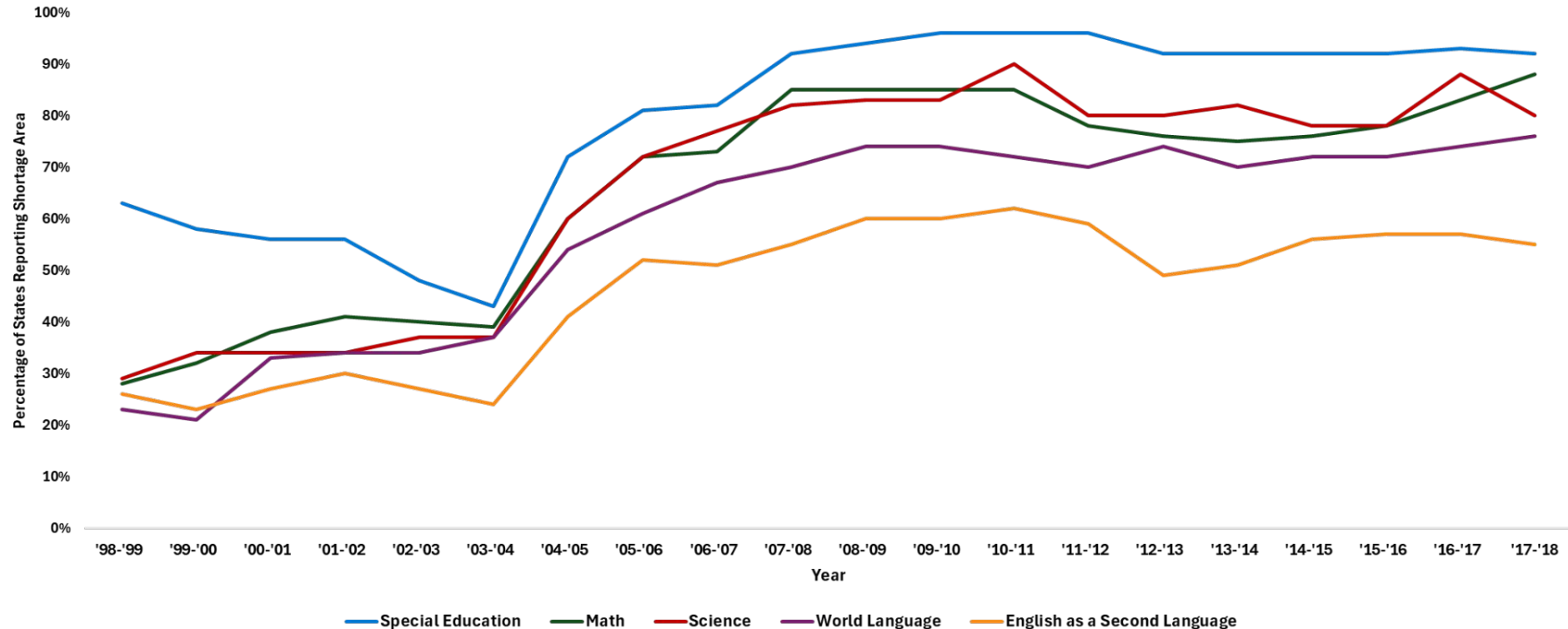
While there is no single cause for these academic disparities, research highlights inequities in access to qualified and effective teachers and lack of support for these students and teachers as a key problem.<sup>6</sup>

Improving outcomes for students with disabilities and English learner students starts with ensuring every child has access to well-prepared, well-supported, and highly effective teachers. But persistent, long-standing shortages of both special education and English learner teachers have made that goal difficult to reach.



# Special education and ESL teacher shortages date back to at least the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

Top five subject area shortages reported nationally, 1998-2018



Adapted from McVey, K. P., & Trinidad, J. (2019).

# Three converging forces have made it harder than ever to staff special education and English learner positions with qualified teachers.

## 1

### CHALLENGE:

#### **Too few teachers enter the field.**

Each year, fewer teachers choose to specialize in special education or ESL/bilingual education—raising serious concerns that states are on a path toward even greater staffing shortages and unmet student needs.<sup>8</sup>

## 2

### CHALLENGE:

#### **Too many teachers leave the profession.**

Once in the classroom, special education and ESL/bilingual education teachers experience some of the highest attrition rates in the profession.<sup>9</sup>

## 3

### CHALLENGE:

#### **Rising student need.**

Even as overall student enrollment declines, nearly every state has reported an increase in students with disabilities, and more than 40 have seen similar growth in their EL populations.<sup>10</sup>

**All states—especially those with large populations of students with disabilities and English Learners—have an opportunity and responsibility to improve teaching and learning for these students.**



**States with the highest proportion of K–12 students receiving special education or EL services:**



**States with the largest growth in number of students served over time:**

### **Students with Disabilities<sup>11</sup>**

Pennsylvania  
New York  
Maine  
Massachusetts  
Delaware  
West Virginia  
Vermont  
New Hampshire  
Indiana  
Rhode Island

### **English Learners<sup>12</sup>**

Texas  
California  
New Mexico  
Nevada  
Illinois  
Rhode Island  
Delaware  
Washington  
District of Columbia  
Maryland

2001-2023

### **Students with Disabilities<sup>13</sup>**

Utah  
Nevada  
Delaware  
Arizona  
Pennsylvania  
Colorado  
District of Columbia  
Texas  
Oklahoma  
Minnesota

2011-2021

### **English Learners<sup>14</sup>**

Maine  
Louisiana  
Delaware  
Rhode Island  
New Jersey  
Mississippi  
Kentucky  
District of Columbia  
Alabama  
Tennessee

# Key Findings

POLICY LEVER 1

# Cooperating Teachers

## WHY THIS MATTERS

# Strong cooperating teachers develop more effective future teachers who are more likely to stay.

**Strong clinical experiences with an instructionally effective cooperating teacher can make a first-year teacher as effective as a second- or third-year teacher.<sup>15</sup>**

**This is especially critical for students with disabilities and ELs.<sup>16</sup>**

Teachers who are paired with cooperating teachers in the same subject area and have opportunities to collaborate with colleagues are significantly less likely to leave the profession during their first year or to transfer schools.<sup>17</sup>

An analysis of over 250 people who completed special education teacher preparation in Massachusetts found that special education teachers whose supervising practitioner was licensed in special education were 12 percentage points less likely to leave the workforce.<sup>18</sup>

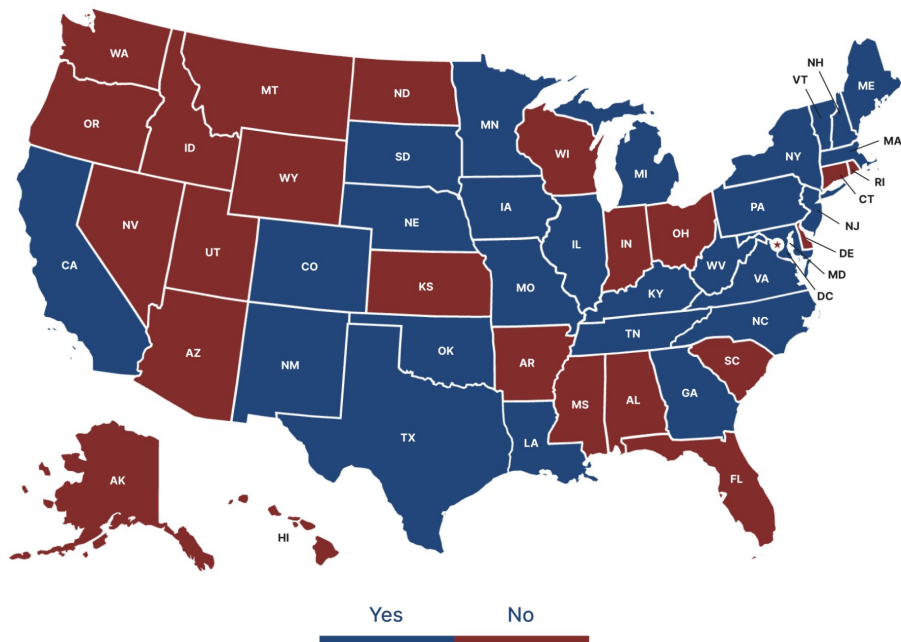
This Massachusetts study also found that nearly one in three candidates earning a license in Moderate Disabilities completed student teaching in a setting that did not match their first teaching position (e.g., inclusive vs. self-contained). Teachers whose clinical placement and their first job placement were aligned were significantly less likely to leave the profession, suggesting that mismatches between training and job placement contribute to attrition.<sup>19</sup>



## Half of states do not require teacher candidates to be mentored by a cooperating teacher who is certified in the same subject area(s) for which they are seeking certification.

While some states specify that **aspiring teachers** should complete their clinical experiences in their intended teaching field or area of instructional support, many do not require the same alignment for the **cooperating teacher's certification**.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, research shows clinical practice mismatches can drive attrition.<sup>21</sup>



Does the state require teaching candidates to be mentored by a cooperating teacher who is certified in the same subject area(s) for which they are seeking certification?



## State Spotlight: Illinois

**Illinois requires that all student teaching take place under the supervision of a licensed cooperating teacher currently teaching in the subject area of the student teacher. They must also have at least three years of teaching experience and have earned a rating of proficient or higher on their most recent evaluation.**

“

Having a special ed cooperating teacher meant I got to see what the work really looks like—I learned how to collect student data, write IEP goals, and adjust instruction for different learners. You don’t get that level of specialized practice if your cooperating teacher isn’t in special education.”



**Patty**

Special Education Teacher of 15 years

POLICY LEVER 2

# Teacher Preparation Standards

## WHY THIS MATTERS

Specific teacher preparation standards help ensure that all educators receive the training they need to be effective.



Students with disabilities and English learners require individualized support to access grade-level content and thrive. For example, students learning to read in a new language need additional oral language support so they understand the words and the text teachers are using to teach them to read.<sup>22</sup> Without strong preparation before entering the classroom, teachers may be unprepared to meet their students' needs.

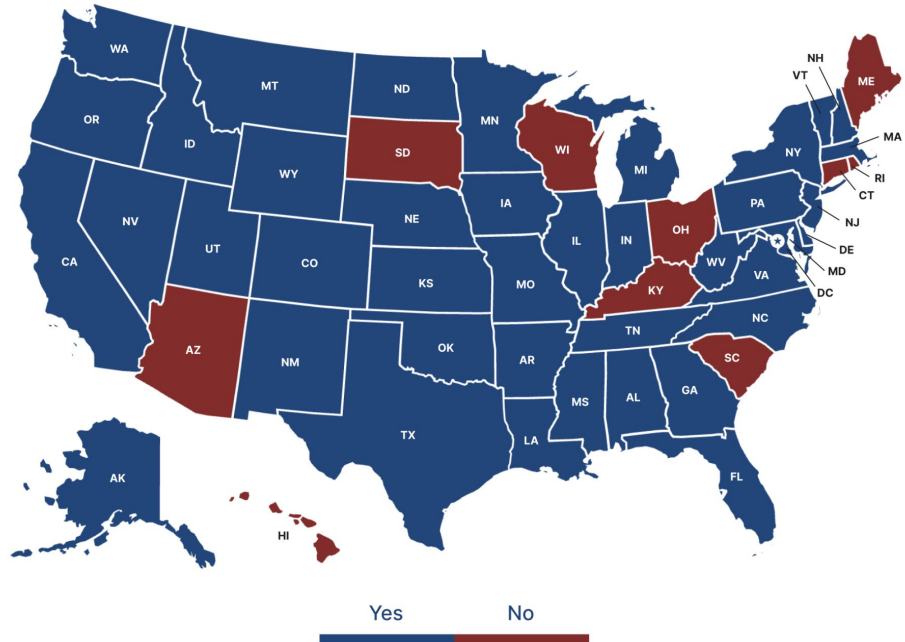
While limited research directly connects subject-specific preparation standards to student outcomes, **research has shown that teachers who receive more comprehensive preparation are two to three times more likely to stay in teaching than those who do not.**<sup>23</sup>

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

### Ten states do not set explicit special education standards for teacher preparation programs.

Clear, well-defined state standards for teacher preparation ensure aspiring special education teachers gain the skills needed to support students with disabilities.

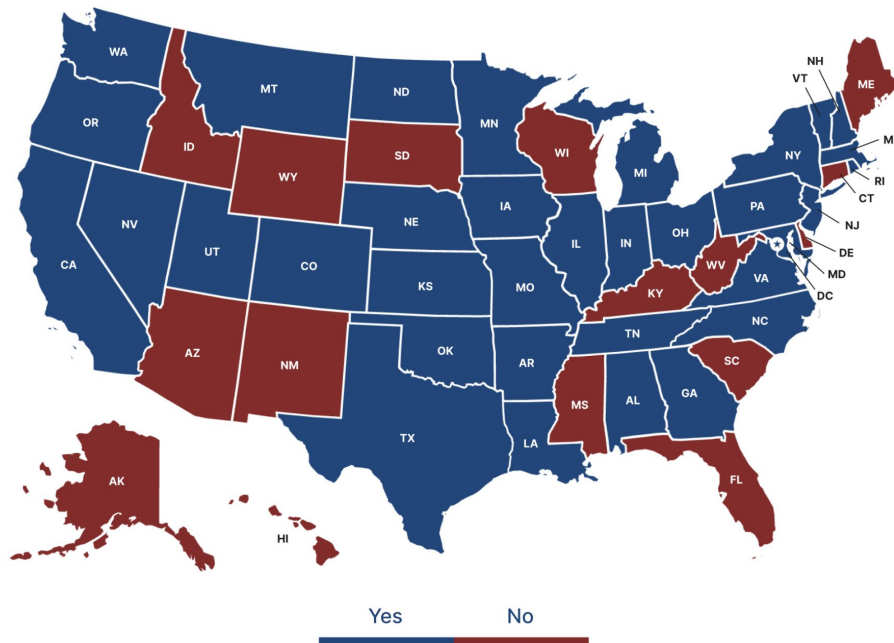
They also create a consistent framework for program evaluation and accountability. Without them, programs set their own criteria—leading to wide variation in training quality and teachers who are underprepared to meet students' complex needs.



Does the state have specific special education standards/requirements for teacher preparation programs?

## ENGLISH LEARNERS

**Sixteen states do not set explicit teacher preparation standards for future teachers of English learners.**



Does the state have specific standards or requirements for teacher preparation programs that certify teachers of English learners?



## State Spotlight: Texas

Texas has established clear standards for both English as a second language and bilingual education teacher prep programs. These expectations include that aspiring teachers understand the foundations of language acquisition, adapt instruction to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of their students, and engage in ongoing professional learning. Through these standards, Texas supports teachers to be prepared to meet the unique needs of different instructional settings, whether through supporting students in their English language acquisition or fostering dual-language development in bilingual classrooms.





POLICY LEVER 3

# Principal Preparation Standards

## WHY THIS MATTERS

# Principals need dedicated training to effectively support students with disabilities and English learners



For principals, understanding how to meet the unique needs of these student populations and their teachers is equally important. Principals set instructional priorities, allocate resources, bear responsibility for cultivating inclusive school cultures, and provide essential support to teachers. Without a deep understanding of effective practices for supporting students with disabilities and English learners, principals are likely less equipped to improve outcomes for these students and to retain the teachers who serve them.

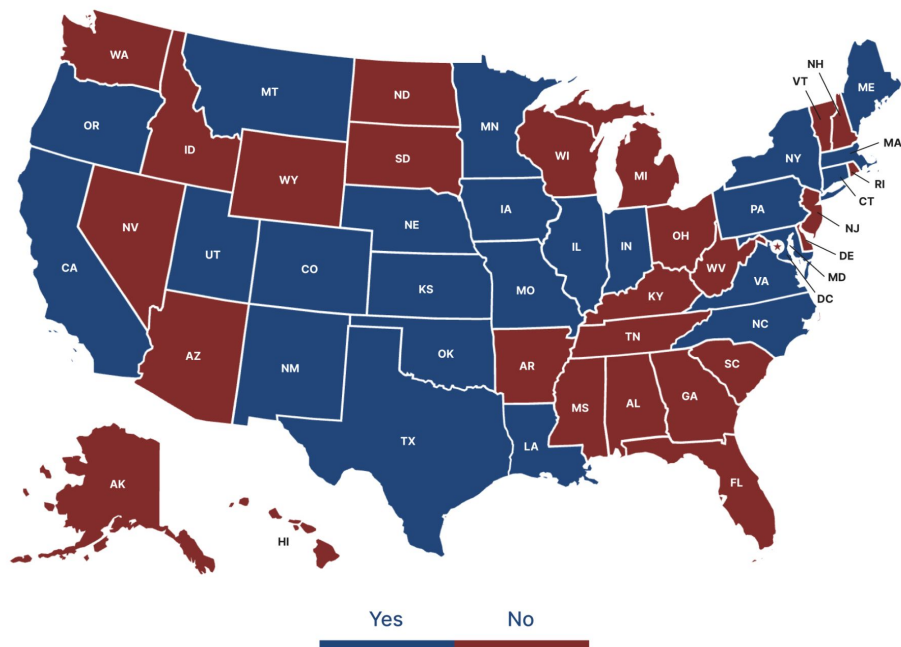
## SPECIAL EDUCATION

Only 24 states require principal preparation programs to explicitly address special education in their coursework.

Despite the fact students with disabilities and English learners make up a significant and growing share of each state's public school enrollment, most states do not explicitly require preparation programs for principals to include coursework focused on serving students with disabilities.

**As a result, many principals and administrators enter their roles without the skills to support these students and their teachers, leading to weak instructional leadership, inconsistent services, and less inclusive school environments.**

This lack of preparation increases the burden on special education teachers,<sup>24</sup> raising stress and burnout<sup>25</sup>—and ultimately driving some out of the profession.



Do states require school leader preparation programs to address students with disabilities in their coursework?

**Just 13 states explicitly require principal preparation programs to include coursework related to English learners.**

29



## State Spotlight: Iowa

**Iowa law requires school leader preparation programs to provide evidence that candidates are equipped to address the unique needs of English learners, students with disabilities, and students struggling with literacy, including those with dyslexia.**



POLICY LEVER 4

# Reading Knowledge

## WHY THIS MATTERS

# Ensuring SPED and EL teachers can effectively teach reading will help close achievement gaps.



**Reading is foundational to the academic success of all students**—including those with disabilities, those learning English, or both. As such, it is critically important that the teachers responsible for educating these students demonstrate proficiency in teaching reading aligned to the research-based methods.

Many students, and particularly ELs, are at increased risk of being identified for special education services due to reading-related difficulties.<sup>26</sup> Requiring special education and EL teacher candidates to demonstrate mastery of knowledge of the science of reading through a quality standardized assessment signals to state leaders that these educators are prepared to accurately diagnose reading challenges and deliver effective interventions.

While this is an area ripe for further research, the available evidence suggests that various measures of teachers' knowledge of scientifically based reading instruction correlate with their students' reading achievement gains.<sup>27</sup>



“

It is not enough to love our students. We must also be able to teach them to read. Teachers working with exceptional learners—including English learners and students with disabilities—must be equipped with the latest research and evidence-based practices in the science of reading.



**Missy Testerman**

2024 National Teacher of the Year

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

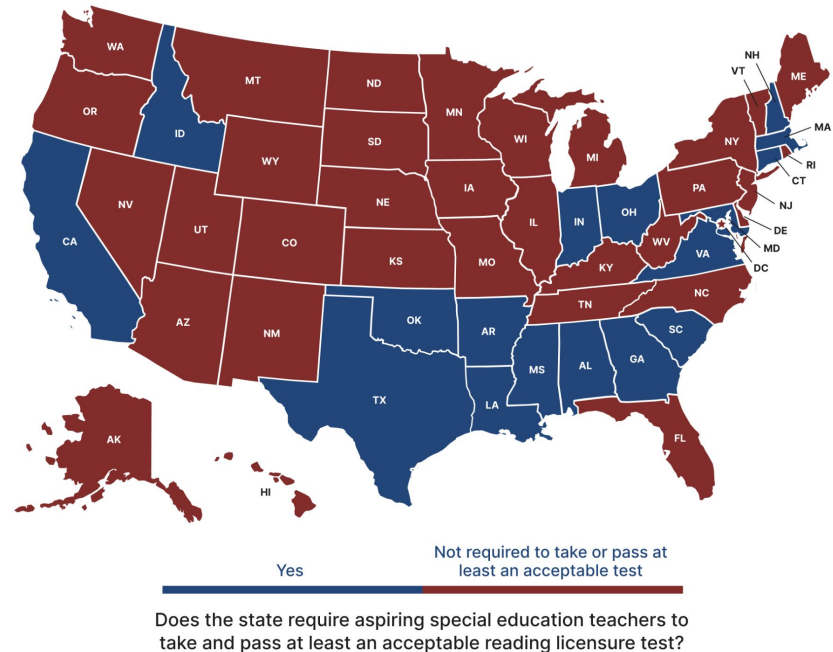
### Only 17 states require special education teacher candidates to pass at least an acceptable reading licensure test.<sup>28</sup>

Despite being responsible for delivering core academic content alongside specialized instruction, few states require teacher candidates working with students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge of reading through a licensure assessment.

This gap is particularly concerning given that the large number of students referred for special education services are identified due to reading-related difficulties.<sup>29</sup>

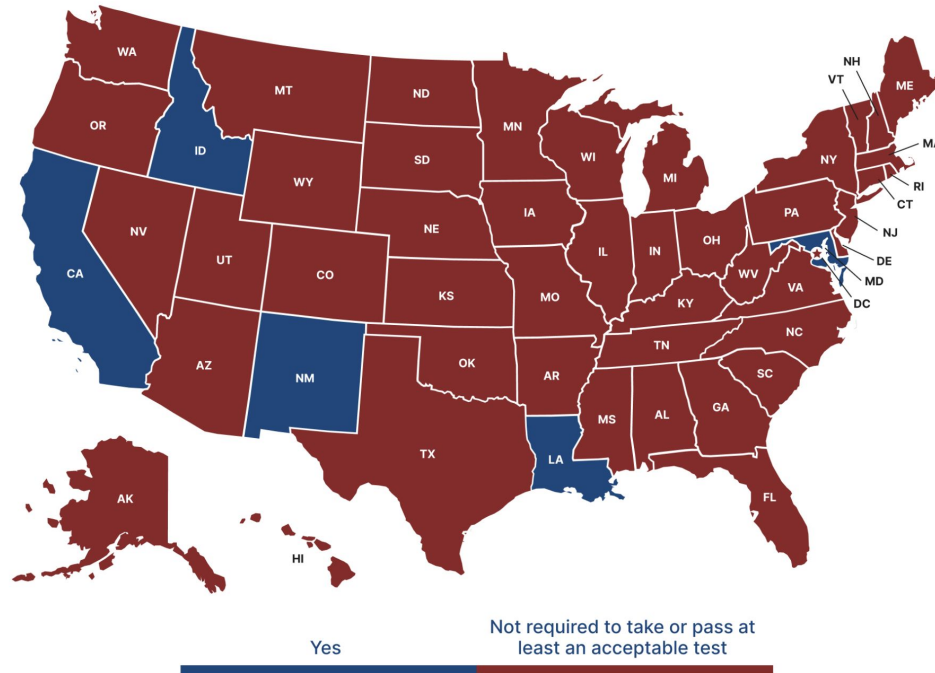
Given decades of devastating reading outcomes for SWDs and ELs, states should work to close this gap by ensuring that all teachers—including those who teach SWD and ELs—have demonstrated proficiency in evidence-based literacy instruction.

Learn more about how NCTQ analyzed the quality of [reading licensure tests](#).



## ENGLISH LEARNERS

**Just 5 states require aspiring teachers of English learners to pass an acceptable reading licensure test.**



Does the state require aspiring English learner teachers to take and pass at least an acceptable reading licensure test?

## BUT WHAT ABOUT...

# Licensure requirements for special education teachers?

10+

Each state has taken their own approach to special education licensing in an attempt to meet workforce and quality demands, but this has resulted in significant variation across states. In fact, **seventeen states offer 10 or more distinct types of credentials.**

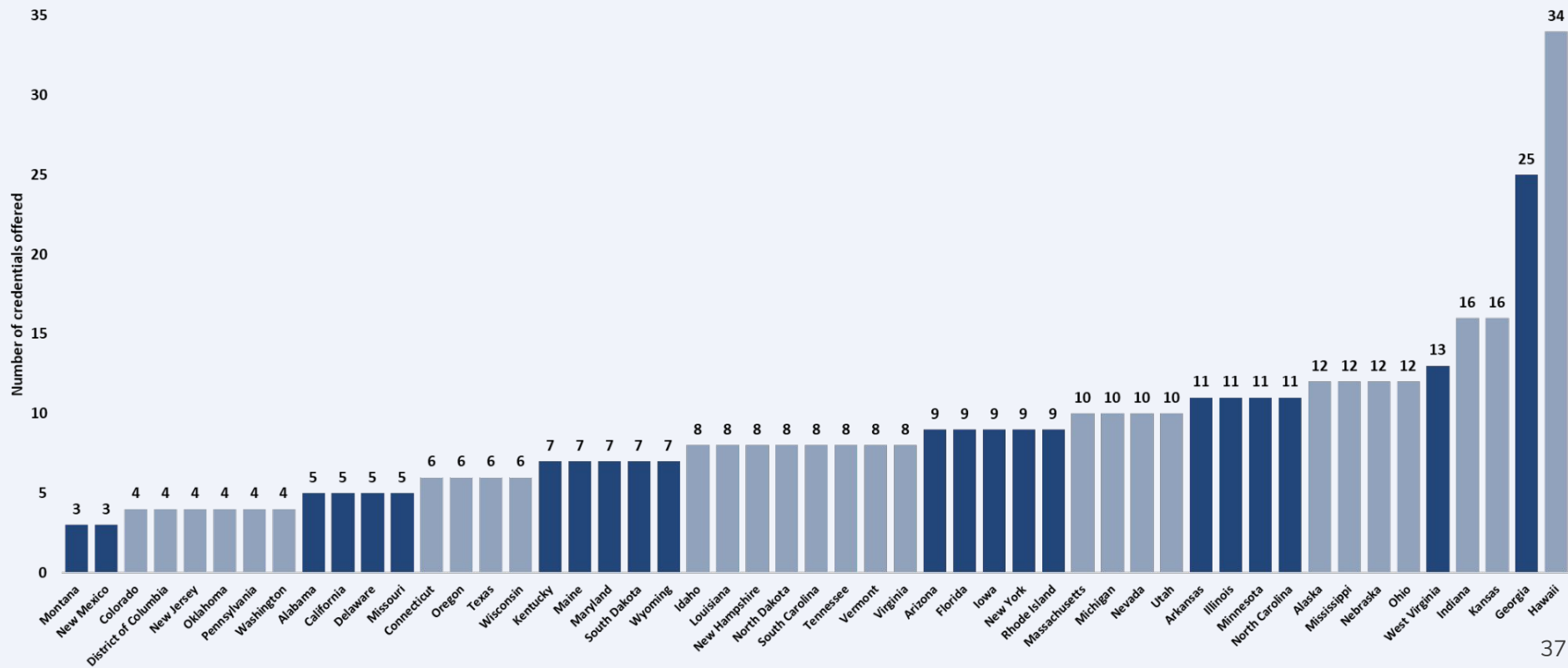
?

**The impact of licensure structures is unclear.**<sup>30</sup> Each approach has tradeoffs. Broader licenses offer districts more flexibility, but may place challenging demands on teacher preparation programs and candidates. **Dual certification can also present challenges:** teachers with dual licenses are less likely to enter special education roles, and those who do are more likely to transfer into general education classrooms.<sup>31</sup>



State variation in licensure structures often creates reciprocity issues, making it difficult for teachers licensed in one state to transfer their credentials to another.<sup>32</sup> **States should review their current licensure structures** and work with nearby states to be clear about the skills and knowledge needed and reduce unnecessary barriers.

There is no consistency in special education teacher licensure standards requirements—with states offering as few as 3 to as many as 34 credential types.



## BUT WHAT ABOUT...

### Licensure requirements for English learner teachers?



Inconsistent state licensure policies for teachers of English Learners have created a patchwork of qualifications, making it difficult to ensure all EL students have access to well-prepared and knowledgeable educators.

Some states offer standalone certifications in English Language Development (ELD) or bilingual education, which may authorize teachers to provide instruction or support to English learners. These certifications typically require comprehensive preparation focused on language development and the academic needs of ELs.

In contrast, many states offer ELD as an add-on endorsement to a general teaching license, with requirements that vary widely—from robust preparation including coursework and field experience to minimal requirements like completing a single course or simply passing a test without any formal training.<sup>33</sup> In some states, neither EL teachers nor general classroom teachers are required to hold any specialized certification, despite the growing number of ELs in schools.

## Licensure requirements for English learner teachers vary across the nation.

States take a variety of approaches to certifying or endorsing teachers to support English learners. Select examples include:

Alabama	Iowa	Virginia	D.C.
Earning an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement requires a master's degree, a survey course in special education, a minimum GPA of 3.0, 300 hours of internship with an ESOL-certified cooperating teacher, and pedagogy coursework.	An ESOL endorsement requires completion of 18 semester hours of approved coursework	An ESOL endorsement requires a bachelor's degree and completion of an ESOL teacher preparation program, or a bachelor's degree plus 24 semester hours of ESOL coursework.	Certifications in bilingual education and ESOL both require a bachelor's degree and passage of a certificate-specific assessment.

POLICY LEVER 5

# Financial Incentives



## WHY THIS MATTERS

# Differentiated pay can attract and retain teachers into the hardest-to-fill positions.



Research shows that differentiated compensation, like bonuses or higher salaries, is an effective strategy to improve teacher retention<sup>34</sup> and attract educators into hard-to-staff subjects.<sup>35</sup>

However, to meaningfully influence behavior, studies suggest this additional pay must amount to **at least** 7.5% of a teacher's base salary, or roughly \$5,000 annually, to effectively recruit and retain teachers in critical areas.<sup>36</sup>

Such strategies have been shown to be effective—particularly in fields like special education:

- An annual \$10,000 incentive in Hawai'i reduced the number of vacant teaching positions by 32% and reduced the number of positions filled by unlicensed teachers. The compensation was most effective at drawing general education teachers into special education roles.<sup>37</sup>
- A recent study found that a 10 percent increase in base salary for special education teachers would reduce attrition by 4 percent—twice the reduction seen among general education teachers.<sup>38</sup>

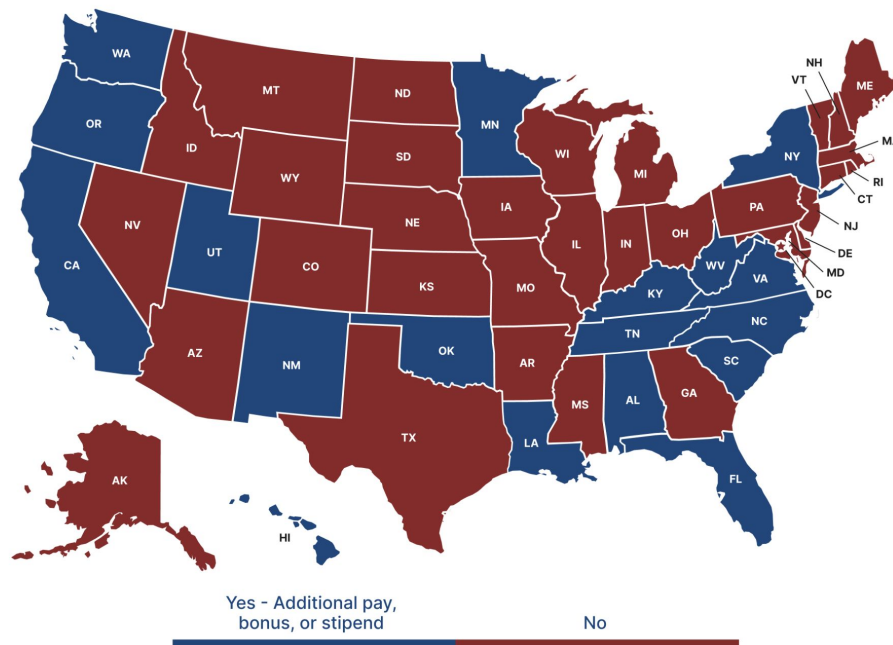
## SPECIAL EDUCATION

Only 18 states differentiate compensation for special education teachers.

To make a meaningful impact, states should prioritize direct financial incentives like salary increases or hiring bonuses.

These incentives should be substantial, sustained, and easy for teachers to access without administrative hurdles.

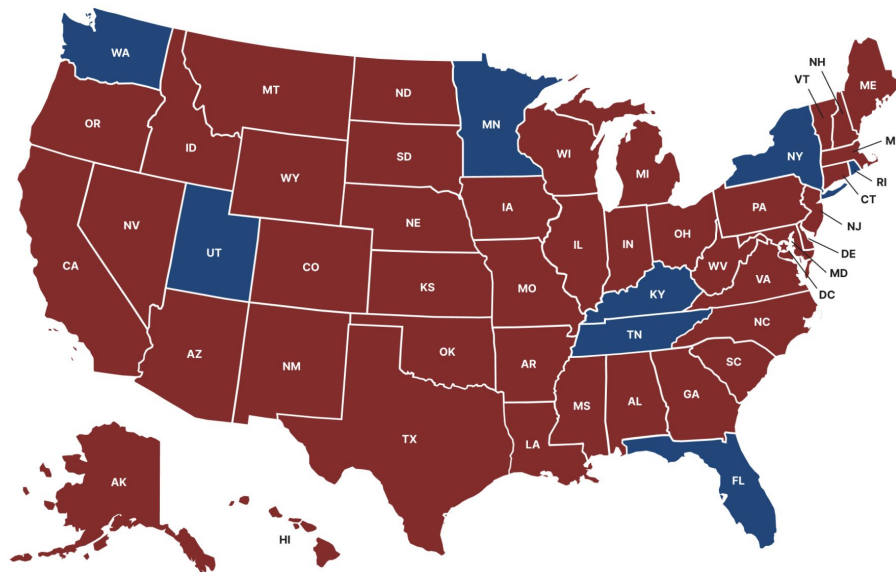
**Just one state—Hawaii—offers differentiated compensation at the threshold research suggests to make an impact (at least \$5,000).**



Does the state offer differentiated or additional pay to attract and retain special education teachers?

## ENGLISH LEARNERS

**Just eight states differentiate compensation for teachers of English learners, and none at a meaningful level.**



Yes - Additional pay,  
bonus, or stipend

No

Does the state offer differentiated or additional pay to attract and retain teachers of English learners?



## State Spotlight: Hawaii

The Hawaii Department of Education, which operates as a single statewide district, offers special education teachers an annual \$10,000 incentive, with additional bonuses for those working in high-need schools. The policy has led to remarkable results: it reduced the number of special education positions that were vacant or filled by an unlicensed teacher by 35%. Interestingly, it did little to improve retention among current special educators. Instead, the reduction in vacancies was driven almost entirely by general education teachers (who were presumably dual certified) transitioning into special education roles—highlighting the power of targeted financial incentives to shift teachers into high-need areas.

### **What made the implementation of the policy so successful? Simplicity.**

All special education teachers across the state were automatically eligible when the policy launched—no applications, no red tape. Teachers didn't need to navigate complex bureaucratic processes to access the bonus. In addition, the state ran a dedicated marketing campaign to raise awareness and influence the career decisions of both current and prospective educators.<sup>39</sup>



## BUT WHAT ABOUT...

## Other financial incentives?



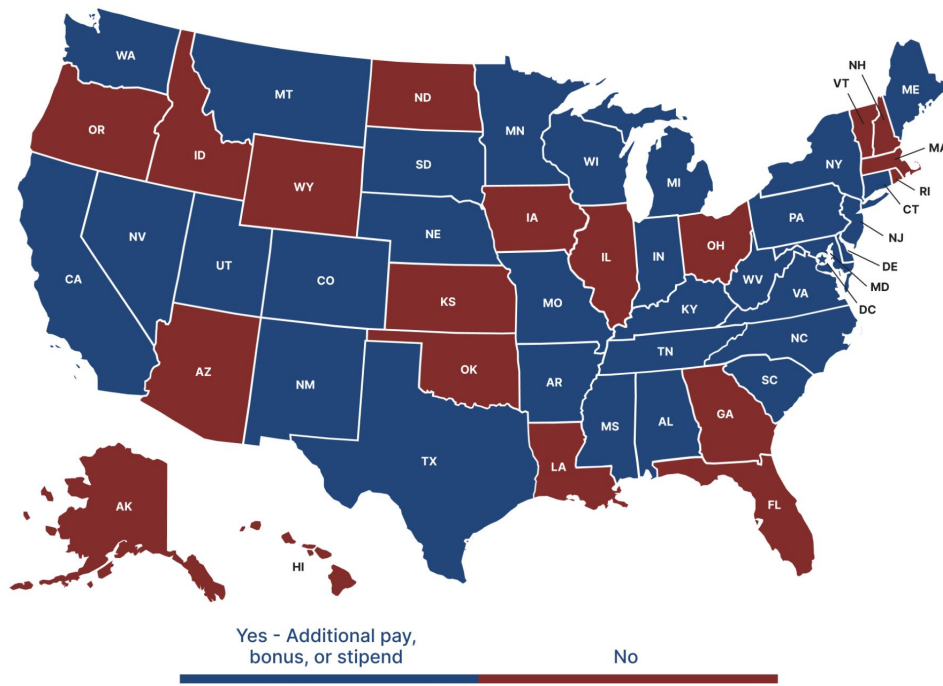
While direct financial incentives are the most effective financial tool for improving the recruitment and retention of special education and English learner teachers, other strategies such as scholarships and loan forgiveness can also play an important role.

Research generally finds that these incentives are effective in encouraging individuals to enter and remain in hard-to-staff roles.<sup>40</sup> Evaluations of loan forgiveness and scholarship programs have shown promising impacts, particularly when the benefits are substantial, well-targeted, and easy to access.<sup>41</sup>

However, a recent evaluation of the federal Teacher Loan Forgiveness program found that although teachers reported valuing debt relief for student loans, the program had limited impact on actual employment decisions—suggesting that the structure and implementation of such incentives may affect their effectiveness.<sup>42</sup>

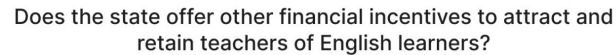
## SPECIAL EDUCATION

32 states offer incentives like scholarships or tuition assistance to special education teachers.



Does the state offer other financial incentives to attract and retain special education teachers?

**23 states offer scholarships, loan forgiveness, or other incentives to English learner teachers.**



POLICY LEVER 6

# Professional Learning



## WHY THIS MATTERS

**High-quality professional learning supports the implementation of best practices, improves teacher satisfaction, and increases retention.**



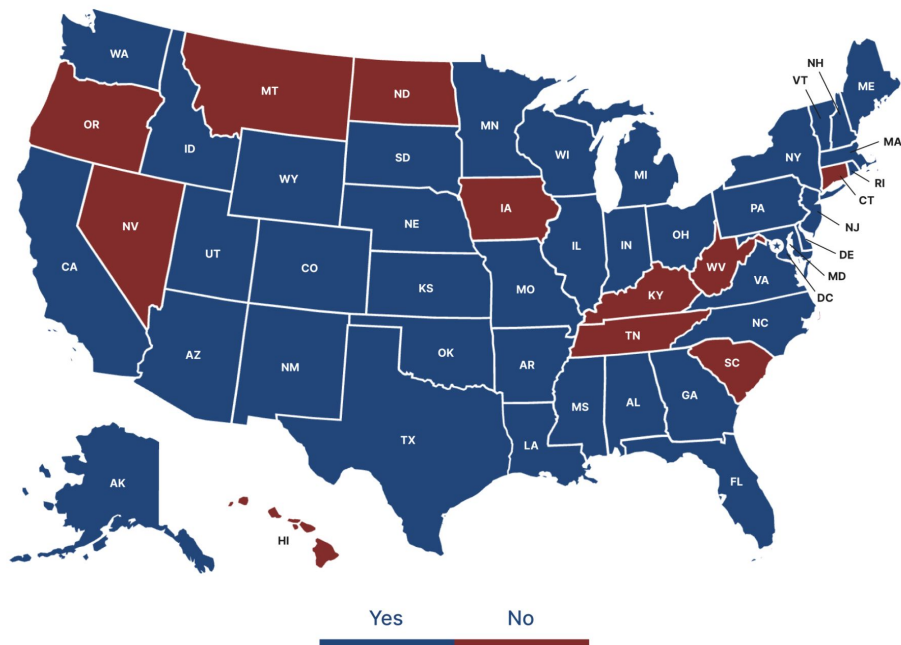
While research on the impact of professional learning on teacher effectiveness remains mixed,<sup>43</sup> access to meaningful professional development may influence special education and English learner teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom.

- Intensive professional learning is valued by special education teachers and is associated with increased efficacy and lower probability of attrition.<sup>44</sup>
- A survey of teachers revealed that professional development opportunities explained a large share of teachers' commitment to stay in special education teaching.<sup>45</sup>
- Survey data show that access to professional development focused on teaching English learner populations is associated with higher self-reported teacher confidence and a greater sense of efficacy.<sup>46</sup>

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

40 states provide professional learning opportunities for special education teachers.

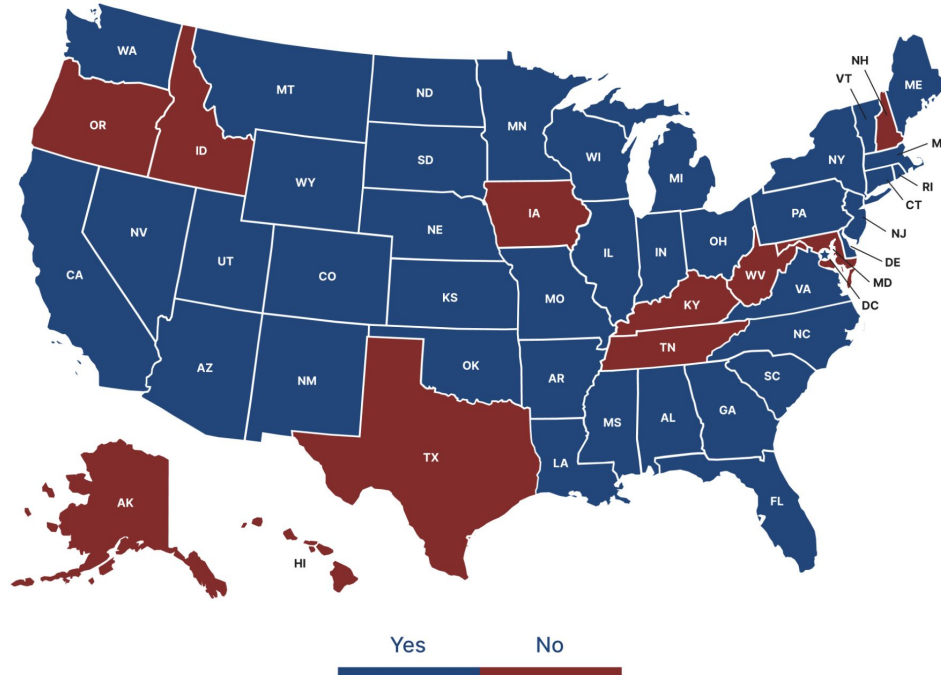
Given the specialized needs of students with disabilities, states can support districts by offering high-quality professional learning opportunities that may be difficult to develop or sustain locally.



Does the state offer any specific professional learning or grants related to special education teacher development (outside of pass through IDEA funds)?

## ENGLISH LEARNERS

**40 states provide professional learning for English learner teachers.**



Does the state offer any specific professional learning or grants related to the development of teachers of English learners (outside of pass through Title III funding)?



## State Spotlight: Rhode Island

Rhode Island recently adopted [new regulations](#) that update both the programming available to multilingual learners (MLLs) and the expectations for educators who serve them.

A central component of these regulations is a statewide professional learning requirement for all certified educators—including EL teachers, general education teachers, principals, and superintendents. The state will be phasing in the requirements, which take full effect in 2030.

Recognizing the challenges of implementing a new statewide mandate, particularly the cost to districts and the need for buy-in, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) modeled this new requirement on a familiar initiative: the Right to Read. That work, which focused on the science of reading, **used a 2-tiered approach for professional learning**. The state replicated this structure for the new professional learning requirements related to MLLs.

### AWARENESS-LEVEL

**Who completes it:** Certified educators not responsible for delivering English language development (ELD) in content-integrated settings (e.g., music teachers, PE teachers, school counselors, administrators)

**Time commitment:** Up to 15 hours of coursework

**Cost:** Covered by the state.

### PROFICIENCY-LEVEL

**Who completes it:** Educators who deliver English Language Development support in content-integrated settings (e.g., classroom teachers supporting MLLs in general education settings).

**Ways to demonstrate proficiency:**

- Holding an ESL certification
- Earning an MLL endorsement (a microcredential offered by the state)
- Completing a state-approved professional development experience

**Cost:** Paid for by districts

## BUT WHAT ABOUT...

## General education teachers?

Through co-teaching and collaboration, special education teachers and EL teachers serve as essential partners to general education teachers, helping to build inclusive classrooms that support all learners.

While this report has focused on strengthening the pipeline and preparation of SPED and EL teachers, it is equally important to build the capacity of general education teachers to effectively support these historically underserved students.

**90% of teachers have at least one student with a disability in their classroom.**<sup>47</sup>

**67% of teachers have at least one English learner in their classroom.**<sup>48</sup>

States should ensure that districts have the support they need to foster collaboration and joint professional learning among general education, special education, and English learner teachers. They should also set clear expectations for preparation programs to equip general education teachers with the knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities and English learners.

“

Teachers who work with English learners should be well-trained in the intricacies of second language acquisition, as there are important differences between learning an additional language and learning a first language that are critical to successful language development.”



**Missy Testerman**  
2024 Teacher of the Year



## State Spotlight: Michigan

Faced with persistent, statewide concerns about special education staffing shortages, the Michigan legislature—spurred by advocacy from the Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education—created and funded a \$1 million effort to [analyze and address](#) barriers to attracting, preparing, and retaining a diverse, qualified special education workforce. The work is spearheaded by a task force.

The [task force](#) brings together teachers, administrators, higher education leaders, state officials, union representatives, legislators, and the business community to tackle issues such as credentialing and licensure, paraprofessional educator recruitment and training, behavioral supports, compensation strategies, professional learning, administrative support, and university program alignment.

Since its launch, the task force has served as a catalyst for meaningful change: helping to revise Michigan's outdated licensure structure, supporting the rollout of a statewide train-the-trainer model for paraprofessional educators, launching professional learning for principals on inclusive practices, and securing additional appropriations to expand and sustain its work.

“

We're not building pockets of excellence—we're building an equitable system, rural to urban to suburban, that can attract, prepare, and retain educators across the state—from the Upper Peninsula to Detroit.”



**Laurie Vanderploeg**

Associate Executive Director, Council for Exceptional Children

# Policy Recommendations

# Policy Recommendations

**1. Require a cooperating teacher during teacher preparation who is certified in either special education or teaching English learners.**

Research shows that teacher candidates—particularly those pursuing dual certification—are more likely to remain in the classroom and take positions serving students with disabilities when they are paired with a qualified cooperating teacher in special education.<sup>49</sup> Requiring this alignment ensures candidates are learning from cooperating teachers with the specialized expertise needed to effectively serve these student populations.

**2. Set explicit teacher preparation standards for programs that certify aspiring teachers in special education and English learner instruction.**

Students with disabilities and English learners require teachers with specific skill sets and knowledge to thrive. Despite this, many states fall short of establishing explicit standards for preparation programs tasked with preparing these teachers. Without clear, statewide expectations, program quality can vary—and students may enter classrooms with teachers who are not fully prepared to support their success.

**3. Require principal preparation programs to include dedicated training for all future leaders on supporting students with disabilities and English learners.**

While most states (about two-thirds) include expectations for special education and English learner instruction in *teacher* preparation standards, these topics are often missing or insufficiently addressed in *principal* preparation standards. To effectively support all students, principal preparation programs should go beyond legal compliance and ensure their aspiring leaders understand the instructional strategies that foster learning and have the time and resources to meet the needs of SWDs and ELs.



# Policy Recommendations

**4. Require all special education and English learner teachers pass an acceptable reading licensure test.**

Reading difficulties are a common factor in referrals for special education services, particularly for English learners.<sup>50</sup> While many states have strengthened reading laws and invested in teacher capacity, they cannot afford to overlook this critical part of the workforce. By requiring special education and EL teacher candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of evidence-based literacy practices through [acceptable reading license tests](#), states can ensure these educators are well-prepared to recognize reading-related disabilities, provide targeted interventions, and support the literacy development of students who have historically struggled to achieve reading proficiency.

**5. Increase compensation for SPED and EL teachers by at least \$5,000 on top of base pay.**

Providing additional compensation to teachers has been shown to improve teacher retention,<sup>51</sup> including in high-need subjects<sup>52</sup> and schools.<sup>53</sup> To maximize impact, research indicates that pay increases need to reach a meaningful threshold of 7.5% of a teacher's base salary, or roughly \$5,000 annually, to influence career decisions.<sup>54</sup> [Hawaii](#) is proof that raising salaries can help address staffing shortages in this area.

**6. Provide sustained, high-quality professional learning, with a focus on induction and early career supports, for all teachers serving students with disabilities and English learners, including general education teachers.**

All teachers—both specialized and general education—should have access to ongoing, high-quality professional learning to better support students with disabilities and English learners. One-time workshops aren't enough; teachers need sustained, job-embedded support that builds their expertise over time and equips them with up-to-date, evidence-based practices.

# Additional Considerations for State Leaders

- **Review the certification requirements and overall licensure structure for special education teachers and English learner teachers to identify opportunities for streamlining and improvement.**

States should review licensure requirements to identify and eliminate unnecessary barriers such as overly complex or duplicative credential types. States should also explore opportunities to align licensure systems with neighboring states to reduce reciprocity challenges, particularly for experienced, certified teachers moving across state lines.
- **Support research on teachers of English learners, including their workforce patterns, best practices in teacher preparation, and how best to recruit and retain them.**

There is a significant lack of research on English learner teachers. States should invest in research that examines effective strategies to recruit, prepare, and retain these educators. Developing a more robust data and evidence base would help inform state and district policymaking and likely improve outcomes for English learners.
- **Develop incentives for great teachers to serve as cooperating teachers.**

Studies show that teacher candidates who are mentored by instructionally effective cooperating teachers are more effective when they become teachers themselves; however, only 3% of teachers serve as cooperating teachers.<sup>55</sup> Often, cooperating teachers receive only modest stipends— just a few hundred dollars per semester—or pennies per hour of time they invest in the next generation of teachers.<sup>56</sup> States could consider developing greater incentive programs for highly effective teachers to serve as cooperating teachers.
- **Provide joint professional development to ensure consistent, coherent instruction and strong implementation across all educators in the school.**

Given that many students with disabilities and English learners spend much of their time in general education classrooms, states should explore how to create more opportunities for collaboration and professional learning among general education, special education, and English learner teachers. Strengthening the skills and practices of all educators working with these populations is essential to improving student outcomes.
- **Strengthen induction and early career supports for special education and English learner teachers.**

States should ensure that teachers in their first two to three years receive comprehensive induction that includes high-quality, coherent, and aligned professional development as well as targeted mentoring. Evidence shows these supports improve retention and effectiveness for special education teachers, and it is likely that English learner teachers would benefit in similar ways.<sup>57</sup>

# Companion Resources

## State Specific Recommendations



Learn more about policies that help or hinder your state in building a strong teacher workforce for students with disabilities and English learners.

[View Recommendations](#)

## Research Summary



Explore the research behind these recommendations.

[View Research](#)

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3. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024 Reading Assessment; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024 Mathematics Assessment.; Academic performance data for English learners should be interpreted with caution. Because the EL subgroup is dynamic—with students continually entering and exiting—it reflects only those still classified as ELs, many of whom are simultaneously learning English and being assessed in English. Some states track both current and former ELs to provide a fuller picture of their growth and achievement.
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