Understanding Shortages of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

Dialogue Guide

Prepared by the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services

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Dialogue Guide
Introduction

Based on article: *Understanding Shortages of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel*

National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services

Dialogue Guide: Is a means to connect stakeholders who care about the issues and who seek unified solutions to them. Is not a simple, informative discussion in which participants agree to disagree. It is not a debate in which one side is persuaded to accept assumptions as truth.

Dialogue Guide Participants:
- examine and question assumptions
- seek common ground and consensus
- reflect on and generate joint actions

Goal of the Dialogue Guide is to:
- explore together the practical value of information and knowledge
- develop a shared process for managing and reflecting on information
- become better able to act jointly upon shared knowledge to improve practice

Dialogue Guides are developed by stakeholders who are actively engaged in their work, who have identified the issues, reviewed available materials for relevancy, and written questions based on the materials to stimulate dialogue. Data from national studies that are relevant to the topic and that have implications for practice are included. The Dialogue Guide below is based on the article, *Understanding Shortages of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel*.

The following Dialogue Guide Questions were constructed by members of the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services. The mission of the Coalition is to sustain a discussion among stakeholders on the need for and value of special education, related services, and early intervention; and to identify, disseminate, and support implementation of national, state, and local strategies to remedy personnel shortages and persistent vacancies for the benefit of all children and youth.

The intent of these questions is to serve as the framework to start a public dialogue with policymakers, practitioners and educators, the general public, school administrators, and higher education programs that:
- addresses personnel shortages in education, including issues related to recruitment, preparation, and retention
- build shared meaning among stakeholders about the impact personnel shortages can have on the provision of special education
- generate workable solutions to these issues

The questions reflect what stakeholders believe is important for people in the field to discuss.

To initiate a Dialogue Guide several things need to be considered including:
- selecting the topic
- inviting participants
- planning the agenda
- arranging the logistics

To facilitate a Dialogue Guide and enhance the Dialogue process the following tasks are important:
- establishing trust
- maximizing participation
- focusing on action
- redirecting the process as needed

Complete information and suggestions for starting and facilitating a Dialogue Guide can be found on the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org/. The IDEA Partnership reflects the collaborative work of more than 50 national organizations, technical assistance providers, and organizations and agencies at the state and local level resulting in The Dialogue Guide Facilitator Handbook at
www.ideapartnership.org/media/documents/Dialogue_Guide_Facilitator_Handbook.pdf.

Dialogue Guide

Understanding Shortages of
Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

Article Summary

For an estimated 7 million students with disabilities nationwide (ages 0-21), specialized instructional support services (also known as related or pupil services) are essential. Federal law mandates school districts and early intervention programs utilize appropriately trained personnel and states ensure an adequate supply of qualified providers.

However, nationwide there is a growing shortage of qualified school-employed specialized instructional support personnel and in many cases a critical shortage of funded positions. [1] These shortages have a negative impact on both the professions and the quality of services provided to our students.

How can states and districts ensure that qualified specialized instructional support personnel are available to meet the current and future needs of students with disabilities? Some schools across the country have initiated innovative and successful strategies to address this important issue. However, retaining qualified specialized instructional support personnel in school districts is still a challenge. New or expanded federal, state, and local programs are needed to help remedy this situation.

Source Document: Understanding Shortages of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

Who are "Specialized Instructional Support Services" Providers?

For quite some time, the specialized services provided by "related services" or "pupil services" professionals have been recognized as important for providing access, instruction, and learning for struggling students. In some school districts these professionals are known as specialized instructional support personnel. They are currently known in federal education law as "related services personnel" under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and as "pupil services personnel" in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind. The definition of "pupil services" in ESEA is as follows:

> (A) PUPIL SERVICES PERSONNEL- The term 'pupil services personnel' means school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and other qualified professional personnel involved in providing assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational,

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[1] "Educator Supply and Demand Reports, American Association For Employment in Education Research Summary (1996-2008)."

therapeutic, and other necessary services (including related services as that term is defined in section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) as part of a comprehensive program to meet student needs. (See Title IX, Part A, Sect. 9101 (36))

Included among specialized Instructional support personnel are:
- Art Therapists
- Audiologists
- Dance/Movement Therapists
- Music Therapists
- Occupational Therapists
- Physical Therapists
- School Counselors
- School Nurses
- School Psychologists
- School Social Workers
- Speech-Language Pathologists

Is there a shortage of specialized instructional support personnel?

Yes. The American Association for Employment in Education supply and demand research (2008) indicates schools have experienced a significant shortage of specialized instructional support personnel over the past 10 years. A summary of the American Association of Employment in Education research[2] documents shortages for the following school-based professions:
- Speech-Language Pathologists
- Vision Specialists
- Audiologists
- Physical Therapists
- Occupational Therapists
- School Nurses
- School Psychologists

Why do personnel shortages exist?

Studies indicate that personnel shortages in special education and related services exist due to two primary conditions: 1) an increasing demand for services and 2) a tightening supply of qualified personnel to meet that demand. The Condition of Education report (2006) estimates that school enrollment will continue to increase and reach an all-time high of 51.2 million by 2015. In addition, the demographics in school settings continue to change with increases in disability populations such as autism and brain injury and children ages 3-5.

A shortage of qualified personnel exists also because of an overall lack of concerted workforce development planning as demonstrated by the following shortfalls:

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[2] Ibid.

- Insufficient funding for incentive programs (e.g. loan forgiveness, personnel preparation grants) designed to entice new graduate students and support them as they gain their professional training.
- Limited capacity of existing training programs to meet the demand for new professionals due to:
  - shortages of qualified faculty
  - increasing higher education costs

Moreover, the supply of personnel is tight because of high rates of attrition in the first five years of employment. Below are some of the reasons that people leave their profession:
- poor supervision, low quality or no mentoring programs
- lack of recognition and support from school leadership
- difficult working conditions including increased workloads/caseloads
- burdensome IDEA paperwork and documentation requirements
- growing pressures on teachers and other professions to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements of ESEA/NCLB
- personnel attrition due to retirement rates exceeding the supply of new university graduates eligible for employment
- limited supply of qualified professionals willing to work in hard-to-staff communities or with specific populations
- limited educational opportunities in some states for those interested in changing or growing in their professions (e.g., no available university training programs, including insufficient distance learning opportunities, inflexible higher education admission, degree, or supervision policies)

What is the impact of these shortages?

The primary impact of personnel shortages is that students often do not receive the specialized services and instructional supports that reduce barriers to learning. Reasons for this include:
- missing or incomplete services when qualified professionals are not available
- low quality services provided by unqualified personnel even though ESEA/NCLB and IDEA require that all students receive services from qualified, highly trained professionals
- increased caseloads/workloads
- decreased opportunity for individualized services
- less opportunity to work collaboratively with school staff, students, and parents

What can be done to remedy these shortages?

State and local school districts are encouraged to use the following strategies that have yielded positive results:
- Improve the ability of local and state educational agencies to:
  - identify and address the needs of students related to the impact of shortages
  - advocate within the community for needed resources and systems change
  - improve working conditions

- provide professional support and mentoring
- offer incentives such as advancement opportunities or incentive pay
- restructure the school day so that teachers and service providers can work together in teams to better support students
- encourage changes in service delivery models and workload management, including flexible scheduling options for meeting the needs of students as required by federal mandates
- Collaborate with higher education institutions to seek opportunities that utilize state and federal funding sources and programs that assist in recruiting students into high need professions, especially minority and bilingual candidates. Such programs include:
  - loan forgiveness
  - personnel preparation grants
  - alternate routes to certification when the quality of services provided will not be jeopardized
  - incentives to recruit qualified faculty
  - distance learning and more flexible training opportunities that meet educational requirements

Congress is encouraged to improve the availability of federal funding to support states and districts in creating new positions and programs to meet national standards, student needs and improved academic outcomes.

What specific federal programs need support in order to help remedy the shortage of special education and related services professionals?

- Higher Education Act Perkins and Stafford Loan Programs
- Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, including State Professional Development Improvement Grants
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act

The National Coalition for Personnel Shortages on Special Education and Related Services advocates adoption of the following recommendations in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act:

Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Personnel

Title II of the ESEA should address recruitment and retention of all specialized instructional support personnel, similar to what is included for teachers. Specialized instructional support personnel are critical to assisting teachers with the many difficult challenges they face in today's classrooms. We cannot expect teachers to possess all the skills, knowledge and qualifications of these personnel, who are specifically trained to address and reduce barriers to learning.

Loan Forgiveness

Incentives such as loan forgiveness must be available to assist districts in recruitment and retention of specialized instructional support personnel. Loan forgiveness will help ensure students have access to services from qualified personnel that are critical to achieving academic success.

Professional Mentoring Programs

Specialized instructional support personnel also should be involved in mentoring programs similar to those for teachers and administrators aimed at increasing staff retention rates. Specialized instructional support personnel will feel more supported when specially trained individuals are available to help them meet student and classroom challenges and thus more likely to stay in the profession.

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Dialogue Guide
Starter Questions

Based on article: *Understanding Shortages of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel*

National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services

POSSIBLE DIALOGUE GUIDE PARTICIPANTS
- General Education Classroom Teacher
- Special Education Teacher
- Parent
- Policy Maker
- School Administrator
- Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

REACTION QUESTIONS
1. How do schools really know that there are personnel shortages?
2. How do students, teachers, principals, and parents benefit from having a variety of specialized instructional support personnel in schools?
3. In what ways have personnel shortages affected the success of students?
4. Given that students can't wait to receive services and they lose valuable educational opportunities with delays, how can schools find the necessary personnel to support them?
5. How can parents know that the specialized instructional support personnel in their school are qualified to deliver services to students?
6. Why should school leaders and other educators be concerned with the availability of specialized instructional support personnel when the school's priority is meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)?
7. How can the school district best respond to the growing number of students who need specialized instructional support services each year?
8. Why do specialized instructional support personnel primarily serve small numbers of students? How can these services benefit a broader group of students?
9. How can specialized instructional support personnel assist general and special education teachers in meeting the needs of all students?
10. How can information on the need for adequate staffing of specialized instructional personnel be effectively shared with school leaders, policy makers, parents and community members to help them understand and address this important issue?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the service providers available to students and what are their roles?
2. How can the workloads of specialized instructional support personnel be based on the needs (behavioral, social-emotional, and academic) of all students including those with or without IEPs and 504 plans?
3. How can working conditions be improved for specialized instructional support personnel in order to help with recruitment and retention efforts?
4. How can school districts ensure high quality mentoring and supervision of specialized instructional support personnel?
5. How can parents and other stakeholders find out what their local school districts and/or states are doing to address the issues of personnel shortages?
6. What should local and state school administrators, higher education faculty, and other policy makers be doing to address the issues related to personnel shortages?
7. What models and best practices exist to address ways to remedy personnel shortages related to training, recruitment and/or retention?
8. How do these models and best practices take into account limited resources and declining school budgets?
9. What information and data do school boards and district administrators need in order to understand the benefits and cost effectiveness of utilizing these personnel in schools?