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Recruitment, Hiring, Training and Retention for Preschool Children with Disabilities: State Approaches

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states are “required to ensure that highly qualified personnel are recruited, hired, trained and retained to provide special education and related services to children with disabilities” [Section 612(a)(14)(D)]. The purpose of this document is to describe state-level efforts to recruit, hire, train and retain highly qualified personnel for *preschool children with disabilities*. Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) completed this document as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

DATA COLLECTION

In collaboration with Maureen Greer, the director of the IDEA Infants and Toddler Coordinators Association¹, Project Forum developed a survey on state efforts to recruit, hire, train and retain highly qualified personnel for preschool children with disabilities. From November 2009 through January 2010, the survey was conducted using Zarca Interactive[®] (an online survey management program). Project Forum received survey responses from 39 states and non-state jurisdictions (hereafter referred to as states). Data were analyzed using Zarca and survey findings are reported in the following sections of this document.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Policies

Respondents from 15 states reported that their state has adopted, or plans to adopt, a policy that addresses the recruitment, hiring, training and/or retention of personnel specifically for preschool children with disabilities. Respondents from 23 states reported that their state has not adopted such a policy, or plans for a policy, at this time. Most commonly, states reported having adopted generic (i.e., non-special education specific) policies or provided generic

¹ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Infant and Toddler Coordinators Association is a nonprofit corporation that promotes mutual assistance, cooperation and exchange of information and ideas in the administration of Part C and provides support to state and territory Part C coordinators. For more information, see www.ideainfanttoddler.org/index.htm.

resources for supporting recruitment efforts and/or personnel training and professional development activities (7 states). Several respondents also described policies relating to endorsement requirements for early childhood special educators (3 states) and issuing policy briefs or professional development plans specifically relating to the preparation of highly qualified early childhood educators (2 states). Types of policies described by only one state included:

- incorporation of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) special education preschool standards into the state's general education preschool endorsement and requiring institutions of higher education (IHEs) to update their programs by 2010 to reflect these changes; and
- identification of early childhood special education licensure program goals by the state's higher education collaborative.

Practices

Respondents identified which measures their states are taking, or planning to take, to address the recruitment, hiring, training and/or retention of personnel for preschool children with disabilities. Measures most commonly described included:

- opportunities for continuing education for veteran special educators and related service providers (23 states);
- mentoring programs (21 states);
- working with state or national technical assistance providers (20 states);
- scholarships and/or tuition reimbursement to offset the costs for new teacher candidates and related service providers (17 states);
- loan reimbursement for recent graduates of preparation programs (5 states); and
- wage or salary supplementation for special educators and related service providers (4 states).

Additional measures described by respondents included:

- increased distance learning opportunities (2 states);
- blended early childhood/early childhood special education programs (2 states);
- reimbursement to districts for substitute wages while teachers are released for selected professional development trainings (1 state);
- implementation of a policy framework for professional development that includes a component for special education/early intervention (1 state); and
- subscriptions for local education agencies (LEAs) to Teachers-Teachers.com's Internet-based recruitment program (1 state).

Funding

Respondents were asked to identify how states are funding efforts to address the recruitment, hiring, training and/or retention of personnel for preschool children with disabilities. Most commonly states are using:

- IDEA 619 funds (25 states);
- State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) funds (19 states);
- other IDEA Part B funds (19 states);
- state funds (13 states); and

- American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) funds (12 states).

Additional sources of funding identified by respondents included OSEP Personnel Preparation grants, Department of Human Services, Head Start, TEACH scholarships, tobacco settlement monies, grants to IHEs for paraprofessional training coursework and a public/private financing partnership in the state legislature.

Documentation and Reporting

Most commonly, respondents reported that efforts are documented in grant reports□ especially in SPDG and ARRA reports. Others noted that funding reports for state monies, or 619 and other IDEA reporting (e.g., annual performance reports [APRs]), document efforts. Respondents also frequently noted that LEAs submit quarterly reports to the state education agency (SEA). Other ways in which efforts are documented include state-level tracking of licensure/certification and/or analyses of personnel and personnel shortages; and tracking of teacher attendance at professional development events or documentation of reimbursement for courses toward endorsement and licensure renewal submitted to the SEA. *Iowa* has an advisory council that documents and reports efforts to establish a state-wide system of professional development, and *Mississippi* generates an annual report to state legislators on the topic of personnel, including early childhood personnel.

Outcomes

Many respondents identified outcomes resulting from their efforts to recruit, hire, train and retain personnel for preschool children with disabilities. For example:

- less extreme personnel shortages than in the past;
- increased numbers of qualified personnel (e.g., increased percentages of Head Start teachers who meet federal requirements);
- mentorship and salary supplements resulting in greater retention rates;
- increased numbers of applications for tuition reimbursement and stipend programs;
- increased enrollment in classes, summer institutes and annual conferences that award credits or hours toward initial certification and recertification;
- increased support from LEAs for teachers taking classes and becoming endorsed in early childhood;
- higher numbers of young children receiving special education services; and
- more effective transitioning of preschool children with disabilities.

Barriers

Respondents identified a variety of barriers to the recruitment, hiring, training and retention of personnel for preschool children with disabilities. Most commonly mentioned were:

- lack of highly qualified personnel, particularly in rural/remote areas (8 states);
- limited funding (both state and IDEA Part B and Part B 619 funds) (7 states);
- lack of IHE degree and certification programs in the area of preschool special education (6 states);
- difficulty recruiting personnel to the field of early childhood special education (5 states);
- lack of competitive salaries (5 states);

- poor working conditions (e.g., large caseloads, jobs that cut across age ranges, excessive paperwork, lack of mentoring, legal liabilities) (5 states);
- lack of financial incentives in the form of stipends and/or tuition reimbursement to support individuals seeking preschool special education endorsement (4 states); and
- lack of release time for staff to attend professional development trainings (3 states).

Other barriers, mentioned by no more than one respondent, included:

- student teaching requirements that create financial hardships for individuals wishing to pursue licensure in early childhood education;
- length of time to obtain all currently required credentials in order to teach special education preschool;
- limited coordination among IHE programs;
- lack of an undergraduate teaching certificate for early childhood;
- lack of a coordinated plan among various stakeholders;
- lack of data at the LEA level regarding retention/attrition; and
- lack of publicity/outreach regarding training and resources that are preschool specific.

Resources Needed

Respondents also identified a variety of resources they felt are necessary to promote the recruitment, hiring, training and retention of personnel for preschool children with disabilities. Most commonly mentioned were:

- additional funding, particularly to support the preparation of early childhood/early personnel (15 states);
- improved data systems to track supply and demand needs, and a robust system for following students to ensure educators serve the state for three years after receiving funding (5 states);
- creation of alternative training programs to prepare personnel—particularly programs that are flexible and utilize new technologies (4 states);
- an integrated technical assistance (TA) system (4 states);
- vigorous marketing efforts to increase public awareness of the benefits of a career in early childhood special education (3 states);
- coordination across two- and four-year IHEs to create and support an early childhood career ladder (3 states); and
- a taskforce to address early childhood certification issues (3 states).

Other needed resources mentioned by no more than two respondents included:

- state- and local-level recognition that preschool education and outcomes are as important as elementary and secondary education and outcomes;
- policies and resources that promote quality early learning environments that are inclusive of all children;
- additional IHE programs offering early childhood teacher training;
- regional coaches to coordinate professional development efforts throughout the state;
- use of Title I funds for children at-risk in combination with Head Start programs; and
- effective, evidence-based models.

Summary

Although only 15 states reported having policies specifically addressing the recruitment, hiring, training and retention of early childhood personnel for children with disabilities, states may be addressing this population through generic personnel policies and practices to varying degrees. Almost all states are engaged in one or more efforts to ensure that this population is being served by highly qualified teachers and related service providers. Most commonly, efforts include continuing education activities, mentoring programs, technical assistance and scholarships and/or tuition reimbursement for individuals pursuing certification in the area of early childhood. Funding for these efforts comes primarily from IDEA 619 funds, other Part B funds, state funds and SPDG or ARRA funds. Outcomes are documented via a range of means and include reductions in personnel shortages and increased participation in mentoring and professional development activities. Barriers most commonly cited include a lack of highly qualified personnel, limited funding and too few IHE degree or certification programs in the area of preschool special education. Respondents stressed the need for adequate funding; improved data systems; alternative personnel preparation programs; and integrated TA systems in order to better address the recruitment, hiring, training, and retention of personnel serving preschool children with disabilities.

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