

Special Education Teacher Workforce in Hawai'i

Key Insights from the SPARC Center's Multi-State Analysis



Overview

Aimed at state education leaders and policymakers, this Fact Sheet presents five key findings from the SPARC Center's initial analysis of the special education teacher (SET) workforce in Hawai'i. Drawing on data from the 2017/18–2022/23 school years, it highlights persistent challenges in the composition, distribution, and stability of the SET workforce—factors that directly affect services and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Identifying Special Education Teachers in Hawai'i

In Hawai'i, special education teachers are identified by a variable in the state's administrative data that indicates if a teacher is in a special education position.

Finding 1: Varying Proportions of Special Education Teachers Across States

A common challenge across states is the composition of the SET workforce—in other words, ensuring there are adequate numbers of SETs with the necessary characteristics to meet the needs of students with disabilities. **In Hawai'i, approximately 18% of the teacher workforce were SETs, resulting in a 9:1 ratio of students with disabilities to SETs (Exhibit 1).** Eighty-seven percent of SETs were fully certified in special education, a lower rate than for teachers outside of special education (95.9%).

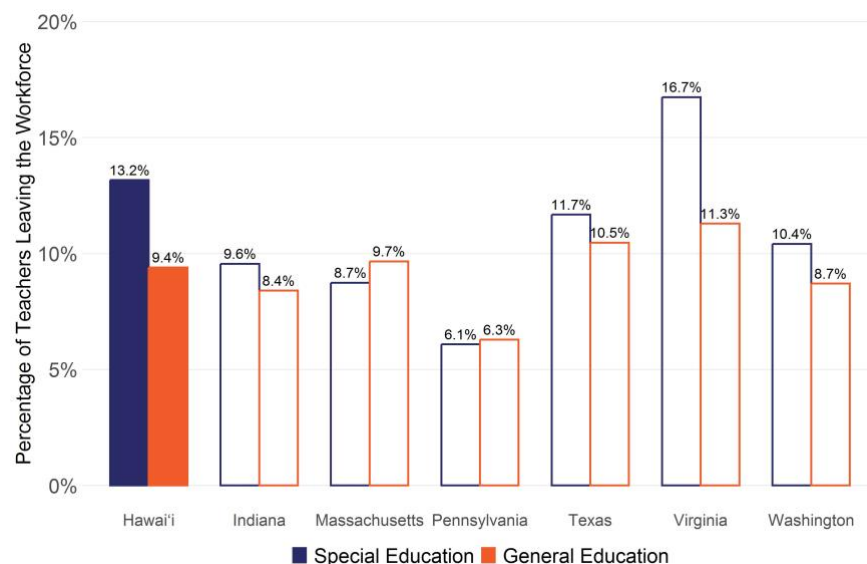
Exhibit 1. Percentage of Teachers Serving in Special Education Roles and Student-to-Special Education Teacher Ratios



Finding 2: Higher Attrition Among Special Education Teachers Than General Education Teachers

The stability of the SET workforce is another issue that can create challenges in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. **SETs in Hawai'i had substantially higher average rates of leaving teaching in the state (13.2%) than general education teachers in the state (9.4%; Exhibit 2).**

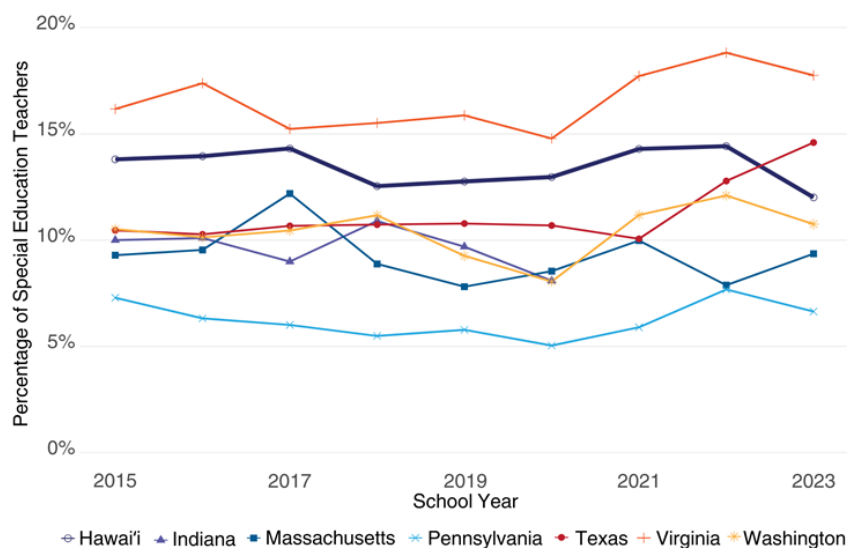
Exhibit 2. Attrition Rates Among Special and General Education Teachers



Finding 3: Similar Pandemic-Related Attrition Trends Across States

In most states, SET attrition rates declined after the first year of the pandemic, spiked the following year, and then stabilized (Exhibit 3). **In Hawai'i, the SET attrition rate remained stable during the pandemic (13–14%). Attrition rates now appear to be declining after the post-pandemic increase.** In the 2022/23 school year, 12% of SETs left teaching in the state.

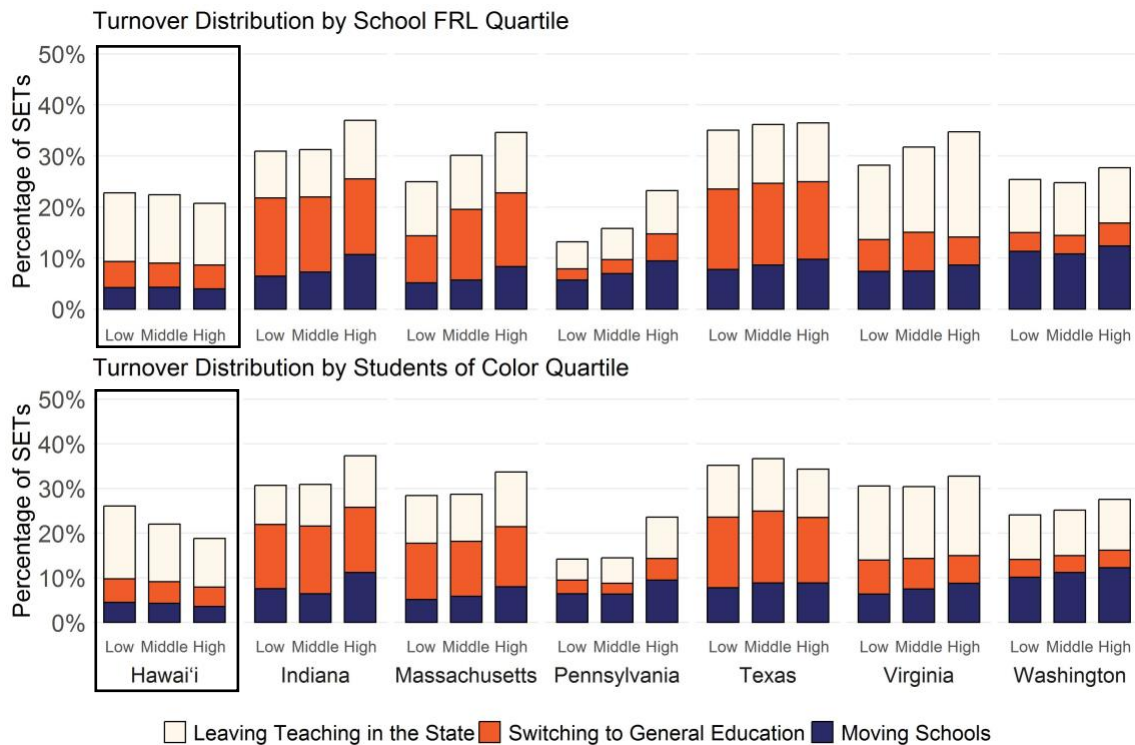
Exhibit 3. Attrition Rates Among Special Education Teachers Over Time



Finding 4: Lower Turnover in More Diverse Schools

An equitable distribution of qualified, experienced SETs is essential to support the achievement of students with disabilities, but access to such individuals often varies by school and district characteristics. Exhibit 4 displays three types of turnover by school poverty level, measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), and by the percentage of students of color. The beige section of each bar represents the average percentage of SETs who left teaching in the state, the orange section shows those who transitioned to general education roles, and the dark purple section shows those who moved to special education positions at other schools.

Exhibit 4. Turnover Distribution by School FRL and Diversity Quartile

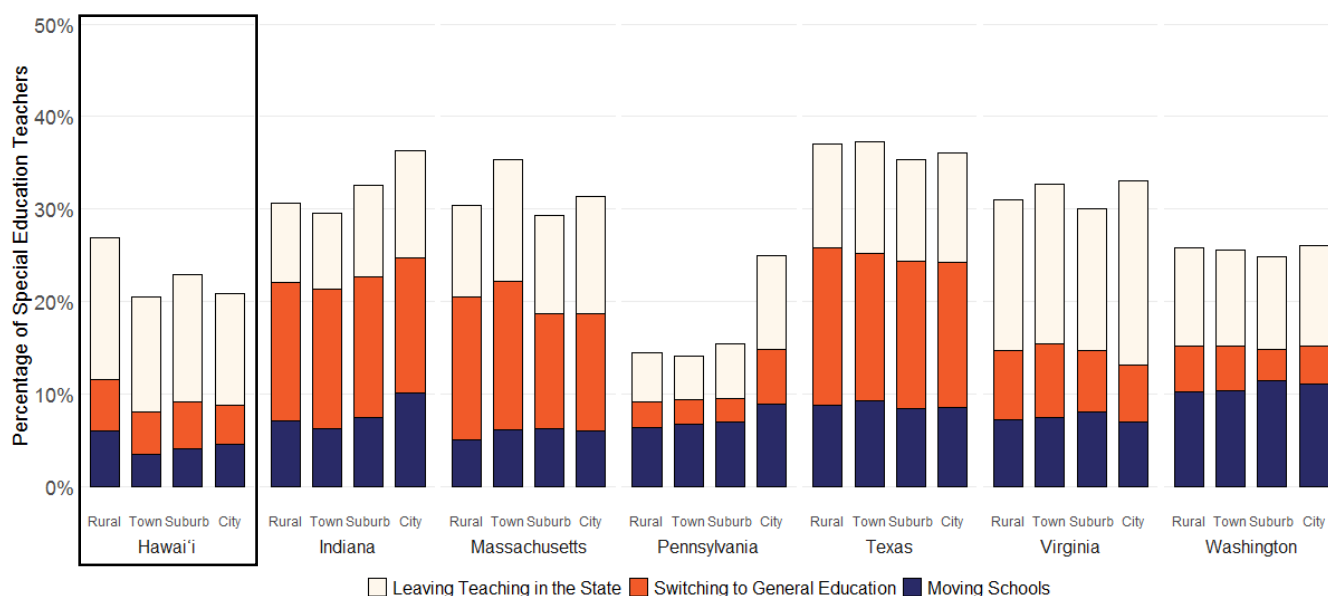


Unlike other states, in Hawai'i, SET turnover was lower in schools with more students of color. Schools with a high proportion of students of color experienced 18.8% SET turnover compared with 26.1% SET turnover in schools with a low proportion of students of color. When examining SET turnover by the percentage of students eligible for FRL, differences in turnover across schools appeared consistent. Regardless of school characteristics, SETs were more likely to leave teaching in Hawai'i (10–16%) than move to other schools or switch to general education positions (4–5%).

Finding 5: Higher Turnover in Rural Schools

The stability of the SET workforce in Hawai'i varied by school urbanicity, with higher turnover in rural schools. Exhibit 5 displays three types of turnover by school urbanicity (rural, town, suburban, or city). The beige section of each bar represents the average percentage of SETs who left teaching in the state, the orange section shows those who transitioned to general education roles, and the dark purple section shows those who moved to special education positions at other schools. SET turnover was generally higher in rural schools in Hawai'i (26.9%) compared to town, suburban, or city schools. Total turnover was higher in rural schools due in part to higher percentages of SETs moving to new schools when they worked in rural settings (approximately 6% compared with 3–4% in other settings).

Exhibit 5. Turnover Distribution by School Urbanicity



Recommendations

Addressing SET workforce challenges will require policy solutions that are not only evidence-based but are also tailored to the unique conditions faced by complex area or individual schools. Based on the analysis of SET workforce data in Hawai'i, we recommend developing targeted supports for rural schools. Policymakers should continue providing targeted incentives, professional learning, and technical assistance to schools in these settings to ensure all students with disabilities have access to a qualified, stable SET workforce.

STUDY INFORMATION

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R324C240002 to the American Institutes for Research. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Please visit <https://www.sparccenter.org> to learn more about SPARC Center and the analyses reported here.