

Special Education Teacher Workforce in Indiana

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 Indiana. Drawing on data from the 2017/18–2022/23 school years, and the 2017/18–2019/20

school years in Indiana, 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.

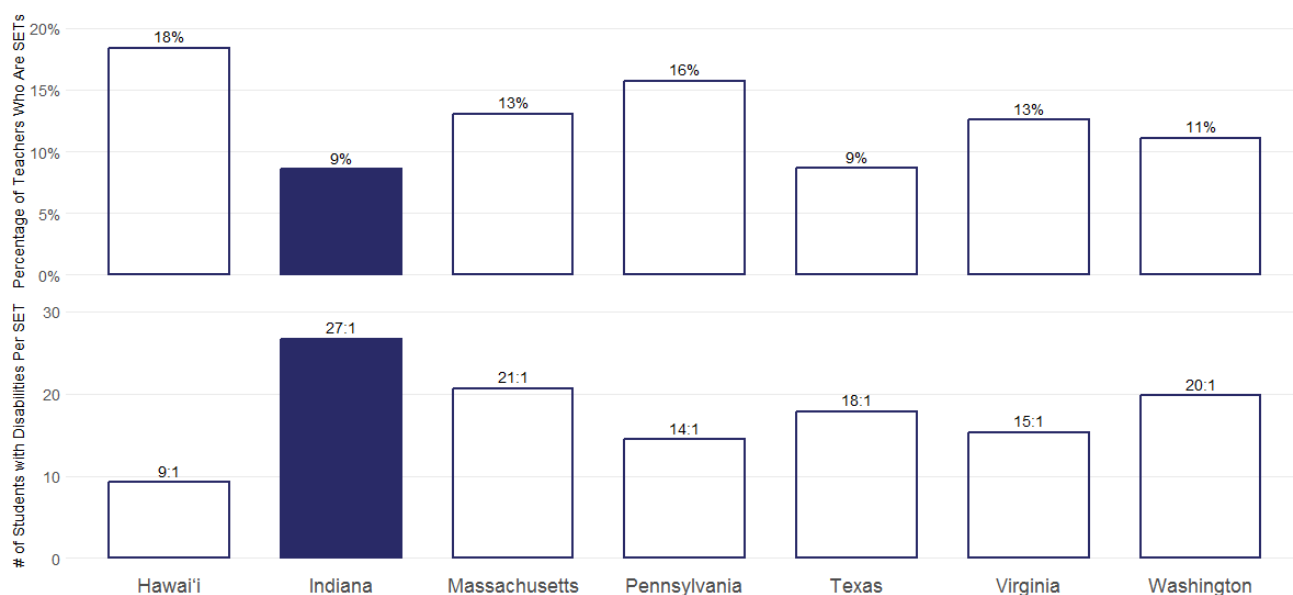
Identifying Special Education Teachers in Indiana

In Indiana, special education teachers are identified by an indicator for the setting in which the teachers worked included in the state's administrative data.

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 Indiana, approximately 9% of the teacher workforce were SETs, resulting in a 27:1 ratio of students with disabilities to SETs, a notably higher ratio than in other states (Exhibit 1).** Eighty-nine percent of SETs were fully certified in special education, a slightly higher rate than for teachers outside of special education (86.2%).

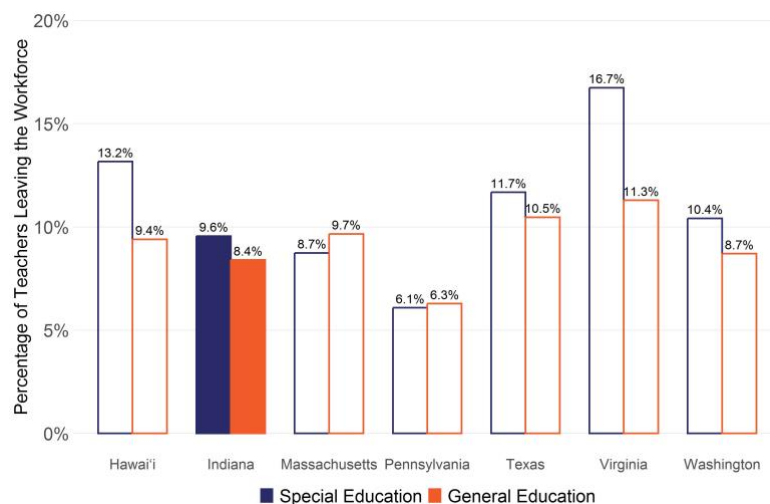
Exhibit 1. Percentage of Teachers Serving in Special Education Roles and Student-to-Special Education Teacher Ratios



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 Indiana had slightly higher average rates of leaving teaching in the state (9.6%) than general education teachers in the state (8.4%; Exhibit 2).** Overall attrition rates in Indiana were comparable to other states.

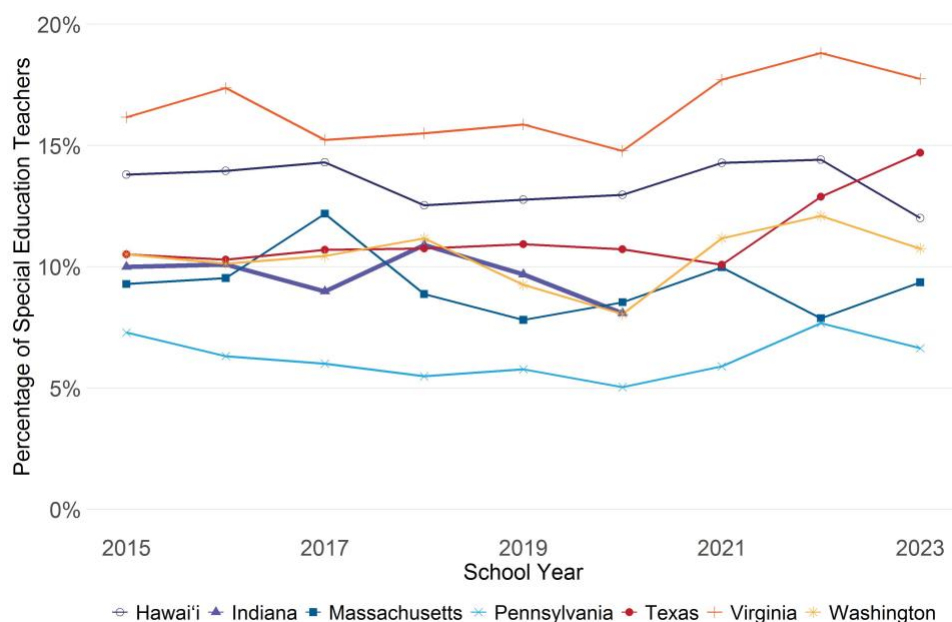
Exhibit 2. Attrition Rates Among Special and General Education Teachers



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). **Indiana experienced a decline in SET attrition in the first year of the pandemic from 9.7% in 2018/19 to 8.1% in 2019/20.**

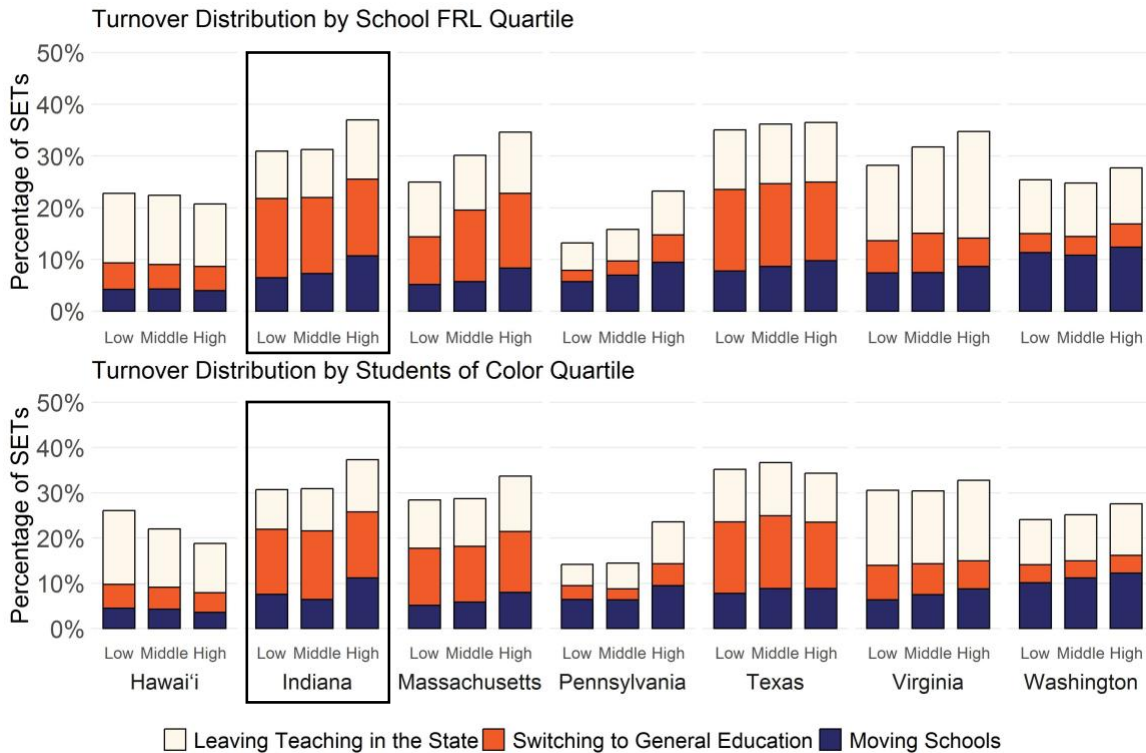
Exhibit 3. Attrition Rates Among Special Education Teachers Over Time



Finding 4: Higher Turnover in High-Poverty and 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

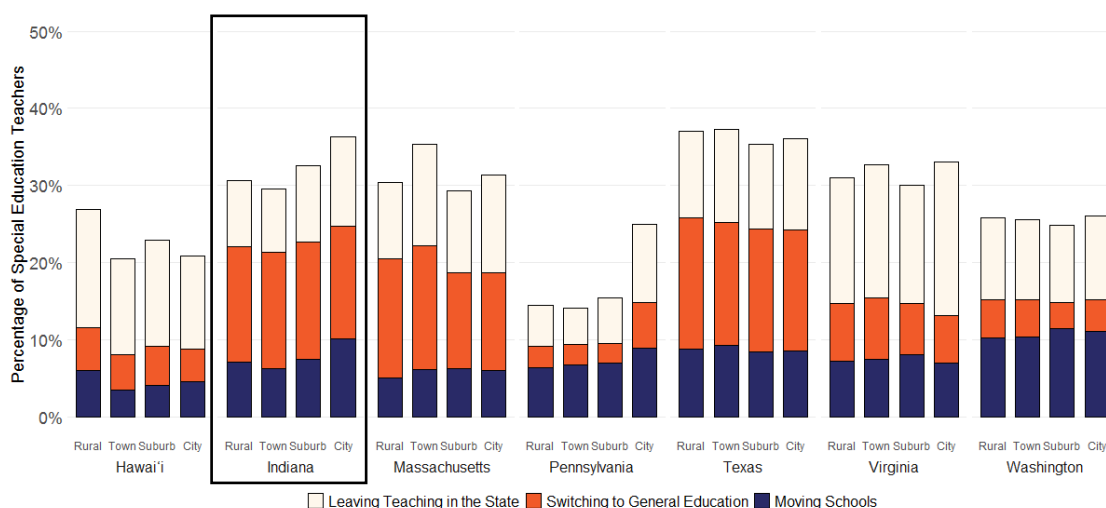


In Indiana, SET turnover was generally higher in schools with more students from low-income families and more students of color. Differences in turnover across Indiana schools appeared similar whether examining SET turnover by FRL or the percentage of students of color. In Indiana, SET turnover was higher in schools with more students eligible for FRL and in schools with more students of color (approximately 37%) compared to other schools (approximately 31%). Regardless of characteristic measured, switching to general education appeared to drive most of the turnover in Indiana (14–15% of SETs).

Finding 5: Higher Turnover in City Schools

The stability of the SET workforce in Indiana varied by school urbanicity. 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. In Indiana, SET turnover was slightly higher in city schools (36.3%) compared to rural (30.1%), town (29.5%), and suburban (32.6%) schools. Across all schools, switching to general education positions appeared to drive turnover most (14.9% of turnover compared to an average of 8–10% for leaving teaching in the state or moving schools).

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 a school district or individual school. Currently, Indiana is implementing the Indiana Special Education Assisted Licensure Program (I-SEAL) and the Aspiring Statewide Special Education Teacher (ASSET) program, both aimed at increasing the number of qualified SETs through program funding and scholarships. Future research is needed on the effectiveness of these programs. Policymakers should consider providing targeted incentives, professional learning, and technical assistance to schools in cities and schools serving more low-income students and students of color to ensure all students with disabilities have access to a qualified, stable SET workforce.

STUDY INFORMATION

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