

# Special Education Teacher Workforce in Massachusetts

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



# SPARC

The Special Educator Workforce:  
A Research Collaborative

## 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 Massachusetts. 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.

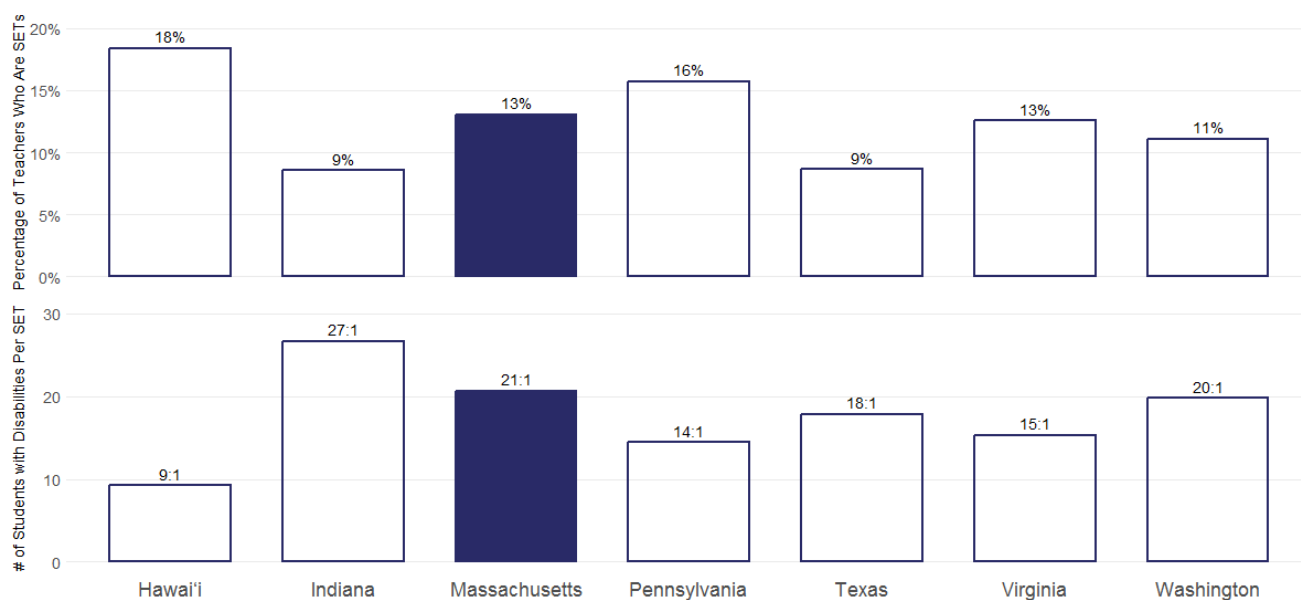
### Identifying Special Education Teachers in Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, special education teachers are identified by assignment codes 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 Massachusetts, approximately 13% of the teacher workforce were SETs, resulting in a 21:1 ratio of students with disabilities to SETs (Exhibit 1).** Eighty-three percent of SETs were fully certified in special education, a lower rate than for teachers outside of special education (92%).

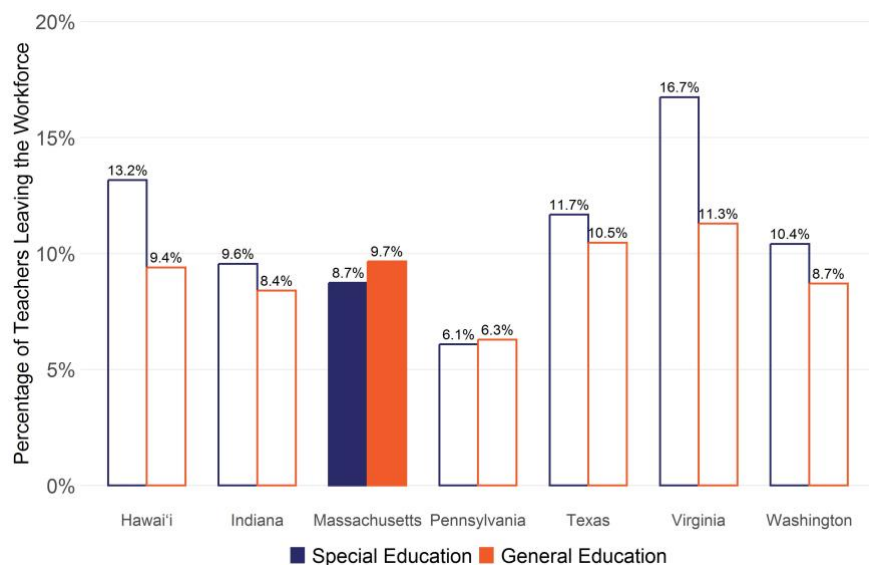
### Exhibit 1. Percentage of Teachers Serving in Special Education Roles and Student-to-Special Education Teacher Ratios



## Finding 2: Lower Attrition Among Special Education Teachers Than General Education Teachers in Massachusetts

The stability of the SET workforce is another issue that can create challenges in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. **SETs in Massachusetts had slightly lower average rates of leaving teaching in the state (8.7%) than general education teachers in the state (9.7%; Exhibit 2).** Attrition rates appeared comparable to rates in other states.

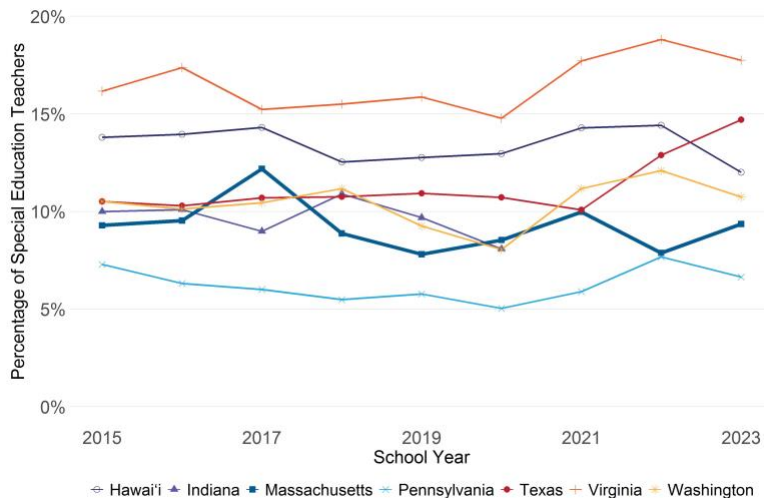
**Exhibit 2. Attrition Rates Among Special and General Education Teachers**



## 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). **In Massachusetts, attrition was at its lowest in 2019 (7.8%) and increased to nearly 10% in 2021.** Although it decreased to 7.9% in 2022, by 2023 the attrition rate increased again (9.4%).

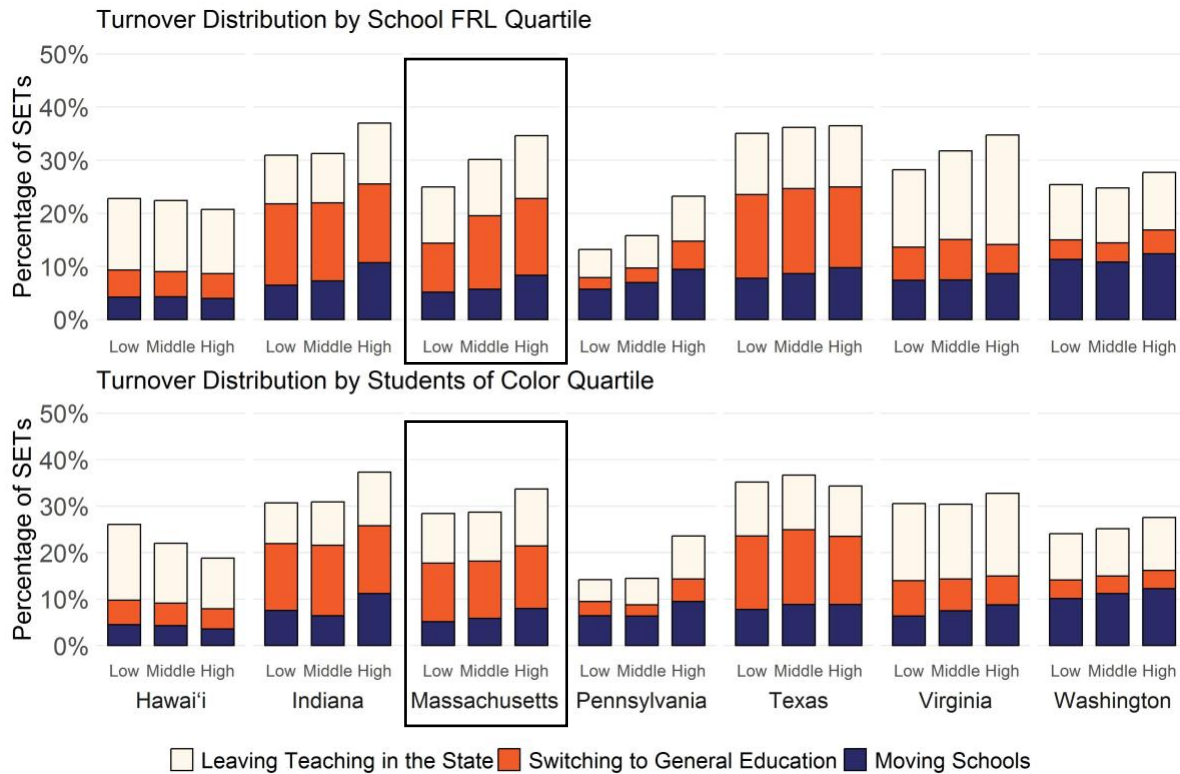
**Exhibit 3. Attrition Rates Among Special Education Teachers Over Time**



## 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**

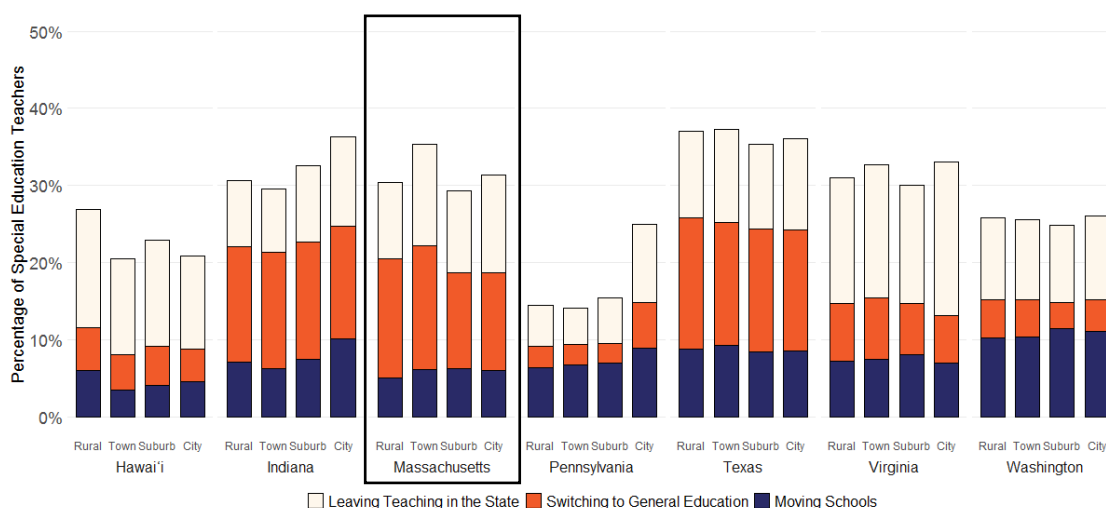


**In Massachusetts, SET turnover was higher in schools with more students from low-income families and more students of color.** While turnover was higher in Massachusetts schools with a higher percentage of student eligible for FRL or a higher percentage of students of color, differences were greatest across FRL with 34.6% of SETs turning over annually in high-poverty schools and 25% of SETs turning over annually in low-poverty schools. These differences were due in part to higher percentages of SETs in high-FRL schools moving between schools in Massachusetts (14.5%).

## Finding 5: Higher Turnover in Schools Located in Towns

The stability of the SET workforce in Massachusetts varied somewhat by school urbanicity, with higher SET turnover in schools located in towns. 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. Schools in towns in Massachusetts experienced higher instability in the SET workforce than rural, suburban, and city schools, with 35.3% of SETs turning over annually in schools located in towns compared to 29.4–31.4% 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 a school district or individual school. Based on the analysis of SET workforce data in Massachusetts, we recommend developing targeted supports aimed at stabilizing the workforce in high-poverty schools and schools located in towns. Massachusetts should consider 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

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