

Special Education Teacher Workforce in Pennsylvania

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 Pennsylvania. 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.

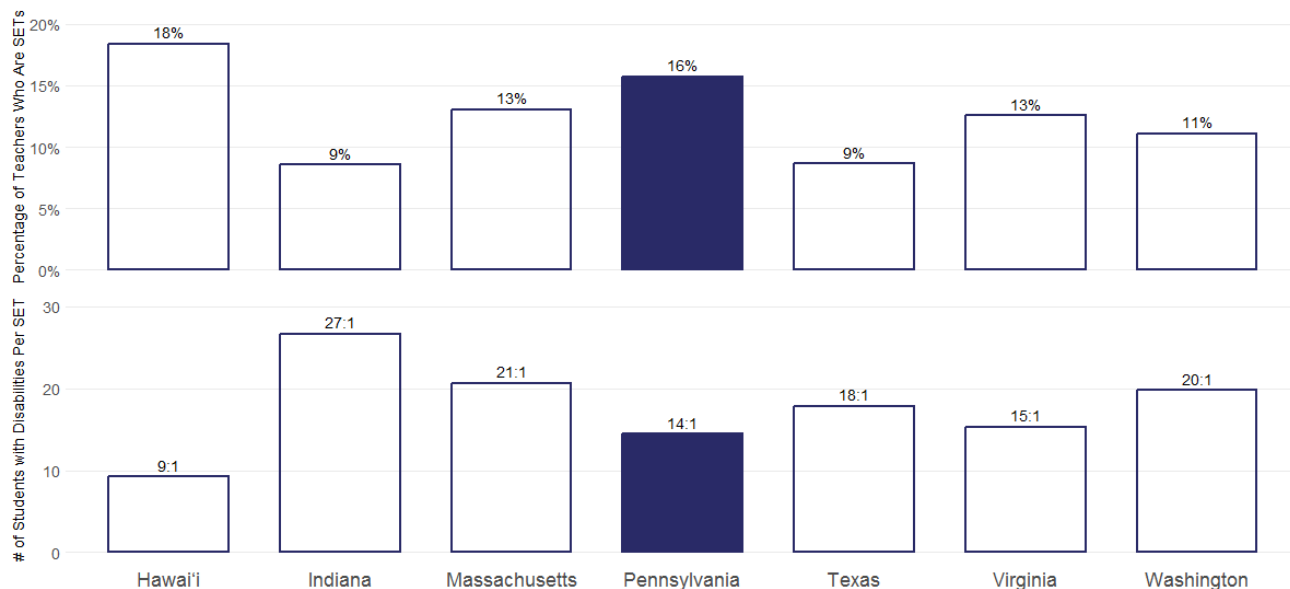
Identifying Special Education Teachers in Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, 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 Pennsylvania, approximately 16% of the teacher workforce were SETs, resulting in a 14:1 ratio of students with disabilities to SETs (Exhibit 1).** Ninety-one percent of SETs were fully certified in special education, approximately the same rate as teachers outside of special education.

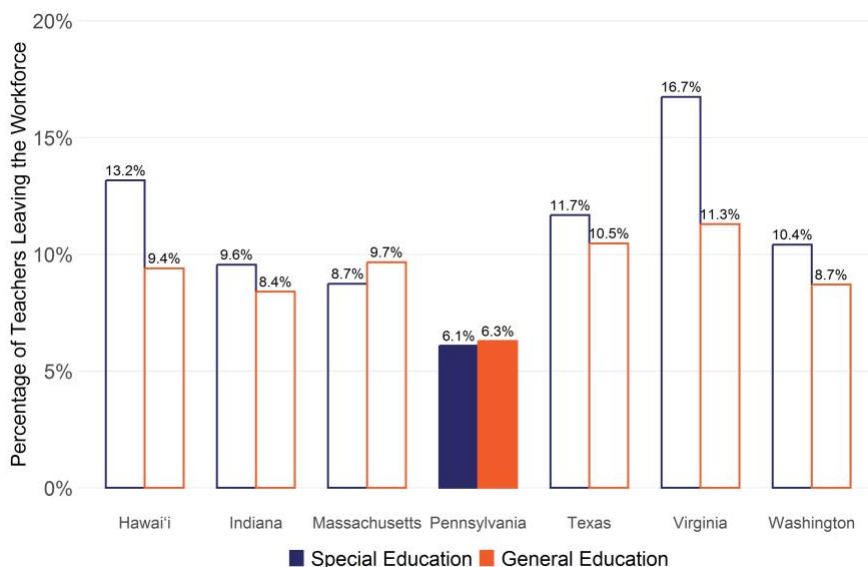
Exhibit 1. Percentage of Teachers Serving in Special Education Roles and Student-to-Special Education Teacher Ratios



Finding 2: Comparable Attrition Among Special and General Education Teachers

The stability of the SET workforce is another issue that can create challenges in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. In general, the teacher workforce appeared more stable in Pennsylvania than in other states. **SETs in Pennsylvania left teaching in the state at an average rate of 6.1%, about the same average rate as general education teachers (6.3%; Exhibit 2).**

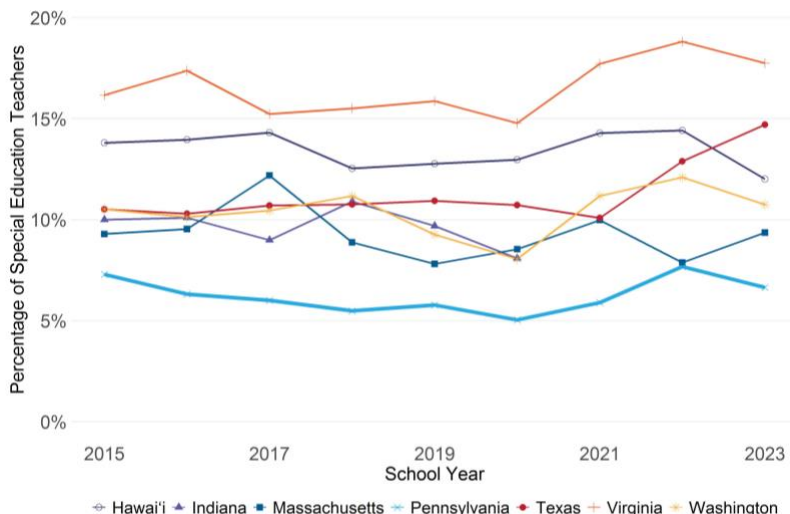
Exhibit 2. Attrition Rates Among Special and General Education Teachers



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 Pennsylvania, the SET attrition rate was at its lowest in 2020 (5%). The SET attrition rate increased to 7.7% in 2022 and then slightly decreased to 6.6% in 2023, similar to pre-pandemic rates.**

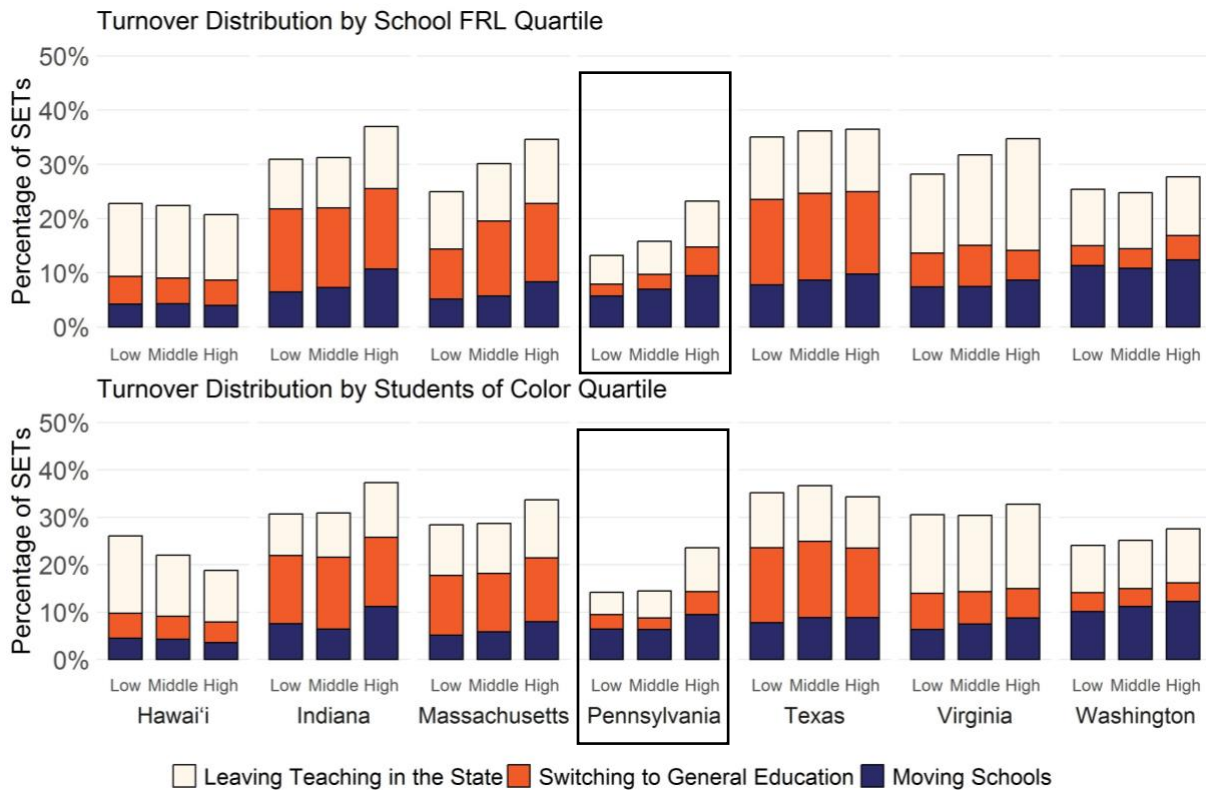
Exhibit 3. Attrition Rates Among Special Education Teachers Over Time



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 Quartile and Diversity Quartile

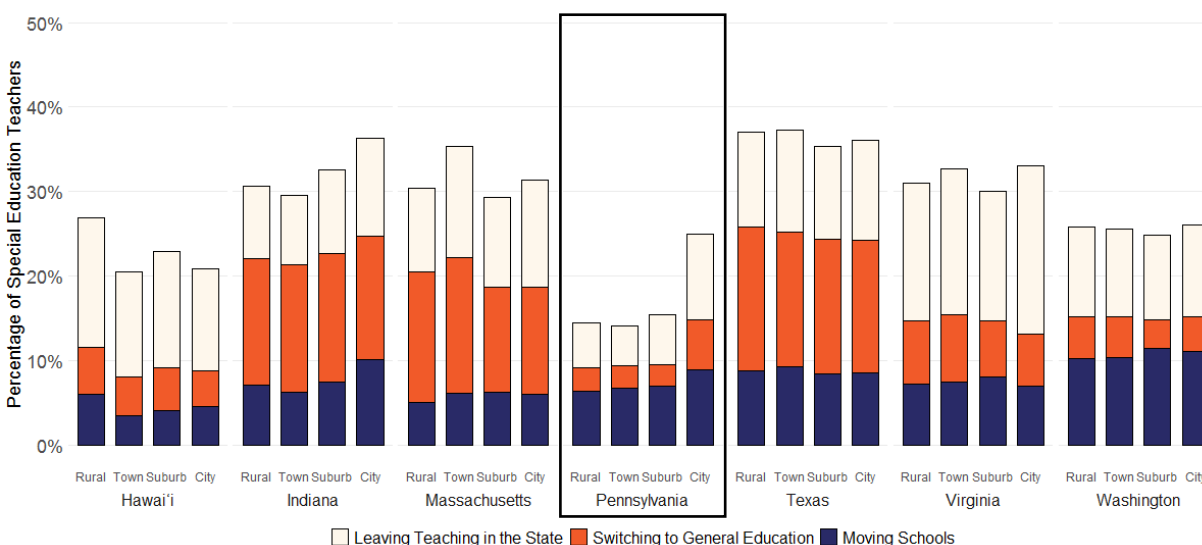


In Pennsylvania, SET turnover was higher in schools with more students from low-income families and more students of color. In schools with a high percentage of low-income families, 23.2% of SETs left their position, compared to 13.2–15.8% in schools with lower percentages of low-income families. Similarly, SETs were more likely to leave their positions in schools with a high percentage of students of color (23.5%) than schools with lower percentages of students of color (14.2–14.4%). Leaving teaching in the state or moving schools appeared to be the primary drivers of SET attrition in Pennsylvania, regardless of school characteristics.

Finding 5: Higher Turnover in City Schools

The stability of the SET workforce in Pennsylvania varied by school urbanicity, with city schools experiencing higher turnover than other settings. 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 highest in city schools in Pennsylvania (25.0%) compared to rural, town, and suburban schools (14–15%). At the same time, SETs in city schools in Pennsylvania still experienced lower turnover rates than in most other states.

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 Pennsylvania, we recommend developing targeted supports for high-poverty and city schools. Policymakers 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.