

Special Education Teacher Workforce in Virginia

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 Virginia. 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.

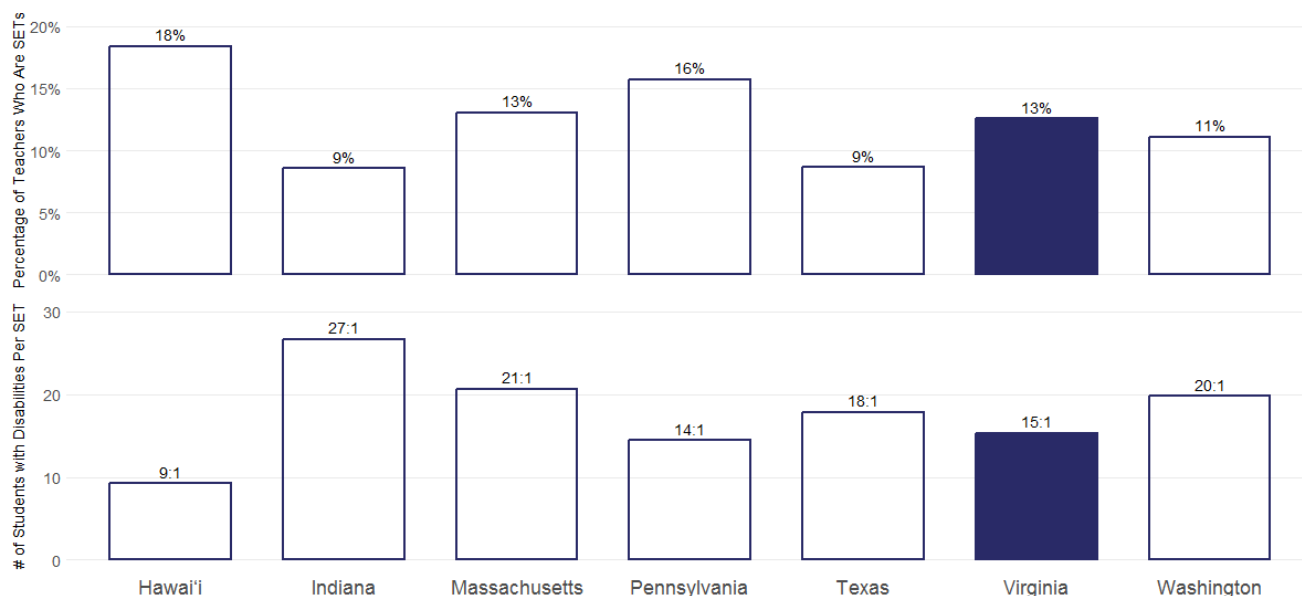
Identifying Special Education Teachers in Virginia

In Virginia, 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 Virginia, approximately 13% of the teacher workforce were SETs, resulting in a 15:1 ratio of students with disabilities to SETs (Exhibit 1).** Eighty-five percent of SETs were fully certified in special education, a lower rate than for teachers outside of special education (95%).

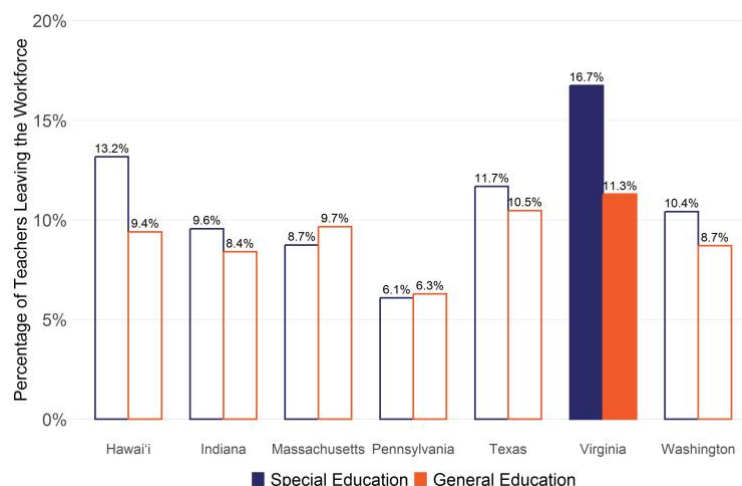
Exhibit 1. Percentage of Teachers Serving in Special Education Roles and Student-to-Special Education Teacher Ratios



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 Virginia had substantially higher average rates of leaving teaching in the state (16.7%) than general education teachers in the state (11.3%; Exhibit 2).** In fact, SET attrition was higher in Virginia than in any other state.

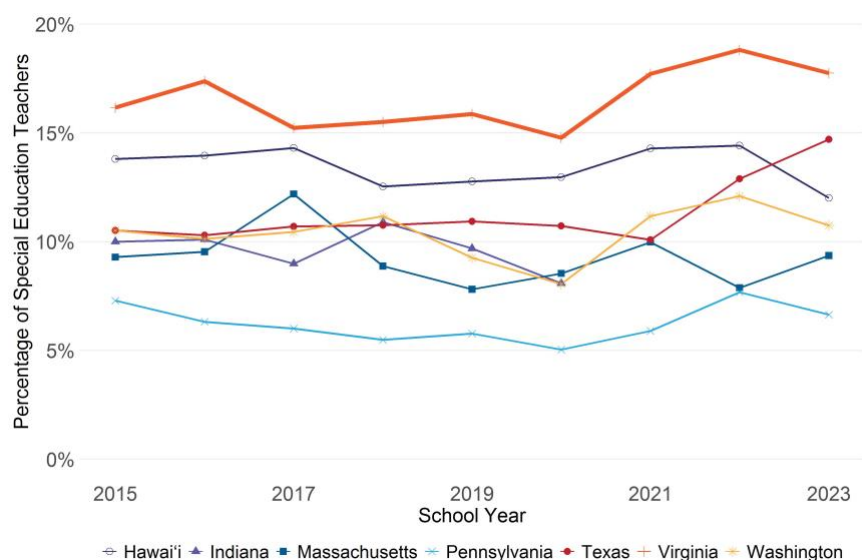
Exhibit 2. Attrition Rates Among Special and General Education Teachers



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 Virginia, the SET attrition rate was at its lowest in 2020 at 14.8% and then increased until peaking in 2022 at 18.8%.** In other words, nearly 2 out of every 10 SETs left teaching in the state in 2022.

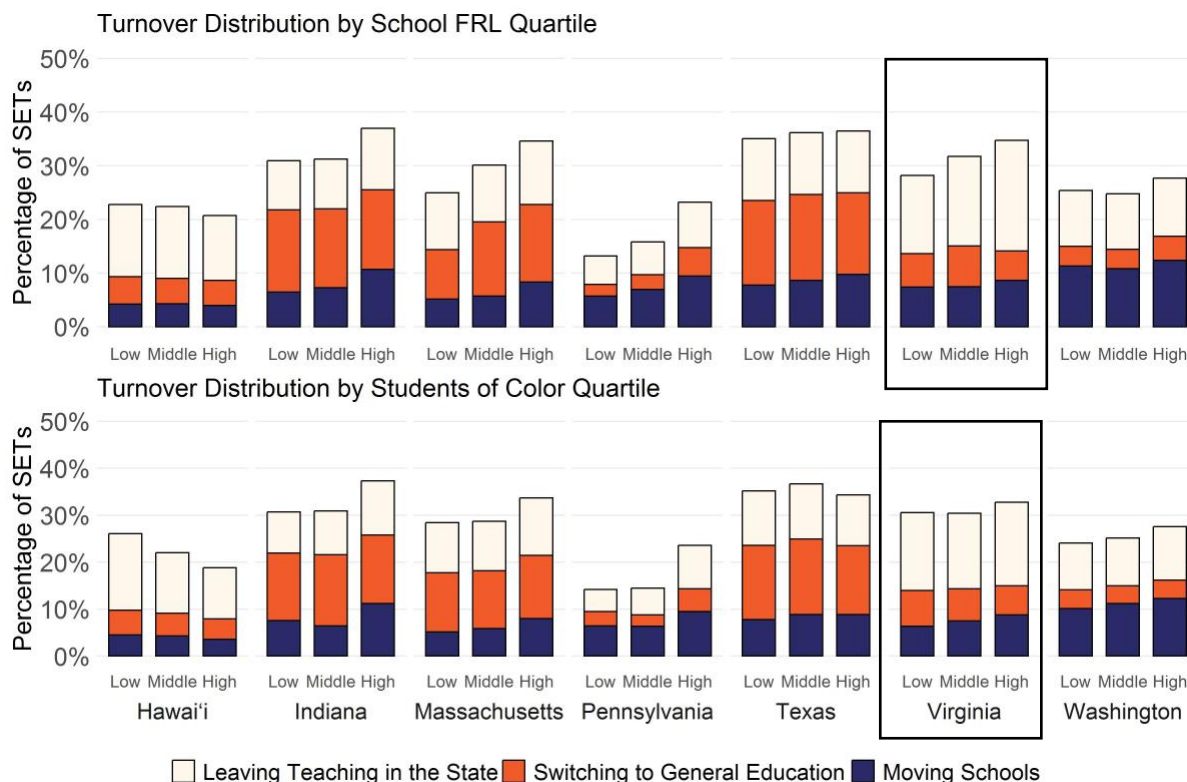
Exhibit 3. Attrition Rates Among Special Education Teachers Over Time



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



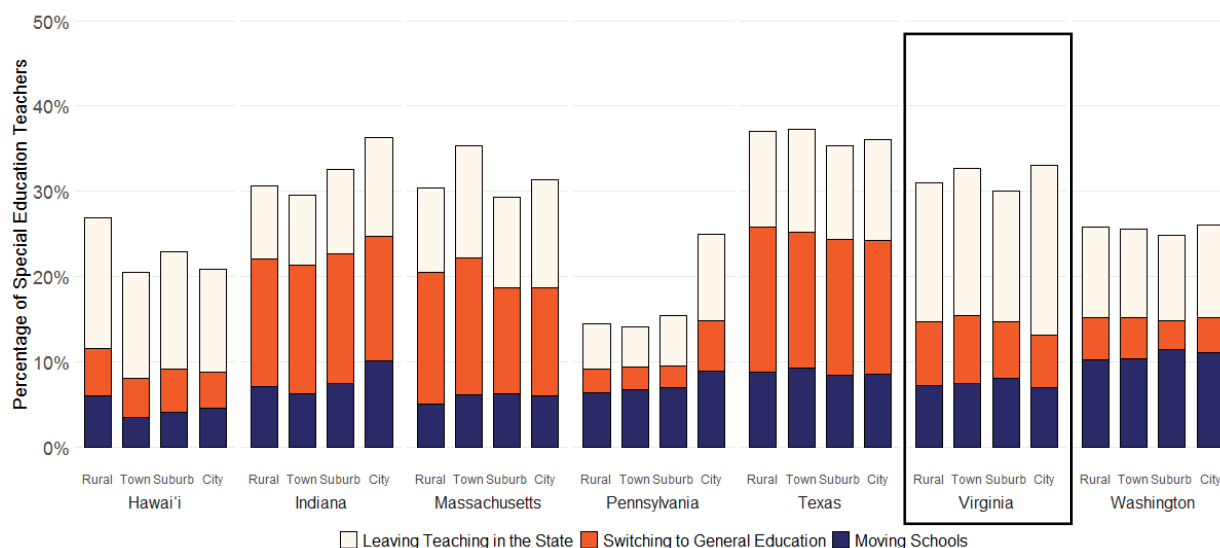
In Virginia, SET turnover was generally higher in schools with more students from low-income families and more students of color. SET turnover averaged 34.8% in schools with a high percentage of students eligible for FRL and 32.7% in schools with a high percentage of students of color, compared to 28.2% and 30.6% in schools with low percentages of these students. Turnover varied more by the percentage of students eligible for FRL than by percentage of students of color. Regardless of comparison, SETs appeared to leave teaching in Virginia more often than other types of turnover, which may be a symptom of the overall transient nature of the region, given proximity to a number of neighboring states (i.e., approximately 50% of the SETs who turned over no longer taught in Virginia). At the same time, SETs appeared to switch to general education positions less often than in other states.

Finding 5: High Rates of Turnover Across All School Settings

The stability of the SET workforce in Virginia did not vary substantively 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. Town and city schools in Virginia experienced slightly higher instability in the SET workforce than rural and suburban schools (32.7–33.1% for town and city schools compared to 30.1–31.0% for rural and suburban schools). However, the difference in SET turnover rates by urbanicity was negligible.

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 Virginia, we recommend developing targeted supports for high-poverty 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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