

Special Education Teacher Workforce in Washington

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 Washington. 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.

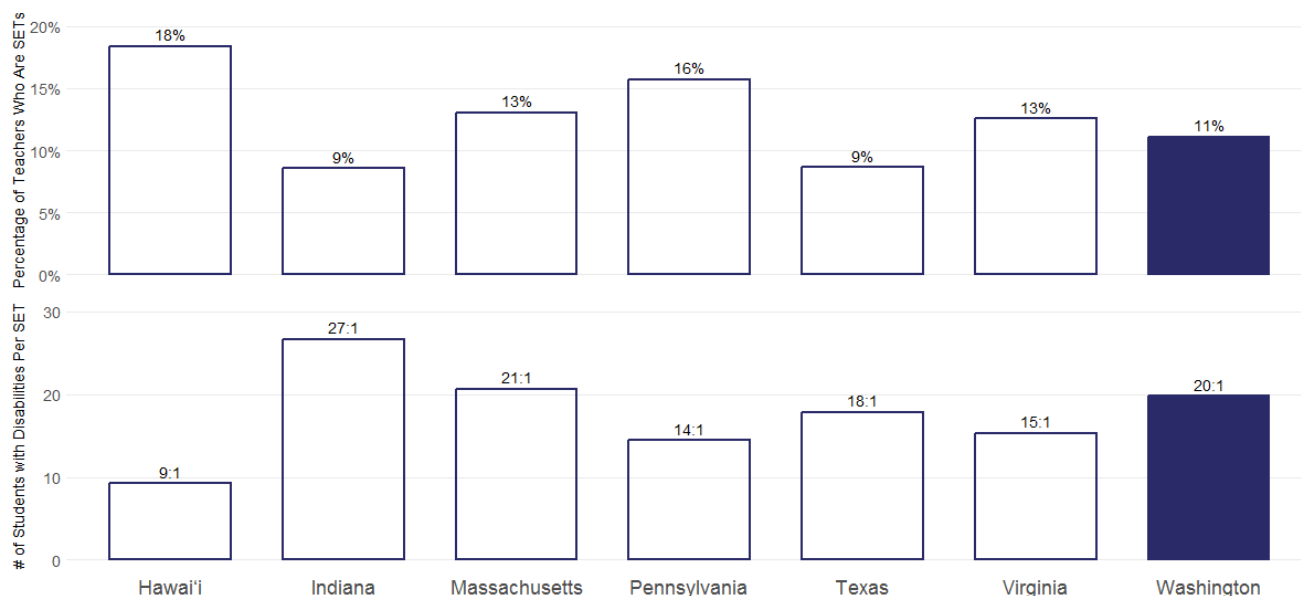
Identifying Special Education Teachers in Washington

In Washington, special education teachers are identified by a program code in the state's administrative data indicating if a position was funded by special education funds.

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 Washington, approximately 11% of the teacher workforce were SETs, resulting in a 20:1 ratio of students with disabilities to SETs (Exhibit 1).** Ninety percent of SETs were fully certified in special education, a lower rate than for teachers outside of special education (95%).

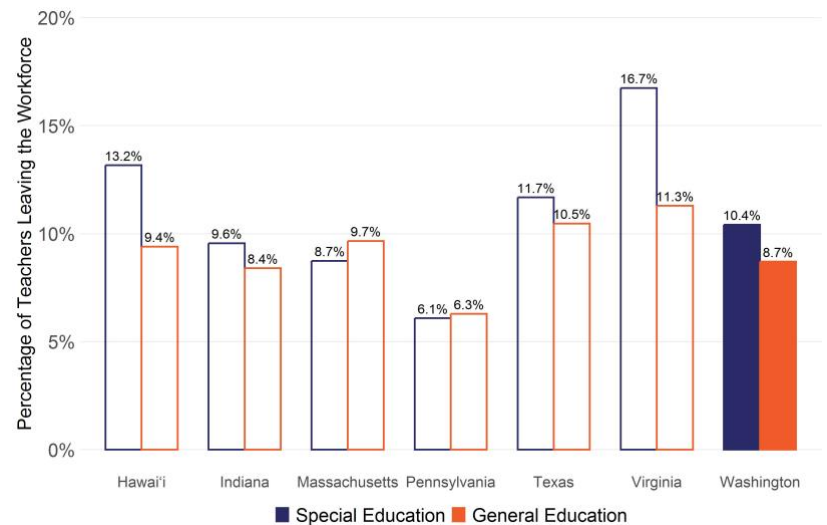
Exhibit 1. Percentage of Teachers Serving in Special Education Roles and Student-to-Special Education Teacher Ratios



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 Washington had higher average rates of leaving teaching in the state (10.4%) than general education teachers in the state (8.7%; Exhibit 2).**

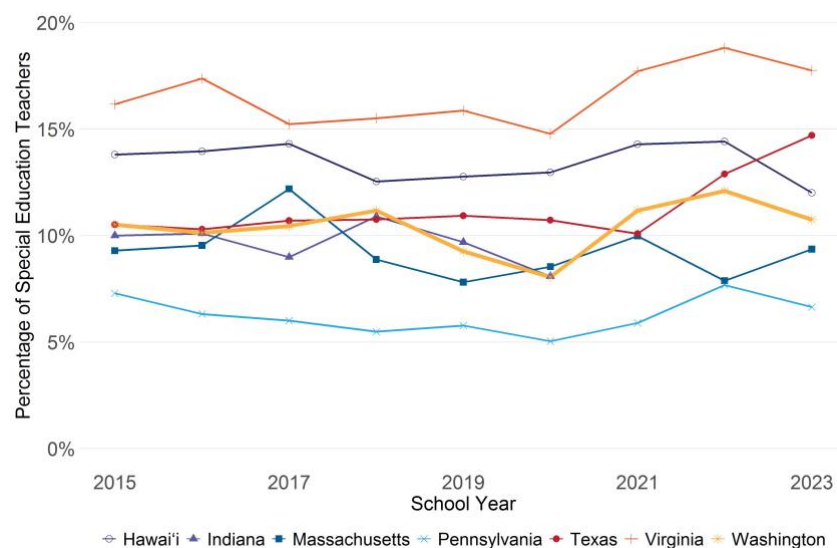
Exhibit 2. Attrition Rates Among Special and General Education Teachers



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). **Attrition rates in Washington followed a similar pattern and now appear to be declining, decreasing from 12.1% in 2022 to 10.8% in 2023.**

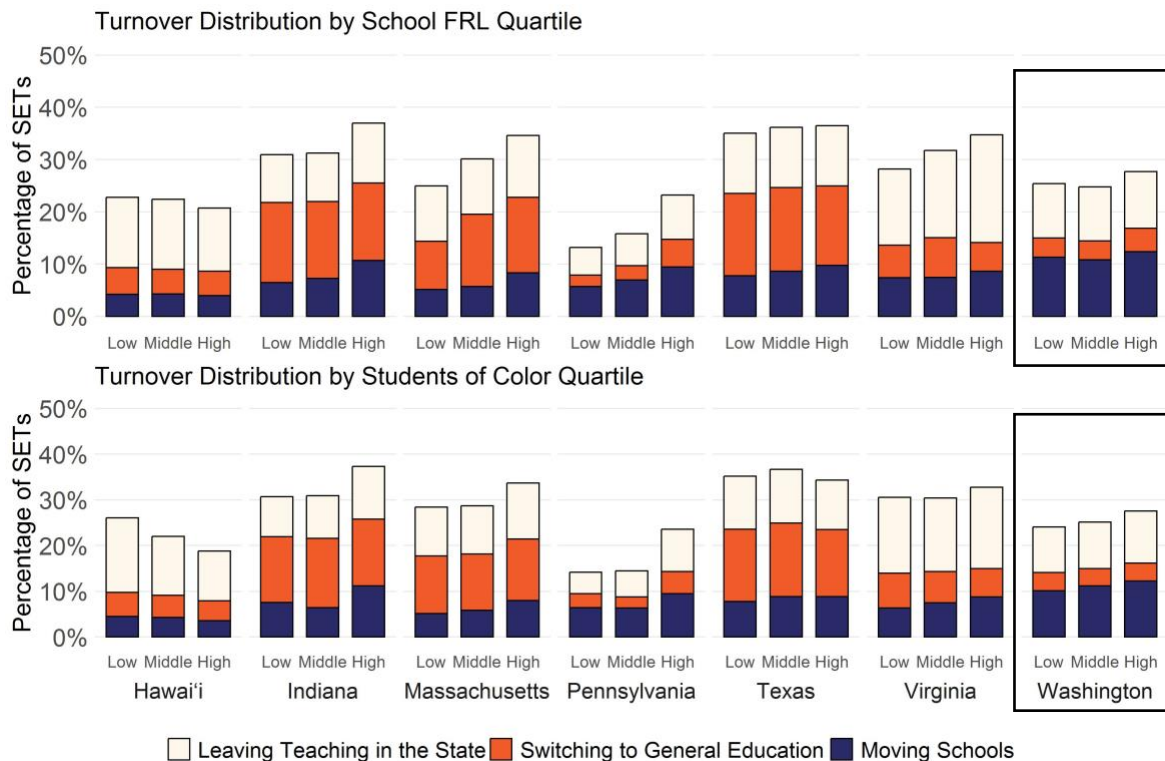
Exhibit 3. Attrition Rates Among Special Education Teachers Over Time



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

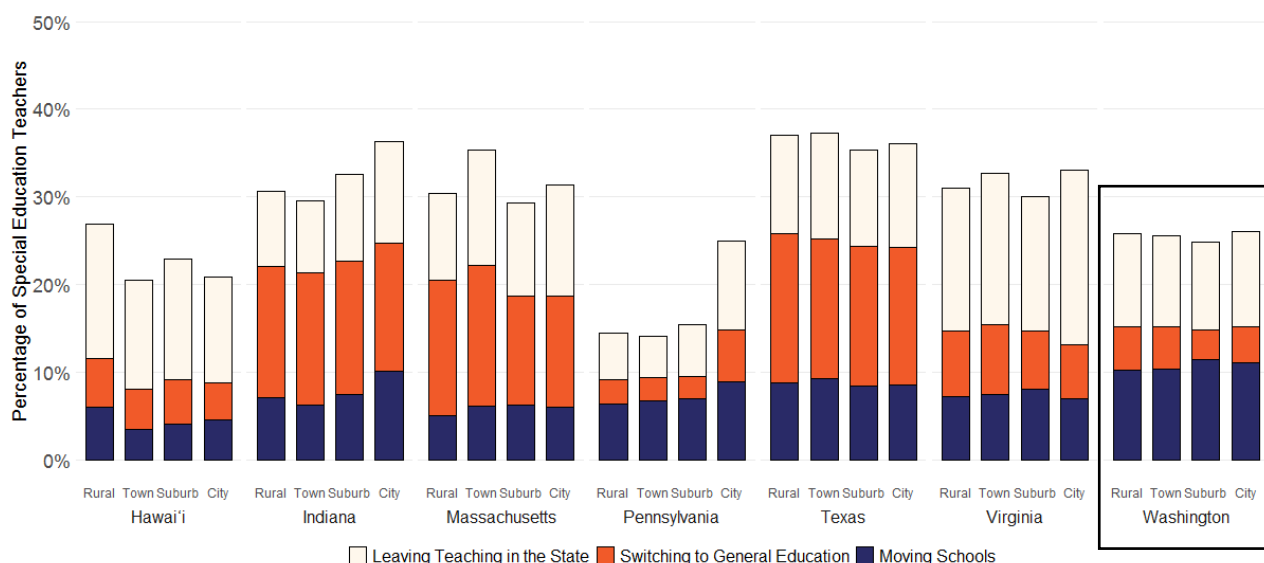


In Washington, SET turnover was slightly higher in schools with more students from low-income families (27.7%) and more students of color (27.6%) compared to approximately 25% in other types of schools. Regardless of school characteristics, the proportion of SETs who either left teaching in Washington or moved to a new school outpaced the proportion of SETs who moved into general education positions. For instance, in schools with a high percentage of students receiving FRL, an average of 10.8% of SETs no longer teach in Washington and 12.4% moved schools, compared to only 4.5% who moved to general education positions.

Finding 5: Similar Rates of Turnover Across School Settings

The stability of the SET workforce in Washington did not vary 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. SET turnover was similar across school settings in Washington, ranging from 24.9% on average in suburban schools to 25.0% in city schools. Slightly smaller percentages of SETs in suburban schools on average switched to general education (3.5%) than SETs in other settings (4.0–4.9%).

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 Washington, we recommend prioritizing mentoring, manageable workloads, and leadership development to reduce higher attrition rates among SETs. Decreasing turnover will help to ensure all students with disabilities have access to a qualified, stable SET workforce.

STUDY INFORMATION

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