

## **Guest Opinion: Solution to shortage of Special-Ed teachers demands collaboration**

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Students with disabilities make up about 10% of the student population in Idaho's public schools, or about 25,000 children. Varying in the type and severity of disability, students with disabilities are served by special education teachers who are highly trained to understand each child's unique instructional needs, and to design individualized education programs that will help all children meet their educational goals.



At least that is the way the system is supposed to work. As Bill Roberts reported in the September 20 Idaho Statesman, there has been and continues to be a critical shortage of special education teachers. Numerous districts across the state hire people to fill special education teacher positions on a letter of authorization, which requires the person to complete an approved certification program within a specified amount of time. Traditional teacher preparation programs can take between 2-3 years to complete, and given the number of rural districts in our state with limited access to colleges and universities, often the only option is to seek 'alternate' routes to certification, which, in some cases, do little to provide the needed expertise to serve Idaho students well.

This creates a terrible cycle of teacher turnover. Teachers who accept special education positions without being trained have their hearts in the right place – they are willing to take on a very demanding job that rarely receives the kind of recognition (such as pay, praise and respect) that it deserves. But because they are not adequately prepared for the difficult challenges, many teachers appointed on letters of authorization quickly become discouraged and leave the field in 2-3 years. And then the cycle begins again. In districts where vacancies, turnover, and attrition are greatest, students with disabilities are rarely afforded the high quality

instruction they need and deserve to realize their potential.

At Boise State University, we are tackling this problematic cycle head on. This past year, with the support of University leadership, the State Department of Education and the State Board of Education, we created the Special Education Collaborative, an innovative partnership between the Department of Early and Special Education, school districts across the state, and Lee Pesky Learning Center.

The primary intent of the program is to provide a flexible, high quality program and cultivate the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are needed for long-term success. To this end, our teacher candidates earn both a Master in Teaching degree alongside a certification in Special Education. This innovative approach provides training and certification for those teachers who might otherwise be appointed on letters of authorization and results in a level of mastery that teachers need to sustain their commitment in this challenging field.

Furthermore, many of our teacher candidates in the Special Education Collaborative are completing their field work in schools, but those who hope to specialize in working with children with learning disabilities have the unique opportunity to complete their field work at Lee Pesky Learning Center, where they are being mentored by education specialists who have incredible expertise in supporting the individualized and specialized needs of children with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and other learning disabilities. The goal of partnerships like this is to build the capacity of Idaho's special education teaching force to meet the needs of the 1 in 5 school-age children who struggle with some type of learning or attention issue.

In our view, the Special Education Collaborative represents higher education at its best. It is a response to a significant community need—to break the cycle of special education teacher turnover. And it is created in partnership with the many organizations in Idaho that embrace the moral imperative to give students with disabilities access to the best learning opportunities possible.

– Richard D. Osguthorpe, Ph.D., Dean and Professor, College of Education  
at Boise State University