



November 1, 2021

The Honorable L. Louise Lucas  
Chair, Senate Education and Health Committee  
Virginia General Assembly  
P.O. Box 700  
Portsmouth, VA 23705-0700

The Honorable Roslyn C. Tyler  
Chair, House Education Committee  
Virginia General Assembly  
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**Dear Mesdames:**

In December 2020, the General Assembly's Joint Legislative Audit Review Commission (JLARC) released its report, [K-12 Special Education in Virginia](#). The report recommended that language be included in the Appropriation Act directing the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to develop and maintain a targeted statewide strategic plan for recruiting and retaining special education teachers. The recommendation further qualified that:

*At a minimum, VDOE's strategic plan should include: (i) use data analyses to determine divisions' specific staffing needs on an ongoing basis; (ii) evaluate the potential effectiveness of strategies for addressing recruitment and retention challenges, including tuition assistance, differentiated pay for special education teachers, and the expansion of special education teacher mentorships; and (iii) estimate the costs of implementing each strategy, including the extent to which federal funds could be used to support implementation.*

House Bill 2299 and Senate Bill 1288 from the 2021 Special Session I of the General Assembly codified this recommendation as an annual reporting requirement found in the new § 22.1-214.4 of the *Code of Virginia* related to certain duties of the Department.

As noted in the JLARC report, qualified special education teachers are essential to the effective provision of special education services. Special education teachers have a challenging job and need to be able to:

- understand complex federal and state legal and regulatory requirements relating to special education;

- understand the characteristics and manifestations of different disabilities;
- evaluate students for special education services;
- identify appropriate and implement services accommodations;
- conduct effective case management;
- provide specialized instruction; and
- collaborate effectively with general education teachers.

School staff in other positions are not required to have this knowledge and skillset, so special education teachers are needed to effectively educate and support students with disabilities.

VDOE has identified special education as among the top three critical teaching shortage areas since it began reporting shortages in 2003 and since 2006, special education has been the top shortage area. The State Special Education Advisory Committee has reported concerns about special education teacher shortages to VDOE since at least 2000. The JLARC report served to confirm the prior actions of the Virginia Board of Education (Board) in its [2018-2023 Comprehensive Plan](#) to prioritize policies to address the continuing teacher shortages and staff turnover in Virginia. The VDOE's development of strategic plans, consistent with the tenets of the Board's Comprehensive Plan, addresses the entire teacher workforce but in this report is focused on the significant challenges of recruiting and retaining special education teachers. I am pleased to share the key components of VDOE's strategic plan to support school divisions in recruiting and retaining high quality special education teachers.

### **Development of Virginia's Plan**

In 2021, the VDOE identified the need for an interagency team to create a comprehensive strategic recruitment and retention plan for special education including key staff from the following departments: Teacher Education and Licensure (TEL); Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI); and Special Education and Student Services (SESS). The SESS department has employed recruitment and retention initiatives due to the recurring shortages across the state and nationwide for many years with varying degrees of effectiveness. These existing strategies and initiatives, some of which are listed below, continue today and provide some historical perspective of strategy effectiveness and required resources. These strategies must be better assessed based on clear criteria to determine if they should be continued and new strategies added if they are determined to have met high levels of success based on national studies. The deployment of effective existing strategies and new supports will enable school divisions to meet the challenge of recruiting and retaining highly qualified special education teachers.

As part of its work, the interagency team identified existing and planned data collections to inform a strategic plan. Additionally, the team began to evaluate existing and planned initiatives to address the special education teacher shortage and identified the key local and state leaders who support these initiatives. A future workgroup, composed of collaborators at the state, division, and local levels, will be developing consistent procedures for monitoring outcomes from proposed strategies and programs, identifying policies that support expanding pathways to licensure, as well as determining the metrics for evaluation of the statewide strategic plan and related initiatives in the coming year.

The VDOE has proposed a comprehensive and coherent set of policies and practices that address the following goals:

- **Goal #1:** reduce the barriers for qualified individuals to enter the profession as special education teachers;
- **Goal #2:** attract greater numbers of promising candidates and retain them once employed; and
- **Goal #3:** raise the quality of teaching overall in the Commonwealth.

VDOE intends to begin implementation of its plan to recruit and retain special education teachers by the end of 2021. This work will be led by VDOE's new Engagement Specialist who will collaborate closely with the stakeholder workgroup. In this first phase of implementation, VDOE will leverage federal pandemic funding to expand on many of the existing strategies for recruitment and retention, as noted below, into 2022. This work, while specific to special education teachers, will also help to inform a broader recruitment and retention plan for all endorsement areas and evaluation models. A draft of the general recruitment and retention plan, a part of phase two, is scheduled to be completed by March 2022. As first-year initiatives are evaluated for effectiveness, VDOE will continue to expand existing programs identified as successful and introduce new initiatives through 2023.

### **Key Data Points**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2004), the United States is lacking 41,141 certified special educators. The challenge of recruiting and retaining a diverse and highly qualified care of special education teachers is a national issue and is evident in Virginia's various data collection metrics.

The collection of state and local data by the VDOE on teacher supply and demand and related data analytics informs strategies of recruitment, retention, and program effectiveness.

Available data analyses used to inform state and division-specific staffing needs across the Commonwealth include historical and trends captured around the impact of the pandemic in 2020 – 2021. Historical data provides a demographic description of educators and vacancies including the Instructional Personnel (IPAL) collection, Supply and Demand, and the December 1 Child Count Table 2, Report of Special Education Teachers serving Children with Disabilities. Additionally, qualitative data are captured from Mentor Teacher Program Evaluations, Program Annual Reports and usage data of various grants and incentive programs. The [December 1 Special Education Child Count](#) collection is a “snapshot” of students receiving special education services on December 1 each year. Additionally, this report provides regional or by-division special education teachers (endorsement) and the demographics of the students they serve.

Trends in teacher retention and atrophy during the pandemic remain largely anecdotal, but data collection has expanded in the last two years to comply with Code of Virginia and Every Student Succeeds Act, Title II reporting requirements necessary to address critical staff shortages by position and geographic region, measure growth and decline of required staffing levels, and evaluate the reasons licensed personnel leave the field. The collection reduces the reporting burden on school divisions by replacing several older collections including the state’s Supply and Demand Survey and IPAL Survey reports. Specifically, the new [Position & Exit Collection \(PEC\)](#) Data will be typically collected annually in October beginning in 2021–2022 school year. Results are anticipated for release by late 2021.

Related to teacher recruitment and retention are concerns of working conditions in schools. For the past 10 years in Virginia, teacher turnover rates have remained above 10 percent. Two-thirds of individuals leaving depart before retirement age, most because of dissatisfaction with aspects of their teaching conditions.

The Recruitment Incentive for Public Education (RIPE), a new data source, provided a snapshot of vacancies reported on August 15, 2021. Seventy-six divisions reported 4,922 vacancies. With many school divisions not opening until after Labor Day, the data collected is anticipated to change. The most vacancies were found in Special Education (#937) and Elementary Education (#1388), which were anticipated given the reoccurring top two categories in the state’s [Education Workforce Data](#).

An analysis of the 2019–2020 evaluations of Mentor Teacher Programs submitted by Virginia’s school divisions indicated that the following practices were the most effective: New Teacher Orientation *and* having the existence of a division mentor coordinator and lead mentor in each building. Overall, the most common concern across all programs was constraints placed upon Mentor Teacher Programs due to limited financial and administrative resources. Annual feedback

collected by the Department from divisions has informed a new calculation formula for state funding allocations and a revised mentor teacher guidance document approved by the Board of Education in October 2021 which emphasizes more administrative management and program design. It is work like this that uses data collected from school divisions to inform support initiatives that will be critical to the success of the strategic plan and to providing the skilled workforce our children in need in their classrooms.

### **Strategies for Virginia's Plan**

The Education Commission of the States published a policy brief entitled, *Building a Diverse Teacher Workforce* (2020) which drew upon data sets from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and is being used by the VDOE team to support the development of strategies to address teacher shortages in Virginia. From these and other studies, key strategies emerge that when undertaken synchronously as part of an overall strategic plan increase the recruitment and retention of the teacher workforce. Some of the strategies include:

- grow-your-own initiatives, especially those that help paraprofessionals become certified teachers;
- targeted incentives directed at teachers willing to teach in schools or subject areas in which the need is greatest (*special education*) to include differentiated compensation;
- prioritize recruitment and higher education partnerships which provide tuition for aspiring special education teachers and other hard-to-fill areas;
- improved recruitment and hiring practices across divisions supported by technical assistance from the state agency which address equity and human resources practices;
- improved school-level support for teachers, including formal induction and mentoring programs;
- use of interactive technologies to meet information and professional development needs; and
- the ongoing use of data metrics to develop and deploy recruitment and retention work.

Virginia's strategic plan will consider these strategies and will also include the creation of monitoring structures and systematic evaluation processes to inform yearly progress reports through three phases of implementation.

#### Phase 1:

- Immediate implementation and planning finalization of the Special Education plan, completion in December, 2021.
- Complete the hiring process for the Engagement Specialist who will lead in plan implementation in early November 2021, as well as form a workgroup with external and

internal stakeholders. We plan on using ESSER III funds to expand several existing and new strategies in early 2022.

Phase 2:

- Workgroup development of the broader plan for all endorsement areas and evaluation models. Completion in March 2022.

Phase 3:

- Continue with the expansion of existing and new initiatives 2022-2023. Completed in December 2023.
- Include evaluation of the effectiveness of first year initiatives.

Understanding that the effectiveness of any strategy deployed must be measured more closely going forward, below are some existing strategies which are currently being implemented in Virginia with the strategic plan's goal(s) annotated. The strategies collectively provide a path to achieve the goals and will be assessed for effectiveness by annual metrics collected by the Department in conjunction with local school divisions. Examples of strategies currently being implemented in Virginia are listed below:

- Tuition assistance to add endorsement areas (Goals 2,3)
- [2021 Competitive Grant for Praxis and Virginia Communication and Literacy Assessment Assistance to Support Diversity Among Provisionally Licensed Teachers Seeking Full Licensure in Virginia](#) (Goal 1)
- Residency Grants (Goals 2, 3)
- Journey Into Teaching Program: Superintendents' Regions 1 & 8 (Goals 2, 3)
- Grow-Your-Own Grant Program (Goal 2)
- Online recruitment system (Goal 2)
- Licensure support for provisionally endorsed teachers (Goals 1, 2, 3)
- [Virginia Teaching Scholarship Loan Program](#) (Goal 1)
- Differentiated salary structures or retention bonus by divisions (Goals 1, 2)
- CEEDAR Technical Assistance Grant to VDOE SESS (Goals 2,3)
- VDOE Educator Engagement Specialist (Goals 2,3)

Strategies that are being considered by the team for future implementation based on effectiveness data from other states include:

- Journey Into Teaching Program: expansion to other Superintendents' region (Goals 2, 3)
- Targeted Marketing Campaign: webpage, state-level promotional materials (Goal 2)
- Paid Internships for aspiring teachers (Goals 1, 2)
- Human Capital State-Level Planning (Goal 3)

- Division Principal Network (Goals 2, 3)
- Professional Learning Community for Human Resources staff in school divisions (Goals 2, 3)
- [Educators Rising](#) expansion program (Goal 2)
- Retention & Mentoring Programs (Goals 1, 2)
- Expanded Mentorship Incentive and Training (Goals 2, 3)
- Professional Development Grants for school divisions (Goals 2,3)

### **Funding Virginia's Plan to Achieve Desired Outcomes**

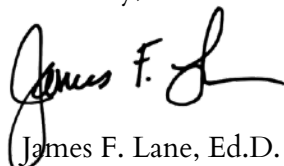
No additional funding from the state is being sought at this time. New and expanded strategies will be underwritten by federal funding. The current funding allocated by the state will enable some of the more effective strategies to be continued based on developed success criteria. Future analysis of program components will determine if additional funding at the state level will be sought in subsequent years.

The desired outcomes from this targeted recruitment and retention plan include an increased ability for the VDOE to provide support as follows:

- Use state-level data to identify gaps and strengths in human capital resources;
- Reduce barriers for qualified individuals to enter the profession as special education teachers;
- Increase the pipeline of licensed candidates to fill existing Local Education Agency special education positions;
- Expand equity practices in human capital management for divisions;
- Strengthen strategies and resources to recruit and retain a diverse, highly-qualified teaching workforce for the state (including those individuals from historically underrepresented populations); and
- Operationalize metrics for evaluation of the strategic plan and yearly progress.

If you require additional information, please contact Holly Coy, Assistant Superintendent, Department of Policy and Communications at (804) 225-2092 or [holly.coy@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:holly.coy@doe.virginia.gov).

Sincerely,



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Superintendent of Public Instruction