



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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November 13, 2023

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

The Honorable John Avoli
Vice-Chair, House Education
PO Box 1942
Staunton, Virginia 24402

Dear Delegate Avoli and Senator Lucas:

House Bill 2299 (Chapter 451, Acts of Assembly 2021 SSI) and Senate Bill 1288 (Chapter 452, Acts of Assembly 2021 SSI), Code of Virginia - § 22.1-214.4 (5.) requires the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to take specific steps to improve both the provision of special education and related services and the outcomes for students with disabilities. The law requires the VDOE to provide training, develop training modules, conduct reviews of individualized education programs (IEPs), and develop policies and procedures to improve the administration and oversight of special education in the Commonwealth.

The law also includes a focus on recruiting and retaining highly qualified special education teachers, aligning with the VDOE's priorities and initiatives and building upon the Virginia Board of Education's work to prioritize the development of policies that seek to improve long-standing teacher shortages across the Commonwealth. Importantly, this legislative mandate also aligns with the recently enacted [Executive Directive 3 - Addressing Teacher Shortages in Virginia Schools](#), which bolsters and strengthens the VDOE's ability to remove obstacles that prevent qualified individuals from filling teacher vacancies in critical shortage areas, such as special education. The VDOE's ongoing effort to empower school divisions to recruit, grow, and retain highly-qualified teachers remains a top priority.

Among other requirements, House Bill 2299 and Senate Bill 1288 require the VDOE to develop and implement a plan for addressing teacher shortages in the area of special education. Specifically, § [22.1-214.4\(5.\)](#) requires the VDOE to take the following action:

5. Develop and maintain a statewide strategic plan for recruiting and retaining special education teachers. At a minimum, such plan shall (i) use data analyses to determine the specific staffing needs of each local school division 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 such strategy, including the extent to which federal funds could be used to support implementation. The Department shall, no later than November 1 of each year, update the Chairmen of the Senate Committee on Education and Health and the House Committee on Education on its progress in implementing such plan

Please note that this report on VDOE's Special Education Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategic Plan provides an update on the work completed this past calendar year, 2022-2023, as aligned to the original plan submitted by the agency in November 2021. Given the ongoing and compounding challenges we face in the Commonwealth related to teacher recruitment and retention and Governor Youngkin's commitment to improving the teacher pipeline and workforce, per Executive Order #3, VDOE anticipates the need to substantively revise the existing strategic plan in the coming year to better reflect the urgency of the issue and the administration's policy priorities. The agency's submission in November 2023 will provide an updated strategic plan as well as a report on the work accomplished in meeting these new goals and benchmarks.

Virginia's Plan Progress

In December 2020, the General Assembly's Joint Legislative Audit Review Commission (JLARC) released its report, [K-12 Special Education in Virginia](#), which recommended that language be included in the Appropriation Act directing the VDOE to develop and maintain a statewide strategic plan for addressing the special education teacher shortage. In 2021, the VDOE responded with the creation of a comprehensive strategic recruitment and retention plan for special education educators—and an internal working group that included staff from several offices within the department including Teacher Education and Licensure (TEL) and Special Populations and Specialized Student Services. Staff from these departments continue to engage and support this important work. The VDOE consistently identifies strategies, activities, and approaches to build upon and strengthen the strategies outlined in VDOE's initial [strategic recruitment and retention plan for special education](#); current activities are informed by emerging needs of Virginia's school divisions and national and regional trends in educator recruitment and retention practices.

Simultaneously, in 2021, Virginia partnered with the Center for Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR), a national organization funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. CEEDAR is dedicated to improving student outcomes by building the capacity of state personnel preparation programs (Virginia Technical Assistance, 2020). The purpose of the collaboration continues to be to work directly with school divisions to plan and implement evidence-based talent management strategies to address special education teacher shortages within localities. The objective of the VDOE's work with CEEDAR is to support high-quality preparation for special

educators, which will, in turn, increase student outcomes. Several members of VDOE's core interagency team participate on the Virginia CEEDAR team. The Virginia CEEDAR team, in conjunction with other state agency technical assistance partners, institutions of higher education, allied professional organizations, and local school divisions are working to create data-driven, evidenced-based action plans to address retention and recruitment that begins with educator preparation programs. Team member participation and a recent policy brief from the [CEEDAR Center and the Center for Great Teacher and Leaders \(2020\)](#) affirms Virginia's development and implementation of a comprehensive, systemic approach that includes long-term strategies across the career continuum to address the persistent shortages in special education.

In January 2022, under the leadership of the newly hired VDOE Teacher Education and Licensure's Engagement Specialist, a formal Advisory Committee for Recruitment and Retention was established and launched to provide feedback on plan goals and strategies, as well as determine metrics for plan evaluation. Additionally, a new Special Education and Student Service Recruitment and Retention Specialist was hired in May of 2022, to provide expertise in the Office of Special Populations on special education recruitment and retention. VDOE's Specialist is also responsible for managing the VDOE's *Creating Capacity for Change and Continued Professional Growth* grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Award H325P210003), which assists the VDOE in its efforts to bolster special education teacher retention efforts through implementation of multi-tiered systems of supports.

Additionally, the VDOE is developing 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 and increase the number of candidates eligible to fill public school division's hard to staff positions, specifically in special education, and retain them once employed; and
- **Goal #3:** Strengthen strategies to recruit and retain a diverse, highly qualified educator workforce of special educators.

These goals have been reviewed by the Recruitment and Retention Advisory Committee and align with Executive Directive 3 ([ED-3 Addressing Teacher Shortages in Virginia Schools](#)).

Key Data Points

Based on various VDOE reports, including the inaugural data collection of the [Position and Exit \(PEC\), the Staffing and Vacancy Report](#), the Instructional Personnel Data Collection System, [Board of Education Annual Reports](#), Educator Preparation Program (EPP) enrollment figures, and anecdotal evidence from educators and school leaders across the state, Virginia school divisions are grappling with educator shortages that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Virginia faces a shortage of staff, including teachers, who enter and remain in Virginia's public schools. This critical shortage predated the pandemic but continues to worsen. For the 2021-2022 school year, there were 2,593 teacher vacancies as of October 2021. For the start of the 2022-2023 school year, there were 3,307 teacher vacancies on the first day of school. Out of these vacancies, 744 were special education teacher vacancies, representing about 5.85%

of the special education teaching workforce and over 21% of overall teacher vacancies in the Commonwealth.

These data are indicative of an increase in vacancies nationwide. Scott *et al* (2021) conducted research in special education teacher attrition and retention by focusing on special education teacher persistence, intrinsic motivators, and satisfaction with salary. The study found that teacher persistence in special education is linked to a positive working/learning climate and receiving strong support from administrators. Special education teacher persistence is not dependent on one factor, but the intersection of environmental and intrinsic factors. This increase in the number of teacher vacancies correlates with the downward trend in EPP enrollment.

According to data made available through the U.S. Department of Education's [Title II of the Higher Education Act's](#) website, Virginia's enrollment in teacher preparation programs has decreased from 13,511 students in the 2011-12 academic year to 8,777 in the 2019-2020 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). These challenges are compounded by factors related to the pandemic, including increased levels of stress among educators, concerns over safety, and financial burdens exacerbated by the 2020 recession.

Data presented in the *Commonwealth of Virginia's Critical Teaching Shortage Endorsement Areas* has consistently found special education leading the top ten critical shortage teaching endorsement areas for the state. The VDOE's [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 data, by region or by school division, on the number of teachers with a special education endorsement and the demographics of the students with disabilities they serve. Additionally, the Recruitment Incentive for Public Education (RIPE), a new data source, provided a snapshot of vacancies reported on August 15, 2023. Eighty-five divisions reported 4304 vacancies. Unsurprisingly, the most vacancies were found in Special Education (#1127) and Elementary Education (#1306); this is consistent with data collected from school divisions on critical shortage endorsement areas and presented in VDOE's [Education Workforce Data](#).

Strategies for Virginia's Plan

The VDOE continues to utilize resources from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs to support its efforts to focus on teacher recruitment and retention in the area of special education. For example, OSEP's [Attract, Prepare, and Retain Initiative](#) not only addresses critical shortages but also the causative factors that have long plagued the professional pipeline of educators. VDOE has used resources produced as a part of this initiative to engage with the field, and in the identification and confirmation of leverage points within the system to support strategic change and inform recruitment and retention efforts. The VDOE has disseminated these resources and utilized these strategies not only in demonstration grant programs, but also in supporting conversations between local school divisions on creative and innovative programming to address critical shortage needs.

From these and other studies, VDOE has utilized the following key strategies as part of the implementation of Executive Directive 3 and an overall strategic plan for recruitment and retention of the teacher workforce:

- grow-your-own initiatives, especially those that help paraprofessionals become licensed teachers;
- targeted incentives directed at teachers willing to teach in high need schools or subject areas, such as 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 VDOE which address access and human resources practices;
- improved school-level support for teachers, including formal induction and mentoring programs;
- use of interactive technologies to meet professional development needs; and
- the ongoing use of data metrics to develop and deploy recruitment and retention work.

The strategies outlined below are currently being implemented in Virginia; each strategy includes a specific reference to the strategic plan goal that is supported. The strategies collectively provide a path to achieve the goals and preliminary annual metrics on impact collected by the VDOE in conjunction with local school divisions. They include the following:

- provide tuition assistance to add endorsement areas (Goals 2, 3)
- offer licensure support for provisionally endorsed teachers (Goals 1, 2, 3)
- support with comprehensive retention planning within an MTSS framework through the Personnel Development Grant: *Creating Capacity for Change and Continued Professional Growth* (Award H325P210003) (Goals 1, 2, 3)
- implement the [Virginia Teaching Scholarship Loan Program](#) (Goal 1)
- offer differentiated salary structures or retention bonus by divisions (Goals 1, 2)
- collaborate with institutions of higher education and CEEDAR to focus on incorporation of High Leverage Practices (HLPs) into teacher preparatory programs (Goal 2, 3)
- implement CEEDAR Technical Assistance Grant to VDOE Special Populations and Specialized Student Services (Goals 2, 3)
- hire Dedicated Staff at the VDOE (Goals 2)
- expand Journey Into Teaching Program (Provisional) into other Superintendents' regions (Goals 2, 3)
- launch [Marketing Campaign](#): Becomeateacher.virginia.gov webpage, and other state-level promotional materials (Goal 2)
- provide paid internships for aspiring teachers (Goals 1, 2)
- collaborate with Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS) and Old Dominion University's Center for Implementation and Evaluation of Education Systems (CIEES) to develop evidence-based practice (EBP) modules for incorporation into teacher preparatory programs in Virginia (Goal 2, 3)

In addition to these strategies that are currently being implemented, VDOE is working with the Advisory Committee for Recruitment and Retention for future implementation of additional strategies that have been highlighted by national organizations or have been proven successful in other states. Examples of strategies under consideration include:

- Online statewide recruitment system, which is slated to be rolled-out in 2023 (Goal 2);
- Professional Learning Community for Human Resources staff in school divisions (Goals 2, 3); and
- Expanded Mentorship Incentive and Training (Goals 2, 3).

Not within the timeframe of the 2022-2023 school year but prepared to start and impact school divisions within the following year are two initiatives: the additional alternate pathway to earning full certification from iTeach as well as the \$10 million Grow Your Own- Teacher Apprenticeship grant.

The iTeach system allows provisional licensed teachers to complete remaining teacher education courses asynchronously within a self-paced program at a much lower cost than traditional programs. This program was approved by the Virginia Board of Education in June of 2023 for more than twenty divisions under two conditions. First, they must maintain their accreditation through the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP). Second, participating school divisions are required to have mentorship programs for new teachers. To assure that this program provides high quality preparation for special education teachers, VDOE and iTeach have sought oversight from the Southeastern Cooperative Educational Programs (SECEP) to evaluate and recommend improvements in the program.

In November 2021, the U.S. Department of Labor approved K-12 teaching as an “apprenticeable” occupation, qualifying teacher apprentice programs for funding through several federal workforce grants administered by the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry (DOLI). On August 5, 2022, the VDOE solicited for proposals via [Superintendent’s Memo \(#172-22\)](#) to support eligible applicants that intend to develop a new or existing apprenticeship program in the coming year. Grant awards were made on a competitive basis in the amount of \$20,000 per proposal. The funding would be used to assist in the development of a formal Apprenticeship Residency proposal. These were intended as planning grants. Recipients of the planning grant were invited to join “network meetings” in order to collaborate, provide status updates, and hear from experts in the field. The first network meeting was held in December 2022. Representatives from the Bank Street College of Education joined the meeting and shared their “lessons learned” from their experience implementing an apprenticeship model. In January 2023, the VDOE and DOLI officially signed an agreement, known as a “certificate of commitment” approving VA’s application to create a registered teacher apprentice program in the commonwealth. This was announced as a [news release](#) on the VDOE website. The first call for proposals for the Apprenticeship Implementation Grant went out on February 10, 2023 via [Superintendent’s Memo \(#025-23\)](#). The initial call for proposals focused on individuals who could implement the program starting in the 2023-2024 school year and targeted apprentices who could complete the requirements by May 2024. Awards were made in July 2023. In October of 2023, Virginia completed the last steps in the process with VDOLI to have teachers in Virginia to have a pathway for a registered apprenticeship. One week later, VDOE released the request for proposals for the [Grow Your Own- Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program](#). This program focuses on taking potential teachers from an associates degree through teacher certification at a low/no cost to the applicant. Many potential applicants will be instructional aides within special education classrooms. Teachers coming from such a program will be better

prepared than most traditional teacher education graduates due to the extended student teaching time and structured mentorship.

Funding Virginia's Plan to Achieve Desired Outcomes

As a part of the implementation of Executive Directive 3 and earlier efforts, the VDOE's Teacher and Educator Licensure department has leveraged federal pandemic recovery funds to focus on teacher recruitment and retention, investing approximately \$12 million in aligned programs. Initiatives include the use of ESSER funds to establish new grants to assist with post-secondary education expenses for Virginia special educators, cover the costs of licensure-related assessments, provide financial assistance to college students completing their clinical experience, and develop a statewide marketing campaign designed to celebrate and elevate the profession.

In collaboration with other VDOE departments and offices, allied professional organizations, and technical assistance partners, the VDOE's Special Populations and Specialized Student Services department is continually prioritizing funding to develop and expand statewide teacher induction options grounded in research to improve professional practice. At this time, two academies are designed to improve leading effective teaching and learning in our schools:

1. **Journey into Teaching Academy (JITA):** VDOE is currently facilitating its sixth cohort of the JITA, a yearlong professional development initiative for teachers entering their third-year of teaching during the 2023-2024 school year as a provisionally licensed special education teacher. JITA is designed as a program to provide teacher support beyond mentorship to enhance the retention, as well as the overall performance of provisionally licensed special education teachers as they journey through the teaching, learning, and licensure processes. In collaboration with VDOE and regional Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTAC) staff, teachers selected for JITA will have opportunities to gain knowledge and skills in such areas as content knowledge, pedagogical strategies, collaboration/co-teaching strategies, and special education processes and procedures as the teachers enter their third year of teaching. These experiences will help them to excel in their positions as teachers of students with disabilities. Teachers will also be given the opportunity to participate in other VDOE-sponsored summer academies and additional seminars and workshops as preparation for the teacher licensure assessment. Prior to the current school year, the Academy served approximately 100 participants in Superintendents Regions 1-5, and 7-8. Approximately \$50,000 has been allocated annually (*Goals 1, 2*) to support JITA activities.
2. **Petersburg City Public Schools JITA:** During the 2021-2022 school year, JITA was expanded to minimize preparation and retention gaps. Eleven provisionally licensed special education teachers participated during the first year, over the course of the next two years, four additional teachers joined the cohort. Three teachers from this cohort ended their employment with Petersburg City Public Schools, but continued employment within other Virginia school divisions. As a result of this Academy, Petersburg City Public Schools was fully staffed in special education for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. Additionally, cohort members have met requirements for

licensure, and in partnership with Virginia State University, members of this cohort either have completed or will complete required coursework to obtain valid Virginia teaching credentials. The VDOE allocated \$150,900 over a three-year period to support this project (*Goals 2, 3*).

3. **Northampton County Public Schools JITA:** Beginning in the 2023-2024 school year, JITA was further expanded to minimize preparation and retention gaps in Northampton County Public Schools. In collaboration with VDOE staff, teachers will gain knowledge and skills in pedagogy, content, inclusive practices, and special education processes/procedures. In addition to the teaching staff, school counselors and administrators will engage in strategies to monitor and improve graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. The VDOE has allocated \$60,000 during the current school year for teacher assessments and coursework to become fully licensed.
4. **Special Education Teacher Support Academy:** The VDOE's Region 5 Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC) at James Madison University (JMU), in partnership with the JMU's College of Education and Content Teaching Academy, is sponsoring for the third year, a Special Education Teacher Support Academy (SETSA). The SETSA is a yearlong opportunity that focuses on building the capacity and efficacy of early-career special education teachers by improving teacher effectiveness and reducing teacher attrition in K-12 classrooms. SETSA is designed for early-career (beginning year through year 2) special education teachers and experienced special educators interested in being trained as instructional coaches. SETSA provides learning opportunities in professional knowledge, learning environment, instructional planning, instructional delivery, and assessment for and of learning. The program provides learning opportunities in instructional coaching for educators identified as coaches; participants are taught practical strategies and tools around topics that include disability awareness, inclusive practices, Individual Education Program (IEP) development, student & parent involvement, specially designed instruction, differentiation, universal design for learning and classroom management. Over the past three years, the Academy served 177 teachers and 97 instructional coaches in all Superintendent's Regions. The VDOE allocated one time grant funding of \$468,760 during a three-year period to support this project (*Goals 2, 3*).

The VDOE's Special Populations and Specialized Student Services department will continue to build, promote, and advance practices within these academies to respond to the needs of critical educator shortages and effectiveness in special education instruction to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Therefore, continuing to provide aspiring and provisionally licensed educators affordable access to coursework has also remained a priority. To further support this important work, the VDOE offered the following seven-week, intensive training opportunity through Radford University:

- To increase the pool of eligible applicants for open special education teaching positions across the Commonwealth of Virginia, the VDOE partnered with Radford University to deliver a compressed, seven-week asynchronous online course for 25 individuals in fall 2022 and summer 2023. The VDOE requires teachers hired as provisionally licensed

special educators to complete coursework in: 1) the competencies of foundations for the education of students with disabilities; and 2) the understanding and application of the legal aspects and regulatory requirements associated with identification, education, and evaluation of students with disabilities. This course, provided through the VDOE partnership, fulfilled this requirement for special educators. Over the past two years, the VDOE allocated \$80,345.00 for this project (*Goal 2*) to help ensure these educators are moving toward full certification.

Additionally, the VDOE's Teacher Education and Special Populations and Specialized Student Services departments provide federal grant funding for teacher recruitment in specific special education teaching endorsement areas. Virginia is unique in that we have several consortiums and specialty programs that provide coursework and financial support towards endorsements in the area of special education. A sample of projects listed below demonstrate the extensive support in this area, including relevant strategic plan goal alignment:

1. **Virginia Consortium for Teacher Preparation in Special Education Adapted Curriculum: Supporting Students with Severe Disabilities and Autism:** The following institutions are part of a consortium that offers an endorsement in Adapted Curriculum K-12: George Mason University, James Madison University, Old Dominion University, Radford University, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Utilizing distance education and a shared program of study and coursework, participating universities provide initial licensure in special education, adapted curriculum and add-on endorsement programs, and continuing education courses to enable teachers to meet the state required competencies for highly qualified teachers of students with severe disabilities. (Additional information may be accessed at the [Virginia Consortium for Teacher Preparation in Special Education Adapted Curriculum](#) website.) During this fiscal year, the Consortium has served 6 IHEs; 659 cases of course enrollment. The VDOE allocated continuing grant funding of \$500,000 this period for tuition (*Goal 2*).
2. **Virginia Consortium for Teacher Preparation in Visual Impairment (VI Consortium):** The VI Consortium is comprised of five universities in Virginia that are working together to develop and implement a statewide program to meet the initial and continuing education needs for teachers of students with visual impairments in Virginia. Utilizing distance education and a shared program of study and coursework, participating universities provide coursework toward licensure with an endorsement in visual impairment, and continuing education courses to enable teachers to meet the state required competencies for highly qualified teachers of students with visual impairments. Additional information may be accessed at the [Virginia Consortium for Teacher Preparation in Vision Impairment](#) website. During this fiscal year, the VI Consortium has served 3 IHEs; 159 cases of course enrollment. The VDOE allocated continuing grant funding of \$315,777 during this period for tuition (*Goals 1, 2*).
3. **Radford Teaching Preparation Project: Hearing Impairments PreK-12:** The purpose of this program is to provide training for full-time undergraduate and graduate students seeking an endorsement in Hearing Impairments in PreK-12. In addition,

educators currently working under provisional licensure-serving students with Hearing Impairments and persons seeking an add-on endorsement in this area will be served through part-time studies. Specifically, classes for professional development for teachers, speech language pathologists, early interventionist, interpreters, and other service providers are offered through coursework and summer institutes. The Hearing Impairment/PreK-12 Preparation and Professional Development Program Web site may be accessed at the following link:

<https://www.radford.edu/content/grad/home/academics/graduate-programs/education/special-education/deaf.html>. During this fiscal year, the Radford Teacher Prep Hearing Impairment project has served 1 IHE; 7 candidates served. The VDOE allocated continuing grant funding of \$180,000 during this year (*Goals 1 2*).

Federal programs have provided funding for the majority of the initiatives highlighted in this report. Federal funding will be utilized to underwrite the cost of new and expanded strategies through 2024. Any additional funding requests to the General Assembly will be based on a determination of the successful outcomes of program components.

As a part of the continued implementation of Executive Directive 3 and the strategic plan, the VDOE will have an increased ability to support school divisions in the effective recruitment and retention of special education staff by:

- Using state-level data to identify gaps and strengths in human capital resources;
- Reducing barriers for qualified individuals to enter the profession as special education teachers;
- Increasing the pipeline of licensed candidates to fill existing school division special education positions;
- Expanding and improving practices in human capital management for divisions;
- Strengthening strategies and resources to recruit and retain a diverse, highly-qualified teaching workforce for the state; and
- Operationalizing metrics for evaluation of the strategic plan and yearly progress.

If you require additional information, please contact Mr. Robert Gilstrap, Assistant Superintendent, Department of Teacher Education and Licensure at (804) 750-8190 or rob.gilstrap@doe.virginia.gov.

Sincerely,



Lisa Coons

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