

WVACEEC Annual Report 2024-2025

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires each state to have an Advisory Council. The West Virginia Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Children (WVACEEC) is also mandated by State Code (18-20-6).

The Council is charged in part with advising the decision makers regarding the unmet needs of exceptional children. The mission adopted by the Council is to influence the State Board of Education, public policy makers, and West Virginia's citizens in ways that continuously improve educational outcomes for children with exceptionalities.

The Council is comprised of members approved by the State Superintendent of Schools.

2024-2025 WVACEEC Members

Ashley Orndorff, Co-Chair

Erica Sauer, Co-Chair

Rhonda Hayes

Happy Plaugher

Samantha Ribeiro-Matos

Katie Keener

Rachel Hatfield

Kelly Crow

Kelly Griffith

Trina Clark

Cara Price

Paul See

Jared Hughes

Julie Reneau

Council Staff

Dawn Embrey-King, Executive Director WVACEEC

dembreyking@k12.wv.us

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The activities of the WV Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Children are supported and funded by a Federal grant from the West Virginia Department of Education.

The Council:

- Schedules and conducts regional meetings across the state to seek input and gain information about programs and services for exceptional students.
- Informs local special education administrators, principals, superintendents, and community members about scheduled meetings.
- Provides a forum for programs to be showcased and issues to be identified.
- Develops and shares information and the Annual Report of recommendations with the State Board of Education, schools and members of the public.
- Reviews and comments on proposed policies, regulations and procedures affecting children with exceptionalities.
- Provides a part time staff to ensure access to the council.
- Provides practical information to parents on how to deal with concerns.
- Serves as a stakeholder group for the development of the State Performance Plan and the Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR).
- Cooperates and collaborates with the West Virginia Department of Education/Office of Special Education to address the unmet needs of students with exceptionalities.

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Date

October 17, 2024
October 18, 2024

Meeting Format

Face to Face

Districts

Randolph- April Senic
Pocahontas- Kristy Tritapoe

Council Members Present

Ashley Orndorff, Paul See, Kelly Crow, Kelly Griffith, Julie Reneau, Jared Hughes, Erica Sauer, Cara Price, Rhonda Hayes, Trina Clark(Friday), Rachel Hatfield

Others Present

10/17-Dawn Embrey-King, Shelia Paitsel, April Senic, Kristy Tritapoe, Lori DiBacco, Rebecca Leary, Paula Hedrick, Elizabeth Cummings, Ishah Franks
Rebecca Leary (parent), Paula Hedrick (parent), Whitney White (WVDE)
10/18- Dawn Embrey-King, Shelia Paitsel, April Senic, Kristy Tritapoe, Jennifer Ervin (parent), Karen Kalar (parent)
Holly Sheldon (Friday-V)

WVDE Spotlight was presented by Whitney White-Coordinator, Federal Programs Office of Special Education

- Emphasis at the WVDE is that Special Education is integrated into all aspects of the work to support students.
- Special Education is a service not a "place".
- Spoke to the council about HB 3035
- FAQ Document
- 3rd Grade Success Act
- Common Fact Videos-Standards Based IEPs, Specially Designed Instruction
- parentguidance.org

District Reporting

April Senic- Director of Special Education; Randolph County

- Strive for Five- Attendance Initiative
- Capturing Kids Hearts-School Culture and Climate
- Social Contracts and Expectations-Positive School Climate
- District Struggles- number of long-term substitutes at Elkins Middle
- D/HH and School Psychologist Shortage- district participates in the Grow your Own Program
- District Kagan Trainings include special education teachers
- There is a need for more support for special education teachers because of the demands with paperwork and learning the jargon associated with special education
- The district provides an IEP Study Hall where teachers are paid, and provided with support writing IEPs, behavior plans, or any other help they may need in order to perform their job requirements.
- The IEP study hall is available to new principals and new teachers

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Kristy Tripatoe- Director of Special Education; Pocahontas County

- Every special education position in filled in district; however not all have certifications
- District emphasis on grade level collaboration, early interventions in place to reach struggling students early, data based Present Level Statements to base appropriate IEP goals and services
- Excellent communication between the central office and the community
- District participation at fairs and festivals
- Difficulty with student behaviors
- District is in a remote area where services are an hour away which makes it hard to coordinate services
- More training is needed to general education staff to implement student IEPs
- Investigating incentives to retain staff
- Participates in Grow your Own Program

Council Takeaways

The district faces challenges with student behavior and limited access to services due to its remote location, highlighting the need for more training for general education staff on IEP implementation, while also exploring staff retention incentives, participating in the Grow Your Own program, and managing with several long-term substitutes currently serving at Elkins Middle School.

Public Comments and Concerns

1. A mother and a grandmother of a student attended the meeting to share their concerns about the closing of their grandson's school (Harman K-12). The student is currently in 3rd grade and making all A's. They were concerned about the time on the bus which would be 34 miles each way. They shared that the young man had just begun to do better in school regarding both behavior and academics and they felt that moving him to an unfamiliar school would disrupt his progress. They believe that homeschooling may be their best option.
2. A father shared his concerns about the education of his son in the 7th grade at Philippi Middle School. The father shared that the son is "very gifted", but that he is able to manipulate tests. He has been receiving homebound services for 3 months. The father is alleging that the school has forged paperwork. A state complaint has been filed. The student's IEP indicates that he is to receive social skills support for 1 hour a week and this has not been done.

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Date

November 14, 2024
November 15, 2024

Meeting Format

Face to Face

Districts

Wood County- Karen Small, Special Education Director
Richie County- Invited/did not participate
Wirt County- Invited/did not participate

Council Members Present

11/14/24- Kelly Crow, Jared Hughes, Ashley Orndorff, Erica Sauer, Trina Clark, Julie Reneau, Samantha Ribeiro-Matos, Rhonda Hayes, Rachel Hatfield
11/15/24- Kelly Crow, Julie Reneau, Ashley Orndorff, Trina Clark, Rachel Hatfield, Jared Hughes, Paul See, Samatha Ribeiro-Matos, Cara Price.

Others Present

11/14/24 Lisa Wilson (parent), Marcy McKain (educator), Sami Bibbee (educator), Jessica Daggett (family member), Alyssa Flowers (parent), Rachel Merriman (parent), April Moore (parent), Veronica Kirk (grandparent), Christina Smith (Astrive Advocate) Shelia Paitzel (WVDE), and Dawn Embrey-King (WVACEEC Director), Whitney Price (parent)
11/15/24 Angel Kennedy (WVDE), Jennifer Carpenter (WVDE), Debbie Wright (educator), Courtney Miller (community member), Rachel Merriman (parent), Christina Smith (Astrive Advocate), Alyssa Flowers (parent), Holly Yoke (school psychologist), Allison McMurray (BCBA), Shelia Paitzel (WVDE), and Dawn Embrey-King (WVACEEC Director), Sarah Harris (parent), Holly Sheldon (DRWV), Whitney Price (parent).

WVDE Spotlight was presented by Jennifer Carpenter, WVDE Behavior Coordinator, Federal Programs Office of Special Education

- WV is experiencing an increase in GEE behavioral issues and concerns.
- Basic classroom data is not being collected.
- Because data is not being collected, data-based decisions cannot be made and trends cannot be identified.
- There is a lack of knowledge by GEE teachers concerning Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP).
- Staff do not appear to be motivated to learn.
- WVDE has developed a Guidance Document for BCBA's
- WVDE is having conversations with higher education concerning behavior training for preservice educators.
- WVDE has a BCBA and a school psychologist that meets with school psychologists, BCBA's, and Behavior Specialists (monthly meetings, survey, topics)

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Angel Kennedy, WVDE Family Engagement Coordinator, Federal Programs Office of Special Education

- WVDE has updated the Hand in Hand Book to make it more parent friendly.

District Reporting

Kara Small, Director of Special Education; Wood County

- Met with Marietta College for new graduates.
- She reported that she had 200 aides at a training for deescalation

Council Takeaways

West Virginia is seeing a rise in GEE behavioral concerns, but the lack of basic classroom data prevents data-driven decision-making and trend identification. Many GEE teachers lack knowledge of FBAs and BIPs, and there appears to be low staff motivation to engage in learning.

In response, the WVDE has developed a guidance document for BCBA's and is collaborating with higher education to improve behavior training for preservice educators.

Public Comments and Concerns

Several staff and parents from Madison Elementary autism classroom expressed concerns of students having "significant behaviors" and staff spending more time trying to keep all students safe rather than providing instruction.

Schools participate in Due Process and make immediate corrections, then fall back into "old habits".

Teachers and aides report being certified in CPI but being told to manage students with a "hands off" approach.

Aides report lacking training, being "stressed out", having more and more students but fewer resources.

Lack of appropriate staffing and sufficient training opportunities for teachers and aides were noted.

Lack of support and communication between schools and parents were noted.

Lack of knowledge of school administration in special education laws, practices and procedures.

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**Virtual Resource Fair
February 2025**

SESSION TITLE	PRESENTER
How to Navigate IEP Meetings Tips and Tricks for Families	Angel Kennedy; WVDE Special Education Coordinator
Dispute Resolutions and How They Work	Whitney White; WVDE Special Education
What is a Facilitated IEP and When You Need to Request One	Whitney White; WVDE Special Education
Transitioning from Birth-3 to School Age Services	Kristy Stout, MSSW CSPD and Policy Specialist WV Birth to Three
What Every Parent of a Child who is Deaf/Hard of Hearing Needs to Know	Dr. Christina Firkins Ed.D WV Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Information About the WV School of the Deaf and Blind	Mary Anne Clendenin; WV School for the Deaf and Blind
How to Read an Audiogram and Implications of a Hearing Loss	Dr. Nancy Gillispie Au. D., CCC-A, F.A.A.A
What to do if you Need an Advocate or Legal Questions Answered	Rhonda Hayes; Regional Parent Coordinator, Legal Aid of WV
Shepherd University, Fostering, Kinship and Adoption	Angela Bender; BSW Training Specialist Shepherd University Department of Social Work
What is WVABLE	Roxanne Clay; Program Director WVABLE Savings Program
Clinical vs School Based Therapies	Kairlyn Comer Linda Vass

The decision was made for the WVACEEC to hold a **Virtual Resource Fair** in February of every year since it is a cold month, and travel is typically a concern.

The WVACEEC wanted to have a platform where parents and educators could receive information from experts around the state .

In 2024 the fair was held during the day.

In 2025 the Virtual Fair was held in the evening 6-8 pm in an effort to provide parents, families, and educators the opportunity to participate after school and work hours.

Above is a list of the sessions/presenters that participants had to choose from.

Council debriefing of the Virtual Resource Fair indicated that it would benefit the participation and the size of each session if the fair had a more narrow scope, with fewer sessions offered.

Approximately 50 participants were registered for the event, however, there were fewer participants present for the resource fair.

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Date

March 13, 2025
March 14, 2025

Meeting Format

Face to Face

Districts

Logan County
Boone County

Council Members Present

Ashley Orndorff, Kelly Crow, Kelly Griffith, Jared Hughes, Rhonda Hayes, Cara Price (V), Happy Plaughter (V), Julie Reneau (V) Paul See (V)

Others Present

3/13/25 Shelia Paisel (WVDE), Dawn Embrey-King (WVACEEC Executive Director), Cindy Napier (Special Education Director; Logan County)

3/14/25 Shelia Paitsel (WVDE), Dawn Embrey-King (WVACEEC Executive Director), Bretta Cook (Special Education Director; Boone County), Elizabeth Hudson (teacher), Karen Ramsey (teacher), James Pratt (teacher), Elizabeth Vance (teacher), Jennifer Dent (teacher), Elaine Saunders (teacher), Ivy Dent (parent), LeeAnn Adkins (teacher), Vonda Hall (teacher), Kendalyn Mann (teacher), Brianna Stollings (PRIDE Head Start/Logan Co.),

WVDE Spotlight:

Cyclical Monitoring and General Supervision

Shelia Paitsel, WVDE Director of Special Education; Federal Program shared with the Council the ongoing work of the WVDE, including events, training, and targeted support.

Shelia discussed Cyclical Monitoring, a process conducted on a 4-year rotation to ensure compliance with federal and state regulations.

Ian Kennedy, Coordinator/Monitor; WVDE Office of Special Education, presented to the Council on Cyclical Monitoring.

He explained the different components of general supervision, including integrated monitoring activities, and the importance of continuous improvement and enforcement of requirements.

LEAs receive a one-month notice of upcoming monitoring visits and that new charter schools receive a one-year grace period to prepare.

The monitoring process includes a file review, virtual entrance and exit conferences, on-site visits to elementary, middle, and high schools, interviews with teachers and administrators, and classroom observations. The monitoring process also includes service verifications, student focus groups, and parent surveys. The goal is to ensure that special education students receive equitable services and that schools are following policies and procedures. The

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monitoring process is tailored to the size of the school district, with more schools visited for larger districts.

The monitoring team issues reports identifying individual and systemic issues.

Schools are identified for monitoring based on various factors, including previous monitoring cycles, school performance data, and input from other office members.

LEAs have four months to make initial corrections after receiving the noncompliance report, with a total of one year to fully correct all noncompliance.

West Virginia Special Education Facility Oversight

The WVDE Office of Special Education is responsible for funding educational costs for eligible students placed in out of state facilities by the Department of Human Services.

An interagency team, including representatives from education, human services, and the court system, conducts on-site visits to at least five facilities each year.

The selection criteria include the number of students placed, compliance issues, and distance from West Virginia. During visits, the team reviews documentation, interviews staff, and inspects facilities to ensure proper education and care.

If non-compliance is found, corrective actions will be imposed, ranging from technical assistance to removal of students from the facility.

IEP Meetings for Out-of-State Students

The process for involving parents or guardians in IEP meetings for students in out-of-state placements was discussed.

If parents retain educational rights, they must be invited to participate. If not, a surrogate must be assigned. Currently, there are approximately 250 West Virginia students in out-of-state non-educational placements.

District Reporting:

Cindy Napier- Director of Special Education; Logan County

- Work on getting more teachers certified in autism to address the high number of students with autism in Logan County.
- Develop and implement training programs for special education teachers and aides in Logan County.
- Work on improving parent participation in IEP meetings, especially for middle and high school students.

Bretta Cook- Director of Special Education; Boone County

- Explore curriculum options for self-contained classrooms in Boone County.
- Investigate the possibility of adding a self-contained or profound room at Ramage Elementary.
- Ensure speech therapy progress reports are sent to parents for students receiving speech services.
- Coordinated with Jennifer Carpenter (WVDE behavior analyst) for assistance with functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans.

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- Sent representatives to the dyslexia specialist training as required by law.
- Highlights- successful programs like the inclusive summer academy, reading horizons curriculum, and transition fairs for students. Ongoing efforts to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in schools and plans for more family involvement activities.
- Challenges-Staffing shortages, particularly in self-contained classrooms. Various recruitment strategies and potential solutions have been implemented, including the "Grow Your Own" program and incentives for alternative certification pathways.
- Special education staffing and training.
- Difficulty in finding substitutes for self-contained classrooms due to the demanding nature of the work, which often involves physical confrontations with students.
- The need for better training for aides and substitutes, particularly in understanding the diverse needs of special education students.
- The issue of compensation, noting that special education aides do not receive the same incentives as those in general education.
- The group discussed ongoing legislative efforts to provide raises for special education staff.
- Concerns about funding shortages for special education programs, noting that federal and state funds often do not cover all needs, leaving local districts to make up the difference.
- Importance of job experience programs for students with disabilities.
- Boone County is hiring a job coach and utilizing grants for work exploration programs.

Guest Presenter- Roxanne Clay WV ABLE

The WV Savings Program is a financial tool designed for individuals with disabilities.

The program allows families to save without impacting eligibility for public benefits like SSI, Medicaid, SNAP, and HUD.

It also offers tax benefits, with earnings growing tax-free and contributions qualifying for a West Virginia State income tax deduction.

The program is administered through the State Treasurer's Office and is a partner in the tax code as a new section 529a.

The program is available to West Virginia residents with a disability onset before age 26.

She encouraged the attendees to send families her way for more information and to use the program's website for enrollment and account management.

Council Takeaways

The district is working to improve special education through targeted training for teachers and aides, increasing parent participation in IEP meetings, especially at the secondary level.

They are addressing significant staffing shortages in self-contained classrooms. Efforts include the "Grow Your Own" program, alternative certification incentives, and ongoing legislative discussions about pay raises.

Challenges remain in recruiting and retaining substitutes due to the demanding nature of the work, with a critical need for better training and equitable compensation for special education aides.

Funding shortages for special education programs were also a key concern.

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Public Comments and Concerns

Kelly, a parent of three children at Ramage Elementary, expresses concerns about her autistic son potentially being sent to Madison Elementary for kindergarten. She worries about the small, windowless classroom at Madison overstimulating her son and separating him from his siblings. Kelly also raises issues about the lack of speech therapy progress reports and the need for a profound classroom at Ramage.

The school representatives acknowledge the staffing and funding challenges but offer to arrange a visit to Madison Elementary and discuss options to address Kelly's concerns.

A parent, Sidney, shared her concerns about her children's attendance and special education needs in Jefferson County. Sheila Paitsel is to follow up with Jefferson County schools regarding Sydney's concerns about limited school attendance for her children with autism.

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Date

April 3, 2025
April 4, 2025

Meeting Format

Face to Face

Districts

Ohio County
Marshall County

Council Members Present-Ashley Orndorff, Rhonda Hayes (V)- TR, Samantha Ribereo-Matos (V), Paul See, Jared Hughes (V-TR in person Friday), Julie Reneau, Kelly Crow, Kelly Griffith (V), Cara Price (V), Happy Plaughter (Friday)

Others Present Dawn Embrey-King, Shelia Paitsel, David and Kerrie Riggs (parents),Christy Black (V) disability rights, Karen Finney (WVDE), Leah Stout (district special education director)

WVDE Spotlight was presented by Karen Finney, WVDE Medicaid Coordinator

Karen discussed the High Cost, High Acuity Grant, which provides reimbursement for special education students with high needs. The grant is funded by IDEA and state appropriations, with eligibility based on a threshold of three times the per pupil expenditure. Eligible expenses include personnel, special evaluations, therapy services, equipment, and transportation. Karen also mentioned the need for documentation, including IEPs and payroll reports, and the plan to distribute the application and instructions in May.

Karen expressed a desire to streamline the process and invited feedback from the team. Karen also mentioned that she is working with Tamara Westfall, a data expert, to make the application more user-friendly. The team discussed the large number of applications received, with a total of 325 reviewed. Karen also mentioned that the total funds available for the project are 3.5 million, while the application requests are worth 13 million. The team also discussed the expansion of Medicaid, which will allow billing for services beyond students with IEPs. Karen mentioned that the Medicaid expansion grant has been awarded, but there is a risk of funding cuts. The team also discussed the need for training for their liaisons on billing Medicaid.

Federal IDEA Funding Application Process

Shelia Paitsel explained to the Council the process for commenting on the Federal IDEA funding application, which is currently open for public comment on the Department of Education website. She detailed how to find the application and encouraged stakeholders to provide suggestions or feedback.

The breakdown of special education funding was then explained. It was noted that most of the federal money goes directly to LEAs, while about 10 million dollars is set aside for state-level expenses. It was highlighted that a significant portion of this set-aside funding goes towards paying for out-of-state placements ordered by courts.

District Reporting

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Leah Stout- Special Education Director; Ohio County

Leah shared her journey from teaching to becoming the special education coordinator, and eventually the director. She expressed her pride in her position and her desire to continue learning from her colleagues

- Discussed the recent monitoring visit to Ohio County, highlighting positive feedback on the use of augmentative communication devices, inclusion practices, and the project employee program for students with special needs.
- Described their three-tier behavior model, which includes whole-group counseling sessions, small group interventions, and individual therapy for students with more significant needs.
- Emphasized the importance of collaboration and finding solutions to challenges, stating that her approach is always to ask, "How can I help"
- The challenges faced by Ohio County schools include the loss of students due to scholarship money being given to private and parochial schools, and difficulty in recruiting students for pre-kindergarten programs.

Erin Cuffaro- Special Education Director; Marshall County

- Discussed the use of the Insights to Behavior program in their district. She explained how the program works, including the assessment process, strategies for addressing behaviors, and data tracking.
- Emphasized the importance of a team effort in implementing the program and shared success stories.
- Mentioned the potential for using county funds for the program and the involvement of the TA Center.
- The team discussed the potential for presenting the program to superintendents and the importance of replicating successful strategies.
- Discussed the challenges of implementing behavioral mental health programs in schools, particularly in areas with a high turnover of teachers.
- Mentioned the importance of hands-on workshops and the need for superintendent support.
- Shared her experiences with the TA Center and the need for more awareness about their services.
- Discussed the importance of retaining teachers and the potential of teacher education programs in addressing this issue.

Council Takeaways

The district shares concerns of schools facing challenges with declining enrollment due to scholarship funds supporting private and parochial schools, as well as difficulties recruiting students for pre-kindergarten programs. The district also emphasized the importance of teacher retention and the role of teacher education programs in addressing staffing needs.

Public Comments and Concerns

Parents attend to discuss their daughter's struggles with anxiety and autism in high school, including attendance issues and communication challenges with the school. Council members provide suggestions and resources, including contacting the special education office for support, exploring dispute resolution options, and reaching out to advocacy organizations like Disability Rights of West Virginia.

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The WVACEEC has developed an online survey (Jotform) for parents, educators and community members who are unable to attend a meeting in person.

The survey has provided the council the opportunity to be informed of areas of strengths and areas of concern in school systems and classrooms across the state.

Each completed survey receives an automatic response upon submission that provides links to resources such as Policy 2419, Due Process and Dispute Resolution, and A Parent;s Advocacy Guide to Special Education.

The council considers each submission the same as a parent, family member, educator or community member sharing with the council in person.

Each submission is discussed during WVACEEC meetings and a return email is provided to share additional resources and information discussed during the meeting.

A total of 64 Jotform Surveys were submitted.

Jotform Questions:

Jotform/Survey Questions	Summary of Survey Response (Examples)
What are (3) things that you like about your child's school or education program?	<input type="checkbox"/> Teachers that care <input type="checkbox"/> Clean School Facilities <input type="checkbox"/> Related Service Providers <input type="checkbox"/> Mainstreamed Classrooms <input type="checkbox"/> Safe, caring environment for students
What are (3) things that you are concerned about regarding your child's education?	<input type="checkbox"/> Substitute teacher and classroom aide training <input type="checkbox"/> Certified teachers in the classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Behavior concerns of students and how behaviors are handled in school <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline/Suspensions of Special Education Students <input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health Concerns of Students <input type="checkbox"/> Parents feeling welcome at IEP meetings <input type="checkbox"/> Having student's IEP's followed <input type="checkbox"/> Generic Accommodations provided for students
Is there anything else that you would like to share about	

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your child's education?	
Do you want to be sent the meeting link to attend the next WVACEEC meeting virtually?	<p>Most people do not request a link to the meeting. However, when they do, a link is provided for them to participate virtually via Zoom.</p> <p>There have been a few occasions where a submission was provided AND the parent attended in person or virtually.</p>

Based on Council Takeaways obtained through district presentations, public comments and jotform submissions, the WVACEEC makes the following recommendations to the WVDE/WVSBEOE:

1. *Despite the growing success of West Virginia’s Grow Your Own (GYO) teacher program, there remains a critical gap in the number of high school students selecting special education as their intended certification area. This trend is concerning given the persistent statewide shortage of qualified special educators and the high turnover in special education classrooms. While Grow Your Own programs have increased interest in teaching careers overall, general education pathways (such as elementary or secondary content areas) continue to attract the majority of participants. Special education, despite being one of the highest-need fields, remains under-selected due to perceived workload, lack of exposure to the field, and limited financial or academic incentives.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Special Education Signing Incentives for Grow Your Own Students

Offer targeted financial incentives (e.g., \$1,000–\$2,000 scholarships, stipends, or tuition waivers) for GYO participants who commit to a special education certification track by the end of their junior year of high school.

Early Exposure Through Peer Mentorship and Classroom Internships

Partner GYO students with experienced special educators and provide structured internship or observation hours in inclusive and self-contained classrooms. Early positive exposure can shift perceptions and build confidence in the field.

Create a “Special Education Scholars” Track

Establish a formal recognition program within GYO that honors students who choose special education, offering exclusive leadership opportunities, specialized training, and mentorship from both higher education faculty and district-level special education

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coordinators.

Guaranteed Job Placement and Priority Hiring

Collaborate with districts to offer GYO special education candidates guaranteed interviews and priority placement upon successful completion of their certification and degree, with an added retention bonus for remaining in a special education role for at least three years.

Emphasize the Impact and Career Pathways

Integrate recruitment materials that highlight the life-changing work of special educators and the diverse career advancement opportunities within the field (e.g., behavior specialist, IEP coordinator, special education director).

2. *Since the implementation of West Virginia House Bill 3035, which expands access to early literacy and foundational skills instruction, districts across the state have reported a noticeable increase in the shortage of classroom aides. This shortage poses a significant risk to the bill's intended impact, particularly in Pre-K through 3rd grade settings where small-group instruction and individualized support are critical to early learning success. Classroom aides play an essential role in supporting differentiated instruction, managing classroom behavior, and assisting with the implementation of intervention strategies, particularly in early grades. The increased instructional demands introduced by HB 3035, coupled with existing staffing challenges, have heightened the urgency to address this workforce gap. Without immediate and sustained action, schools may struggle to meet student needs, and the goals of HB 3035 could be undermined.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Increase Compensation and Benefits for Aides: Work with local and state policymakers to explore competitive wage increases, health benefits, and incentives such as signing bonuses or tuition assistance for aides pursuing teaching credentials.

Develop Grow-Your-Own Programs: Partner with community colleges and workforce development agencies to create pathways for high school graduates, paraprofessionals, and career changers to enter aide positions with clear pathways to teacher certification if desired.

Offer Flexible Scheduling and Part-Time Options: Modify job descriptions and schedules to attract a wider pool of applicants, including retirees, stay-at-home parents, and college students seeking part-time employment.

3. *West Virginia classrooms are increasingly diverse in terms of learning needs, particularly with growing populations of students with disabilities, autism, mental health challenges, and behavior disorders. Yet, many new educators enter the workforce underprepared to*

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implement specially designed instruction (SDI), manage challenging behaviors, or tailor instruction to meet individualized student needs.

To ensure that newly licensed educators are classroom-ready and equipped to meet the diverse needs of West Virginia students, the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) should promote and formalize deeper collaboration with Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) offering teacher preparation programs. These partnerships must emphasize the educational priorities of the WVDE, including specially designed instruction, evidence-based accommodations, and behavior and mental health strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Establish WVDE-IHE Curriculum Alignment Workgroups

Create formal workgroups involving WVDE representatives, district leaders, and IHE faculty to review and align teacher preparation course content with state priorities, particularly around SDI, accommodations, and behavioral supports.

Require Clinical Experience in High-Need Classrooms

Encourage or require IHEs to place preservice teachers in inclusive settings or classrooms that serve students with autism, emotional/behavioral disorders, or intensive support needs. Practical exposure to differentiated instruction and positive behavioral supports is essential for skill development.

Incorporate Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Training

Promote integration of modules focused on trauma-informed teaching, social-emotional learning, and mental health first aid into teacher education coursework.

Leverage Statewide Professional Development Resources

Provide IHEs with access to WVDE-developed resources, training frameworks, and statewide PD events so that preservice instructors can embed current best practices and WV specific policy expectations into their instruction.

Develop a Special Education Micro-Credential or Endorsement Option

In collaboration with IHEs, create a voluntary micro-credential or endorsement pathway for general education preservice teachers that focuses on instructional strategies for students with disabilities and behavioral or mental health needs.

Monitor Impact and Share Promising Practices

Create mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these collaborative efforts by tracking teacher preparedness surveys, principal feedback, and student performance outcomes. Promote replication of successful partnerships statewide.

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4. *Student behavior concerns across all grade levels are increasing in frequency and intensity, placing added pressure on teachers, administrators, and support staff. Challenging behaviors, particularly among students with disabilities, trauma histories, or mental health diagnoses, are negatively impacting learning environments and contributing to teacher burnout and attrition.*

To address this urgent need, the WVDE should support the expanded utilization of Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs) as a key component of a district-wide behavior support framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Pilot RBT Integration in High-Need Schools

Launch pilot programs that embed RBTs in schools with the highest rates of behavioral incidents, office referrals, or out-of-school suspensions.

Partner with BCBAs for Supervision and Oversight

Ensure all RBTs work under the guidance of a BCBA to develop and implement Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and to ensure adherence to ethical and effective practices.

Develop a Grow-Your-Own RBT Pipeline

Partner with local workforce agencies or community colleges to provide training and certification opportunities for existing aides or new hires to become RBTs, offering incentives like tuition reimbursement or stipends.

Respectfully submitted,

Dawn Embrey-King
Executive Director
WVACEEC

**WVACEEC Annual Report
2024-2025**