



West Virginia DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

Office of Special Education's Response to the
WV Advisory Council for the Education of
Exceptional Students
2024 Report

June 13, 2025

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires each state to establish and maintain a State Advisory Panel for the purpose of advising state special education officials on the education of eligible children with disabilities [34 CFR § 300.167]. In alignment with this federal requirement, the West Virginia Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Children (WVACEEC) is mandated by West Virginia State Code 18-20-6. The Council is charged in part with advising 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. After conducting forums around the state during the 2023-2024 school year, *the WVACEEC made the following recommendations based on parent/family/educator feedback and council takeaways:*

- Based on the critical need for qualified special education teachers in WV, the WVACEEC recommends that the WVDE continue to expand the **Grow your Own** Pathway to Teaching Program. The council recommends that funding be provided to create a specific cohort of special educators.
- Based on the number of parents and families that the council heard from that do not feel heard, or that their input is valued regarding their children's education, the WVACEEC recommends that training opportunities be provided to IEP Team members including administrators who often chair the IEP Team meetings. The **Facilitated IEP** training model would be a beneficial type of training for any teacher, service provider and administrator that participates in IEP Team meetings.
- Based on the high number of students in special education in the foster care system, the WVACEEC recognizes the need to support students, foster parents and schools. Special education adds another layer of communication and service delivery hurdles. The WVACEEC recommends that the WVDE continue to expand the work of the WV Schools of Diversion and Transition **Education Recovery Specialists**. The council recommends that the Office of Federal Programs/Special Education collaborate with the WV Schools of Diversion in Transition to institute a stronger communication system with the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), county attendance directors, and foster agencies to better support students with disabilities in foster care.
- Based on the transition needs of students with disabilities and data from the WVDE Office of Special Education SPP/APR, the WVACEEC recommends the expansion of **Project Search** across WV. Currently, 4 counties in WV participate

in Project Search. The council recommends that the WVDE Office of Special Education utilize Project Search at WVU Medicine/Ruby Memorial Hospital as a model of job training and employment opportunities for students with disabilities. The council recommends that Project Search be promoted at conferences and special education director's meetings and calls. The council also recommends that Project Search be included as a transition option in the Office of Special Education's Guidepost to Graduation pathway to post school outcomes.

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE), through the Office of Special Education (OSE), works collaboratively with the West Virginia Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Children (WVACEEC) and remains committed to advancing educational excellence for students with exceptional needs. In alignment with this mission and in response to the 2024 WVACEEC annual report, the WVDE/OSE has implemented a series of targeted initiatives designed to strengthen support systems, enhance professional development, and improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Guided by recommendations from the WVACEEC, these efforts reflect a collaborative, statewide approach to addressing the critical areas identified in the 2024 WVACEEC report. The remainder of this report expands on the work that has been initiated and completed in each area.

Facilitated IEP Training

The WVACEEC recommended, based on the number of parents and families reporting they do not feel heard or that their input is not valued regarding their children's education, that the WVDE provide training opportunities to IEP Team members including administrators who often chair the IEP Team meetings. The council's report further noted that the Facilitated IEP training model would be a beneficial type of training for any teacher, service provider and administrator that participates in IEP Team meetings.

The WVDE/OSE has been proactive in developing, delivering and improving training opportunities that will result in continuous improvement in IEP processes throughout West Virginia. The WVDE/OSE has provided IEP training to various audiences comprising IEP teams on many occasions throughout the 2024-25 school year. Most recently, approximately 200 new special educators or those who have not met full certification requirements were trained at the 3rd annual boot camp event targeting this group. This allows inexperienced teachers to learn their role as an IEP team member. Not only receiving training on the mechanics of the development of a quality IEP, the group was also supported on the development of parent engagement strategies that will enable them to form relationships with parents based on full transparency and a shared

partnership to ensure that IEPs are developed with the meaningful participation of all team members to ensure that students receive a quality education. The STRIVE spring special education conference was another highly successful recent event that targeted capacity building local educational agency (LEA) teams comprised of principals, special education directors, general and special educators, superintendents and other LEA staff who were also trained in the content addressed at the boot camps and identified as an area of need by the WVACEEC. At this event the LEAs were provided with the resources and information necessary to go back to their LEAs to provide this training to all relevant staff statewide. This STRIVE Spring event required a training plan from each LEA and provided a grant opportunity to assist LEAs in rolling out this valuable information throughout the state.

In response to the recommendation from the WVACEEC referencing the value in the facilitated IEP process, WVDE/OSE took significant steps to address this need for IEP facilitation skills within LEAs. During the summer and early fall of 2024, WVDE/OSE offered each LEA the opportunity to register send staff members for training through Key2Ed on the Facilitated IEP (FIEP) training model. This training is designed to equip LEA staff with the skills to navigate IEP meetings successfully and reach consensus using the same techniques implemented by the state's neutral facilitators. To support this initiative, WVDE was able to support the cost of the training and issue grants to LEAs to provide stipends for staff who might not be working within their LEA contract during the training sessions, ensuring that financial constraints would not hinder participation.

Three separate dates were offered to accommodate the maximum number of participants. The training, conducted by Key2Ed offered both virtual and face-to-face models and allowed participants to choose a fast-paced intensive course or a slower paced option, spanning either two or three days to accommodate participants with various scheduling needs and learning styles. The FIEP training provided intensive instruction in conflict prevention and IEP Meeting Facilitation. Across the state, 65 participants took part in this training. Participants learned to guide IEP teams to develop effective, compliant educational programs for individual students, focusing on positive communication, conflict reduction, and student needs. Practice sessions during the training focused on building mutual understanding, creating agreements with full participation of all IEP team members, generating informed discussions, and resolving or preventing conflicts. Real-life IEP meeting simulations provided hands-on practice, preparing facilitators to implement these techniques immediately. Through these efforts, WVDE/OSE has ensured that LEA staff are well-equipped to facilitate IEP meetings effectively, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment for students.

Students with Disabilities in Foster Care – In and Out of State

The WVACEEC recommended that the WVDE continue to expand the work of the WV Schools of Diversion and Transition (WVSDT) Education Recovery Specialists. The council recommends that the Office of Federal Programs/Special Education collaborate with the WVSDT to institute a stronger communication system with the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), county attendance directors, and foster agencies to better support students with disabilities in foster care.

The WVDE/OSE is part of an interagency system that monitors the treatment of West Virginia students who are in the custody of the State and are placed in out-of-state residential facilities through a court order. In collaboration with the Department of Human Services (DoHS), the WVDE ensures that special education services for “foster students” in these facilities are implemented as seamlessly as possible to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) when their non-educational needs dictate the need for a change in their physical placement. A complex system of tracking and continuous monitoring is in place to facilitate this transition and to create a supportive educational environment that addresses the unique needs and promotes the academic and personal development of each student impacted. For all students in out of state facilities, whether students with disabilities or general education students, the transition specialists at the WVSDT work with facilities and the WV LEAs to ensure that students are scheduled in the correct classes and progressing appropriately toward graduation.

The Education of Children in Out-of-Home Care Advisory Committee in West Virginia collaborates with various projects and initiatives to support the study of residential placement of children. The committee holds regular meetings titled "Education for Out-of-Home Care," where stakeholders from different departments, including the WVDE/OSE, the WVSDT, and others review the educational needs of foster students. These efforts aim to ensure a supportive and effective educational environment for foster students, through collaboration of all entities who serve as a resource to students in foster care. Additionally, the committee focuses on increasing educational participation in Multi-Disciplinary Treatment Teams (MDTs), implementing the foster care provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and expanding statewide transitional services to assist students in their educational journey.

In West Virginia, the Foster Care Education Lead Specialist plays a vital role in supporting students transitioning between LEAs and foster homes. This position is housed within the WVSDT and works in close collaboration with the WVDE/OSE. The specialist's role is to facilitate smooth transitions by coordinating with foster care points of contact in sending and receiving LEAs. They provide essential guidance to foster families, particularly those caring for students with disabilities, and connects them with community resources based on availability and location to ensure students receive the support they need.

In addition to these responsibilities, the foster care specialist collaborates with LEAs and the WVDE to track academic credits, verifying foster students within the state are successfully working toward completion of the necessary credits for graduation. The foster care specialists actively participate in relevant student meetings, including Student Assistance Team (SAT), Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team (MDET), Individualized Education Program (IEP), and Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) meetings. The specialist advocates for the best interest of foster care students to ensure timely enrollment or continued enrollment in the appropriate school, facilitates communication, and provides support to the teams and professionals involved in the students' education.

To support accurate tracking of students, the foster care specialist is working to distribute foster care lists to LEA points of contact for foster students on a bi-monthly basis and is currently collaborating with WVDE to expand the integration of this data into the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) for more timely updates. Their work ensures that enrollment is not delayed due to special education needs, safeguarding students' right to FAPE. In addition, schools are asked to add a mechanism to enrollment documents as a second layer of data collection to ensure that students in foster care are identified and that their educational needs are being met. The WVDE/OSE has worked diligently to establish contacts at each LEA on both the education and social services domains to facilitate the attendance of an education representative at MDT meetings, which is required by law.

Regular updates and guidance from the foster care specialists are shared with special education directors through universal support TEAMS calls and email communications, reinforcing the strong partnership between WVDE/OSE, LEAs, and WVSDT in supporting foster students with disabilities.

Finally, the ESSA monitoring protocol enforces requirements under the federal law regarding the educational rights of students in foster care to ensure that the best interest of the students is considered in order to give each individual student every opportunity to succeed academically and beyond the classroom.

Grow Your Own

In its 2024 Annual Report the WVACEEC recommended that the WVDE continue to expand the Grow you Own Pathway to Teaching Program by providing funding to create a specific cohort of special educators due to the critical need for qualified special education teachers in West Virginia.

To address the critical shortage of special education teachers, the WVDE/OSE is collaborating with the Grow Your Own Pathway to Teaching Program facilitated by the Office of Educator Preparation. This partnership aims to attract and retain new special education teachers through a series of targeted recruitment strategies spanning 34 LEAs actively participating in the program. OSE staff have proposed to actively engage with students by visiting Grow Your Own classrooms across West Virginia to conduct informational sessions that will hopefully spark interest in potential career paths in the field of special education. These sessions will provide detailed insights into the benefits of a career in special education, including the development of the skills and personal satisfaction of creating the special designed instruction necessary to reach students who have identified needs outside the scope of typically developed instruction in order to access the general education curriculum, the opportunities provided through the three-step pay raise for special educators, and will outline the different types of certifications and positions available within the state. The WVDE/OSE is also proposing following up the initial information sharing visits with virtual or in-person classroom professional learning opportunities to support participants statewide by providing mini sessions that will give them information and training relevant to a career in special education. This would provide resources to students in the Grow Your Own Pathway program and benefit the state in its recruitment and development of special educators. Currently only 19 of the 476 students in the Grow Your Own Pathway have delineated special education as their preferred endorsement area. The opportunity exists to develop a cohort of these students and other undecided participants to provide outreach, communication and recruitment. Presently students in the Grow Your Own program are able to take college courses with funding provided by the West Virginia legislature designed to guide them in their goal of becoming a teacher. One of the courses, *Exceptionalities*, is being encouraged for all teachers and may serve as a recruitment tool for the special education educator preparation programs.

In addition to Grow You Own, the WVDE/OSE is collaborating with the Office of Educator Preparation to reach students currently enrolled in teacher education programs in our

West Virginia Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) as part of the OSE's new Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) initiative. The implementation of this initiative has resulted in a Community of Practice being created with professors at IHEs throughout the state and leadership at the WVDE to allow collaboration between those working in the field and those training new teachers to join the profession. Specifically, this endeavor aims to positively impact teacher education content, programmatic scope, and will hopefully result in the development of qualified teachers who are more prepared to step into a classroom ready to positively impact student outcomes.

To measure the effectiveness of these initiatives, the WVDE/OSE will track the number of students participating in Grow your Own and in supplemental activities provided by the OSE for current and potential special education teacher candidates, as well as the recruitment and retention rates of new special education teachers. This data will help refine and improve the strategies to ensure a steady influx of qualified special education professionals.

*Note: The WVDE OSE and Office of Educator Preparation have worked collaboratively throughout the past two school years with LEAs, technical assistance centers and other partners to develop a grant proposal to apply for a large federal Special Education Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) to address the recruitment, training and retention of qualified special educators. Although extensive time and effort was put into the acquisition of this grant opportunity, the funding for this longstanding project administered by the U.S. Department of Education has been eliminated at this time due to the recent focus on "waste" at the federal level. If the grant funding is reinstated in the future the WVDE is prepared to submit the proposal that has been developed and if approved may be able to offer tuition reimbursement or deferment for candidates seeking a career in special education.

Project SEARCH

The WVACEEC noted its interest in the expansion of Project SEARCH across West Virginia, specifically promoting the program at conferences and special education director meetings and calls. The council also recommends that Project Search be included as a transition option in the Office of Special Education's Guidepost to Graduation pathway to post school outcomes.

Project SEARCH (PS) in West Virginia is a collaborative initiative involving LEAs, the WVDE/OSE, and the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitative Services (WV DRS), which serves as the statewide coordinator for each PS site. Together, these partners have

worked to establish and sustain a successful local PS worksite that provides students with disabilities real-world immersive job training and transition support, often leading to full time paid positions for participants who have successfully graduated from the program.

To facilitate the launch of new PS sites, WVDE/OSE has provided substantial support through the WV Guideposts to Graduation (WVGtG) grant program. Since Spring 2024, approximately \$130,000 in WVGtG funds have been awarded to LEAs to cover startup costs, transportation, and staffing for new PS sites. Additionally, the WVDE/OSE allocated \$200,000 in grant funding to Ruby Memorial Hospital to fund the cost of working with students participating in the program. The Ruby Memorial PS site operates under a unique funding model distinct from the national PS framework and serves several northern West Virginia LEAs. This has allowed these pilot LEAs to reap the benefits of PS without significant financial hardship.

WVDE/OSE has promoted PS through statewide events to encourage its expansion. At the inaugural secondary transition conference in 2024, the national Project SEARCH office delivered the closing keynote. They are scheduled to return in June 2025 to lead six breakout sessions on establishing new PS sites, further expanding the program's reach. The PS annual graduation ceremony video has been historically shared annually with special education directors throughout the state to spread awareness and interest in the program.

Summary

While addressing the recommendations of the WVACEEC and the shared desire to impact positive outcomes for students with disabilities, the WVDE/OSE has demonstrated a proactive and collaborative approach to continuous improvement initiatives. Through the utilization of federal and state special education funding and the valuable feedback provided by both the WVACEEC and other stakeholders, initiatives such as Facilitated IEP training, enhanced support for out-of-home care students, Grow Your Own, and the expansion of Project SEARCH, have been prioritized to allow the WVDE/OSE to continue to build capacity within LEAs, foster interagency partnerships, and promote inclusive practices. These efforts reflect a steadfast commitment to ensuring that every student in West Virginia has the resources, supports, and opportunities necessary to access the general education curriculum, to improve results, and to thrive academically and in the world beyond graduation.