



West Virginia Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Children

ANNUAL REPORT
School Year | 2024-2025

Preface

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) requires each state to have an Advisory Panel. 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 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 composed of members appointed by the State Superintendent of Schools.

Council Members

Ashley Orndorff, Co-Chair
Erica Sauer, Co-Chair
Rhonda Hayes
Happy Plaugher
Samantha Ribeiro-Matos
Katie Keener
Rachel Hatfield
Kelly Crow
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Council Staff

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

COUNCIL ACTIVITIES

The Advisory Council plans and initiates a variety of activities to meet its charge and achieve its mission.

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, both required by federal law.
- cooperates and collaborates with the West Virginia Department of Education/Office of Special Education (OSE) to address the unmet needs of students with exceptionalities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although the Council is charged with identifying the unmet needs of children with exceptionalities, it is important to recognize that there are many parents, families, educators, and other agencies working together to ensure access to the benefits of public education. Examples include, but are by no means limited to:

PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

We offer our deepest gratitude to all parents, families, and community members who continue to support and improve services for every student. Your dedication makes a meaningful difference. We also extend special thanks to the community members who shared their feedback and ideas during the Council's public meetings this year.

LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

We sincerely appreciate the local school districts for their commitment to improving services for all students. We value their responsiveness to feedback and their willingness to engage in open dialogue that strengthens our shared work. We also extend our thanks to the districts that hosted Council meetings and provided spaces for productive discussion. Their partnership and support help ensure that every student's needs remain at the center of our efforts.

WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Council recognizes the importance of continued teacher training based on evidence-based practices. We commend the Office of Special Education for its strong partnerships with state, regional, and national technical assistance centers. The Council also acknowledges the efforts of the special education office for supporting districts through a multi-tiered approach that includes universal, targeted, and intensive supports.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

The Council applauds the West Virginia Board of Education for demonstrating leadership in setting strategic goals for school improvement. Their development of clear policies and accountability measures helps schools make real progress. This leadership, along with ongoing professional development and guidance, has opened new opportunities to enhance achievement for all students

Meeting Dates	Districts Represented
October 17 – 18, 2024	Randolph, Pocahontas
November 14 – 15, 2024	Wood, Ritchie, Wirt
March 13 – 14, 2025	Logan, Boone
April 3 – 4, 2025	Ohio, Marshall

For information about these meetings or to obtain a copy of the minutes, please email Dawn Embrey-King, Executive Director (dembreyking@k12.wv.us)

UNMET NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on Council Takeaways obtained through district presentations, public comments, and JotForm submissions, the WVACEEC has identified the unmet needs and makes the following recommendations to the WVDE/WVSBOE:

1. GROW YOUR OWN (GYO)

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 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. WEST VIRGINIA HOUSE BILL 3035

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. UNDERPREPARED WORKFORCE

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 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.

4. STUDENT BEHAVIOR

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 on behalf of the chairperson,

Dawn Embrey-King

Executive Director, WVACEEC