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## Special ed faculty in demand despite drop in child count

One might think that the need for professors to train K-12 special ed teachers would diminish as the [IDEA child count drops](#).

In fact, people with such degrees are needed now more than ever, observers say, because they can show prospective general educators how to work with all students instead of making [referrals](#) to special ed.

However, a pending wave of retirements will limit the number of people with doctorates in special ed, threatening the drive for blended training and underscoring the need to maintain OSEP's [personnel preparation](#) programs, these observers say.

Leading the cries of alarm about the supply of new doctoral graduates is Deborah Deutsch Smith, a professor of special ed at [Claremont Graduate University](#) and principal investigator for the [Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment](#).

"It's a stunning and remarkable imbalance that happens now and is only going to continue to get worse over the next five years," she said.

In a [preview](#) of a forthcoming report, Smith says the special ed field is making gains in producing more people with doctorates.

The number of doctoral students has risen 7 percent over 10 years and the number of doctoral programs has increased by 16 percent during that time, she says.

Most important, there has been a 28 percent increase over just five years in the number of new doctoral graduates, she says.

But according to her research, the number of special ed professors who are retiring is rising by 21 percent annually.

In fact, from one-half to two-thirds of the faculty at the 90 institutions that grant doctorates in special ed will retire over the next six years, she said.

## **Finding new job opportunities**

This is Smith's second report on the issue since [2001](#), and she had hoped the problem of having too few special ed professors would have been solved by now.

"I thought when we began the study that maybe there's no longer a [Ph.D.] shortage," she said. "I walk into a study like this with an open mind."

But the numbers do not lie, she said.

"I mean, we are just blown away [at the] significant changes on the demand side that outstrip these improvements on the supply side," she said.

The shortfall is important, she said, even though the number of children with disabilities is declining as educators emphasize strategies like [RTI](#).

RTI is "doing exactly what it's supposed to do [by] preventing some of those problems in the general ed classroom," she said.

But the children who used to be in special ed haven't gone away, she said, and neither has the need for people who can teach others how to serve them.

A recent case shows the continuing need for people with special ed training at the doctoral level, regardless of where they end up working, according to Ben Lignugaris/Kraft, head of the [Special Education and Rehabilitation Department](#) at [Utah State University](#) and president of the [Higher Education Consortium for Special Education](#).

Recently, he said, the university hired a woman with a doctorate in special ed. But she did not join the special ed department.

Rather, she joined the [School of Teacher Education and Leadership](#), where she is showing students how to use RTI to help at-risk children improve their reading and writing skills, he said.

"As we produce new doctoral candidates and as this demand arises for general ed training, a number of those people are going to be hired into positions in general ed," he said.

## **Keeping an eye on Congress**

In some ways, Smith said, the shortage of people with doctoral training is simply a product of a field that is coming of age.

"We have a relatively new discipline, [and] a lot of people were prepared in the late '70s, early '80s, to become faculty," she said. "So what you've got is this huge bubble, moving up chronologically up through the ranks."

In fact, some special ed professors have "continued to work because they can't find replacements for themselves," she said.

That's something Congress should remember as it considers various proposals to cut funding for education, she said.

For FY 2011, Congress provided \$88,466,000 for personnel preparation programs, including funding specifically to train new candidates for doctorates in special ed.

After all, Smith said, special ed has matured, and "we don't want to lose the gains that these kids have made."

But if there aren't enough people to train the teachers, there is a risk of backsliding, she said.

"It all relates to the results for kids," she said.

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