

Confronting the Special Education Staff Shortage

What districts can do to curb the negative effects and outcomes of a limited special education staff

SESSION *Special Education Staff Shortage: What Should Districts Do?*

Presenters CESA 7: Nissan Bar-Lev, special education director; Department of Public Instruction: Sheryl Thormann, special education consultant

Faced with an acute shortage of licensed special education staff, school districts across Wisconsin — and throughout the United States — are struggling to meet student needs and their own legal obligations to do so.

Nissan Bar-Lev, special education director for CESA 7, and Sheryl Thormann, special education consultant for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), discussed the staffing shortage and offered several options for districts that aren't able to find enough licensed staff. The presenters focused on the position of speech and language pathologist because the shortage in that area is so acute. Bar-Lev said there are 10,000 positions open nationwide.

If districts are unable to provide speech services to students according to the terms of their individualized education plans (IEPs), parents can file complaints with the DPI and districts can face sanctions, Thormann explained.

"We want to provide services to kids but when there are shortages, we have issues," she said.

Districts are more likely to prevent parents from filing complaints if they address the situation in a proactive manner, Thormann continued. If the district does not have access to a

licensed pathologist, she suggested writing a letter to parents explaining the situation and assuring them that the district is doing all that it can to find someone to fill the position.

Districts should also document what is happening with the student in question to determine whether the lack of service is making the student regress in language skills. Districts should also keep track of the amount of speech service the student is missing in order to make up the lost time with some sort of compensatory service later.

The IEP team for an individual student, which includes the parents, should also be reconvened so members can discuss alternatives for providing speech services.

Bar-Lev said the shortage of pathologists first became evident in 2013. A statewide task force convened to work on the issue and came up with suggestions for districts.

The DPI maintains a website where districts can post vacancies and look for candidates. Districts can offer incentives or hire outside companies to provide services.

Classroom teachers may also be able to help students with speech issues such as vocabulary development and pragmatic language skills, Bar-Lev said.

Special education paraprofessionals can help students practice skills using



RESOURCES:

Guidance to School Districts Facing Shortage of Speech & Language Pathologists (WCASS Special Projects Committee) — gg.gg/3yo9n

The Use of Telespeech as a Service Delivery Method for Speech and Language Services (DPI Information Update Bulletin 12.02) — gg.gg/3yo9p

Describing Special Education, Related Services, Supplementary Aids and Services, and Program Modifications and Supports (DPI Information Update Bulletin 10.07) — gg.gg/3yo9q

instructions given by a licensed pathologist. Paraprofessionals can help in other ways such as behavior management, clerical support, and maintaining and programming equipment. This would free up a pathologist to spend more one-on-one time with students.

Another option is to use online speech services. A licensed pathologist works with students during video conferences and students practice their skills using online games and activities.

"Kids love technology. What kid wouldn't want to participate in a program like that?" Bar-Lev said.

However, not all students have the ability to benefit from an online service since they must be able to hear, follow directions and sit in front of a computer for a set period of time. Using an online service has to be written into a student's IEP, he added. ■