



Educating New Jersey's Most Vulnerable Students with Disabilities

The School Staff Shortage Crisis at Approved Private Schools for Students with Disabilities

Executive Summary

While the national and statewide shortage of school staff is affecting ALL students, there are unique challenges *and unique solutions* to better serve the 10,000 public school students with disabilities who are placed by sending districts in New Jersey's approved private schools for students with disabilities (APSSDs).

These schools are an important safety net for local public schools, who are responsible under state and federal law (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33>) for delivering appropriate and individualized special education services to all students who are eligible.

Under federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400, et., (found here: <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33>) private special education schools are part of the required "full continuum" of placement options that must be made available to students with disabilities. As such, APSSDs operate as **part of the public school system**. Students placed at APSSDs are public school students. They are placed by public school employees after it is determined that the public programs are not able to offer the range, scope, or intensity of services a child needs. Tuition is paid through public tax dollars.

Other states have true private schools, most of which operate like New Jersey's independent schools, but the concept of "private" schools for students with disabilities in New Jersey is somewhat misleading. APSSDs are heavily regulated and monitored by NJDOE for fiscal and program excellence. Tuition is set annually, not by the school itself, but by NJDOE. Tuition rates are based on a set of costs that NJDOE deems to be "allowable." Any cost that is not "allowable" cannot be counted toward tuition.

While APSSDs serve more than 10,000 of New Jersey's most complex public school students with disabilities, they face a unique set of rules and limitations that make it extremely difficult to operate. The following recommendations would ease hiring, recruiting, and retention challenges faced by APSSDs, allowing us to partner more effectively with local public schools in order to best serve students for whom they are responsible.

Recommended Policy Changes

Certification and Credentialing

It is time-intensive and costly for an educator to be certified to teach special education in New Jersey. NJDOE certification rules create a strong disincentive for educators to pursue special education. Teachers must be dually-certified for jobs that are harder and likely offer lower pay.

1. Allow APSSDs to participate in the limited CE/CEAS program.
2. Allow for the temporary use of long-term substitute teachers beyond 60 days.
3. Allow educators with special education teaching certification to demonstrate core knowledge in other content areas by taking Praxis, with no added coursework required.
4. Allow APSSDs to hire teachers for departmental classrooms at the secondary level according to NJAC 6A:14-4.7 (g) in the same ways that public programs are allowed.
5. Allow educators with a bachelor's degree who are enrolled in an approved teacher preparation program to get 2-year emergency teaching certificate.
6. Allow school professionals who are certified/credentialed in other states to practice in NJ.
7. Allow teachers to earn more than 6 transferrable credits at community colleges.
8. Expedite and streamline the fingerprinting process, and ensure better communication.

Compensation and Benefits

It is vital that APSSDs are able to offer attractive, competitive salaries, benefits and compensation packages if they are to compete in today's job market. APSSDs are at an added disadvantage in several areas including outdated salary caps, outdated and incomplete salary guide, benefits and bonuses.

1. NJDOE should complete a formal salary and benefits study, and make necessary changes to allow APSSDs to offer competitive compensation packages. ¹
2. NJDOE should update outdated salary "caps."
3. NJDOE should establish reasonable salary and rate guides for a broad range of specialists and outside contractors (e.g. psychiatrists, BCBAs, physicians.)
4. NJ leaders should enact A-2514 and make its provisions effective immediately.

(1)N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-18.3 (o)(3) requires NJDOE to initiate a study examining the maximum allowable salary structure. In conducting the study, the Department may seek and/or include input from an APSSD representative(s). The study includes a data-driven review of maximum salaries and recommendations, if any, for changes to the maximum allowable salary calculation formula contained. The study has not been completed.

Career Ladder, Professional Growth, and Leadership Development

Educators need accessible, affordable, and visible ways to advance in their careers. NJDOE's fiscal code for APSSDs, as it relates to professional development, is very limiting.

1. Expand allowable costs to include more spending for professional development.
2. Provide more generous stipends and/or tuition remission to new teachers in exchange for a commitment to teach complex special education students for a period of 3-5 years.
3. Provide state funding for tuition remission to support paraprofessionals as they pursue teaching credentials.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Most educators are not familiar with or exposed to APSSDs or the education of students with severe disabilities. They lack awareness about professional opportunities at APSSDs.

1. Teacher preparation programs should develop and promote tracks for educators to teach students with severe and profound disabilities.
2. Teacher preparation programs should be encouraged to place student teachers at APSSDs.
3. NJDOE should allow employment opportunities at APSSDs to be listed alongside those of local education agencies (LEAs) on the NJDOE website under Education Employment Opportunities.
4. State education stakeholder groups should engage leaders from APSSDs in mentorship roles with NJ Association of School Business Administrators, NJ Leader to Leader, and NJ Excel.

Staff Retention

Fiscal flexibility must allow APSSDs to engage in staff retention strategies, and have costs associated with such efforts included in allowable costs.

1. Increase the cap on payout for unused paid time off in order to remove the incentive to use the days.
2. Allow APSSDs to offer stipends based on years of service.
3. Increase caps on professional development costs to allow APSSDs to train and develop a crisis team that can step in when teachers need help in the classroom.