

Introduction to Special Education Policy for Higher Education Faculty

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ABSTRACT

Policy plays a crucial role in shaping special education practices. It is essential that special education professionals, particularly those in higher education, understand the policies that shape programs and practices and take an active role in their ongoing development. This article will provide historical context for special education law and policy. The authors also emphasize key components at the local, state, and federal levels. Finally, the article will highlight the critical role of higher education faculty engagement in policy development and implementation, including actionable steps for faculty to undertake.

KEYWORDS

Higher education faculty, policy, special education policy, special education laws, teacher preparation

Policy plays a crucial role in shaping the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities and significantly influences the implementation of special education. To effectively prepare all educators for their roles in this area, it is essential that faculty members not only understand special education policy but also grasp how it impacts the broader landscape of higher education. Special education policy encompasses a wide range of laws, regulations, court cases, and practices that directly affect the education, services, and support provided to students with disabilities. These policies operate at the federal, state, and local levels, each contributing to a complex system that determines how and where special education services are provided to students with disabilities.

At its core, special education is designed to address the specific educational needs of students with disabilities by ensuring appropriate services and support. In the United States, legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) serve as cornerstones of these policies. IDEA (2004) mandates that public schools provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE) to all eligible students with disabilities, while Section 504 protects all individuals with disabilities from discrimination in programs that receive federal funding. These legal structures are not only foundational but also drive the evolution of special education practices.

Special education policy is rooted in inclusion (Kirby, 2017) and emphasizes diversity, equity, and equality (Nelson, 2024; see definitions in Table 1). These principles are central to the legal framework and guide the broader educational mission of striving for an inclusive environment where all students can succeed. Faculty in special education programs typically come to the table with a basic understanding of these principles, as well as their connection to policy. It is their professional responsibility to support future educators' ability to navigate the relationship between policy and practice. This will ensure they have adequate preparation in order to advocate for and implement inclusive practices in their own classroom. In the following sections, we will explore how policy comes to be, the key policies and laws that shape special education, the various levels of policy implementation, and the role these policies play in higher education.

TABLE 1: Key Special Education Policy Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
Diversity	“In special education policy, diversity refers to recognizing and addressing the wide range of differences among students, including their abilities, cultures, languages, races and socioeconomic backgrounds. It emphasizes inclusive education, culturally and linguistically responsive practices, and addressing disproportionality such as the overrepresentation of certain racial groups in special education. Federal laws like IDEA and Section 504 mandate that all students, regardless of background, receive equitable access to education and services.” (Nelson, 2024)
Equity	“Equity means ensuring that students with disabilities receive the individualized support and resources they need to access the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers.” (Nelson, 2024)
Equality	“...equality, which treats all students the same, equity focuses on addressing each student’s unique needs through tools like the Individualized Education Program or IEP and fair distribution of resources. It aims to eliminate disparities in areas such as identification, placement and discipline, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds.” (Nelson, 2024)
Inclusion	“Inclusion refers to their practice of educating students with disabilities in general education in classrooms alongside their peers to the greatest extent possible. The goal of inclusion is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the same academic curriculum, social experiences and extracurricular opportunities as other students, while receiving appropriate supports and services to meet their individualized needs.” (Nelson, 2024)

THE FORMATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY

Special education policy is in play at local, state, and federal levels. However, given that states are bound to meet the minimum federal policy requirements and local policy agents must adhere to both state and federal requirements, faculty must have a clear understanding of how federal education policy is created. Thus, this section will examine how policy comes to be at the federal level. Such policy historically developed from a need to provide policy solutions when critical needs emerged nationally. For example, in the 1970s, policymakers put forth Public Law 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), which was later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Edu-

cation Act (IDEA, 2004), in response to advocates’ demands for the integration and inclusion of students with disabilities in public education settings. Despite the pivotal role federal policy plays in driving the nation’s initiatives, an understanding of how policy comes to be remains elusive for many agents responsible for enacting policy, or for those affected by policy, at the state and local levels.

When faculty provide explicit instruction in policy, teacher candidates have opportunities to increase their knowledge base and their preparedness to navigate tensions they will undoubtedly experience between policy and practice. Faculty and teacher candidates must understand that federal policymaking involves three key sectors: Congress (i.e., the House of Representatives and Sen-

ate), the executive branch, and interest groups. They should also recognize that proposed policies are shaped by affected individuals, the political climate, and the policy’s content (West, 2023). For example, imagine a congressman’s constituents and/or interest groups raising concerns. Depending on the political climate, these concerns might prompt the congressman to sponsor a bill addressing the issue of concern. Once sponsored, this policy may or may not be put to a vote in the House of Representatives. If the policy should pass the vote, it then must also pass the vote in the Senate before being considered in the executive branch. Although this example provides a 20,000-foot overview, it does not dive into all the influences behind the discussions at each step that can either contribute to the policy-making process or serve as a barrier on the journey a bill takes to become a law. Understanding the processes and influences at play allows constituents, including faculty and preservice teachers, to act both individually and collectively to generate relevant messaging and requests for their respective congressmen and contribute to the policy-making process.

Having established a basic understanding of how policy is developed, it is important to clearly define what is meant by policy in the specific context of special education. In general, special education policy includes legislative acts, court rulings, and administrative rules that define the rights and responsibilities of students, parents, and educational institutions. Such policies focus on identification, evaluation, placement, and the provision of services for students with disabilities. For instance, the IDEA (2004) guarantees access to special education services and emphasizes the importance of procedural safeguards to protect the rights of students and their families. By promoting equity and accountability, special education policy

TABLE 2: Timeline of Major Milestones in Special Education Policy

YEAR	POLICY/EVENT	SIGNIFICANCE
1954	<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>	Established the principle that “separate but equal” is inherently unequal, laying groundwork for inclusion.
1973	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act	Prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities in federally funded programs.
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)	Mandated free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and introduced the concept of the individualized education program (IEP).
1990	Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)	Expanded civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities across various sectors, including education.
1990	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	Reauthorized EAHCA with added provisions for transition planning and inclusive practices.
2001	No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)	Emphasized accountability and high standards for all students, including those with disabilities.
2004	IDEA Reauthorization	Enhanced accountability measures and introduced Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks.
2015	Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	Replaced NCLB, providing greater flexibility to states while maintaining accountability for students with disabilities.

serves as a foundation for creating inclusive and effective learning environments. These policies aim to eliminate disparities and provide opportunities for all learners to succeed.

The evolution of special education policy in the United States is marked by significant legislative and judicial decisions. These milestones reflect society’s changing attitudes toward individuals with disabilities and highlight the transition from exclusion to inclusion. Advocacy for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms has its roots in civil rights movements, parent activism, and progressive legislative measures:

- 1. Civil Rights Movement and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954):** Although this landmark case primarily addressed racial segregation, its central principle—that “separate but equal” is inherently unequal—provided a basis for challenging the exclusion of students with disabilities.

Advocates drew parallels between racial and disability-based segregation, emphasizing the need for inclusive educational opportunities (Smith & Kozleski, 2005).

- 2. Parent Advocacy Groups:** In the 1950s and 1960s, parents of children with disabilities began organizing to demand better educational access. Organizations like the National Association for Retarded Children (now The Arc of the United States) emerged as powerful advocates for systemic change. Parents were instrumental in raising awareness about the challenges faced by their children and in lobbying for legislative action.
- 3. Legislative Progress:** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 marked a turning point by prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities in federally funded programs. The Education for All Handicapped

Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 followed, mandating FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities. This act also introduced individualized education programs (IEPs), formalizing the individualized approach to special education.

- 4. Shifting Societal Attitudes:** The mid-20th century saw a broader cultural movement toward equity and inclusion. Efforts to deinstitutionalize individuals with disabilities and integrate them into community and educational settings further reinforced the push for inclusive classrooms.

These developments and others (see Table 2) have marked shifts in how society views disability and education, fostering systemic efforts to support the needs of all learners through individualized and inclusive practices. Understanding special education policy is essential for educators, administrators,

and policymakers to ensure compliance with legal requirements and to promote effective practices. These policies serve as a blueprint for creating inclusive environments, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and advocating for the rights of students with disabilities.

LEVELS OF POLICY

Policy in special education happens at multiple levels, mainly the federal, state, and local level. However, at each level, policy may look different. While at the federal level this includes laws and nationwide policy, policy at the local level could be as small as allocation of teaching positions among schools or teacher salaries. See Figure 1 for a summary of policy at each level.

Federal Policy

Most often, when people think about special education policy, they are considering the federal level, specifically the requirements of the IDEA (2004) as the overall governing statute of the field. IDEA is the “national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities” (IDEA § 601(c)(1)). At its core, the IDEA is civil rights legislation that requires all public schools to provide a meaningful education for all students aged 3–22, regardless of disability. It is broad and far-reaching to provide protections for as many eligible students as possible.

It is important to remember that the U.S. Constitution does not specifically mention education. Because of this, the administration of education falls under the 10th Amendment, which states, “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (U.S. Const. Amend. X). The main roles of the U.S. Department of Education are

to provide funding, leadership in national programs, and regulatory guidance regarding the provisions outlined in the law. In essence, the federal government is not meant to have authority over education initiatives; rather, it only advises. The U.S. Department of Education does not develop curriculum or determine education standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a). This is left up to the individual states and school districts. Since IDEA is a national policy, the U.S. Department of Education (as of the writing of this manuscript) is the entity that oversees state compliance with the law. This occurs specifically through its Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Notably, although OSEP can monitor compliance, it does not determine compulsory implementation rules.

One method of communication that OSEP regularly uses to provide policy guidance to states and local education agencies (LEAs) is Dear Colleague Letters (DCL). These letters are generally written in response to an area of policy in which data has shown a problem in implementation and/or student outcomes. DCLs often reiterate the language in IDEA, share data that demonstrate any disparities, and supply resources and guidance documents for states and LEAs to consider using to better implement IDEA. Recent topics of DCLs include inclusive educational practices, transition and post-secondary access, special education personnel retention, and use of restraints and seclusion in schools. To view the full text of these and other DCLs, visit <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/policy-guidance>.

The principle of LRE is a useful example of policy as it travels through the different levels (i.e., federal, state, local) from creation to implementation. According to IDEA (2004), LRE is defined as:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...are

educated with children who are not disabled and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

This language in federal statutes is purposely vague in order to allow individual states the authority to interpret and implement this provision; therefore, each state's implementation may depend on its context.

State Policy

If the federal government's role is to provide overarching federal special education policy that protects the rights of students and teachers, the states' roles are much more inclusive. States provide the day-to-day implementation of and oversight for all IDEA provisions, including, but not limited to, teacher training and qualifications, graduation requirements, and eligibility criteria for disabilities (Obi, 2015). State laws cannot contradict IDEA, nor can they offer *less* than what is guaranteed under federal law. States can, however, choose to require *more* than is indicated in IDEA. For example, the IDEA mandates that postsecondary transition services must be included in the IEP no later than when a student turns 16 (IDEA, 2004). However, several states require that transition services begin by the age of 14, which is above and beyond the IDEA mandate. Another example is state-level interpretation of the 13 disability categories named in IDEA. Some states have created additional categories, sometimes splitting a single category into multiple categories (e.g., dividing speech or language impairment into sound system disorder, voice disorder, and language

impairment; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023).

States communicate their policy requirements to LEAs, the federal term for school districts, through state administrative codes. Such codes are written by staff at state departments and, hopefully, in consultation with school personnel throughout the state. These documents outline in greater detail each of the provisions under the IDEA as the particular state department wants it to be undertaken in practice. The method by which these documents are authorized, however, is dependent upon the structure of state level governance in each individual state constitution. According to a report by the Education Commission of the States, although all 50 states have constitutional language outlining the educational authority of state legislatures, the details after that differ greatly (Evans et al., 2020). Some states appoint leaders while others have elected positions. For example, in states like Oregon, Kentucky, and Florida, the governor appoints the state board of education, who then appoints a chief state school officer (CSSO). Yet, in states such as Alabama, Colorado, and Utah, the state board of education members are elected and then appoint a CSSO. In other states, including California, Georgia, and Indiana, the governor appoints the state school board, but the CSSO is elected. Finally, in states such as Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, the governor appoints both the state school board and the CSSO. Additionally, states may confer authority to state school boards, or those entities may have advisory capacities only. As a result, individual states can each view and implement IDEA quite differently.

There is a fair amount of variability in the regulatory LRE language across states' administrative codes. Seventeen states have made changes to the lan-

guage of the federal regulations around LRE (White et al., 2018). Some of these changes include clarification of the necessity of policies and procedures for LRE implementation and compliance or revision to the statement that students with disabilities should be "educated with children who are nondisabled" (White et al., 2018, p. 11). While the majority of changes provide guidance or clarification and are not substantive, each modification could potentially create distance between the IDEA and the implementation of the policy, as well as gaps between states.

Local Policy

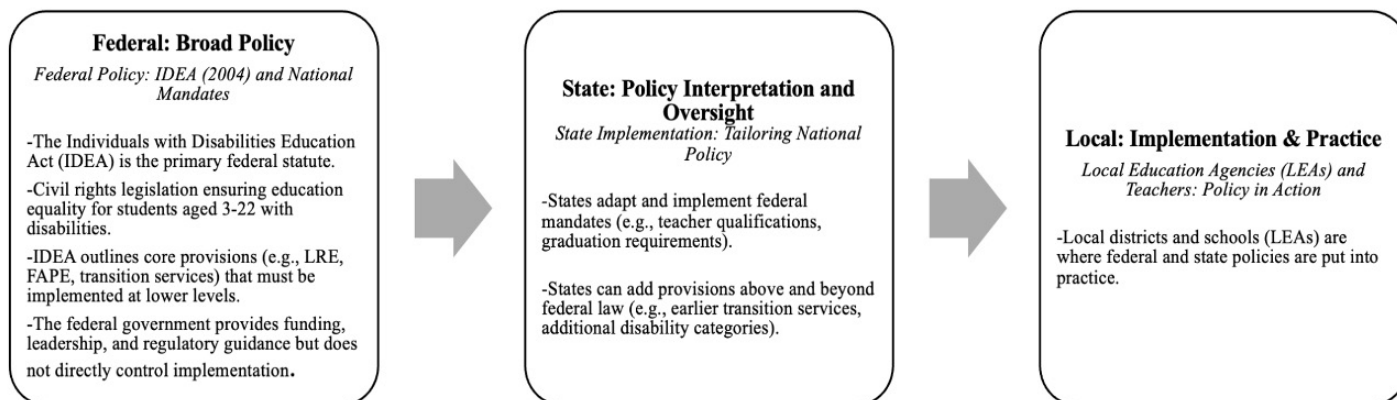
Perhaps the most influential level for educational policy is the local level, as this is where policy is implemented by LEAs, and, more specifically, administrators and teachers. None of these entities are passive receptors of these initiatives; rather, they construct the policy messages that will eventually become practice in local schools. LEAs must determine how to execute policies that have been mandated at the state and federal levels. Therefore, building-level personnel are the ultimate policymakers. Given the evident policy differences among states, implementation at the district and school levels has even more variety. Principals and teachers draw on their own conceptions of education and understandings of their local context to determine what policies and parts of policies should be implemented (Spillane, 2004). Principals have more direct access to policy messages, as they usually attend state and district-level meetings where policy is initially discussed. They are often the first people within LEAs to have the opportunity to practice sensemaking (Hill, 2001) around new policy initiatives, which provides them with the occasion to decide how the message will be presented to teachers. Ganon-Shilon and Schech-

ter (2017) describe sensemaking as "when there is a gap between what one expects and what one experiences, it leads individuals or groups to ask what is going on and what they should do next" (p. 684). In other words, although the state may expect a policy to be carried out in a certain manner, principals often scrutinize the policy for their own school and student needs, leading them to select and implement only the parts that currently fit with their "worldview" (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Hill 2001). Additionally, these administrators must consider their current access to resources, including financial and personnel resources. This adds to the variability in execution of policies that require additional actions by schools who may be operating with limited resources.

Lastly, teachers are the ultimate interpreters of policy, as the classroom is where policy is actualized. It must be noted, however, that by the time a policy reaches teachers, it has already been strained through several filters. Think of the childhood game of telephone—by the time a policy reaches teachers, it may look quite different from how it started. Often, teachers draw on their existing knowledge to interpret new initiatives and reconstruct policy messages in ways that can either reinforce preexisting practices or usher in incremental change (Coburn, 2005). Since this can happen at the school, grade, and individual level, the 'sense' of a policy may diverge in multiple places. The culture of an individual school may also influence the ways that teachers implement policy (Coburn, 2005), as social interactions with colleagues and local workplace norms certainly shape teachers' responses to policy messages.

Returning to the example of LRE, although schools in a district may have the same expectations, each individual school has its own culture that may re-

FIGURE 1: Policy at the Federal, State, and Local Levels



flect different values in relation to inclusion. A school that prioritizes inclusion will likely have a greater proportion of students with disabilities being educated in a meaningful way in the general education environment. Conversely, a school whose culture reflects a perception of special education as a place that students “go to,” students with disabilities will likely spend less time receiving services in an inclusive environment. In this scenario, individual teachers may advocate for students with disabilities to remain in the general education classrooms for instruction, while others may balk at this, believing that those same students cannot be successful in their classes.

Finally, the availability of resources can affect how LRE might be enacted. For example, if a rural elementary school has only one special education teacher serving all its students, IEP teams may feel the need to make placement decisions based upon staff availability and schedules. Even if teachers want to offer a full continuum of placements, the realities of their contexts may prohibit them from doing so. In this way, although policies remain the same, their implementation can be wildly different, affecting the type and quality of education students with disabilities receive.

POLICY IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION

Policy has a significant impact on the content within preservice preparation programs. Faculty and staff are held accountable to follow and implement the policies as adopted by the federal government, the department of education in their own state, and their individual university. Federal and state policies influence the structure and content of special education teacher preparation in terms of licensure types, IEP formats, definitions of high-quality educators, adopted strategies for instruction, curricular content, and achievement standards. All of these can look different from one state to another. For example, each state determines what types of teacher licenses will be offered in the area of special education. Subsequently, universities develop teacher education programs to meet those identified licensure standards. These programs must prepare teacher candidates to understand the 13 disability categories eligible for special education, which are named in IDEA but have specific eligibility criteria determined by state policy. Assessment of students with disabilities provides another illustration of the impact of policies at every level. Teacher preparation programs must prepare candidates to understand and

support the administration of assessment systems within the state. While federal policy creates flexibility for establishing alternate achievement standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities, each state decides if they will employ those types of standards and associated assessments. If the state policy includes alternate achievement standards, the state must create the standards and teacher preparation programs must include content surrounding these policies and standards in their coursework.

Another example of how policy has impacted teacher preparation programs is the concept of high-quality teachers and the development of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*. This report kicked off numerous reforms in education in response to the idea that American children were falling behind other countries in the development of their knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, the authors of the report challenged the idea that American children and the workforce were “mediocre”. One subsequent reform was the development of the NBPTS in 1987. This organization was tasked with identifying what good teachers know and do in their classrooms and,

TABLE 3: Resources and Activities for Special Education Candidates

LEVEL	RESOURCES	EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES
Undergraduate	<p>Rude, H., & Miller, K. J., (2018). Policy challenges and opportunities for rural special education. <i>Rural Special Education Quarterly</i>, 37(1), 21-29.</p> <p>Sacks, A. (2018). <i>Special education: A reference book for policy & curriculum development</i> (3rd ed.). Grey House Publishing.</p> <p>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (n.d.) <i>Education policies and strategies</i>.</p>	<p>Discuss the challenges and promising practices identified in Rude & Miller (2018) and how those interact with the policy recommendations.</p>
Masters	<p>Mitchell, D. E., Shipps, D., & Crowson, R. L. (Eds.). (2017). <i>Shaping education policy: Power and process</i> (2nd ed.). Routledge.</p> <p>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2020). An implementation framework for effective change in schools. <i>OECD Education Policy Perspectives</i>, 9. OECD Publishing.</p> <p>Thorius, K. A. K., & Maxcy, B. D. (2015). Critical practice analysis of special education policy: An RTI example. <i>Remedial and Special Education</i>, 36(2), 116–124.</p>	<p>Use the critical analytic framework proposed within Thorius et al. (2015) to study other topics related to equity issues.</p>
Doctoral	<p>Nagro, S. A., Shepherd, K. G., West, J. E., & Nagy, S. J. (2019). Activating policy and advocacy skills: A strategy for tomorrow's special education leaders. <i>The Journal of Special Education</i>, 53(2), 67–75.</p> <p>Peyton, D. J., Acosta, K., Harvey, A., Pua, D. J., Sindelar, P. T., Mason-Williams, L., Dewey, J., Fisher, T. L., & Crews, E. (2021). Special education teacher shortage: Differences between high and low shortage states. <i>Teacher Education and Special Education</i>, 44(1), 5–23.</p>	<p>After reading Peyton et al. (2021), work in groups to generate ideas for why every state is not a low shortage state. Brainstorm ideas to rectify teacher shortages and solutions to barriers for those ideas. Craft policies that could be implemented.</p>

in turn, creating standards and a system to certify high-quality teachers. While the organization engaged in this work, each state had to determine its own policies regarding the implementation and support for NBPTS certification. These policies varied by state. For instance, states developed different incentivization policies and pay scales for NBPTS-certified teachers depending upon state funding. On a larger scale, discussions about identifying effective teaching practices and evidence-based practices continue to evolve today. The creation of high-leverage practices (HLPs) by teacher educators under the charge of the Council for Exceptional Children and the CEEDAR Center continues those efforts to outline

what effective teachers know and do. Policies at the federal, state, and local levels articulate that teachers must use evidence-based practices within their instructional efforts. The landmark educational report, *A Nation at Risk*, and subsequent reform efforts continue to impact policy more than 40 years later and directly impact the work of teacher preparation programs.

Because policy impacts so much of the work done in special education, it is critical that faculty explicitly teach candidates at every level (i.e., undergraduate, graduate, doctoral) about policy. Candidates need to engage with policy not only to implement it as practitioners but also to understand the process of

policy creation and adoption at various levels. Faculty should provide guidance to undergraduates beyond naming the laws surrounding special education. It is the policies associated with those laws that directly impact the work of a special educator. For example, Lewis and Young (2013) outlined education policy around teacher accountability and its measurement. The authors applied Kingdon and Stano's (1984) multiple-streams framework related to policy formation to teacher accountability in order to understand the three streams: the problem, the policies, and the politics. This framework can be applied to any policy to understand the problems and politics surrounding the content

and adoption of the policy. Actively engaging candidates at each level to understand, apply and evaluate policy and the policy development process is necessary. Using the Lewis and Young (2013) publication as context, states continue to implement teacher accountability models with policies that frame what effective teachers do. As a result, higher education must be acutely aware of how teacher evaluation works and ensure candidates have the necessary skills to be evaluated as effective teachers. Graduate candidates may be part of the mentoring or evaluation process as teacher leaders. Doctoral candidates could be involved in writing and interpreting policy at local, state or national levels. By applying policy frameworks to existing special education policies within course content, faculty can support special educators, leaders, and experts as they engage in the policy work that frames our field.

There are several ways faculty can help candidates understand policy in action. Table 3 provides some resources for use with candidates at each level. At the local level, policies are represented in various tangible avenues. Undergraduate candidates might engage with student and teacher handbooks for schools and school districts. Candidates could select a notable topic within the state or region and examine how different schools or districts articulate the policy surrounding that topic. For instance, they might compare the policies surrounding the implementation of a multi-tiered system of support across schools and districts. Graduate candidates might research inclusive education for students with disabilities, such as the belief systems and implementation of inclusive practices, the politics of inclusive education (e.g., funding, resources, community perceptions), or the policies of the state or local district regarding inclusion. Using a theoretical

framework, candidates could discuss which factors influence policies and practices. At the doctoral level, candidates might statistically evaluate the effects of specific policies on teachers, students, families and communities. Or, they might examine how federal laws are interpreted into specific policies in different states or how state laws are applied across school district or organizational policies. Regardless of the level of the candidate, faculty must invest time and effort to facilitate discussions and discovery surrounding policy within coursework.

Special education policy plays a crucial role in higher education, especially in preparing future teachers to work with students with disabilities. These policies set the stage for addressing equity, inclusion, and individualized instruction, but their interpretation and implementation can vary widely across states and universities, leading to unique challenges and opportunities.

States often build on federal guidelines, creating differences in teacher preparation programs. As previously noted, while the IDEA mandates transition services from age 16, some states require these services to start earlier, which affects how programs must teach transition planning (U.S. Department of Education, 2025b). Recall also that states can use different definitions for disability categories, which influences how future teachers will learn to identify and support students with disabilities. For instance, one state might have more detailed categories for speech and language impairments than another, leading to varied emphases in coursework and practical training.

At the university level, policy interpretation can differ based on institutional priorities, faculty expertise, and resources. Some universities emphasize hands-on experiences in inclusive classrooms, while others fo-

cus more on theoretical knowledge and policy analysis for shaping the skills and perspectives of their graduates. Funding mechanisms and accreditation standards can also play a significant role in shaping programs. Personnel preparation grants, primarily those administered through OSEP, are vital in supporting higher education institutions in their efforts to prepare qualified special education teachers. These grants aim to address critical shortages in the special education workforce and enhance the quality of teacher preparation programs. They provide financial support for developing and implementing innovative training programs that align with federal priorities. For example, grants may fund programs focused on evidence-based practices, culturally responsive teaching, or specialized training for working with students with significant disabilities (Bateman, 2025). Additionally, these grants often support research initiatives, curriculum development, and faculty professional development, ensuring that teacher preparation programs remain at the forefront of best practices. Institutions receiving federal personnel preparation grants must align their curricula with specific policy objectives (Bateman, 2025). These requirements can drive program innovation but can also introduce challenges to maintaining consistency across institutions.

The variability in policy interpretation underscores the importance of providing future teachers with a comprehensive understanding of special education policy and its practical applications. Teacher preparation programs must equip candidates with the skills to navigate differences in state and local implementation, ensuring they are adaptable and well-prepared to meet the needs of all students. Faculty play a critical role in bridging the gap between policy and practice. By

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integrating policy analysis into coursework, they can help candidates understand the underlying principles of equity and inclusion that guide special education laws. Additionally, exposing future teachers to diverse educational settings allows them to see how policies are enacted in practice, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexities of special education.

ENGAGING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY

While the focus of this article is on understanding special education policy, it is equally important to address the necessity of involvement in the development and implementation of such policy. Special education policy is critical to the lives of those with disabilities and could not happen without stakeholders' involvement. Educators, families, community members, policymakers and others all play a crucial role in the success of these policies. The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Teacher Education Division (TED) offers many resources for staying informed and actively engaged with policy developments. CEC's TED suggests the following action steps:

1. Receive Weekly Washington Updates
2. Attend Virtual Washington Updates
3. Access the Legislative Action Center
4. Attend the Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS)
5. Read Policy Agenda and Position Statements
6. Review Children and Youth Action Network (TED CEC, 2024).

These resources are an excellent starting point for faculty seeking to become more involved in policy work. However, just accessing resources is not enough. To create meaningful implementation of policy, it is essential that faculty stay engaged. There are numerous ways to engage with policy, several of which are articulated in articles within this issue. Engagement can occur through following regular updates regarding policy initiatives at any level, collaborating with colleagues, or embarking in advocacy efforts. This is not a one-time activity; it is an ongoing process of engagement to make a long-lasting impact not only on children with disabilities, but also on all children and the professionals that serve them.

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