

Empowering Educators to Advocate Locally, Statewide, and Nationally

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ABSTRACT

Advocacy is important in educator preparation programs, equipping future teachers with the knowledge, skills, and mindset to support students, schools, and communities. Educators are critical in driving policy change and supporting students with disabilities. This article explores how educator preparation programs can engage in advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. The authors share strategies and insights for involving undergraduate and graduate students in advocacy work within communities and local school districts and building relationships with key stakeholders at the state and federal levels. By prioritizing advocacy, educator preparation programs encourage future teachers to actively engage with the broader educational ecosystem, collaborate with stakeholders, and become change agents in schools and communities.

KEYWORDS

Advocacy, educator preparation programs, policy, special education policy

Dr. Taylor is a special education professor at a small liberal arts college in a rural southern community. One of the topics she will cover in her undergraduate course this semester is advocacy in education. To invest her students in policy and advocacy, she invites students to brainstorm current issues in education. As the students worked in groups to identify topics, it became clear that her pre-service teachers were interested in learning more about one of the most significant challenges facing schools today: the teacher shortage. Several students expressed concern about the low enrollment in their classes, the low pay of teachers, and the financial burden of unpaid student teaching. One student suggested that student teachers should receive a stipend from the local school district in return for a commitment to teach in the district if offered the position. Dr. Taylor thought this was a great idea because, during a recent meeting with the school district, the superintendent expressed a concern about the vacant teaching positions across the district. Dr. Taylor wanted the students to be the leaders of this initiative to advocate for their idea; therefore, she assigned them to research teacher recruitment and retention to educate themselves on the topic.


Advocacy is an essential component of educator preparation, empowering future teachers to be effective educators and proactive advocates for students, schools, and communities (Roberts & Siegle, 2012). As key figures in the educational system, teachers can influence student outcomes, school culture, and broader educational policy (Bradley-Levine, 2018). In today's educational and political landscape, teaching alone is not enough; teachers must advocate for students and the future of education in the United States (Hoyle, 2017). While Colucci (2013) noted that many teachers believe politics is not their responsibility, this view is no longer sufficient. Educator's active participation in political advocacy is essential for shaping sustainable educational policies and ensuring the viability of the edu-

cation system (Watkins, 2022).

The complexity of educational needs continues to grow, increasing the need for educators to be equipped to advocate for systemic change. Advocacy goes beyond supporting individual students or classroom practices; it includes advocating for policies that enhance educational equity, improve access to resources, and ensure inclusive environments for all learners.

Advocacy is “the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Educators are uniquely positioned to advocate for causes important to schools because their expertise and experience in regularly interacting with students gives them direct insight into the challenges students face, including accessibility barriers, educational inequities, and social stigma. They understand how systemic gaps negatively impact students’ academic and social skills outcomes. By the training they receive and the nature of the job, educators are skilled communicators who are accustomed to engaging in conversations with and about student needs, whether through individualized education plans (IEPs), Section 504 plans, or through parent and administrator communications to strategize best methods for student success. Whether advocating for increased inclusion and equitable opportunities in education for students or better pay and working conditions for themselves, educators can leverage their knowledge, empathy, and influence in a community to drive meaningful dialogue that champions a more inclusive society.

The importance of integrating advocacy into educator preparation programs (EPPs) has recently become more apparent (Mangin, 2020). These programs are tasked with preparing students for the classroom and cultivating the skills, knowledge, and mindset necessary to engage in broader



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advocacy efforts at the local, state, and federal levels. Educators gain firsthand experience navigating the challenges within the educational system, such as the results of inadequate funding, lack of resources, policy constraints, and the diverse needs of students. Because of this, they must become well-equipped to engage in advocacy efforts that address these disparities and influence policies that benefit students, school staff, families, and communities.

Although advocacy work is often seen as efforts led by seasoned professionals or policy experts, there is growing recognition that future teachers—those currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate educator preparation programs—must also be equipped to engage in these efforts (Howell & Marshall, 2023). Undergraduate students preparing for careers in education are often deeply immersed in the field through coursework, field experiences, practicum placements, and student teaching. These experiences provide them with direct exposure to classroom dynamics, instructional challenges, and systemic barriers that affect students and educators. Additionally, undergraduate programs typically emphasize contemporary educational theories, policies, and best practices, equipping students with both foundational knowledge and critical perspectives on issues such as student success. As a result, they are well-positioned to recognize areas in need of reform and advocate for change. Educator prepara-

tion programs can harness this by integrating advocacy skill development into their curricula, which can, in turn, foster undergraduate students’ beliefs about the importance of advocacy (Massengale et al., 2014).

Similarly, graduate students in education programs are often practicing educators who bring firsthand experience from working directly with students, managing classrooms, and navigating the complexities of the education system. Their roles as teachers, interventionists, or administrators provide them with direct exposure to the challenges and inequities that exist in schools, such as disparities in funding, resource allocation, and student support services. This practical engagement positions them to critically analyze policies and advocate for reforms that improve educational equity and student outcomes.

However, the extent of their firsthand experience depends on the type of graduate program they are enrolled in. For instance, Master of Arts in Teaching and professional licensure programs typically serve in-service teachers already embedded in school environments. In contrast, research-focused programs, such as a doctoral-level degree in education, may include students transitioning from other fields or focusing more on policy and academia rather than direct classroom instruction. Nonetheless, all graduate students engage deeply with theoretical frameworks, policy analysis, and educational research, positioning them to advocate

FIGURE 1: Advocacy Activities in Educator Preparation Programs

Advocacy at all levels

- Focus on story telling
- Partner with university Government Relations office
- Utilize online platforms (LinkedIn, social media, etc.) to connect with stakeholders

Local Advocacy

- Attend local school board meetings
- Research key issues in local area
- Interview local school board members and superintendents
- Participate in public forums such as town halls or committee hearings
- Develop partnerships with local schools

State Advocacy

- Build relationships with policy makers by scheduling meetings, writing letters, and calling the local offices
- Join state professional organizations
- Attend state advocacy days

Federal Advocacy

- Join national organizations (e.g., TED, CEC, HECSE, AACTE)
- Sign up to receive federal policy updates through TED (i.e., Washington Update and Virtual Washington Update, Policy Briefs, and Podcast)
- Participate in national advocacy events or virtual legislative visits (CEC-SELS)
- Build relationships with state representatives through local office by letter writing and phone calls

for evidence-based improvements in education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In academic and professional settings, graduate students are frequently invited to take on leadership roles, preparing them to organize and lead advocacy efforts. EPPs can prepare students to be agents of change for the educational system, encouraging active involvement with key stakeholders, such as policymakers, community leaders, and families (Hoyle, 2017). This article explores how EPPs can integrate advocacy into curricula, strategies for involving future teachers in advocacy work, and the benefits of cultivating an activist mindset that extends beyond the classroom. By prioritizing advocacy, EPPs can shape the upcoming generation of teachers to become skilled in pedagogy and committed to creating positive change within schools, communities, states, and the nation.

ADVOCACY AS A BRIDGE TO MAKING CHANGE

Educators possess a unique and powerful tool for policy advocacy: storytelling. Storytelling is a vital tool for advocating for change that benefits teachers, teacher educators, and students with disabilities. Personal narratives allow advocates to highlight the lived experiences of these individuals, bringing to light challenges that statistics alone cannot fully convey. Stories from teachers about the lack of resources or support for inclusive classrooms illustrate the gaps in current policies and demonstrate the need for systemic change that can be discussed at the local, state, and federal levels. Similarly, stories from students with disabilities and their families can reveal the barriers they face in accessing equitable education, fostering greater empathy and understanding among policymakers.

Moreover, storytelling humanizes policy issues and shifts the focus from

abstract legislation to the real people it impacts. It has been said by a member of Congress that “the most effective way to influence a lawmaker is for a constituent to talk to a legislator about how the policy will affect the person or a particular group” (Rubenstein et al., 2024). By sharing specific examples of how improved funding, accommodations, or teacher training can transform outcomes for students with disabilities, advocates can make a compelling case for reform. These stories build bridges between educators, families, and decision-makers, creating a shared sense of purpose and urgency to act. By centering these voices, storytelling can inspire policies that are more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the diverse needs of all students.

Sharing firsthand experiences, specifically from pre-service teachers in the classroom, allows policymakers to see the real-world impact of their decisions (Hollingsworth et al., 2016). These personal accounts focus on the individuals directly impacted, such as funding shortages or curriculum changes, and create a compelling case for action. By framing challenges through the lens of individual stories, educators and students can inspire empathy and drive meaningful dialogue in their communities (Kimball et al., 2016). Advocacy can also serve as a bridge to connect local efforts to state and federal policies.

A key approach to bridging the gap in advocacy across all levels is leveraging social and online platforms to organize, inform, and engage stakeholders. Platforms like social media, LinkedIn, and professional blogs allow educators to share stories, highlight successes, and call for action. Educators and pre-service teachers can use these platforms to develop a storytelling narrative by sharing their experiences in the classroom. By combining traditional advocacy with digital outreach, teachers and

teacher educators can build broader coalitions and exert meaningful influence on policies that shape education systems.

As teacher educators, it is important to collaborate with the Government Relations office within your university. University Government Relations or External Affairs offices can serve as a resource for faculty to collaborate with elected officials and understand the university’s policy and initiatives with advocacy. By partnering with the Government Relations office, faculty and students can ensure advocacy efforts meet university guidelines and are aligned with university priorities. See Figure 1 for a list of suggested strategies for advocacy across the local, state, and federal levels.

After the first few weeks of class, student excitement was building in Dr. Taylor’s class, and several students decided to continue this work outside of class. Students attended a local town hall with area superintendents and shared the idea of giving stipends to student teachers. To the students’ surprise, one superintendent was interested and suggested that the students develop a proposal. Dr. Taylor’s students developed a partnership proposal in which the school district would provide a small stipend for student teachers. In turn, the student teachers would commit to teaching in the district for at least one year upon graduation. During the development of the plan, the students met with other faculty members and local school board members for their feedback. They practiced their pitch before meeting with the superintendent and school administrators. The superintendent was impressed with the student’s attention to detail and potential solution to the school district’s problem. After the meeting, the superintendent recommended that the students present their ideas at the next school board meeting for approval.

Local Advocacy Efforts

Policy advocacy is essential for teachers and educators who seek to shape policies impacting the profession, students, and local communities (Smith et al., 2024). Teachers and teacher educators may often feel intimidated by advocacy work, specifically at the state and federal levels. However, advocacy at the local level can be just as impactful, if not more, because teachers and teacher educators may have a direct connection to the local issues. Teachers, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators have firsthand experience with the challenges and needs of classrooms, making their voices invaluable in crafting effective and equitable policies. Policy advocacy aims to prompt a policy solution (West, 2024). As educators and teacher educators, we are experts in our respective fields and can provide guidance, knowledge, and expertise to shape local policies within higher education institutions and communities. By engaging in advocacy, we can ensure that our perspectives are heard and help bridge the gap between policymakers and the realities of education.

One strategy for getting involved in local policy advocacy is building strong relationships and partnerships with colleagues, local school district board offices, and school administrators within the local education agency (LEAs). The LEAs are responsible for understanding and directing the implementation of policies determined at the federal and state levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Advocacy at the local level can be one of the most impactful and meaningful ways to support teachers and students with disabilities. Building administrators and classroom teachers directly implement the policy by drawing on their expertise and experience (Coburn, 2005). EPPs can get involved with local advocacy work by attending local school board meetings, devel-

oping partner schools within the local LEA, and attending local town hall meetings. EPPs have an investment in local schools as they serve as a pipeline for future teachers. This partnership is essential for both parties, as LEAs provide an avenue for pre-service teachers to develop their expertise, and EPPs serve as a resource for LEAs to recruit and retain high-quality educators.

Although it is the LEA's responsibility to implement and execute state and federal policies, some policies can also begin at the local level. Initiatives and priorities directly impacting local schools may not be applicable across an entire state and may be centralized to specific communities. For example, the recruitment and retention of teachers is a priority in Dr. Taylor's rural community. While the declining enrollment in EPPs may impact districts across the state, it is critically important in rural communities with less access to EPPs (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Therefore, rather than waiting for policies to come from the state and federal levels, Dr. Taylor's class began a grassroots effort to advocate for the unique needs of the class, which mutually benefited the local school community.

Another strategy to impact policy locally is to stay informed with the local school district. School district board meetings are often open to the public and serve as an avenue to understand LEA priorities, current initiatives, and challenges the local community faces. Instructors in EPPs can assign students to attend a board meeting, interview board members, or even attend a family or community night within the district. Staying informed about current policy discussions and aligning advocacy efforts with broader educational priorities can enhance the impact of your efforts. EPPs can also build relationships by partnering with LEAs and developing partner schools. Partner schools

can serve as a source of collaboration between LEAs and EPPs and provide professional development and research opportunities.

The students presented the proposal to the local board of education, and the plan was approved. Dr. Taylor's students were excited; however, they knew this was only a small step in the larger issue of recruitment and retention of teachers across their state. As a part of their research, the students learned about a statewide advocacy day at their state capital called "The Day on the Hill," where they had the opportunity to meet with their state representatives. The students decided to take their idea to the next step: the state level. In preparation for their visit to the capitol, Dr. Taylor invited local representatives to speak with her students about current legislation across the state. To continue their research on the topic, the students researched their state representatives, including understanding how policy changes at the state level. When the day arrived, the students participated in the advocacy event, meeting with representatives from their districts to share their experiences and plan to support the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural communities. The students proudly shared their pilot plan as a model for other districts across the state.

Advocacy at the State Level

Both state and federal governments have important roles to play in the areas of educational policy. Though the federal government, including Congress and the United States Department of Education, facilitates important educational policies, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), many important educational policies and policy enactment

is deferred to the state level (West, 2024). Because state governments play significant roles in educational policy decisions, advocating at the state level is imperative. Approaches to state-level advocacy are similar to the approaches of advocacy at the local and federal levels. One way to understand advocacy at the state level is to imagine it as a bridge between the local and federal levels of government and legislation. Moreover, educators and professionals have expert experience and knowledge to inform policy as experts in their fields at all levels (West, 2024). It is important to remember that state representatives work for the constituents of that state. Constituents have the unique ability and power to advocate for educational policy in ways that outsiders to the state do not have. This section discusses four ways to integrate state-level advocacy for special education policy in undergraduate and graduate-level teacher-educator preparation programs.

The first method to integrate state-level advocacy into the higher education classroom is by including policy and advocacy in class curricula. This might include exploring state legislation and new bills being introduced or case studies on state hearings in special education. Instructors could also include presentations, group discussions, and papers on these topics. It is important to consider that one educational policy that may vary across the states and can directly affect the training and placement of teachers in schools is the policy for preparing pre-service teachers and state implementation of the IDEA's standards for special educators (Rodriguez & Murawski, 2020). Learning about the educational policies of the state where one lives, especially how federal policies impact that state, can challenge students to think critically about the specific needs of the communities across the

state and how state policy addresses the needs of their state's students, families, and teachers. Becoming familiar with state educational policy, interpretation, and enactment may also reveal areas of need within policy and, thus, areas of advocacy.

The second method to integrate state-level advocacy in educator preparation programs is communicating with state legislators via email, phone, letters, and social media. This directly involves future teachers with hands-on advocacy experience. Once students are aware of state educational policies and needs, maybe even including their own needs, they can begin to use their voices to speak and educate state legislators within these areas. This is a simple but effective way to become involved in advocacy efforts. Educators may encourage students as individuals or as a group to reflect on a personal or collective educational issue for which they may like to advocate individually and/or as a group. Another method of incorporating state-level advocacy into the higher education classroom is inviting state legislators to class to speak about specific policies, practices, or the overall educational pulse of the state. Again, state representatives are "motivated to represent the needs of their constituents, as the number of constituents they represent is far smaller than for elected officials at the federal level" (Miller & Roup, 2022, p. 36). These speaking opportunities, either in person or virtual, can increase student understanding of current educational legislation and provide opportunities for students to interact with state-level representatives in a low-stakes environment. They can also provide opportunities for students to ask questions and present issues important to them and their communities to state representatives. Inviting state policymakers is a great way to build connections and rapport with state

legislators and can be helpful for future advocacy efforts. University Government Relations offices can help facilitate these visits.

Finally, educators may also arrange meetings with state legislators as a class and/or visit the state capitol during state advocacy days. Meeting with state representatives may be integrated into class as part of an assignment or as a final project, or it could even be an extracurricular activity built into the class syllabus. Teacher educators may lead students to advocate for a broader need or interest in your state or a more specific need or interest within your district, but either way, your state representatives are accessible and want to hear from you (Miller & Roup, 2022). Teachers and pre-service teachers can also participate in statewide advocacy efforts by visiting the state capitol or meetings with state legislators and connecting with state-level organizations, including university and student organizations. State-level organizations often have advocacy days at state capitols and help to navigate meetings with state legislatures and key stakeholders in the community. Visits with state representatives and partnerships with statewide advocacy groups can educate students on state legislation processes and how to navigate advocacy and education efforts at the state level. This can encourage students to advocate at the federal level, which has many similar processes regarding requesting meetings and having conversations with representatives in Washington, DC.

Advocacy at the Federal Level

Advocacy at the federal level mirrors much of the advocacy efforts at the state level. Again, one of the most effective ways to teach about federal education policies and advocacy efforts is to include advocacy efforts in class curricula. This could include student or

TABLE 1: Professional Organizations with a Focus on Advocacy

Organization	Policy Statement on Educator Preparation	Resources for Educators	Level of Support
<p>Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)</p> <p>https://exceptionalchildren.org/</p>	<p>The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is a professional association of educators dedicated to advancing the success of children with exceptionalities. We accomplish our mission through advocacy, standards, and professional development.</p> <p>CEC has a long history as a leader in advocating on behalf of children and young adults with exceptionalities for the human and fiscal resources necessary to enable each individual to attain their highest level of education and employment and life success.</p> <p>Our influence in shaping the policies that support publicly funded education, special education, and early intervention is well-recognized and valued by legislators and other policymakers as well as other professional organizations throughout the field.</p>	<p>CEC provides members with up-to-date policy information, opportunities for advocacy, and resources for members at the state and federal levels. CEC also supports local Child and Youth Action Network (CAN) coordinators. CEC's CAN is an organized group of volunteers that support CEC policy initiatives by building a strong grassroots network capable of effectively communicating policy priorities.</p> <p>CEC also offers state units and special interest divisions.</p>	<p>CEC supports at the federal, state, and local levels.</p>
<p>Teacher Education Division of Council for Exceptional Children (TED)</p> <p>https://tedcec.org/</p>	<p>Teacher Education Division is a diverse community of professionals who lead and support teacher education on behalf of students with exceptional needs and their families. We accomplish this through professional development, advocacy, research, and collaboration.</p>	<p>TED policy initiatives reflect CEC's legislative priorities through support from the TED Policy Committee. The TED Policy Committee meets virtually every month, to discuss happenings and events that impact the special education teacher workforce, including preparation, professional learning and development opportunities, and retention efforts. Many members of the TED Policy Committee actively engage in workgroups to develop Advocacy Briefs (https://sites.google.com/view/ted-policy-toolkit/home), create content for our TED & CEC Collaboration Podcast, provide professional development for TED members regarding advocacy, and identify award and fellowship recipients.</p>	<p>TED supports at the federal and state levels.</p>
<p>Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE)</p> <p>https://hecse.net/</p>	<p>We have been the primary advocates for the interests of institutions of higher education with personnel preparation, leadership preparation, and research programs in special education since 1982.</p>	<p>HECSE members are from large universities with national reputations for preparing teachers, related service providers, administrators, teacher educators and researchers. HECSE members have access to up-to-date legislative and policy development information, professional development and funding opportunities, and assistance with faculty and scholarship searches.</p>	<p>HECSE supports advocacy at the federal level.</p>
<p>American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)</p> <p>https://aacte.org/</p>	<p>AACTE and its members advocate for policies that are dedicated to building and sustaining high-quality preparation of teachers and other education professionals that ensure our graduates are profession-ready.</p> <p>Through cutting edge research, innovative practice, and advocacy, AACTE and its members advance the field of educator preparation.</p>	<p>AACTE offers members resources and such as policy updates and advocacy guides on topics related to educator preparation quality.</p>	<p>AACTE supports advocacy at both the federal and state levels.</p>

educator-led discussions or presentations on federal special education laws, such as the IDEA, or important topics to your students, such as providing a stipend for student teachers as Dr. Taylor's students proposed. You might also facilitate group work to explore possible case studies of court cases from the United States Supreme Court involving your topic. Another way to integrate advocacy into your curricula is to ask students to facilitate the presentation of various advocacy resources on a desired topic, such as podcasts, important research articles, Dear Colleague letters, federal legislation, etc.

One critical piece of advocacy at the federal level is developing relationships with key stakeholders across your state. As a voting constituent, your voice, experiences, and perspectives can impact the policy mindsets of your elected representatives, and fostering these relationships is essential. One strategy to develop relationships is regularly communicating with your representatives' local office by writing letters and inviting the legislators to local events or even your classroom. By sharing stories about the impact of your work, you can develop meaningful relationships with staffers and stakeholders who are local to your area. Another way to involve future teachers in advocacy from university classrooms is by engaging with state Senators and Congress members in Washington, DC, via phone calls, social media, letters, and emails.

Though state legislators on Capitol Hill want to hear from their constituents, they are less available for individual meetings. However, you could connect with state and national-level organizations and join their efforts to meet with your state representatives on Capitol Hill (West, 2024). There is power in numbers! One great example you might consider joining is the annual Special Education Legislative

Summit (SELS) held by the Council for Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) each summer. At this advocacy event, educators, including CEC members from across the country, learn about updates in Washington related to education and learn strategies to become effective advocates. Then, educators visit Capitol Hill to meet with their respective members of Congress and advocate for priorities aligned with CEC and CASE.

Another benefit of advocacy at the federal level is the network of professional organizations that can influence policy nationally. For example, the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the CEC has pre-written letters on existing issues which are updated throughout the year and can be signed and sent to legislators via mail or email (they can be found here: <https://tedcec.org/policy-and-advocacy-portal>). Other national advocacy organizations include the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). HECSE and AACTE are national organizations that focus on advocacy and education of educator preparation programs. HECSE and AACTE provide opportunities for higher education faculty to network, engage in advocacy work, and provide resources to its members on important issues facing schools and preparing educators. A description of these organizations, including their statements on policy and the levels of advocacy they support, can be found in Table 1.

As an advocate herself, Dr. Taylor knew this project would be great to share nationally, too. Dr. Taylor had previously participated in the SELS as a TED member and looked for an opportunity for her students to have the same experience. She reached out

to her state CEC board members and expressed an interest in taking her students to Washington, DC, to provide the opportunity to advocate at the federal level. Leading up to the summit, her students attended professional development events offered by TED, read advocacy briefs, and listened to the TED policy podcast. The students also learned about committees and the vital role their representatives had on policy at the federal level. Three of Dr. Taylor's students met with their state representatives during their time in Washington and shared their stories. In addition to visiting the capitol building, the students met other students across the country who had similar experiences, and they began a network of support for pre-service teachers. Upon returning to their state, Dr. Taylor's students learned their proposal was approved, and they would receive funding for student teaching at their local school district. The students shared their experiences by writing letters to their local and state legislators, hoping to expand this project across the state.

The Collective Power of Advocacy

Advocacy also elevates the voices of teachers as professionals and experts in education, whether at the local, state, or federal level. Teachers, including teacher educators, who share their experiences and insights with federal policymakers can help shape decisions that align with the actual needs of schools and students. This can lead to implementing policies that provide more resources, enhance teacher training programs, and improve working conditions, such as addressing teacher shortages or reducing class sizes. By engaging in policy discussions at every level, teachers advocate for their profession and contribute to creating an educational system that values and supports both educators

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Caitlin J. Criss, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Elementary and Special Education Department at Georgia Southern University. She earned her doctorate in Special Education and Applied Behavior Analysis from the Ohio State University. Prior to earning her doctorate, she served as a special education teacher and K-12 administrator for 9 years. Her research interests include increasing teachers' use of positive-based classroom management practices, supporting pre-service and novice teachers, performance feedback with technology, effective reading interventions, and advocacy for teachers and students with disabilities.

Nancy Welsh-Young, Ph.D.

Nancy Welsh-Young, PhD recently worked as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Kansas. She holds a PhD in Curriculum & Instruction with a Special Education focus, alongside graduate certificates in Special Education Transition Services and in Educational Statistics and Research Methods from the University of Arkansas where she was also a Doctoral Academy Fellow and OSEP Scholar. Dr. Welsh-Young also earned degrees in School Leadership, Special Education Administration, and Early Childhood Education. With extensive experience teaching K-12 students (including special education and alternative education classes) as well as undergraduate and graduate courses, her research focuses on advancing evidence-based practices to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in inclusive secondary classrooms. She is also a proponent of empowering families and teachers to become strong advocates for all students with disabilities.

Alison N. Kearley

Alison N. Kearley is a Board-Certified Art Therapist and licensed mental health counselor. She expects to complete her Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Alabama in Special Education and Multiple Abilities in December 2025. She has lectured graduate-level Special Education classes at the University of Alabama and has taught as an Assistant Professor in Hyderabad, India. Alison is one of two inaugural Policy Fellows with the Teacher Educator Division of the Council for Exceptional Children and is leading efforts to increase awareness and advocacy across Alabama for the needs of students with disabilities and the educators who serve them. Alison hopes to continue collaborative research and service around students with disabilities and mental health, including trauma-informed practices; supportive policies, enactment, and advocacy for students with disabilities; and training and support for educators.

Jaime Nelson

Jamie Nelson, MAE, serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor at William Penn University. With a background spanning general education, special education, literacy, and building leadership, she brings a rich background from her years in K-12 public education into her role in higher education. Her scholarly interests include neurodiversity, literacy, and advancing social justice and equity in education. She is dedicated to advocacy within the field of education, empowering teachers to make meaningful change.

and students (Derrington & Anderson, 2020). This collective effort can lead to transformative change that has a lasting impact on the future of education in the United States. Encouraging students to become involved in advocacy at the federal level may be daunting, but it can also cultivate an activist mindset that can extend well beyond the classroom.

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