

**Project CREATE: State-wide Partnership for  
Producing Highly Qualified Special Education Teachers**

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**Abstract**

*The highly qualified teacher mandate introduced under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 exacerbated the already well-documented shortage of special educators nationwide. With almost 40% of its special education teachers holding emergency/provisional licenses at the time, South Carolina faced a great challenge in meeting new accreditation requirements. This article examines how Project CREATE (Centers for the Re-education and Advancement of Teachers in special Education), a personnel preparation initiative funded by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), refortified the State's special education teacher force. Project success attributed chiefly to collaboration among SCDE, local education agencies, and institutions of higher education (IHEs). The partnerships formed among the 11-college consortium to offer multiple certification preparation and course delivery options was also a key success indicator. We argue that Project CREATE serves as a model for addressing continued accreditation and policy needs in special education and other teaching specialty areas.*

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Public Law 107-110, commonly known as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB, 2001), has had far-reaching impact on school operations by requiring specific accountability measures for increasing both student learning outcomes and the staffing of schools with highly qualified teachers. South Carolina has made great strides in achieving these aims since NCLB was enacted in 2002. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (USDE OESE, January 8, 2009), South Carolina's standards and assessment system met all statutory and regulatory provisions required for reading/language arts, mathematics and science, as of 2007-2008. South Carolina was also praised for participating in several of the federal discretionary grant programs, including the Teacher Incentive, the Enhanced Assessment, and the State Longitudinal Data System grants designed to provide the State with flexibilities to improve school practice (USDE OESE, 2009). Equally noteworthy is the State's efforts and record for alleviating its teacher shortage in special education, and the measures undertaken to accomplish this desired outcome.

### **Teacher Shortage: Historical Context**

At the time NCLB was enacted, almost 98% of the nation's school districts reported shortages of special education teachers (Fielder, Foster, & Schwartz, 2000; Shepard & Brown, 2003). As alarming were reports (e.g., Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, and Kilgore, 2002) that almost 50% of special educators left the classroom within the first five years (see also Miller, Brownwell & Smith, 1999). Concurrent with the teacher exodus has been growth in the special education student population. As a result, Boe's (2006) longitudinal study determined that the shortage of fully certified special educators increased annually from 7.4% in 1993-1994 to 13.4% in 2002-2003. At the onset of NCLB, it was not surprising that the need for special education teachers was characterized as severe, chronic, and pervasive (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Gehrke, & McCoy, 2007; Olivarez & Arnold, 2006). Critical shortages of special educators have persisted in most states (American Association for Employment in Education, 2006). Unfortunately, the situation may worsen in the foreseeable future, as shortage numbers are projected to increase another 15% by 2016 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007) based on growth of school-age learners with disabilities and teacher factors such as retirement, career changers, etc.

South Carolina's dearth of fully licensed special educators typifies the crisis that is being experienced nationally. In 2001, 36% of the State's teachers hired on permit (i.e., emergency/provisional certification) were in special education, and over-one third of the unfilled teacher vacancies in South Carolina classrooms were in special education (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement, CERRA, 2001). During the 2003-2004 school year, 455 special educators held out-of-field permits to teach in the State's public schools (Sutton, Gurganus, Hodge, & Marshall, 2004) and were mandated to obtain full certification by July 1, 2006 in order to remain employed in South Carolina under NCLB mandates. South Carolina is not unlike the overwhelming majority of states nationwide. The U.S. Department of Education (2008) reported that 43 of 50 states issued emergency or temporary teacher licenses in special education in the 2003-2004 school year to approximately 24,460 teachers, or 6.33% of the national special education teacher force. The only states excluded were Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

### **Project CREATE**

In 2003-2004, Project CREATE (Centers for the Re-education and Advancement of Teachers in Special Education) was established by the South Carolina Department of Education's (SCDE) Office of Exceptional Children (OEC) as a funding mechanism to achieve its chief mission of reducing the number of non-certified special education teachers, while growing simultaneously a highly qualified special education teacher force in South Carolina's schools. By Year 2, SCDE's Division of Educator Quality and Leadership joined the funding flow, which has continued to the current Year 7, 2009-2010 school year. By underwriting both tuition and textbook costs, CREATE has enabled qualified participants to complete needed coursework at a variety of South Carolina colleges and universities, all with State- and NCATE-approved (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, NCATE, 2010) teacher education programs, in order to obtain initial, add-on, or alternative certification in special education. Since coursework is provided by approved teacher education program sites, participants are

prepared to teach students with disabilities more effectively. As primarily a teacher re-education initiative, CREATE was modeled after similar projects that have been implemented in other states, e.g., Virginia (Kneedler & Sutton, 1987-1990), which have been found to successfully prepare teachers in new content teaching specialties (Adelman, 1986).

Table 1 provides key statistics (Sutton et al., 2010) on the effectiveness of CREATE in achieving its mission in the first six years (2003-2009). The project initially began with three colleges, but has grown to a consortium of 11 colleges and universities, representing all geographic regions of the State, working together to prepare highly qualified special educators. The number of qualified participants has averaged 180 each year over the six-year period, ranging from 100 to 246. With the exception of Year 1, more than 60% of the State's school districts have participated in CREATE, peaking at 76% (65 out of 85 districts) in Year 5. Progress toward program completion, defined as number of courses completed out of total courses required for the participant's respective certification program, has averaged 59% each year (range of 37% to 79%). The most noteworthy data is that CREATE has produced a six-year total of 501 completers. Other than a mere 4 completers in the initial first year, the project has averaged almost 100 completers each of the last five years of operation.

Table 1. Key Statistics for Project CREATE, 2003-2009

	Year 1 2003-04	Year 2 2004-05	Year 3 2005-06	Year 4 2006-07	Year 5 2007-08	Year 6 2008-09
Colleges in Consortium	3	4	6	11	11	11
Qualified Participants	100	246	197	152	198	187
Program Courses Completed	121	411	288	279	484	367
Certification Progress	37%	63%	79%	57%	59%	60%
Program Completers	4	74	147	52	145	79
School Districts Represented	33	59	63	53	65	55

### **CREATE Success Indicators**

The more than 500 program completers to date is compelling, empirical evidence that CREATE continues to accomplish its mission of reducing the number of non-certified special education teachers in South Carolina, while simultaneously growing a more highly qualified special education teacher force. Today, the South Carolina special education teacher shortage is no longer dire. According to CERRA (2009), Teacher-Administrator Supply and Demand Report, no special education teachers are teaching on provisional/emergency certificates, and only 52 (versus 114 in 2001) of the teacher

vacancies are designated in special education, a decrease from 36% to 25% over the seven-year period (CERRA, 2009).

The initiatives employed by CREATE to achieve its outcomes are notable. One is recognition by SCDE of the need for multiple institutions of higher education to form a partnership in order to achieve teacher capacity demands. By 2007-2008, the project operated centers in the Upstate (Clemson University, Converse College, Lander University, University of South Carolina Upstate, Winthrop University), the Midlands (Columbia, South Carolina State University, University of South Carolina Columbia), and the Coastal (Coastal Carolina University, College of Charleston, Francis Marion University) areas of the State. SCDE officials envisioned that the 11-college consortium would be able to provide needed professional preparation across a variety of special education certification areas (e.g., learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, etc.) and teacher preparation approaches (i.e., add-on, alternative, and initial certification via bachelor's or Master of Arts in Teaching–MAT degrees). In the process, CREATE has essentially reduced the bureaucratic tendency of colleges and universities to be territorial and, thereby, has enhanced their ability to collaboratively address the critical teacher shortage needs for the purpose of equipping local schools with qualified personnel.

As the number of CREATE college centers has increased since the project's inception in 2003, so have program preparation course options through which qualified participants could complete their respective certification programs. Participants were provided regular campus, contract, satellite/distance, and Internet-based/online courses. Colleges have shared these varied course options in meeting the preparation needs of participants over wide, sometimes remote geographical distances. Project leaders have worked collaboratively to ensure that course content, as outlined in course syllabi, reflected professional standards in accordance with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2010). Course instructors were required to hold the doctorate in special education for purposes of preserving the integrity of instructional and course content delivery.

Upon completion of coursework each semester, the project evaluates participants using an online survey that assesses teaching and interaction skills of instructors, course requirements and evaluations, and adequacy of course content. The most recent annual report (Sutton et al., 2010) for Year 6 (2008-2009) of the project yielded an overall course evaluation mean rating of 3.43 (1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree). This result revealed that project-sponsored courses delivered by consortium colleges, when compared with previous special education classes taken elsewhere, (a) provided more knowledge and skills about instruction in special education, (b) made more relevant applications to the real-world of the classroom, (c) broadened their perspective about how to teach students with disabilities, and (d) significantly contributed to their overall preparation. The Introduction to Exceptional Learners and Characteristics (of Emotional Disabilities, Learning Disabilities, etc.) courses have tended to receive the highest ratings from participants.

As CREATE has developed over the years, areas of certification preparation and target participant groups have expanded. By 2008-2009, certification options included emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, emotional disabilities, mental disabilities, multi-categorical special education, severe disabilities, visual impairments, and, most recently, preparation for Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA). All full-time employees in South Carolina public schools are now eligible for CREATE. Larger target

participant groups include long-term substitutes in special education classrooms, special education teachers with restricted alternative certificates, special education teachers of emotional disabilities enrolled in the State's *Program of Alternative Certification for Educators* (PACE) program, teacher assistants, general education teachers wanting to add-on special education certification, and other non-instructional staff (e.g., librarians, counselors, etc.).

One final success indicator is administrative oversight of the project. Throughout its seven years of operation, CREATE has been directed and administrated by a special education professor whose higher education affiliation was outside the consortium of 11 colleges. This pre-condition has provided important assurances against bias or favoritism toward any particular institution within the consortium. The independence of the project director has also allowed for a neutral, but supportive means of communication among all participating universities, SCDE, and local school districts. Additionally, most of the efforts for recruitment and selection of participants have been conducted by the project director's office, in conjunction with SCDE, and was accomplished principally by (a) statewide mailings each semester to district special education directors, directors of personnel, and school principals and (b) phone and email campaigns. Advising qualified participants about certification program options, monitoring of participants progress, and ongoing efficacy research are additional initiatives spearheaded by the project director's office.

### **Implications for Accreditation and Policy**

CREATE is consistent with the concept of strengthening and expanding partnerships among teacher education institutions and local/state agencies, for the purpose of increasing the number of highly qualified teachers (USDE, 2005). Moreover, CREATE offers a model of how South Carolina has positively changed the direction of its special education teacher workforce to become fully credentialed despite the national critical teacher shortage faced by the State and the high number of teachers holding provisional certificates at the time. Key to the project's success was SCDE leaders' foresight to collaborate with, and to assemble and unify, multiple higher education institutions to collectively provide quality professional preparation to special education teachers in the State.

Numerous peer-reviewed papers and presentations on CREATE at professional conferences (e.g., DuRant, Poda, & Sutton, 2007; Sutton, 2007; Sutton & DuRant, 2007, 2008b) suggest that CREATE is a promising paradigm that has been acknowledged nationally and one that has the potential to address other teacher personnel issues still confronting South Carolina and the nation, including but not limited to, increasing teachers' competencies to meet the needs of underrepresented student groups defined by socio-economic status, minority and racial demographics, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Early research (e.g., Sutton & DuRant, 2008a; Sutton, Bausmith, O'Conner, & Pae, 2009, 2010) also indicates that CREATE is a valid alternative route to certification (ARC) approach, which supports Rosenberg's (2007) contention that ARCs can produce competent special educators on par with traditionally-prepared teachers.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2010) demands that South Carolina public schools employ personnel holding certification in their respective teaching areas. Additionally, SCDE, in accordance with the National Council for

Accreditation of Teacher Education Standards (2010), calls upon teacher education institutions of higher education to produce candidates who satisfy this qualification. Although these two accrediting entities require teachers to have professional preparation and hold qualifications specific to their discipline, a disparity between this ideal and the reality in the schools nonetheless has emerged over time, with the greatest need occurring in the field of special education. Project CREATE has been demonstrably successful in narrowing the gap.

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