



Attracting Personnel

CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Description

The public perception of educators refers to (a) society's view of the role of educators within a greater societal context, (b) the perceived prestige of the profession within the field and externally, and (c) perceptions of how accessible it is to enter the field (OSEP Summit Attract Panel, 2020). Changing the public's perception to be more positive is likely to increase the attraction and retention of personnel.

Overview

Despite the importance of teaching, the supply of new teachers across the United States is at a historic low and continues to decline—signaling a **diminishing interest** in teaching among young people (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Over the past decade enrollment in teacher preparation programs has greatly decreased, as more than one-third fewer students enrolled in preparation programs in 2018 than in 2010 (Partelow, 2019).

While teaching is acknowledged by society as important, careers in the field of education have low social standing (Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2018). A 2018 national poll found that over half of respondents would not want their children to teach in public schools, down significantly from 70% in 2009 and 75% in 1969 (PDK International, 2018). Responses indicate that in **current public opinion** the profession is associated with **low salary, poor working conditions, and a lack of respect and professional autonomy** (PDK International, 2018). Recent reports from practitioners indicate that society's negative view of education is a growing concern for early intervention (EI) professionals as well.

The reported sources of **stress** related to working conditions felt by teachers are numerous. They include ensuring that students meet **testing standards**, collaboration with **parents**, growth in **class sizes**, and personal **financial pressures**. Further, both practitioners and nonteachers believe that teachers are **unsafe** in the workplace (Walker, 2018). These stressors preceded the current stress caused by the pandemic and civil unrest teachers are currently facing.

Research Findings

While practitioners, researchers, and policy makers agree that public perceptions around education and EI must shift, little research has been conducted on the topic.

Existing research and dialogue on the **public's perception** of education have found the following:

- In addition to fiscal considerations, **feelings of "disrespect"** from administrators and families contribute to preventing prospective educators from pursuing careers in schools (USA Today, 2019).
- One study reported that high schoolers identified **societal respect as important as salary** in deciding whether to pursue a career as an educator (Han et al., 2018).
- More college graduates choose to become teachers if they believe that educator **salaries are competitive** (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).
- The perceived attractiveness of the profession reflects individuals' **perceptions of the working conditions** that educators face (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).
- The majority of high schoolers who explicitly aspired to careers in education perceived the field as **providing opportunities for career growth**.

A 2020 study compared States with low special education shortages and States with high special education shortages. It found that in States that **invest more in the well-being** of their students and teachers, the public had a **higher opinion** of the teaching profession, and critical personnel **shortages were fewer** (Peyton et al., 2020).

Overview (Continued)

It is clear that addressing the **role of current educators** in influencing youth to pursue the profession is an important first step to addressing barriers to recruiting educators. This is particularly true for **attracting students of color** to pursue careers in teaching (OSEP Summit Attract Panel, 2020). As educators of color are more likely to report unfavorable working conditions than their white peers, this can lead to educators' expressing disenchantment with the profession to students, which in turn damages their students' perception of the field (Dixon, Griffin, & Teoh 2019; OSEP Summit Attract Panel, 2020).

Additionally, the **perceptions that families and caretakers** have of the field of education and early intervention also affect the educator pipeline (OSEP Summit Attract Panel, 2020). Much like in-service educators, families and caretakers play an essential role in **persuading or dissuading** prospective educators from pursuing careers in the field. One major way in which education is presented to families is through the **media**, which often blames educators for perceived shortcomings in educational settings (Shine, 2020). To take advantage of the important role of families and caretakers, public awareness and outreach campaigns should also address how educators are depicted in all forms of media. Sharing success stories of personnel and the impact they have had in their communities can lead to improved perceptions (OSEP Symposium, 2019).

Research Findings (Continued)

These States typically have higher expenditures per pupil, higher teacher salaries, and greater preparation capacity. They also tend to produce more special education graduates.

Analyzing public perceptions of the field of education and their effect on attracting, preparing, and retaining personnel is an evolving area of study. More research on the strategy of trying to improve public perceptions is needed to determine its long-term effectiveness for addressing shortages of personnel to serve students with disabilities.

Exemplars

- [Texas Education Agency \(TEA\) #IAmTXEd Campaign](#). #IAmTXEd is a TEA-led social media campaign intended to improve the perception of the field of education by sharing ongoing success stories of Texas practitioners. The State campaign collects and disseminates the stories of educators whose work is leading to improved student outcomes and achievements. Social media posts are shared statewide weekly via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and have generated a lot of engagement and interaction with followers.
- [Teach Palm Beach](#). This social media and video vignette campaign on Twitter is designed to improve the public perception of teaching by highlighting stories of local teachers who have made a difference in the Palm Beach, Florida, community.
- [Council of Chief State School Officer's \(CCSSO\) National Teacher of the Year](#). CCSSO's National Teacher of the Year Program is a prestigious teacher recognition program that has operated for almost 70 years. The program provides a platform for exceptional educators to elevate issues that affect teachers and students, expand their leadership roles, and influence policy and practice. It also celebrates teachers as among the most impactful figures in the life of every student. After a teacher receives the award, State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) can arrange for the teacher to share effective teaching strategies, either through social media or speaking engagements.

(Additional exemplars can be found on the [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).)

Resource Spotlight

[Power to the Profession](#). This national collaboration between 15 organizations aims to empower the professions of the early childhood workforce by establishing a framework and setting a vision for how to drive the significant and sustained public investment that will allow all children, birth through age 8, to benefit from high-quality early childhood education provided by well-prepared, diverse, supported, and compensated professionals.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Critical Components for Success

(Lists are not sequential)

Setting the Stage

- Identify a broad stakeholder group to include SEA, LEA, and IHE personnel, policy makers, community leaders, practitioners, families, students, and public relations, marketing, and media specialists.
- Examine data related to the current workforce, including data from personnel, students, families, and communities (e.g., working conditions surveys, school climate surveys, community focus groups, exit interviews).
- Use data to identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement.

Initial Start-Up

- Identify potential funding sources (e.g., Federal or State grants, Title II or IDEA funds, community foundations, other local business partnerships).
- Convene stakeholders to identify focus areas for a public awareness program designed to highlight strengths and shift perceptions of education and the role of personnel.
 - Determine the target audience for the campaign (e.g., parents, community members, students, millennials).
 - Determine the short- and long-term goals of the public awareness program.
 - Align strategies to goal areas, with personnel at the forefront of driving solutions.
 - Determine what platform(s) the public awareness campaign should use to most effectively reach the target audience (e.g., website, social media, news/radio, community outreach).
- Empower stakeholders to share meaningful and compelling messages and create connections within the community.

Continuous Improvement

- Review preliminary data to see whether the program has shown signs of success.
- Examine progress toward short- and long-term goals and make refinements based on data and lessons learned.
- Share success stories.
- Develop guidance, resources, and tools.

Related Services

A 2019 OSEP survey highlighted the important role educators play in changing youths' perceptions of the field. The same is true for related services, as **in-service** professionals often **provide youth with their first exposure** to related service professions (NCPSSERS, 2014).

It is important for State, LEA, and school leaders to **build the visibility** of their related service providers, such as school social workers, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and physical therapists, to present these roles to students and their caretakers as viable career options (NCPSSERS, 2014). Leaders must combine this with **explicit encouragement** for students to pursue careers in these areas.

Additionally, general education teachers can encourage students to pursue school-based professions. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has found success in leveraging high school health science teachers to **bring awareness and reverence to the roles and responsibilities** of school-based speech-language pathologists and audiologists (OSEP Symposium, 2019).

Early Childhood

Early childhood special education (ECSE) and early intervention (EI) also face challenges related to public perceptions of these fields. ECSE and EI professionals, because of their direct work with parents, families, and community agencies, are in a unique position to help shift perceptions to be more positive. These professionals can communicate openly about the beneficial impact of their work on infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities and their families.

Stakeholder Spotlight

- **Professional Associations.** Professional associations can play an important role in improving public perceptions of education personnel, particularly related service providers. Professional associations are not only public-facing advocates for the professional status of school-based related service providers but can also improve public perceptions of the professions through recruitment efforts and public awareness campaigns. An example of this is the **American Occupational Therapy Association's [Student Recruitment Campaign](#)**. More information on this campaign can be found on OSEP's [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).

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