A CELS Policy Brief for New Jersey and Maryland school leaders

Preparing Teachers for Students with Autism

By Dr. Dōnnie R. Johnson, founder and president, Consulting Educational Leadership Services (CELS), LLC · Published October 19, 2026

Summary

In New Jersey, 1 in 29 eight-year-olds has been identified with autism, compared with 1 in 31 nationally (CDC, *MMWR*, April 2025). Most of the teachers who serve these students were never trained for them. In Dr. Johnson's study of 12 effective special educators, only one had taken coursework focused on autism. The other eleven learned on the job.

Districts pay for that gap through repeated professional development, staff turnover, and students whose needs go unmet. Superintendents and boards can close it with three actions:

1. **Build the pipeline.** Partner with preparation programs to give teacher candidates longer, autism-focused field placements in district classrooms.
2. **Support new teachers.** Pair every special educator new to autism classrooms with a veteran mentor for the first two years.
3. **Reward expertise.** Pay for, and recognize, autism-specific coursework and credentials, so trained teachers stay.

The challenge

More students with autism are arriving in classrooms than ever before, and districts cannot hire enough trained teachers to serve them.

- **Rising identification.** In 2022, 32.2 of every 1,000 eight-year-olds nationally were identified with autism, about 1 in 31. New Jersey's rate was 34.0 per 1,000 (about 1 in 29) and Maryland's was 26.3 per 1,000 (about 1 in 38) (CDC, *MMWR Surveillance Summaries* 74(SS-2), April 2025). In Newark, Rutgers researchers found 1 in 20 children diagnosed as of 2020, up from 1 in 167 in 2000 (Chalkbeat Newark, Nov. 2025).
- **Hard-to-fill positions.** Going into 2024–25, 74% of public elementary schools and 74% of middle and combined schools reported difficulty filling special education teaching vacancies. Only 77% of special education vacancies were filled with fully certified teachers (NCES School Pulse Panel, Oct. 2024).
- **New Jersey lacks vacancy data.** The state's own workforce report says New Jersey does not collect teacher vacancy counts and that special education staffing "likely needs to increase" (NJDOE, 2024 Teacher Workforce Report). Districts must track their own numbers.

- **Maryland is improving, but not done.** MSDE reports teacher vacancies fell from 2,145 in 2022–23 to 886 in 2025–26, and special education vacancies dropped 21.4% in the latest year (MSDE Blueprint briefing, Jan. 2026). Teachers entering through Grow Your Own and other alternate routes will still need autism-specific preparation.

Neither state's public reports break out how many teachers of students with autism hold emergency, provisional, or conditional certificates. Boards should ask for that count in their own districts.

What the research found

Effective special educators told Dr. Johnson their preparation did not equip them to teach students with autism. They learned by trial and error, on the district's time.

Her Seton Hall dissertation, *Effectiveness of Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs to Teach Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in a Medium Southeastern Maryland School District* (2018), interviewed 12 special educators rated effective. Half taught in a school serving only students with autism and half in an inclusive school. The sample included novices (four years or fewer) and veterans (ten years or more).

Finding	What teachers reported
Training came late, from employers	1 of 12 had autism-specific coursework, in a graduate program. The other 11 relied on district training, which several called inadequate.
Undergraduate programs fell short	Teachers described undergraduate preparation as general, not focused on any one disability. Many entered through alternate routes.
Social skills are the hardest part	Novices and veterans alike named teaching social skills, and helping students use them in new settings, as their biggest challenge.
Experience helps, but not enough	Veterans felt more confident, yet also less prepared as the number of students with autism in their classes grew.
Gaps teachers did not see	No teacher mentioned partnering with parents or Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a research-based practice.
A shared remedy	All 12 agreed new special educators need more training. They proposed field placements, classroom visits, case studies, and mentoring by veterans.

Dr. Johnson's conclusion: the teacher shortage, alternate licensure, and rising autism identification together create a crisis. Districts end up paying for training that preparation programs should have provided.

Recommendations for districts

Districts cannot wait for preparation programs to change. Each step below is within a superintendent's authority. Most can start with existing professional development funds, such as federal IDEA and Title II dollars.

1. **Build the pipeline with local universities.**
    - Sign agreements with nearby preparation programs to host student teachers in autism and inclusive classrooms for a full year, not a single semester.
    - Ask partner programs to add autism case studies, ABA-informed practice, and classroom observations to required coursework.
    - Recruit paraprofessionals already working in autism classrooms into grow-your-own certification routes.
2. **Mentor every new teacher assigned to students with autism.**
    - Pair each new or alternate-route special educator with a trained veteran mentor for two years.
    - Build in monthly classroom visits to strong autism programs within the district.
    - Focus coaching on social skills instruction, behavior planning, and partnering with families, the areas teachers named as hardest or overlooked.
3. **Reward autism expertise so trained teachers stay.**
    - Offer tuition support or a stipend for autism-specific graduate coursework or credentials, tied to a service commitment.
    - Recognize these credentials in hiring, assignment, and teacher leadership roles.
    - Track retention, IEP compliance, and student progress in autism programs, and report results to the board each year.

The return: fewer outside placements, lower turnover, stronger IEP compliance, and steadier classrooms for every student.

Policy context

Both states are investing in the special education workforce. Districts that act now can align with that funding.

State	Current efforts	Opening for districts
New Jersey	An online, 24-credit Teacher of Students with Disabilities endorsement from NJCTL, launched October 2024 (NJEA). Rutgers' $3.75 million federal PASE grant prepares special educators for leadership, with its first cohort in January 2026 (Chalkbeat Newark).	Add autism-specific coursework and mentoring on top of the general endorsement. Nominate strong teachers for leadership pipelines.
Maryland	The Blueprint for Maryland's Future raises minimum starting teacher pay to $60,000. The $14.7 million Grow Your Own Educators round names special education as a priority (Hoodline).	Route Grow Your Own candidates into autism classrooms with full-year placements and veteran mentors.

Questions board members should ask

- How many of our special education teachers hold emergency, provisional, or alternate-route certificates, and how many teach students with autism?
- What autism-specific training does a new special educator receive in the first year, and who provides it?
- Does every new special educator have a trained mentor? For how long?
- What is turnover in our autism programs compared with the rest of the district?
- How many students do we place out of district for autism services, and at what cost?
- Do we have agreements with local universities to host student teachers in our autism classrooms?
- How do we involve families in planning and progress monitoring for students with autism?

About the author

Dr. Dōnnie R. Johnson is a K–12 district executive leader certified for the superintendency in New Jersey. She has 30 years of experience as a special educator, turnaround principal, and district director of special services in New Jersey and Maryland. She restored a district special education department to 100% compliance with state regulations. Dr. Johnson holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership,

Management and Policy from Seton Hall University and is the founder and president of Consulting Educational Leadership Services (CELS), LLC, which helps districts strengthen special education, leadership, and school culture. Contact: drjohnson821@gmail.com.

Sources

Data come from primary CDC, NCES, NJDOE, and MSDE sources where available; news sources are used only for program announcements. © 2026 Consulting Educational Leadership Services (CELS), LLC. May be shared with attribution.

1. Johnson, D. R. (2018). *Effectiveness of Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs to Teach Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in a Medium Southeastern Maryland School District*. Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses. Link
2. Shaw, K. A., et al. (2025). Prevalence and early identification of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 4 and 8 years: Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 16 sites, United States, 2022. *MMWR Surveillance Summaries*, 74(SS-2), 1–22. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Link
3. National Center for Education Statistics. (2024, October 17). Most U.S. public elementary and secondary schools faced hiring challenges for the start of the 2024–25 academic year. School Pulse Panel. Link
4. New Jersey Department of Education. (2024, February). *New Jersey's Teacher Workforce Landscape: 2024 Annual Report*. Prepared by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University. Link
5. Maryland State Department of Education. (2026, January 28). Blueprint implementation briefing to the House Appropriations and Ways and Means Committees. Maryland General Assembly. Link
6. Chalkbeat Newark. (2025, November 13). Rutgers receives new federal grant to train special education leaders amid rising autism rates. Link
7. NJEA Review. (2025, May 15). Addressing the special education teacher shortage. Link
8. Hoodline. (2026, August 19). Maryland hands out $14.7 million so school staff can become teachers. Link