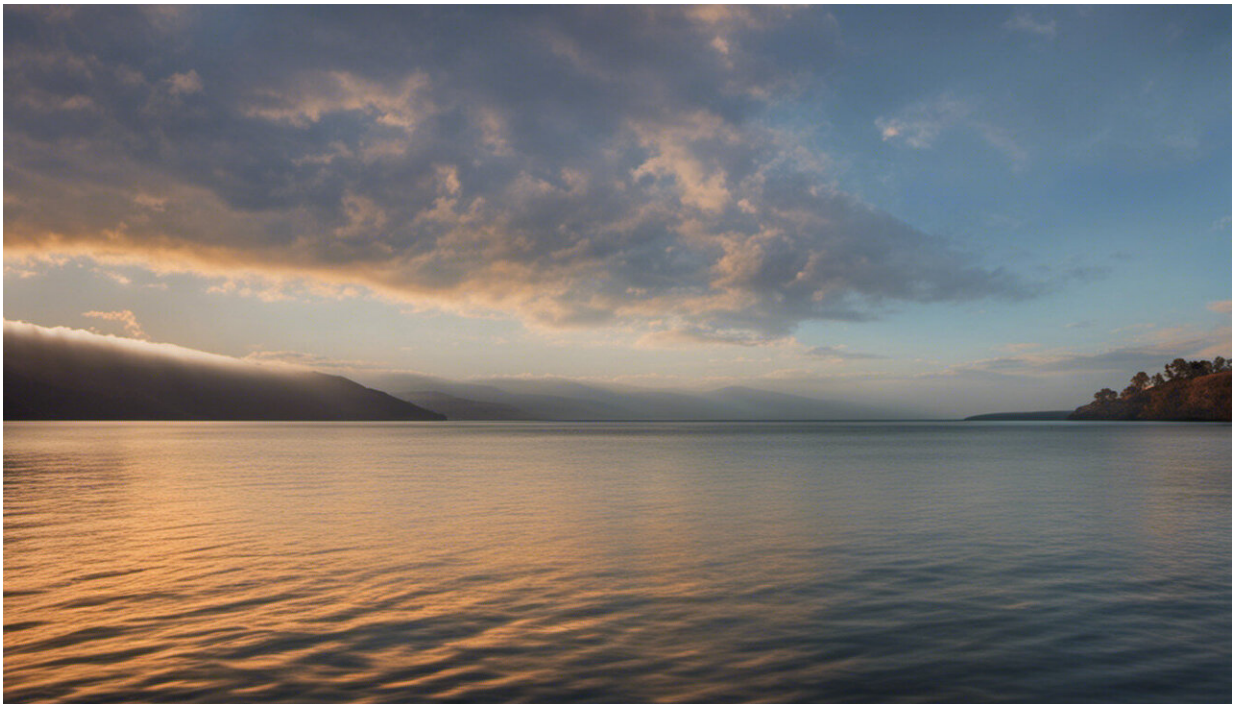


# COVID-19 challenges hit special ed teachers especially hard

January 26 2022, by Jim Murez

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There has never been a tougher time to be a teacher.

Working amid a deadly global [pandemic](#) while navigating multiple problems and evolving guidelines has placed more pressure on teachers than ever before. And for educators who work with students with

disabilities or others who belong to vulnerable or underrepresented populations, the challenges mushroomed, especially once students went remote, UO researchers have found.

"That was the single largest structural change in the delivery of instruction in the history of education in the United States, and it happened in a matter of weeks without any preparation," said College of Education professor Jerry Rosiek. "Teachers were constantly put in impossible positions, and that was causing a great deal of stress. Everybody was in crisis mode, so teachers were doing just what they really absolutely had to do."

Rosiek and his team of graduate students have been talking with teachers about the pandemic since it first set in. At the same time, College of Education faculty member Chris Knowles was in the midst of a UO-Oregon Health & Science University-funded partnership to learn about occupational stress of special educators, but she quickly pivoted to focus on how they were handling the pandemic and its effects on them.

"Teachers faced planning challenges, like how do I move this online," Rosiek said, "but they also faced [emotional challenges](#), and they were bearing witness to the suffering of kids for whom there were solutions, but the solutions were not within their reach or they were being prohibited from actually enacting those solutions."

Teachers were also hamstrung by having little to no control over the curriculum they were given, and they were unable to adjust based on their students' circumstances. Rosiek said teachers frequently managed multiple, simultaneous challenges on top of their teaching responsibilities in an ongoing scramble to connect with and help their students.

"In addition to their own stress of having to figure this out, in addition to

realizing that the children they were serving were facing human challenges that they couldn't always meet, that created a different layer of challenge and stress for teachers," Rosiek said. "And nonetheless, they felt responsible for trying to care for the children."

Teachers who work with students with disabilities were often put in the toughest predicaments.

"It was hard on teachers to watch students that they knew well and knew their vulnerabilities essentially not being served well," Rosiek said.

Teachers would deliver materials to students' homes or even run errands for parents or caregivers as a way to show appreciation for the effort they were making.

"Special education teachers didn't just have to shift to doing their instruction online," Rosiek said. "They basically had to shift to teaching adults to teach kids, because the only way you can reach the students is through another adult who is with them."

Teachers working with English-language learners faced similar challenges, working with parents who were often essential workers, who were invested in their children's education but spoke little or no English and sometimes had a justifiable distrust of public agencies.

"The English-language learner students were more poorly served than were the general population students who were also being poorly served during this crisis," Rosiek said.

Knowles and her team in the College of Education are still too early in the process of analyzing their data to make any strong conclusions. However, one theme that emerged is that teachers' perceptions of their school's environment varied.

"Everybody's experience was completely dependent on different factors," Knowles said. "And I think a lot of it included social support: if they had it or if they didn't."

That ranged from the backing of their school colleagues, administrators and parents or even as broad as society overall.

"The one thing that has come up is not feeling appreciated or respected," Knowles said. "I would say we're learning the power that people in schools have, (that) classified staff, administrators, other general education teachers have. There's a lot of power being a colleague and how you influence that special ed teacher's experience for better or for worse."

Of the 18 individuals they've followed over the pandemic, two took less stressful positions but remain special education teachers, and many made comments about "considering" leaving the field of special education.

"If they didn't make that choice, they would have burned out; they probably would have left teaching," Knowles said of the two who switched positions.

The pandemic also worsened special [education teacher](#) shortages that were in place before the pandemic in rural areas and urban areas with high demand, Knowles said. She added that the past 18 months could also provide a teachable moment for the field.

"Hopefully, this opportunity will provide schools with another way to look at what is authentic support for teachers during challenging situations, whether it be COVID, a natural disaster or an event that happened to someone at the school or in the school," Knowles said.

For now, people are still finding their way through another wave of the

pandemic and the omicron variant.

"There was always the feeling that this was year was going to be, "We're over the hump. Now we're back in schools. Everything's back to normal," Rosiek said. "But it's not normal this year."

Instead, teachers are bearing the brunt from parents and administrators by having to enforce mask-wearing policies and being asked to do more, such as take on [extracurricular activities](#), work through prep periods or teach classes out of their areas of expertise.

The pandemic has functioned as a stress test on the school system, Rosiek suggested, showing places where improvements are needed.

"The pandemic didn't create most of these problems we are seeing," he said. "The pandemic created situations where some of these problems that have been endemic for a while have just been intensified and made more visible to everybody."

Provided by University of Oregon

Citation: COVID-19 challenges hit special ed teachers especially hard (2022, January 26)  
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-covid-special-ed-teachers-hard.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--