

Re: HF3554

March 08, 2022

Chair Richardson and Committee Members,

I hope this message finds you well and warm. Today, I write to you on behalf of INDIGO Education and in support of alternative licensure programs. INDIGO Education is a nonprofit organization providing exceptional special education services to public schools throughout Minnesota for over 20 years. We currently serve over 65 charter schools in Minnesota. Our 14-member INDIGO Education leadership team has more than 200 years of combined years of professional experience in the field, fulfilling administrative and operational support to our client schools, including cohorts for teachers of color, new special education teachers, and school leaders.

As the executive director of the nonprofit, I support my team in making progress on its goals. Specifically, INDIGO Education works to ensure that students with disabilities have high quality programming through the support of effective teachers. In addition, we seek to provide special education teachers with the support they need to access teacher education programs and remain in the field. Looking through the lens of teacher retention, I write to remind the Education Policy Committee that special education law began in 1975. *The initial study of special education teacher burnout began in 1979.*

In addition, I ask the committee to be mindful that current organizational school systems contribute to 40-50% of special education teachers leaving the field within their first 5 years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Education Minnesota, 2021a, 2021b; Liuzzi, 2021; Wanat, 2021). Special education teachers are leaving the field at an even higher rate than their

colleagues (PELSB 2017, 2019, 2021; Wanat, 2021). This leaves our most vulnerable students without qualified teachers, which contributes to the ever-widening achievement gap and its corresponding life outcomes.

This perpetual teacher staff rotation and understaffing predicament cost the United States a monetary sum of 2.2 billion dollars annually (Education Minnesota, 2017a; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Higher Education Consortium for Special Education, 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Gozali-Lee & Connell, 2019; Wanat, 2021). While we work to retain the teachers that have chosen employment in the field of special education, communities must collaborate to bring new voices and perspectives to the field. Alarming, only 7.28% are of our teachers in Minnesota are teachers of color and indigenous teachers, while 38.02% of our Pre-K through 12th grade population are students of color and indigenous students (pg. 20, [PELSB 2021 Biennial Supply and Demand of Teachers in Minnesota Report](#)).

Yet.

Collectively, we press on in the spirit of hope; turning barriers into breakthroughs. As you know, would-be teachers encounter significant barriers to post-secondary education. Deterring dreams and classroom impact, personal and family finances can often stand in the way of special education teacher licensure. To that end, first generation college student status, language barriers, and the need for ongoing/real time mentoring contribute one making an assessment that service to students is not option to entertain.

Yes; barriers exist.

However, INDIGO Education believes that *barriers are born to be broken*.

INDIGO Education is developing an Alternative Teacher Preparation (ALP) program to support the alternative learner and their needs. Our goal is to provide a more focused teacher educator program with supports that are linguistically and culturally present, and in a more affordable way, to meet the needs of those who want to become special education teachers. Just as we strive to create space for the ALP participant; we strive to create space in Minnesota's classrooms. We believe that all students deserve to see themselves in our talented teaching force.

INDIGO Education is committed to serving Minnesota students, regardless of age and their continued educational journey. Because of that commitment to our students and families, INDIGO Education urges you to support [HF3554](#).

Let's partner to make education accessible for everyone.

Better together,

Erin Lavery Wanat