

Special Education In Rural Alaska

Cyndy Fry,
Special Education Director
Petersburg Borough School District

Photo by: Carey Case

Special Education Overview

Individual student centered service education by data and documentation

- Education services to students ages 3-21
- 14 Eligibility categories
- Data determines Eligibility
 - Initial evaluation followed by every 3 years
 - Impacts educational performance
 - Specially Designed Instruction to
 - meets educational needs of the student
- Individual Education Plan
 - Annual revision: present level, goals and services
- Goal Progress
 - Monitoring ensures effective instruction
- Intensive needs continuous adult support

Cognitive Impairment
Specific Learning Disability
Emotional Disturbance
Deaf
Hearing Impairment
Deaf and Blind
Orthopedic impairment
Visual Impairment
Speech and Language Impairment
Multiple Disabilities
Early Childhood Developmental Delays
Autism
Traumatic Brain Injury

Special Education in Petersburg

- **Teachers require**
 - High level of diverse skills to meet needs
 - Professional Development
 - Research of Best Practice
 - Intervention
 - Collaboration with Services agencies
- **Population in Petersburg**
 - 4.5 Teachers serving student ranging from 3-21 years old
 - 458 student in district, 70 students qualify for Special Education (15.2%)
 - 40 students receive Speech Language services
 - 22 students receive Occupational Therapy
 - 4 students receive Physical Therapy

Petersburg Students:

- 2 Cognitively Impaired (1 nonverbal)
- 20 Specific Learning Disabilities
- 3 Emotional Disturbance
- 1 Orthopedic Impairment
- 17 Speech Language Impairment
- 10 Other Health Impairment
- 2 Multiple Disabilities
- 7 Early Childhood Developmental Delays
- 8 Autism (4 nonverbal)

Special Education Administrators and Teachers often wear multiple hats in rural districts

Administrator

- Special Education Director
- District Test Coordinator
- District 504 Coordinator
- Other administration and teaching duties
 - Cover and support administration at building level
 - Unable to fill counselor position 24/25 school year
 - Reading interventionist: 3 groups Elementary, Middle School & High School
 - Behavior interventionist
 - Sub as needed
 - Grant writing

Teacher

- Social Emotional Behavioral support
- Replacement classes
- Credit Recovery
- After school support
- Study Hall
- Bus Monitors
- Recess duty

Teacher and paraprofessional openings across the state

Alaska Retention and Recruitment Center

- 178 SPED Teacher postings
- 29 in Rural Districts
- 2024 80% states reported shortage
- Alaska challenges
 - Competitive salaries
 - Cost of living
 - Retirement benefits
 - Remote locations
 - Some teachers do not stay the full year.

Instructional Paraprofessional (7)
Intensive SPED paraprofessional (12)
Inupiaq Paraprofessional (1)
K-12 Special Ed. Distance/ Homeschool Teacher (1)
K-12 Special Education Teacher (1)
Special Education Elementary (20)
Special Education Intensive Needs Teacher (5)
Special Education Paraprofessional (4)
Special Education Preschool Teacher (1)
Special Education Secondary (2)
Special Education Teacher (5)
Special Education Teacher - Elementary (2)
Special Education Teacher - Secondary (1)
Special Education Self Contained (58)
Special Education Resource (78)

<https://aerrc.org/>

Addressing the challenges of Special Education in Alaska

- J1 and H-1B visa employees
 - Cost to district
 - Training to prepare for Alaska education settings
 - Time between hire and service
 - Commitment 3 yrs District vs. employee
- Contract Agencies/Tele-services
 - Limited services and virtual contact with students
 - Adult required to be in the room for services
 - Doesn't work for all students
- Retired teachers from other states
 - Seeking the Alaska experience
 - Short term solution
- GREAT Alaska Project
 - DEED's grant program to provide educational structure and support for Rural paraprofessional to obtain teaching certification.
- Universities
 - Not enough going into education
- Salary with NW states
 - WA Salary range 60-140,000
 - Retirement

Special Education Teachers Attrition

- National Shortage 8%
- 50% leave the field within the first 5 years, 75% leave within 10 years
- 12% leave the field every year
- 2.5 times more likely to leave the field
- 38% met clinical criteria for depressive disorder and 38% general anxiety (2020)
- 60% scored “dangerous levels” in emotional exhaustion

“A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles”

Christopher Reeve

Essential Support for Special Education in Rural Districts

- Department of Education: Special Education Team
 - Accessible, Resourceful and Supportive
- Special Education Service Agency
 - Autism Specialist
 - Vision Specialist
 - Behavioral Specialist
- SERRC- Alaska's Educational Resource Center
 - Traumatic Brain Injury
 - Transition Camps (Post Secondary Education and Career Planning)
- Council of Administrators of Special Education, Alaska
 - Collaboration of Special Education teachers and administrators
 - Access to current information and legal issues related to Special Education
- Alaska Council of School Administrators
 - Collaboration with other school administration to support student learning as a cohesive team
 - Understanding the essential role of Special Education Administration play education leadership
- Community Partnerships
 - Early Learning Centers to push in and pull out for Special Education services
 - Local businesses and Borough offices for Community Based Transition Program

Questions?

Cyndy Fry
Special Education Director
Petersburg Borough School District
877-526-7656 ext. 104
cfry@pcsd.us

Photo by: Carey Case