
Teachers—Special Education

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Significant Points

- All States require teachers to be licensed; traditional licensing requires the completion of a special education teacher training program and at least a bachelor's degree, though many States require a master's degree.
- Many States offer alternative licensure programs to attract college graduates who do not have training in education.
- Excellent job prospects are expected due to rising enrollments of special education students and reported shortages of qualified teachers.

Nature of the Work

Special education teachers work with children and youths who have a variety of disabilities. A small number of special education teachers work with students with severe cases of mental retardation or autism, primarily teaching them life skills and basic literacy. However, the majority of special education teachers work with children with mild to moderate disabilities, using or modifying the general education curriculum to meet the child's individual needs. Most special education teachers instruct students at the elementary, middle, and secondary school level, although some work with infants and toddlers.

The various types of disabilities that may qualify individuals for special education programs include specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, autism, combined deafness and blindness, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments. Students are classified under one of the categories, and special education teachers are prepared to work with specific groups. Early identification of a child with special needs is an important part of a special education teacher's job, because early intervention is essential in educating children with disabilities.

Special education teachers use various techniques to promote learning. Depending on the disability, teaching methods can include individualized instruction, problem-solving assignments, and small-group work. When students need special accommodations to take a test, special education teachers see that appropriate ones are provided, such as having the questions read orally or lengthening the time allowed to take the test.

Special education teachers help to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each student. The IEP sets personalized goals for the student and is tailored to that student's individual needs and ability. When appropriate, the program includes a transition plan outlining specific steps to prepare students with disabilities for middle school or high school or, in the case of older students, a job or postsecondary study. Teachers review the IEP with the student's parents, school administrators, and the student's general education teachers. Teachers work closely with parents to inform them of their child's progress and suggest techniques to promote learning at home.

Special education teachers design and teach appropriate curricula, assign work geared toward each student's needs and abilities, and grade papers and homework assignments. They are involved in the students' behavioral, social, and academic development, helping them develop emotionally, feel comfortable in social situations, and be aware of socially acceptable behavior. Preparing special education students for daily life after graduation also is an important aspect of the job. Teachers provide students with career counseling or help them learn routine skills, such as balancing a checkbook.

As schools become more inclusive, special education teachers and general education teachers increasingly work together in general education classrooms. Special education teachers help general educators adapt curriculum materials and teaching techniques to meet the needs of students with disabilities. They coordinate the work of teachers, teacher assistants, and related personnel, such as therapists and social workers, to meet the individualized needs of the student within inclusive special education programs. A large part of a special education teacher's job involves communicating and coordinating with others involved in the child's well being, including parents, social workers, school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, school administrators, and other teachers.

Special education teachers work in a variety of settings. Some have their own classrooms and teach only special education students; others work as special education resource teachers and offer individualized help to students in general education classrooms; still others teach together with general education teachers in classes including both general and special



Special education teachers adapt learning plans to the individual needs of their students.

education students. Some teachers work with special education students for several hours a day in a resource room, separate from their general education classroom. Considerably fewer special education teachers work in residential facilities or tutor students in homebound or hospital environments.

Some special education teachers work with infants and usually travel to the child's home to work with the parents. Many of these infants have medical problems that slow or preclude normal development. Special education teachers show parents techniques and activities designed to stimulate the infant and encourage the growth and development of the child's skills. Toddlers usually receive their services at a preschool where special education teachers help them develop social, self-help, motor, language, and cognitive skills, often through the use of play.

Technology is becoming increasingly important in special education. Teachers use specialized equipment such as computers with synthesized speech, interactive educational software programs, and audiotapes to assist children.

Work environment. Special education teachers enjoy the challenge of working with students with disabilities and the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with them. Although helping these students can be highly rewarding, the work also can be emotionally and physically draining. Many special education teachers are under considerable stress due to heavy workloads and administrative tasks. They must produce a substantial amount of paperwork documenting each student's progress and work under the threat of litigation against the school or district by parents if correct procedures are not followed or if they feel that their child is not receiving an adequate education. Recently passed legislation, however, is intended to reduce the burden of paperwork and the threat of litigation. The physical and emotional demands of the job cause some special education teachers to leave the occupation.

Some schools offer year-round education for special education students, but most special education teachers work only the traditional 10-month school year.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

All States require special education teachers to be licensed, which typically requires at least a bachelor's degree and completion of an approved training program in special education teaching. Many States require a master's degree. Most States have alternative methods for entry for bachelor's degree holders who do not have training in education.

Education and training. Many colleges and universities across the United States offer programs in special education at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degree levels. Special education teachers usually undergo longer periods of training than do general education teachers. Most bachelor's degree programs last years and include general and specialized courses in special education. However, an increasing number of institutions require a 5th year or other graduate-level preparation. Among the courses offered are educational psychology, legal issues of special education, child growth and development, and strategies for teaching students with disabilities. Some programs require specialization, while others offer generalized special education degrees or a course of study in sev-

eral specialized areas. The last year of the program usually is spent student teaching in a classroom supervised by a certified teacher.

Licensure. All 50 States and the District of Columbia require special education teachers to be licensed. The State board of education or a licensure advisory committee usually grants licenses, and licensure varies by State. In some States, special education teachers receive a general education credential to teach kindergarten through grade 12. These teachers then train in a specialty, such as learning disabilities or behavioral disorders. Many States offer general special education licenses across a variety of disability categories, while others license several different specialties within special education.

For traditional licensing, all States require a bachelor's degree and the completion of an approved teacher preparation program with a prescribed number of subject and education credits and supervised practice teaching. However, many States also require a master's degree in special education, involving at least 1 year of additional course work, including a specialization, beyond the bachelor's degree. Often a prospective teacher must pass a professional assessment test as well. Some States have reciprocity agreements allowing special education teachers to transfer their licenses from one State to another, but many others still require that experienced teachers reapply and pass licensing requirements to work in the State.

Most States also offer alternative routes to licensing which are intended to attract people into teaching who do not fulfill traditional licensing standards. Most alternative licensure programs are open to anyone with a bachelor's degree, although some are designed for recent college graduates or professionals in other education occupations. Programs typically require the successful completion of a period of supervised preparation and instruction and passing an assessment test. Individuals can then begin teaching under a provisional license and can obtain a regular license after teaching under the supervision of licensed teachers for a period of 1 to 2 years and completing required education courses through a local college or other provider.

Other qualifications. Special education teachers must be patient, able to motivate students, understanding of their students' special needs, and accepting of differences in others. Teachers must be creative and apply different types of teaching methods to reach students who are having difficulty learning. Communication and cooperation are essential skills because special education teachers spend a great deal of time interacting with others, including students, parents, and school faculty and administrators.

Advancement. Special education teachers can advance to become supervisors or administrators. They may also earn advanced degrees and become instructors in colleges that prepare others to teach special education. In some school systems, highly experienced teachers can become mentors to less experienced ones, providing guidance to those teachers while maintaining a light teaching load.

Employment

Special education teachers held a total of about 459,000 jobs in 2006. Nearly all work in public and private educational institutions. A few worked for individual and social assistance

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Special education teachers	25-2040	459,000	530,000	71,000	15
Special education teachers, preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school	25-2041	219,000	262,000	43,000	20
Special education teachers, middle school.....	25-2042	102,000	118,000	16,000	16
Special education teachers, secondary school	25-2043	138,000	150,000	12,000	9

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

agencies or residential facilities, or in homebound or hospital environments.

Job Outlook

Employment of special education teachers is expected to increase faster than average. Job prospects should be excellent as many districts report problems finding adequate numbers of certified special education teachers.

Employment change. The number of special education teachers is expected to increase by 15 percent from 2006 to 2016, faster than the average for all occupations. Although student enrollments in general are expected to grow slowly, continued increases in the number of special education students needing services will generate a greater need for special education teachers.

The number of students requiring special education services has grown steadily in recent years due to improvements that have allowed learning disabilities to be diagnosed at earlier ages and medical advances that have resulted in more children surviving serious accidents or illnesses, but with impairments that require special accommodations. In addition, legislation emphasizing training and employment for individuals with disabilities and educational reforms requiring higher standards for graduation has increased demand for special education services. The percentage of foreign-born special education students also is expected to grow, as teachers become more adept in recognizing disabilities in that population. Finally, more parents are expected to seek special services for their children who have difficulty meeting the new, higher standards required of students.

Job prospects. In addition to job openings resulting from growth, a large number of openings will result from the need to replace special education teachers who switch to teaching general education, change careers altogether, or retire. At the same time, many school districts report difficulty finding sufficient numbers of qualified teachers. As a result, special education teachers should have excellent job prospects.

The job outlook does vary by geographic area and specialty. Although most areas of the country report difficulty finding qualified applicants, positions in inner cities and rural areas usually are more plentiful than job openings in suburban or wealthy urban areas. Student populations also are expected to increase more rapidly in certain parts of the country, such as the South and West, resulting in increased demand for special education teachers in those regions. In addition, job opportunities may be better in certain specialties—such as teachers who work with children with multiple disabilities or severe disabili-

ties like autism—because of large increases in the enrollment of special education students classified under those categories. Legislation encouraging early intervention and special education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers has created a need for early childhood special education teachers. Bilingual special education teachers and those with multicultural experience also are needed to work with an increasingly diverse student population.

Earnings

Median annual earnings in May 2006 of wage-and-salary special education teachers who worked primarily in preschools, kindergartens, and elementary schools were \$46,360. The middle 50 percent earned between \$37,500 and \$59,320. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$31,320, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$73,620.

Median annual earnings of wage-and-salary middle school special education teachers were \$47,650. The middle 50 percent earned between \$38,460 and \$61,530. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$32,420, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$80,170.

Median annual earnings of wage-and-salary special education teachers who worked primarily in secondary schools were \$48,330. The middle 50 percent earned between \$38,910 and \$62,640. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$32,760, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$78,020.

In 2006, about 58 percent of special education teachers belonged to unions—mainly the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—that bargain with school systems over wages, hours, and the terms and conditions of employment.

In most schools, teachers receive extra pay for coaching sports and working with students in extracurricular activities. Some teachers earn extra income during the summer, working in the school system or in other jobs.

Related Occupations

Special education teachers work with students who have disabilities and special needs. Other occupations involved with the identification, evaluation, and development of students with disabilities include psychologists, social workers, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, counselors, teacher assistants, occupational therapists, recreational therapists, and teachers—preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary.

Sources of Additional Information

For information on professions related to early intervention and education for children with disabilities, listings of schools with

special education training programs, information on teacher certification, and general information on related personnel issues, contact:

► The Council for Exceptional Children, 1110 N. Glebe Rd., Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201.

Internet: <http://www.cec.sped.org>

► National Center for Special Education Personnel & Related Service Providers, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1800 Diagonal Rd., Suite 320, Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet: <http://www.personnelcenter.org>

To learn more about the special education teacher certification and licensing requirements in individual States, contact the State's department of education.