

CEC Needs Assessment Identifies Preferences in Professional Development

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What do special education practitioners want to learn and how do they want to learn it?

These questions drove a recent Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Professional Development Needs Assessment Survey that revealed important insights that are already helping CEC tailor its programs to mirror the needs of practitioners across the field of special education.

Methodology

In early 2018, CEC contracted a third-party consultant (the Townsend Group and its research partner, Ruzinsky Research) to conduct a study of

current trends, preferences, and priorities related to professional learning within the field of special education. The goal was to better understand the needs of professionals serving children with exceptionalities and to guide future development of CEC's professional development offerings.

The majority of respondents to the survey were female (90%), experienced educators and administrators. Of the teachers who responded, the majority of respondents had been teaching for more than 20 years. Similarly, administrator respondents averaged about 11 years in their role.

The survey was sent to nearly 50,000 individuals, and 1,541 questionnaires were completed.

The professional roles of those who responded to the survey included the following:

- Teacher (34%)
- State or district administrator (27.8%)
- Related service provider or other (22.1%)
- Consultant (6.4%)
- School administrator (3.6%)
- Early interventionist (3.3%)
- College or university student (2.4%)
- Paraeducator (0.4%)

Chart A. Professional Development Topic Areas

Respondents were asked several questions about professional development topic areas and their availability, desirability, and so on. The following topic areas were covered in this portion of the survey:
Foundations of special education
Role of the individual’s abilities, interests, learning environments, cultural and linguistic factors in learning, types of exceptionalities, augmentative and alternative communication techniques, and assistive technologies.
Collaboration and co-teaching
Creating effective co-teaching strategies and implementation plans.
Literacy
Components of scientifically-based reading research and foundations for teaching reading and writing at different developmental levels and to students with exceptionalities.
Developmentally-appropriate practice
Individual development and difference to respond to needs, academic testing, and diagnostic evaluations commonly used in special education.
Law and ethics
Legal and ethical requirements related to educational equity, health and safety, confidentiality, mandated reporting, record keeping, accountability, and discipline.
Developing and documenting student plans
Tracking student improvement, writing individualized education programs (IEP), and writing behavior plans.
Instructional design and adaptations
Selecting and using technically sound formal and informal assessments that minimize bias and using technologies to support instructional assessment, planning, and delivery as well as collaborative and cooperative learning strategies.
Behavior Intervention Planning
Developing meaningful behavior intervention plans based on functional behavioral assessments
Supervising paraprofessionals
Clarifying roles, planning supports, and effective teamwork.
Career and transition (postsecondary) services
Developing daily living skills, employment skills, planning for college transition, self-determination, and self-advocacy.
Evidence-based mathematics instruction
Helping students develop numerical literacy and translate basic arithmetic to higher-level mathematics procedures.
Early childhood special education/early intervention
Working with families, effective assessment processes, and responsive interactional practices.
Specially designed instruction
Organizing and planning, modifications and accommodations, and linking to IEP goals.
Special education leadership
Teacher accountability and evaluation, discipline procedures, and responding to students’ special education needs.

Course Formats

When asked about a preference between face-to-face and online courses, respondents were mixed, with nearly

40% expressing a preference for in-person activities or activities blending in-person and online learning formats.

The primary reason cited for this preference was the type of interactions afforded by in-person instruction.

Chart B. What Keeps Special Education Teachers Up at Night

Concept	%
Developing meaningful behavior intervention plans based on functional behavioral assessments	58.3
Specially designed instruction	51.9
Developing and documenting student plans	48.1
Collaboration and co-teaching	43.6
Supervising paraprofessionals	42.2
Special education leadership	41.1
Developmentally appropriate practice	37.0
Law and ethics	36.3
Literacy	35.9
Instructional design and adaptations	35.8
Career and transition (postsecondary) services	33.6
Evidence-based mathematics	32.2
Student-centered/culturally responsive practices	28.5
Early childhood special education/early intervention	22.8
Foundations of special education	20.8
Other	8.9
None of these	1.3

A smaller but still meaningful proportion (nearly a quarter of respondents) preferred online-only experiences. For these respondents, learning at their own pace, saving on travel expenses, and spending less time out of the classroom were the primary reasons behind that choice.

When asked who typically pays for registration and travel to professional development courses, 33.8% said their school, district, or organization paid, whereas 30.7% paid all the costs themselves. Others reported shared cost arrangements or other options.

Course Topics

The survey presented a range of topics (see Chart A) relevant to special education professionals and several questions were asked to identify professional development needs related to these topics.

When asked to indicate the most challenging concepts that consistently face special education teachers (what keeps them up at night), survey respondents gave the answers shown in Chart B. The largest group of respondents (58.3%) selected “developing meaningful behavior intervention plans.” Other prioritized topic areas included specially designed instruction (51.9%) and developing and documenting student plans (48.1%).

Many of the respondents who provided an *other* response to this question offered a personalized or nuanced version of one of the preexisting answer choices. However, a topic that appeared consistently among the open-ended question responses was that of “working collaboratively with families” or “dealing with parents and other figures outside the student–teacher relationship.”

All survey respondents except for administrators were then asked how helpful each topic area would be to them professionally. Every topic area was perceived as being helpful, but looking at the *very helpful* responses only, “developing meaningful behavior intervention plans” was the most common response.

Administrators were asked to name professional development topics consistently requested by their teachers. Some of the common themes were as follows:

- Assistive technology
- Behavior management
- Differentiated instruction
- Training to address specific needs (autism spectrum disorder, depression, motivation issues, etc.)

Conclusion

This survey revealed clear preferences in professional learning from a demographic of experienced special education teachers and administrators. Data from this survey will be used by CEC in conjunction with other data, such as historical registration and attendance rates for courses by topic area, emerging trends in special education, and association industry trends and best practice in the design and delivery of professional development offerings, in their planning of future professional learning content.

The information gleaned from this survey will be shared with CEC constituencies in a variety of formats and has already influenced the organization’s professional development offerings for 2018. For more information on CEC’s available webinars, upcoming conventions, and other professional development opportunities, please visit the CEC website at <https://www.cec.sped.org/Professional-Development>.

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