



**THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN
DEFINITION
OF A
WELL-PREPARED SPECIAL EDUCATION
TEACHER**

**CEC BOARD OF DIRECTORS
APRIL 2004**

This paper is based on the fifth edition of *What Every Special Educator Must Know: Ethics, Standards, and Guidelines for Special Educators*.

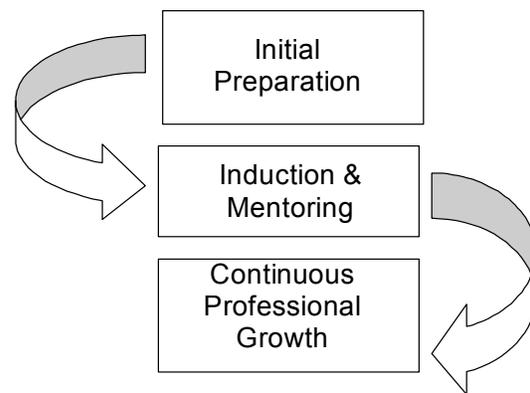
As the largest professional organization of special educators, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has taken seriously its professional responsibility for defining the criteria for a competent beginning special educator. As part of this responsibility, CEC has developed and continues to update and maintain professional standards for entry-level special education teachers. CEC has also developed standards for advanced roles in special education and standards for special education paraprofessionals.) These standards delineate what beginning special education teachers need to know and be able to do to practice safely and effectively.

The CEC Standards for Beginning Special Education Teachers are research-based, pedagogically grounded, and have been rigorously validated using a process that ensures that practitioners in the field have a primary voice in their development. Over the past twelve years, CEC has validated the knowledge and skills that are essential for high quality beginning special educators. This process involved thousands of practicing special educators in consonance with a national committee representing the seventeen national divisions of CEC. The result is the most rigorous and comprehensive set of national standards available anywhere for the preparation of high quality special educators.

CEC works at state and national levels to ensure that preparation programs incorporate the CEC standards into their curricula, and state and provincial jurisdictions incorporate the standards into their licensing requirements. It is through professional standards used by preparation programs and aligned with licensing systems that the public can be assured that special educators are appropriately prepared and are ready to enter practice.

The professional careers of special educators can be thought of as a continuum, including initial preparation, induction, and continuing professional growth (Figure 1). CEC has developed standards and guidelines relevant to each part of the continuum. These are described in the following pages beginning with the preparation standards for pedagogy and content and ending with the guidelines for continuing and advanced professional growth.

Figure 1: Continuum of Professional Preparation



Beginning Special Educator Standards

CEC expects at a minimum that entry-level special educators possess a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution, have mastered appropriate core academic subject matter content, and can demonstrate that they have mastered the knowledge and skills in the CEC Common Core and an appropriate Area of Specialization.

Pedagogy or teaching skill is at the heart of special education. Special educators have always recognized that the individualized learning needs of children are at the center of instruction. The CEC preparation standards (which follow) are developed around ten domains that describe the minimum knowledge, skills, and dispositions shared by all special educators—they provide a picture of the qualified beginning special educator. While these standards are identical across special education specialty areas, distinct sets of validated knowledge and skills have been developed that inform and differentiate the respective specialty areas (e.g. early childhood, mild/moderate, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, etc.) and provide minimum knowledge and skills that special educators must master for safe and effective practice. Each of the specialized knowledge and skill sets can be found on the CEC website at www.cec.sped.org.

Standard #1 Foundations

Special educators understand the field as an evolving and changing discipline based on philosophies, evidence-based principles and theories, relevant laws and policies, diverse and historical points of view, and human issues that have historically influenced and continue to influence the field of special education and the education and treatment of individuals with exceptional needs both in school and society. Special educators understand how these influence professional practice, including assessment, instructional planning, implementation, and program evaluation. Special educators understand how issues of human diversity can impact families, cultures, and schools, and how these complex human issues can interact with issues in the delivery of special education services. They understand the relationships of organizations of special education to the organizations and functions of schools, school systems, and other agencies. Special educators use this knowledge as a ground upon which to construct their own personal understandings and philosophies of special education.

Standard #2: Development and Characteristics of Learners

Special educators know and demonstrate respect for their students first as unique human beings. Special educators understand the similarities and differences in human development and the characteristics between and among individuals with and without exceptional learning need¹. Moreover, special educators understand how exceptional conditions¹ can interact with the domains of human development and they use this knowledge to respond to the varying abilities

¹ “Exceptional Condition” is used throughout to include both single and co-existing conditions. These may be two or more disabling conditions or exceptional gifts or talents co-existing with one or more disabling condition.

and behaviors of individual's with exceptional learning needs. Special educators understand how the experiences of individuals with exceptional learning needs can impact families, as well as the individual's ability to learn, interact socially, and live as fulfilled contributing members of the community.

Standard 3: Individual Learning Differences

Special educators understand the effects that an exceptional condition can have on an individual's learning in school and throughout life. Special educators understand that the beliefs, traditions, and values across and within cultures can affect relationships among and between students, their families, and the school community. Moreover, special educators are active and resourceful in seeking to understand how primary language, culture, and familial backgrounds interact with the individual's exceptional condition to impact the individual's academic and social abilities, attitudes, values, interests, and career options. The understanding of these learning differences and their possible interactions provides the foundation upon which special educators individualize instruction to provide meaningful and challenging learning for individuals with exceptional learning needs.

Standard 4: Instructional Strategies

Special educators possess a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to individualize instruction for individuals with exceptional learning needs. Special educators select, adapt, and use these instructional strategies to promote positive learning results in general and special curricula³ and to appropriately modify learning environments for individuals with exceptional learning needs. They enhance the learning of critical thinking, problem solving, and performance skills of individuals with exceptional learning needs, and increase their self-awareness, self-management, self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem. Moreover, special educators emphasize the development, maintenance, and generalization of knowledge and skills across environments, settings, and the lifespan.

Standard #5: Learning Environments and Social Interactions

Special educators actively create learning environments for individuals with exceptional learning needs that foster cultural understanding, safety and emotional well-being, positive social interactions, and active engagement of individuals with exceptional learning needs. In addition, special educators foster environments in which diversity is valued and individuals are taught to live harmoniously and productively in a culturally diverse world. Special educators shape environments to encourage the independence, self-motivation, self-direction, personal empowerment, and self-advocacy of individuals with exceptional learning needs. Special educators help their general education colleagues integrate individuals with exceptional learning needs in regular environments and engage them in meaningful learning activities and interactions. Special educators use direct motivational and instructional interventions with

³ "Special Curricula" is used throughout to denote curricular areas not routinely emphasized or addressed in general curricula; e.g., social, communication, motor, independence, self-advocacy.

individuals with exceptional learning needs to teach them to respond effectively to current expectations. When necessary, special educators can safely intervene with individuals with exceptional learning needs in crisis. Special educators coordinate all these efforts and provide guidance and direction to paraeducators and others, such as classroom volunteers and tutors.

Standard #6: Communication

Special educators understand typical and atypical language development and the ways in which exceptional conditions can interact with an individual's experience with and use of language. Special educators use individualized strategies to enhance language development and teach communication skills to individuals with exceptional learning needs. Special educators are familiar with augmentative, alternative, and assistive technologies to support and enhance communication of individuals with exceptional needs. Special educators match their communication methods to an individual's language proficiency and cultural and linguistic differences. Special educators provide effective language models and they use communication strategies and resources to facilitate understanding of subject matter for individuals with exceptional learning needs whose primary language is not English.

Standard #7: Instructional Planning

Individualized decision-making and instruction is at the center of special education practice. Special educators develop long-range individualized instructional plans anchored in both general and special curricula. In addition, special educators systematically translate these individualized plans into carefully selected shorter-range goals and objectives taking into consideration an individual's abilities and needs, the learning environment, and a myriad of cultural and linguistic factors. Individualized instructional plans emphasize explicit modeling and efficient guided practice to assure acquisition and fluency through maintenance and generalization. Understanding of these factors as well as the implications of an individual's exceptional condition, guides the special educator's selection, adaptation, and creation of materials, and the use of powerful instructional variables. Instructional plans are modified based on ongoing analysis of the individual's learning progress. Moreover, special educators facilitate this instructional planning in a collaborative context including the individuals with exceptionalities, families, professional colleagues, and personnel from other agencies as appropriate. Special educators also develop a variety of individualized transition plans, such as transitions from preschool to elementary school and from secondary settings to a variety of postsecondary work and learning contexts. Special educators are comfortable using appropriate technologies to support instructional planning and individualized instruction.

Standard #8: Assessment

Assessment is integral to the decision-making and teaching of special educators and special educators use multiple types of assessment information for a variety of educational decisions. Special educators use the results of assessments to help identify exceptional learning needs and to develop and implement individualized instructional programs, as well as to adjust instruction in response to ongoing learning progress. Special educators understand the legal

policies and ethical principles of measurement and assessment related to referral, eligibility, program planning, instruction, and placement for individuals with exceptional learning needs, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Special educators understand measurement theory and practices for addressing issues of validity, reliability, norms, bias, and interpretation of assessment results. In addition, special educators understand the appropriate use and limitations of various types of assessments. Special educators collaborate with families and other colleagues to assure non-biased, meaningful assessments and decision-making. Special educators conduct formal and informal assessments of behavior, learning, achievement, and environments to design learning experiences that support the growth and development of individuals with exceptional learning needs. Special educators use assessment information to identify supports and adaptations required for individuals with exceptional learning needs to access the general curriculum and to participate in school, system, and statewide assessment programs. Special educators regularly monitor the progress of individuals with exceptional learning needs in general and special curricula. Special educators use appropriate technologies to support their assessments.

Standard #9: Professional and Ethical Practice

Special educators are guided by the profession's ethical and professional practice standards. Special educators practice in multiple roles and complex situations across wide age and developmental ranges. Their practice requires ongoing attention to legal matters along with serious professional and ethical considerations. Special educators engage in professional activities and participate in learning communities that benefit individuals with exceptional learning needs, their families, colleagues, and their own professional growth. Special educators view themselves as lifelong learners and regularly reflect on and adjust their practice. Special educators are aware of how their own and others attitudes, behaviors, and ways of communicating can influence their practice. Special educators understand that culture and language can interact with exceptionalities, and are sensitive to the many aspects of diversity of individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families. Special educators actively plan and engage in activities that foster their professional growth and keep them current with evidence-based best practices. Special educators know their own limits of practice and practice within them.

Standard #10: Collaboration

Special educators routinely and effectively collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways. This collaboration assures that the needs of individuals with exceptional learning needs are addressed throughout schooling. Moreover, special educators embrace their special role as advocate for individuals with exceptional learning needs. Special educators promote and advocate the learning and well being of individuals with exceptional learning needs across a wide range of settings and a range of different learning experiences. Special educators are viewed as specialists by a myriad of people who actively seek their collaboration to effectively include and teach individuals with exceptional learning needs. Special educators are a resource to their colleagues in understanding the laws and policies relevant to Individuals with exceptional

learning needs. Special educators use collaboration to facilitate the successful transitions of individuals with exceptional learning needs across settings and services.

Core Academic Subject Matter Content²

CEC expects all special educators to have a solid grounding in the liberal arts curriculum ensuring proficiency in reading, written and oral communications, calculating, problem solving, and thinking. All special educators should also possess a solid base of understanding of the general content area curricula, i.e., math, reading, English/language arts, science, social studies, and the arts, sufficient to collaborate with general educators in:

- Teaching or co-teaching academic subject matter content of the general curriculum to students with exceptional learning needs across a wide range of performance levels.
- Designing appropriate learning and performance accommodations and modifications for students with exceptional learning needs in academic subject matter content of the general curriculum.

Because of the significant role that content specific subject matter knowledge plays at the secondary level, special education teachers routinely teach secondary level academic subject matter content classes in consultation or collaboration with one or more general education teachers appropriately licensed in the respective content area. However, when a special education teacher assumes sole responsibility for teaching a core academic subject matter class at the secondary level, the special educator must have a solid knowledge base in the subject matter content sufficient to assure the students can meet state curriculum standards.

Induction and Mentoring

Even with well-designed and implemented preparation, the beginning special educator faces a myriad of challenges in applying and generalizing learned skills during their beginning teaching. Like other professionals, special educators who have the focused support of veteran colleagues, i.e. mentors, become proficient more quickly, and are more likely to remain in the profession. Every new professional in special education should receive an intensive focused induction program under a mentor during the first year or so of special education practice. The mentor must be an accomplished special educator in the same or a similar role to the mentored individual who can provide expertise and support on a continuing basis throughout the induction.

The goals of the mentorship program include:

² As used the phrase, “core academic subject matter content of the general curriculum”, means only the content of the general curriculum including math, reading, English/language arts, science, social studies, and the arts. It does not per se include the additional specialized knowledge and skill that special educators possess in areas such as reading, writing, math social/emotional skills, functional independent living skills, transition skills, etc.

- ✓ Facilitating the application of knowledge and skills learned;
- ✓ Conveying advanced knowledge and skills;
- ✓ Acculturating into the school's learning communities;
- ✓ Reducing job stress and enhancing job satisfaction; and,
- ✓ Supporting professional induction.

In addition, whenever special educators begin practice in a new area of licensure, they also should have the opportunity to work with mentors who are accomplished professionals in similar roles. The purpose of mentors is to provide expertise and support to the individual on a continuing basis for at least the first year of practice in that area of licensure. The mentorship is a professional relationship between the individual in a new area of practice and an accomplished individual in the area who supports the individual in further developing knowledge and skills in the given area of licensure and provides the support required to sustain the individual in practice. The mentorship must be collegial rather than supervisory. It is essential that the mentor have accomplished knowledge, skills, and experience relevant to the position in order to provide the expertise and support required to practice effectively.

Mentorship can be an effective part of career ladders. Veterans of the special education profession are expected to periodically serve as mentors as part of their professional responsibility, and they must receive the resources and support necessary to carry out this responsibility effectively.

Assuring High Quality State Licensure

Historically, the licensing of individuals to practice has been the responsibility of states and provinces. While approaches to licensing special educators taken by jurisdictions have been variable and somewhat idiosyncratic, most states today align their licensing process with the standards of CEC. Currently, over forty states are committed to align their licensing processes with the CEC standards. In this way, the parents and community have the assurance that special educators have the knowledge and skills to practice ethically, safely, and effectively

As mentioned above, most individuals are now licensed for multicategorical practice. Many states use terms such as Teachers of Students with Mild/Moderate Exceptionalities and Teachers of Students with Severe/Profound Exceptionalities to describe these multicategorical licenses. According to the latest figures from the U. S. Department of Education, over ninety percent of the special education degrees granted each year are multicategorical (U. S. Department of Education, 2003).

For those states that use a multicategorical approach, CEC has developed the ***Curriculum Referenced Licensing and Program Accreditation Framework*** (Figure 2). The Individualized General Education Curriculum and Individualized Independence Curriculum describe these multicategorical licenses, and reference the curricula in which the licensed teacher will primarily practice. In using multicategorical licensing approaches, it is important that states balance the need for both breadth and depth of knowledge and skills for special education teachers. On the one hand, licensing approaches that are overly broad result in teachers who are not adequately prepared for the complex challenges of students with exceptional learning needs. On the other

hand, licensing approaches that are overly narrow do not prepare prospective special educators for the increasing diversity of students with exceptional learning needs that special educators serve today.

Based on the premise that the standards for national program recognition and state licensure should align, CEC organized its professional standards to explicitly align with the INTASC ten principles for model licensing standards at the entry level and with the NBPTS at

Figure 2: Comparison of Professional Standards Frameworks

CEC Curriculum Referenced Licensing and Accreditation Framework	INTASC*	NBPTS Exceptional Needs Certificate
1. Individualized General Curriculum	Mild/moderate disabilities (ages 5-14) Mild/moderate disabilities (ages 12-21)	Mild and Moderately Impaired
2. Individualized Independence Curriculum	Severe/multiple disabilities (ages 5-21)	Severe and Multiply Impaired
3. Deaf/Hard of Hearing	Deaf/hard of hearing (birth-21)	Deaf/Hard of Hearing
4. Blind/Vision Impaired	Visual Impairments (birth-21)	Visually Impaired
5. Early Childhood Special Education	Early childhood (birth-9)	Early Childhood
6. Gifted/Talented Special Education		
*As suggested in INTASC (2001, May), Appendix A, p. 40.		

the advanced level. It is also encouraging, that the initial licensing and advanced certification approaches suggested by both the Council of Chief State School Officer’s Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) align closely with the CEC *Curriculum Referenced Licensing and Program Accreditation Framework*, reflecting a strong national convergence regarding the balance of depth and spread (Figure 2). This close alignment also reflects the explicit intentions of CEC, INTASC, and the NBPTS to collaborate and coordinate with each other.

High Stakes Assessment of Professional Competence

There is increasing pressure on national, state and provincial jurisdictions to develop and implement rigorous assessment and accountability systems for teachers. Development in national, state, and provincial policy are moving to more rigorous assessment and accountability systems for teachers, most notably through the provisions such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2000) in the United States. CEC endorses the various countries’ efforts to ensure that students with exceptional needs are guaranteed well-prepared teachers.

However, CEC is concerned by the growing reliance of education policy makers on using a single high stakes test to make critical decisions about educators' professional competence. Several states in the United States have adopted policies that permit individuals with a bachelor's degree, but no training in special education, to be fully licensed in special education if they achieve a passing score on a special education content-based test. NCLB includes a provision that defines a "highly qualified teacher" as one who passes a single test. Teaching is a complex activity. It requires more than a grasp of specialized content. It also requires a thorough grounding in pedagogy; this is especially true in special education in which pedagogy is central to practice. No currently available single test is able to adequately assess prospective special education teachers in both content and pedagogy. The use of a single test also raises serious validity issues and could have a negative impact on otherwise qualified persons from groups who do not typically perform well on standardized tests. There is consensus in the teaching community that high stakes decisions should never rest on a single test score. In a response to these concerns the CEC Board of Directors approved the following policy in 2004:

It is CEC policy, that, in determining an individual's professional competence, multiple measures rather than a single test score shall be used in the decision making process to enhance the validity and reliability of decisions related to content and pedagogical competence. As a minimum assurance of fairness, when a test is used as part of the decision making process, the individual should be provided multiple opportunities to pass the test. If there is credible evidence that a test score may not accurately reflect the individual's level of performance, the agency shall provide an alternative means by which the individual may demonstrate performance relative to professional standards.

Continuous Professional Growth

Like their colleagues in general education, special educators are lifelong learners committed to developing the highest potential and educational and quality of life potential of individuals with exceptionalities. The fifth principle in the CEC Code of Ethics states that special educators strive to advance their knowledge and skills regarding the education of individuals with exceptionalities.

Effective professional development programs:

- ✓ **Increase mastery of content**
- ✓ **Demonstrate how to teach**
- ✓ **Are ongoing and collegial**

Continuing Licensure/Certification

Both state/provincial licensure and advanced certification of individuals for professional practice in the field of special education should be for a limited period with renewal based on planned, organized, and recognized professional development related to the professional's field of practice. CEC expects practicing special educators to develop and implement a Professional Development Plans (PDP). The PDP should be reviewed and amended at least annually. The

professional development activities in the PDP should go beyond routine job functions of the professional, and no single activity or category should make up the plan. This PDP should include participation in an average of at least 36 contact hours (or an average of 3.6 continuing education units) each year of planned, organized, and recognized professional development related to the professional's field of practice within the following categories:

- Career related academic activities
- Conducting or supporting research
- Participating in district and/or school-based professional development programs
- Teaching courses (other than those for regular employment)
- Delivering presentations,
- Publishing books and/or journal articles
- Participating in mentoring or supervised collegial support activities,
- Providing service to professional association(s),
- Participating in approved educational travel,
- Other professional projects approved by state, district, or other agencies

Advanced Special Education Study

In 2001 the CEC National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education queried State Education Agencies (SEAs) regarding special education career ladders. Of the sixteen states that responded, only five indicated that they offer an advanced special education licensure. The Bright Futures Report (Council for Exceptional Children, 2000) found that when special educators have viable career paths, retention is enhanced. Advanced licensure options are an important component of any special education career ladder program.

As special educators progress in their teaching careers, many seek to develop new skills and broaden their knowledge base through advanced study in specialty areas³. Other special educators pursue new roles within special education. Within the field of special education, CEC has developed advanced standards for the following roles:

- Special Education Administrators
- Educational Diagnosticians
- Technology Specialists
- Transition Specialists

CEC is developing standards in other advanced roles including a number of categorical specialty areas. CEC is developing a process through which professional development programs that have earned CEC national recognition may apply to award CEC Advanced Certificates to their program graduates.

³ Advanced specialty areas are those areas beyond entry-level special education teacher preparation programs. Advanced specialty area programs are preparation programs that require full special education teacher licensure as a program entrance prerequisite.

The NBPTS offers another avenue for advanced certification for teachers. CEC has had a long and fruitful relationship with the NBPTS. Through the NBPTS, special educators may earn the advanced certification for teachers of exceptional needs students. The NBPTS recognizes five advanced areas of specialization:

- Mild/Moderate Disabilities Exceptional Needs Specialist,
- Severe and Multiple Exceptional Needs Specialist,
- Early Childhood Exceptional Needs Specialist,
- Visual Impairments Exceptional Needs Specialist,
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing Exceptional Needs Specialist

Still other special educators will pursue doctoral level studies in special education. There are currently over one hundred and fifty programs preparing special educators at the doctoral level. Like all other preparation programs, CEC expects doctoral programs to demonstrate their quality through CEC performance-based recognition.

CEC's Commitment to High Quality

CEC has advocated for well-prepared and high-quality special education professionals for over 75 years. To this end, CEC has developed and maintains professional standards for entry-level and advanced special education roles, standards for guiding continuing professional growth and ethical and practice standards. CEC expects preparation programs to incorporate the CEC standards into their curricula and states and provinces to incorporate the standards into their licensing requirements. Through these initiatives, CEC continues to define for the public what a competent special education should know and be able to do, and to offer to parents and others in their communities a way to ensure that professional special educators are well prepared and qualified for their practice.

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