



Shaping the Future of Special Education: Framing CEC's Professional Preparation Standards

A Paper From the Council for Exceptional Children's
Standards Framing Paper Workgroup

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Following industry best practices and guidelines from the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), CEC periodically coordinates the revision of the three sets of standards that guide the profession—preparation, practice, and ethical standards. This standards framing paper is intended to focus and refine CEC’s professional standards development process, and ensure that CEC’s professional standards remain up to date, relevant, and reflective of the current state of teacher preparation in the United States.

Introduction

A Brief History of CEC Professional Preparation Standards and Specialty Sets

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has been actively involved in the development and implementation of standards for professional preparation of special educators for more than 85 years. The original “Red Book,” *What Every Special Educator Must Know: Professional Ethics & Standards*, was published in 1995 and updated regularly through the current seventh edition of 2015. A recent paper prepared for CEC (Crutchfield, 2016) described the evolution of the development and use of CEC Professional Preparation Standards and Specialty Sets, particularly over the past 2 decades of CEC’s partnerships with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

Appointed in spring 2016, the Standards Framing Paper Workgroup was created as the initial phase in the process of updating CEC standards according to the parameters and timelines prescribed by CAEP for all contributing specialized professional associations. This document provides the blueprint for the revision of CEC standards.

The Urgent Need for Better Preparation of Special Educators

Despite gains that have been made in providing special education services to students with disabilities, the outcomes produced continue to fall short of expectations. The wide achievement gap between students with disabilities and their typically developing peers has persisted each year since data have been collected by states under the first Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. On regular assessments based on grade-level academic achievement standards in reading, for example, only 23% to 32% of students with disabilities in Grades 3 through 8 were found to be proficient (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). Too few students graduate with adequate preparation for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Although graduation percentages have increased and dropout percentages have decreased in all categories from 2004 to 2014, in the 2013–2014 academic year, a total of 66.1% of students ages 14 through 21 who exited IDEA, Part B services and school graduated with a regular high school diploma; an additional 18.5% dropped out (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). Compared to their same-age peers in the general population, young adults with disabilities are less likely to enroll in and to complete postsecondary education; when employed, they earn lower mean hourly wages (Sanford et al., 2011).

Although research has shown that teachers contribute significantly to students’ success in school, the quality of classroom instruction is being compromised because of national special education teacher shortages and attrition. Students with disabilities are often served by educators who are unprepared or underprepared for

the profession (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006). Coupled with this issue are the changing responsibilities that special educators face as inclusive practices increase in the schools. Because general educators typically are the teachers of record for the large majority of students with disabilities (Blanton, Boveda, Munoz, & Pugach, 2017), special educator’s roles may be ambiguous (Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016), and therefore their ability to influence student learning compromised.

In addition, efforts to address chronic shortages of special educators and improve preparation have led to major changes in educator preparation programs (EPPs), including increasing numbers of alternative routes to initial licensure and online preparation programs. Although university-based programs still predominate, multiple providers now offer EPPs. Many programs of all types are incorporating new applications of technology for instruction and supervision. Given these trends, the time is right to consider how high standards expected of all providers may contribute to better preparation of special educators that will equip them to serve the complex needs of students with disabilities.

The Shifting Context in Education

Recent trends in education—including increasing complexity of birth-to-age-21 student needs, expanding roles of special educators, and demands for accountability at all levels—have critical implications for teacher preparation. Such changes in the landscape warrant a new approach to the development of special educator professional preparation standards.

Complex and Intersecting Needs

School systems and service providers must move beyond the notion that students receiving special education services and their families embody singular and static identities. It is essential to recognize the complex intersection of multiple identities or categories of difference including ability, gender, language, race, class, and so on, both within and across individual students and student groups (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013).

Of importance to this issue is the response of organizations like schools to students and families who represent multiple identities of difference, given the inherent power these organizations possess. Existing organizational bias toward specific students or student groups can cause them to be vulnerable. Recognizing that students may identify as members across multiple groups shapes the manner in which they can experience bias (Crenshaw, 1995). For instance, disability identification of racial minority students may lead to negative consequences including exposure to less rigorous instruction, limited access to general education curriculum, and poor secondary outcomes (Artiles, 2013). In sum, the intersection

of these categories of difference can be shaped by and influence school practices including evaluation, instruction, and discipline practices and special education placement decisions, all with lasting effects (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Acknowledging this complexity and the various social, historical, organizational, and political forces that can shape students' development is imperative to effectively understand and support students' multiple identities and individual needs.

Expanding Roles of Special Educators

In recent decades, changes in policy and practice have affected the roles of special educators, requiring them to have a greater repertoire of skills and to deliver services in multiple and diverse settings. Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, and Morgan noted a lack of clarity in special educators' roles: "The majority of special educators in today's schools are expected to collaborate with general educators to support students from increasingly diverse backgrounds across tiered systems of support, while still providing specialized instruction for students with the most intensive needs" (2016, pp. 83–84). Increased emphases on data-based decision making, access to general education curricular content, evidence-based practices, educational technologies, multitiered systems of support, and collaboration with families and other professionals place new demands on special educators, while at the same time their performance is being evaluated through new accountability systems.

As previously noted, general educators are often the teachers of record for students with disabilities, with special educators in a supportive role. Provision of services through multitiered systems of support and inclusive models such as increasing use of co-teaching have "blurred" the lines between general and special education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010) and heightened role ambiguity (Youngs, Jones, & Low, 2011). For co-teaching to be effective, special educators need to contribute meaningfully to differentiation and intensification of instruction in inclusive classrooms (Friend, 2015)—a role that requires considerable collaboration as well as strong instructional skills (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

For special educators who work with children birth through 5 years, partnerships with families are critical. Services through Part C of IDEA are typically provided in the home with the special educator serving as a coach or consultant to the family versus providing direct instruction. With these changing roles, more effective preservice preparation and ongoing professional development are needed to clarify expectations for effective service delivery.

Higher Expectations and Accountability

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) grants states latitude and flexibility when it comes to accountability and evaluation systems for assessing student academic outcomes, teachers, and schools. ESSA allows states and local education agencies to define their own goals, measurements, and rating systems under the

guidance of explicit expectations. Student progress must be measured annually with results disaggregated by different subgroups of students: English language learners, students with disabilities, racial minorities, and those from low-income families.

A shift to stronger accountability requirements for educator preparation programs emerged in the 1990s (for example, Title II) and continues today (e.g., American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; ESSA, 2015) as a major effort to reform teaching and teacher education (Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2014; Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). ESSA (2015) regulations on teacher preparation programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), and the 1997 and 2004 IDEA amendments have made it clear that students with disabilities are to be part of these accountability requirements. Although some recent federal policies (e.g., ESSA) may not be as explicit about accountability requirements for EPPs as in previous years, the reality of accountability for these programs remains strong as a result of durable state requirements and the output standards of professional accreditation and organizations.

Whether accountability requirements are policy or professionally driven, EPPs are expected to be assessed and rated using multiple measures of accountability which include those focused on candidates or graduates (e.g., candidates' effect on student learning) and those focused on the program (e.g., graduates' job placement and retention; Blanton, McLeskey, & Hernandez Taylor, 2014; ESSA, 2015). Likewise, national accreditation (i.e., TEAC and NCATE [now CAEP]) has begun to heavily focus on outcome standards—to include standards that require reporting data on the effect of EPP candidates or graduates on the achievement of the students they teach. CAEP Accreditation Standards for Educator Preparation (2013) also placed major emphasis on high-quality clinical practice.

Why Reconsider CEC's Professional Standards Now?

As general and special educators have begun to work more closely to revise educator preparation programs, and also to engage in teacher education research, the time is right to call on this knowledge base to reconsider standards for special educators. The work of funded centers has consolidated information that provides a foundation to reconceptualize standards and EPPs.

The Availability of Research and Resources

Over the past decade, research from several fields has supported the use of a practice-based approach to educating beginning teachers. Drawing from professions as diverse as medicine, aviation, and plumbing, this research has shown that preparation is substantially enhanced by defining critical practices and systematically providing candidates opportunities to learn to use these practices

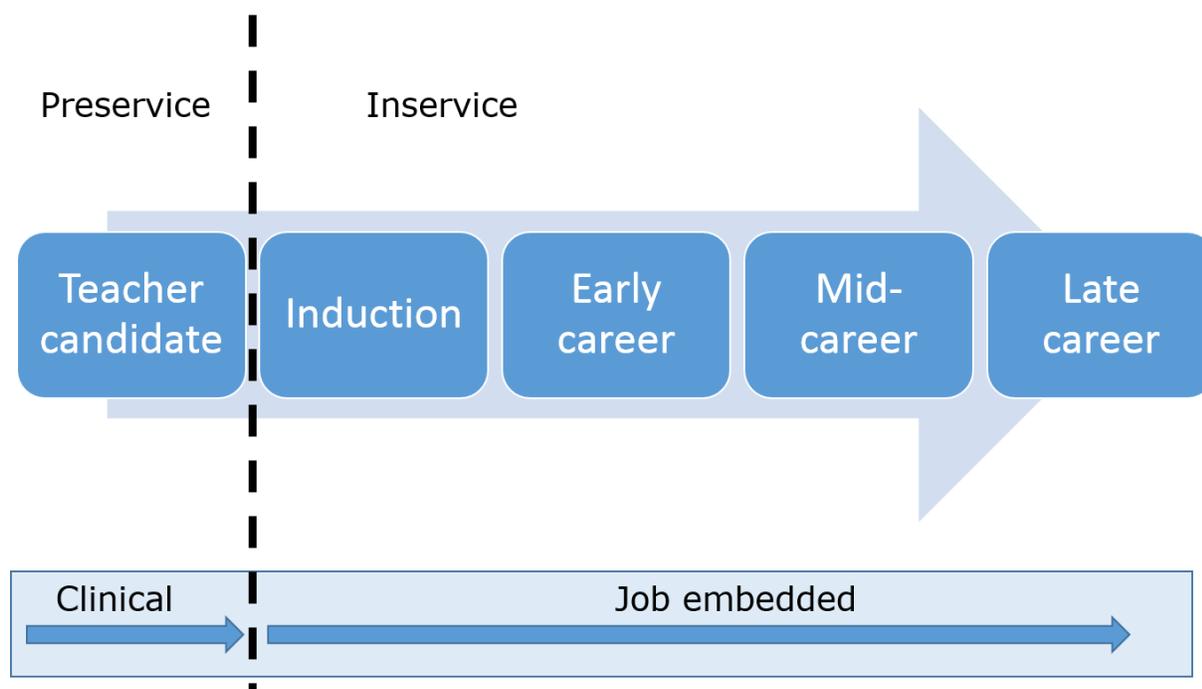
with feedback in natural or simulated settings (Ericsson & Pool, 2016; McLeskey & Brownell, 2015). Teacher educators have begun to employ this research in preparation programs, with the goal of producing teachers who are classroom-ready upon program completion (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanaugh, 2013). This research has also been incorporated into standards for teacher preparation programs (NCATE, 2010; CAEP, 2013) which have shifted from “a norm which emphasizes academic preparation and coursework loosely linked to school-based experiences [to] programs that are fully grounded in clinical practice and interwoven with academic content and professional courses” (NCATE, 2010, p. ii).

The foundation of practice-based teacher preparation programs is a core curriculum that consists of frequently used practices that have been shown to improve academic or behavioral outcomes for students (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015). Research in general and special education, and more generally in the learning sciences, has begun to identify many of these practices (APA, 2015; Deans for Impact, 2015; Harn, Fritz, & Berg, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2017; Sugai, Simonsen, Bradshaw, Horner, & Lewis, 2014; Windschitl, Thompson, Braaten, & Stroupe, 2012). Further, national centers (e.g., CEEDAR Center, SWIFT Center) have developed resources to disseminate this information and provide support to those engaged in teacher preparation and professional development as they learn to use these practices (e.g., Benedict et al, 2016; Sailor, 2016). These research and development activities have provided teacher educators with clear direction regarding approaches that may be used to improve teacher preparation and ensure that beginning educators are well prepared to meet the academic and social/behavioral needs of students with disabilities.

The Continuum of Educator Development (The Pipeline)

Ushering in a new era of educator effectiveness requires in-depth clinical training and ongoing job-embedded supports that yield a highly skilled workforce (Connelly & Rosenberg, 2009; deCourcy Hinds, 2002; Rock et al., 2016)—one in which policy makers, the public, and educator preparation professionals adopt a developmental perspective for preparing and supporting the workforce from initial preparation and induction through early, mid, and late career, a pipeline that is intentional, comprehensive, and strategic in its orientation, rather than a piecemeal approach (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015; Rock et al., 2016). This seamless system of learning (Webster-Wright, 2009) strengthens the capacity of the special educator workforce, and practice-based standards for both initial and advanced preparation play a vital role in shifting to this developmental approach.

Fig. 1 The Special Education Teacher Development Pipeline



Note. Adapted from *The Professional Pipeline for Educational Leadership. A White Paper Developed to Inform the Work of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration*, by D. H. Hit, P. D. Tucker, and M. D. Young, p. 1. Copyright 2012 The University Council for Educational Administration.

The Centrality of Clinical Practice

The recently approved CAEP Accreditation Standards for Educator Preparation (2013) place high-quality clinical practice at the center of educator preparation. Student learning depends on what happens in the classroom (Ball & Forzani, 2011; McDonald et al., 2013); thus, teacher education should directly and unambiguously focus on preparing preservice educators for the work they do in classrooms and other community settings to ensure the effectiveness of clinical practice. This necessitates explicit coordination of efforts by EPPs with local and state education agencies and other community stakeholders.

CAEP has recommended that typical and suggested measures of performance for classroom readiness should include assessments of “teaching practices at key points along a developmental continuum, including but not limited to documentation of expected instructional practices and candidate performance” (CAEP, 2013, p. 40). We concur with this statement and take the position that the next set of standards for special educators should reflect this reasoning.

Although standards for professional practice and thus EPPs have been developed with a focus on what educators need *to know about* instructional practices

(Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009), it is more important to systematically prepare educators to *use* instructional practices in classrooms (Grossman et al., 2009). The intricacy of teaching students with disabilities demands a disciplined approach to preparation that identifies effective practices and prepares preservice special educators to use them in classrooms and other community settings before they assume responsibility for the development and learning of students with disabilities.

Principles and Recommendations

Future standards development is guided by one overarching principle: Clinical preparation is integrated throughout every facet of preparation in a dynamic way to prepare special educators who are career ready. The core experience in educator preparation is clinical practice. Content and pedagogy are woven around clinical experiences throughout preparation, in coursework, laboratory-based experiences, and school and other community-embedded practice (NCATE, 2010).

New initial and advanced CEC standards must set a vision for what professionals do in practice to deliver effective instruction that improves student learning. This conception of special educators' roles must include sufficient understanding of the general education curriculum, data-based decision making, use of assessment to plan and guide instruction, team-based decision making, and delivery of effective instruction.

It is recommended that standards:

- **Are practice-based**
 - Anchored in instructional practices and supports such as technology that meet the needs of students birth–21 years in schools and other community settings
 - Designed and implemented in partnership with state education agencies, local education agencies, and community agencies
- **Focus on in-depth candidate proficiency**
 - Focused on a limited number of effective and essential practices
 - Grounded in evidence and the wisdom of practice
 - Incorporate frequently used practices with strong potential for improving student academic and behavioral outcomes
- **Form the foundation for future professional development**
 - Focused on initial preparation of special educators

- Developed in tandem with advanced standards with complementary themes or principles
- Provide the foundation for further development as educators enter the profession and continue to advance their practice, to include mentoring and induction
- **Address diverse populations along with individual differences and needs**
 - Attentive to academic and behavioral support needs of students with disabilities, including vulnerability from maltreatment and other experiences
 - Inclusive of diversity of ability/disability, race, culture, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so on, and the intersectionality of these markers among students and their families
 - Span the developmental continuum/severity/school levels/transitions
- **Promote continuous improvement of professional preparation programs**
 - Useful to EPPs
 - Address candidate needs in the changing field of special education
 - Responsive to candidate performance and program effectiveness
- **Clearly articulate the expectations for a well-prepared special educator with stakeholders (e.g., EPPs, candidates, employers, families)**

Recommendations for New CEC Standards

- As the new standards define essential specialized practices, rather than decontextualized discrete knowledge, the workgroup recommends that the Special Educator Professional Preparation Standards be renamed the Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators.
- The workgroup recommends that the new Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards be used as the basis for CEC approval of initial preparation programs.
- Essential specialized practices for special educators are defined in part by high-leverage practices, and, for children with disabilities birth through 5 years, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices (2014).
- As the recommendation that the new preparation standards be practice-based and influenced by CEC's high-leverage practices and DEC's Recommended Practices (2014), the workgroup recommends there is no longer a need for the

current set of Professional Practice Standards for Special Educators. Further, once the new practice-based preparation standards are developed and in use, the workgroup recommends that the knowledge and skill sets no longer be used to inform program reviews.

- We recommend that the existing Code of Ethics be carefully addressed as foundational knowledge and aligned with the new Practice-Based Initial Professional Preparation Standards.

Recommendations for the Standards Development Process

- Establish a Standards Development Workgroup to comprise 12 people, including: a chair or co-chairs appointed by the CEC Board of Directors, two members of the Professional Standards and Practice Committee (PSPC), additional CEC members with deep knowledge and extensive experience (meeting criteria in the Report from the CEC Professional Standards Work Group, Epanchin et al., 2013), and one “outside” person with a strong background in standards. The PSPC chair will be an ex officio member of this workgroup, and CEC staff and consultants will facilitate the work.
 - The Board will identify a chair or co-chairs by May 1, 2017.
 - The chair, in collaboration with the chair of the PSPC and president of CEC’s Teacher Education Division (TED), will appoint the remaining members of the workgroup by June 1, 2017.
 - The workgroup will convene in a first face-to-face meeting by August 15, 2017. We anticipate there will be a need for three to five face-to-face meetings of the group prior to the CAEP June 2019 revision deadline.
 - The workgroup will provide periodic updates to the CEC Board of Directors.
- Feedback on development will be sourced from a broader response group of key stakeholders, to be identified by the Standards Development Workgroup. This group will include 30 to 40 individuals who represent a broad range of stakeholders related to the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities, including special education teachers, special education administrators, principals, related service providers, and so forth.
- The Standards Development Workgroup should consider alignment with InTASC (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011) and other relevant sets of standards (recently developed specialized professional association standards).

For further discussion:

- CEC, in collaboration with its special interest divisions, may develop complementary high-leverage practices for specific age groups or populations and for advanced preparation, as appropriate.
- After the new practice-based preparation standards are developed and in use, the divisions and other groups that produce specialty sets will need to determine if they will continue to produce this information in current form or a different form.

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