

Becoming a
SPED
TEACHER

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Introduction



It shouldn't matter how slowly some children learn, as long as we are encouraging them not to stop.

—Robert John Meehan



No one will tell you that teaching students with special needs is easy, but if you're thinking about pursuing special education, you might not find a more rewarding career. As a special education (SPED) teacher, you'll help each child find their unique talents and abilities and develop individualized plans to help them learn.

Unlike classroom teachers, who instruct large groups of students, SPED teachers work with fewer students but work with them more closely, forming deeper relationships with them. With a wide variety of students and settings, SPED teachers can choose to work with the whole student population or in a smaller setting that feels like the best fit.

Working with the school's most special students requires specific characteristics, such as adaptability, perseverance, and purpose. Here's how to get started in this rewarding career.



SPED Teachers Wanted



Education is the most
powerful weapon
which you can use to
change the world.

—Nelson Mandela

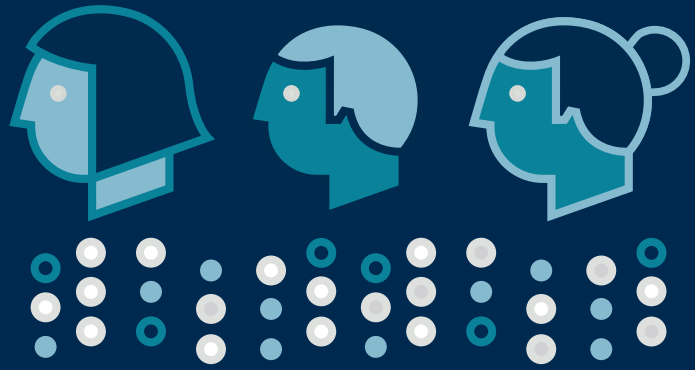


There is currently a nationwide shortage of experienced and licensed teachers, and SPED teachers are the highest in demand. According to the [Learning Policy Institute](#), the United States will need 316,000 new teachers by 2025—with SPED teacher demand seeing the highest growth.

The Learning Policy Institute also reported that 48 states and the District of Columbia experienced special education teacher shortages during the 2015–2016 school year, and most states identified special education as the area in which they face the most severe shortage. Schools that can't fill vacant special education positions are forced to use substitutes, inexperienced teachers, or unlicensed teachers to work with their neediest and most vulnerable students.

SPED teachers are also in high demand because more students are qualifying for special education services. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), the number of students receiving special education services increased from 6.4 million to 7 million in the 2017–2018 school year. Special education students now constitute 14 percent of public school enrollment in the United States, according to the report.

Meet the Students



SPED teachers serve students who have a wide range of disabilities and qualify for services under one of the 13 disability areas outlined in the federal [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA). IDEA, which is closely related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) but specifically targeted to K–12 schools, provides students with disabilities equal access to public education and protects them from discrimination. Before these pieces of legislation were passed, students with disabilities were educated completely separately from their peers, placed in institutions, or not educated at all.

The subgroups identified under IDEA, according to [Understood](#), include:

Specific learning disabilities

Other health impairment

Autism spectrum disorder

Emotional disturbance

Speech or language impairment

Visual impairment or blindness

Deafness

Hearing impairment

Deaf-blindness

Orthopedic impairment

Intellectual disability

Traumatic brain injury

Multiple disabilities

Meet the **Students**

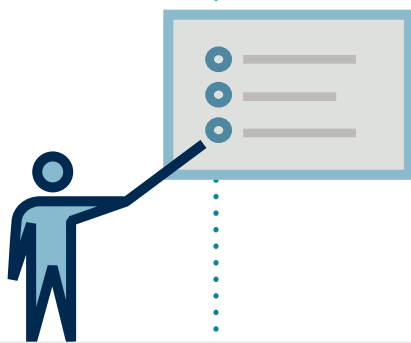
Most special education students fall into the specific learning disabilities category—which could include dyslexia, auditory processing disorder, and nonverbal learning disabilities—but significant increases are emerging in other areas. Data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) shows that from 2008 to 2018 there was a 140 percent increase in students with autism, a 56 percent increase in students with other health impairments, and a 29 percent increase in students with developmental delays. There's been a 21 percent decrease in students with emotional disturbances, though many of those students now slot in the autism spectrum disorder category.

Schools typically group students according to the amount of support they need to succeed. Students who have mild to moderate disabilities, such as a specific learning disability or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), spend most of their time in general education classrooms and receive specialized support as needed.

Students with more profound disabilities might not be able to participate in general education classrooms because of the severity of their needs and might require a self-contained setting. Though each state sets limits on class sizes, teachers will typically work with between five and 10 students who remain with them for the entire school day. These students might be medically fragile or have severe behavioral or intellectual disabilities that prevent them from accessing the general education curriculum or learning in a classroom with nondisabled peers.



Where SPED Teachers Teach



“

If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.

—Ignacio Estrada

”

As you can imagine, a day in the life of a SPED teacher supporting students with mild disabilities in a general education language arts class will look very different from that of a SPED teacher who manages a self-contained classroom with three medically fragile students with severe intellectual disabilities.

IDEA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act require public schools to offer all students a free appropriate public education. “Appropriate” is the key word—an appropriate setting for a student with mild disabilities might look quite different than an appropriate setting for a student with severe needs. For example, a student with mild disabilities typically participates in general education classes but could receive support from a special education teacher either in the classroom or in a separate setting for less than 20 percent of the day. Students with severe needs that can't be met in a general education classroom might spend most of their days in a self-contained classroom with one teacher and five to 10 students who also require a high level of support. Schools must determine the most appropriate educational setting—or combination of settings—for a student and include students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers as much as possible.

Where SPED Teachers Teach

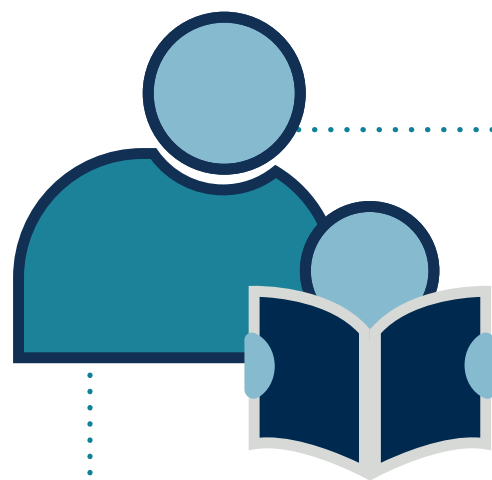
SPED teachers work in a wide variety of settings depending on their students' needs. Some prepare short lessons or activities to work on specific academic or behavioral skills with individual students or small groups. They might go into a general education classroom to work with students or pull students out to work with them in a smaller space. Pulling students out of the general classroom is most common in elementary settings.

Co-teaching a class with a general education teacher or teaching a modified class to a group of students with special needs is more common for secondary SPED teachers. These teachers prepare lesson plans for an entire class and might work closely with general education teachers to align their lessons. Some might also work in a resource room setting where students might not be scheduled for services but come when they need support or a quieter, less distracting environment.

IDEA also mandates that students with disabilities must receive necessary **accommodations or modifications** to enable them to be successful in their classroom setting. Accommodations are

any supports designed to provide access to the general education curriculum to students with disabilities. For instance, some students might require the use of speech-to-text programs to understand grade-level textbooks; others might need to be provided class notes or might need extra time to complete assignments or tests.

Students whose needs are too great to complete the general education curriculum might be offered modified curricula that better meets their needs.



Special Education Behind the Scenes



In addition to teaching, SPED teachers have a lot of paperwork to do. Though SPED teachers have fewer students and collaboratively create lesson plans, they are faced with many challenges. Many schools give SPED teachers additional prep time or pay them more to compensate for these responsibilities.

Every student with a disability has an individualized education plan (IEP). When a student qualifies for special education service, it means that the student's disability hinders their academic success; therefore, that student needs an IEP, which details the academic and behavioral accommodations they need to be successful. A team of parents, educators, and specialists collaborates on the plan and goals. The IEP team meets once a year to discuss the child's progress, and it amends the plan as needed.



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Special Education **Behind the Scenes**



SPED teachers create a student's annual IEP goals and monitor the student's progress toward them. Reporting frequency varies, but most districts require progress toward student IEP goals to be monitored every few weeks and reported as often as general education teachers post grades on report cards. These updates are typically much shorter, but they can take a significant amount of time to complete, depending on the teacher's caseload.

SPED teachers are also responsible for writing evaluation reports at least once and up to three times a year. Every student who is seeking qualification for special education services undergoes a

comprehensive evaluation, and it involves academic or behavioral assessments; interviews with and input from parents, teachers, and the student; medical information; classroom observations; and, possibly, input from doctors or other specialists. The SPED teacher compiles all of this information into a report.

IDEA also requires that special education students be reevaluated to ensure that they continue to meet qualifications and are being served appropriately. Reevaluations might involve assessments from several professionals, but they're mostly written by the SPED teacher.

What Makes a Good SPED Teacher?

While all good teachers share certain characteristics, a few important qualities are unique to SPED teachers.



PASSION AND PURPOSE

Teaching students with special needs is more than just teaching—it's making a difference, one child at a time. It's a tough and demanding job that requires genuine passion. Many people who chose special education did so because they were inspired by a family member or friend who has a disability or because they have a disability. Whatever your reason, you must be able to see the "able" and not the "label."



PATIENCE

Every teacher needs to have an extraordinary amount of patience with their students. Remind yourself every day of the important job that you're doing and the impact you're having on your students' lives.



ADAPTABILITY

As a SPED teacher, there might be times when you have five different students working on five different lessons—and there might be times where all five lessons go wrong at once. Being flexible, dealing with unexpected changes, and managing a room with several different activities going on at once is key for a SPED teacher.



What Makes a **Good SPED Teacher?**



ORGANIZATION

Preparing lessons, serving a variety of student needs, creating materials, and meeting your IEP, evaluation, and progress-monitoring deadlines takes serious organization. To keep track of each student's deadlines and manage your various responsibilities, you'll need to develop a system to keep yourself on track and prepared each day.



INDEPENDENCE AND RESOURCEFULNESS

Developing collaborative relationships with other teachers is key. Your job is to advocate for your students and ensure that their needs are being met. Looking for opportunities to meet with general education teachers' grade level teams is paramount to ensure that instructional alignment with IEP goals and standards are being met.



STRONG PEOPLE SKILLS

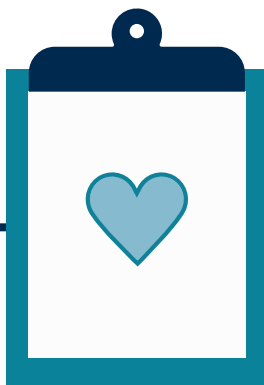
While SPED teachers might sometimes feel like they're on an island, they still must work with many professionals every day. Collaborating with general education teachers and advocating for your students' needs requires diligence and courage, as some teachers might not agree with the instructional accommodations that students need to succeed. SPED teachers also teach paraprofessionals how to work with students to ensure that they're meeting their learning goals.

How Do I Know If I'll Like SPED Teaching?

Most teachers considering special education already know that they like working with kids, and many of them have a personal reason for wanting to work with students with disabilities. But if you want to get a better idea of the challenges you'll face and the true demands and rewards of the job, spend some time exploring the field.

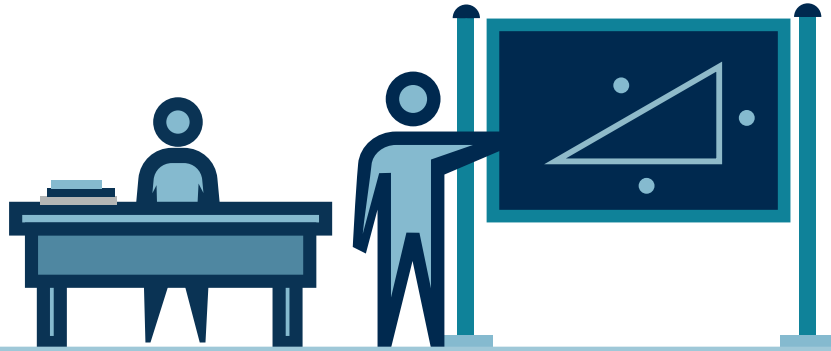
Volunteering is a great way to get experience working with students with special needs, and many community programs serve a wide variety of students. Contact your local YMCA, a tutoring program, your local branch of the Red Cross or the United Way, or an organization that works specifically with students with disabilities, such as [The Arc](#).

To better understand what a typical school day entails and how students with disabilities are taught in your area, consider substitute teaching. Many districts require substitute teachers to have a bachelor's degree and complete a background check. Some districts require a teaching license; if yours does, you'll need to apply for a substitute license through your district. Some temporary employment agencies can place aspiring teachers in substitute positions.



Volunteering is a great way to get experience working with students with special needs.

How Do I Know If I'll Like **SPED Teaching?**



The most up-close-and-personal experience you could have would be to work in a school as an **educational assistant** or a paraprofessional. Most educational assistants either work one-on-one with students with disabilities or assist a teacher with a group of students. Spending time as an educational assistant would give you first-hand insight into the life of a SPED teacher.

Because most districts are facing a shortage of qualified SPED teachers, many might prefer to grow their own. They might reimburse some or all of your tuition and offer employment once you complete your education. Working in a school while you're in school is a great way to get the firsthand experience and student teaching hours required to earn your degree.

If you can, observe a variety of special education settings. Contact your local school and explain your interest. Most schools will require a background check, but, with permission from the SPED teacher, some will allow prospective teachers to view different settings to get a sense of which will be the best fit.

How to Become a SPED Teacher

SPED teachers need either a bachelor's or a master's degree and a state teaching license in the area of disability. Most SPED degrees let teachers work with students in grades K–12; students are separated into categories of mild, moderate, or severe disability, as the skills needed to serve these populations vary greatly. If you have an undergraduate degree in any field, obtaining a master's degree in special education could allow you to work as a SPED teacher sooner—and possibly earn slightly more than a general education teacher.

After completing your required coursework, you'll have to apply for a license to teach in your state. Licensing requirements vary by state, but you'll likely have to pass Praxis tests, coursework reviews, basic skills exams, and background checks.

If you feel a calling to teach SPED, there's never been a better time to pursue your passion. Western Governors University offers a personalized, affordable online program that can get you into a classroom faster than traditional programs can.

[CLICK HERE](#)

to learn more about WGU's K–12 SPED programs and begin your new career today.