

Sonya Kunkel

As a special education teacher and advocate for students with disabilities for the past 27 years, I feel there is an added value to teachers first earning an initial teaching certificate in a content area, then earning a special education certificate to specialize in advanced education practices. However, I believe that it is in the best interest of students to have a teacher who earns a master's degree in special education be a fully qualified special education teacher with all of the needed education and pedagogy to multi-task and case manage on a daily basis. The AARC for special education data has demonstrated that this practice works for special education teacher preparation and for the students serviced by teachers prepared in this manner. In today's inclusive classrooms, a teacher might be required to co-teach for one period, working with a child with severe emotional difficulties in the same classroom as a child with an intellectual disability in need of assistive technology. The next period, the special education teacher, might need to teach a reading intervention group. Another teacher might have a therapeutic self-contained classroom where behaviors are taught, followed by intensive 1:1 teaching of pragmatic or social skills. In order to teach, special education teachers must have to the full range of abilities to assess, teach, contact parents, collaborate with staff, train a job coach and fully case manage.

In other words, a teacher with a content and master's degree with a special education certificate should be able to be a "specialist". After this level of training and experience, a teacher should be able to choose to pursue an area of further specialization after functioning as a special education teacher (examples: autism specialist, assistive technology specialist, behavior specialist). The post master's education (professional certificate) should not impact a special education teacher's ability to work, but only enhance their ability to do their job.

If special education teachers are not "specialists" at the master's degree level, then school systems will be limited in how they can use teachers. In a small district and in financially strapped districts, special education teachers are expected to fill multiple roles in order to meet the needs of students as outlined on the IEP's. Since IEP's cannot be predicted from year to year (especially in areas of high transience), special education teachers need to leave college, with the ability to provide a continuum of services to all students in the 13 disability categories, in a variety of settings.

Reviewing the proposed regulations for the new Special Education Certification
I have some thoughts and concerns I would like to share about the following:

Under Section 10-145d-914 (b) (2)

(D): Designing and implementing differentiated instruction, accommodations or modification for students with learning challenges or identified disabilities in prekindergarten, elementary and secondary programs.

I would like to see "Specially Designed Instruction" added to this definition or be added as an additional category. This added emphasis from IDEA part B, would underscore the need for special education teachers to work in an instructional capacity (and not just a support capacity-something sorely lacking in the roles of special education teachers at the secondary level). Special education teachers under new laws and regulations need to focus on special designed skills and strategies that create student independence.

From IDEA....Special education (I bolded for emphasis)

*Defined, as a term of art, in the IDEA regulations at 34 CFR 300.39(a) as specially designed instruction
Included in the definition of special education in Part B regulations at 34 CFR 300.39(b)(3) as adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under Part B of the IDEA, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability and to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children.*

(L): Develop measurable school goals, school culture, assessing and overcoming barriers in school change, implementing collaborative practices with teachers, administrators and the learning community

Under the initial educator certificate, I agree special education teachers should fully understand school culture and change theory. The wording in this particular item seems to indicate the need for an initial educator to be a change catalyst (administrative) versus a change agent someone that helps promote positive changes for students in alignment with school improvement plans). I would like to see this clarified to indicate the need for special education teachers to understand change theory and to promote positive changes for students served under IDEA.

Under proposed Sec. 10-145d-916 (b), I would like to see these requirements folded into the initial education teacher certification in order to train a fully functional special education teacher. I believe the 75 hours of continuing education should encompass **MORE literacy and numeracy** training (15 hours each), and more general technology training (10 hours). I suggest teachers be allowed to choose the other 35 hours in an area that would help them maximize their job performance.

Overall, I am in agreement with a special education certificate available at the master's level (or beyond...maybe a 6th year program or maybe an AARC equivalent). I would like teacher's earning this certificate to possess all of the needed skills to function and multi-task as a special education teacher.

Finally, I would have liked to see the requirement for general education teachers to be amended to require at least 3 special education courses for certification: 1. Special education law and exceptionalities. 2. Practices in literacy, numeracy and behavior strategies and interventions 3. Practices in collaboration, co-teaching and communication.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Sonya Kunkel

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