



# Preparing General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students With Disabilities

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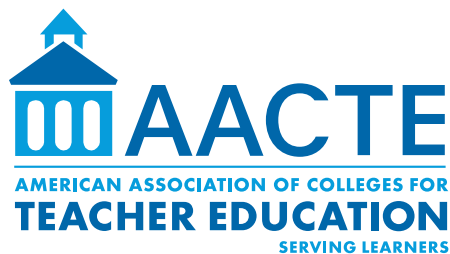
“We will set a clear goal: Every student should graduate from high school ready for college and a career, regardless of their income, race, ethnic or language background, or disability status.”

— President Barack Obama, *A Blueprint for Reform: Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, March 2010

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Prepared for AACTE and NCLD by Linda P. Blanton, Marleen C. Pugach, and Lani Florian, April 2011

*Available for download at [www.aacte.org](http://www.aacte.org)*



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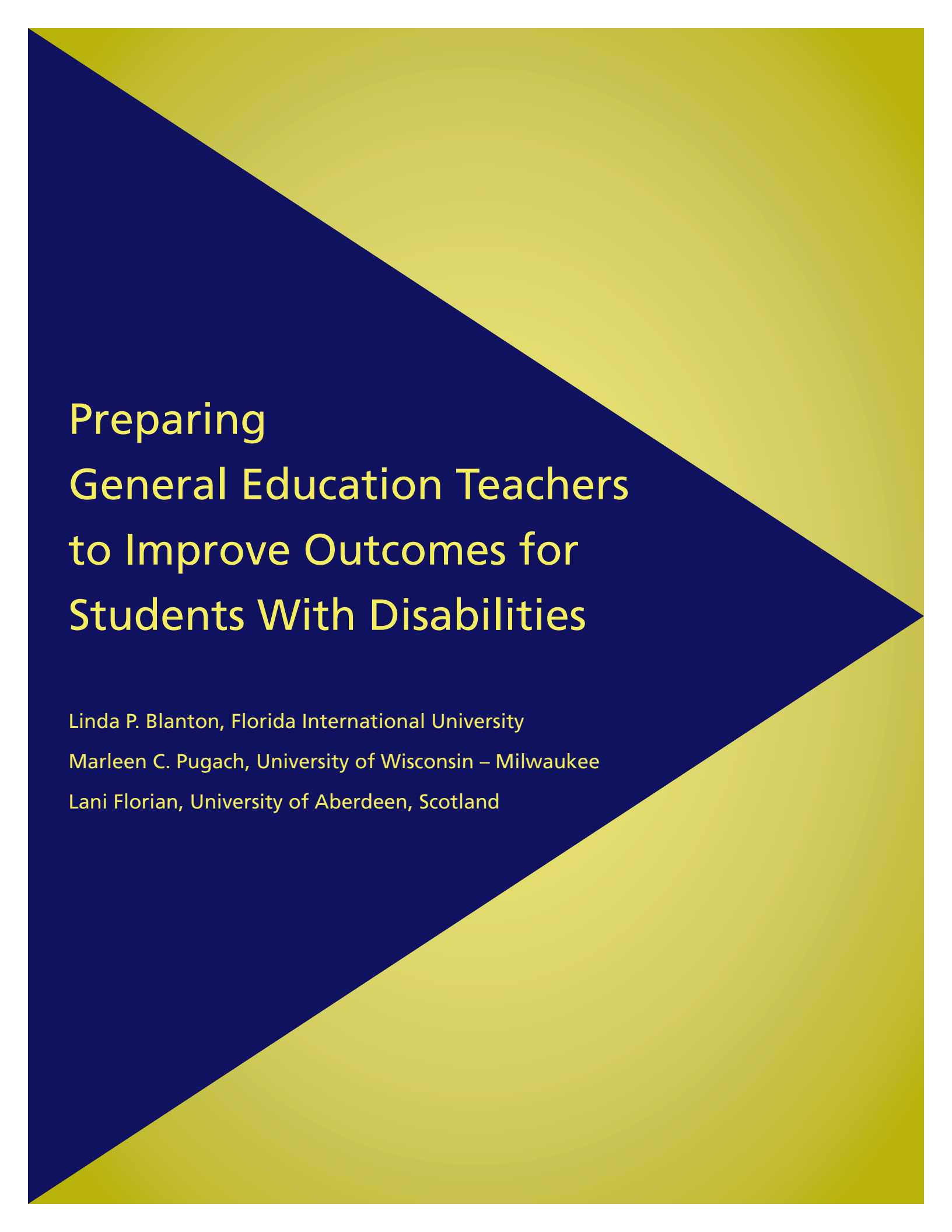
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## About the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) is a national alliance of educator preparation programs dedicated to the highest quality professional development of teachers and school leaders in order to enhance PK-12 student learning. The 800 institutions holding AACTE membership represent public and private colleges and universities in every state, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Guam. AACTE's reach and influence fuel its mission of serving learners by providing all school personnel with superior training and continuing education.

## About the National Center for Learning Disabilities

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) was founded in 1977 to help the 15 million children, adolescents, and adults with learning disabilities (LD) achieve success in school, work, and life. NCLD, a nonprofit organization, works with a national network of more than 40,000 parents, teachers, and other advocates, leading collaborative national policy and advocacy initiatives to strengthen educational rights and opportunities. Its 32-year commitment to individuals with LD is based on the guiding principle that federal policies should reflect the latest research and work to ensure equal opportunities to succeed for those with LD.

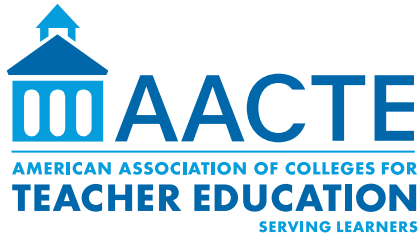


# Preparing General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students With Disabilities

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May 9, 2011

Dear Colleagues:

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) are pleased to jointly release this important policy brief on preparing general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. AACTE and NCLD share a goal of ensuring that all teachers are ready, willing, and able to meet the needs of all learners in the diverse classrooms of today. Because we know that teaching quality is the key ingredient to student success, this imperative holds great urgency.

Students with disabilities are a diverse group of learners, many of whom struggle to be successful in school. As a group, they lag significantly behind their peers without disabilities in graduation rates, standardized measures of achievement, postsecondary participation rates, and employment. These poor outcomes are not acceptable, particularly in light of the fact that the vast majority of students' disabilities should not preclude them from achieving success comparable to their peers without disabilities.

Today 57% of students with disabilities spend more than 80% of their day in general education classrooms, yet general education teachers consistently report that they do not have the skills they need to effectively instruct diverse learners, including students with disabilities. We believe that improving the skills of general education teachers is a lynchpin to improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

This policy brief articulates a vision of effective preparation for general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. It examines initiatives under way in pursuit of that vision, challenges to progress, and promising practices. It provides recommendations for national and state policy makers as well as for higher education.

We invite you to join our dialogue and work with us to ensure that students with disabilities achieve the success they are capable of in our nation's schools.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Sharon P. Robinson'.

Sharon P. Robinson  
President and CEO, AACTE

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'James H. Wendorf'.

James H. Wendorf  
Executive Director, NCLD

## Executive Summary

In today's classrooms, new teachers are teaching more diverse groups of students than ever before. However, these same teachers report that they do not feel adequately prepared for the job and for being held accountable for the achievement of learners who have disabilities, who are English language learners, or who are from the nation's lowest socioeconomic levels.

In responding to these challenges, this policy brief lays out a vision for preparing general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities as part of this nation's efforts to meet the educational needs of all children and the critical need to support reform in teacher education.

Investment in the preparation of general educators is needed if outcomes for students with disabilities are to be improved. This investment must be strategic and clearly linked to federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which increasingly emphasize, and expect schools to teach and assess, all students' progress in the general curriculum.

Teacher education has a crucial role to play in ensuring that classroom teachers are prepared for the challenges of educating students with disabilities—who, contrary to some misconceptions, can achieve in inclusive classrooms. However, moving forward on this agenda will require that some long-standing

assumptions about the content and structure of preservice preparation be reassessed. It will also require that the resources dedicated by institutions of higher education reach levels commensurate with other professional preparation programs to provide candidates the rich, guided clinical practice required to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to improve academic outcomes for all students.

Preparing general education teachers for the changing demographic profile of today's schools is receiving renewed attention both at home and abroad under pressure to perform well on international comparisons and compete in a global economy. To realize high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, teachers must be prepared to work collaboratively to utilize specific, evidence-based teaching practices that both challenge and motivate all of their students.

This policy brief lays out five components of a vision for the future and identifies opportunities to support teacher education reform. Examples of promising developments are also addressed that involve full-scale program redesign featuring collaboration across general and special education. Finally, a series of recommendations intended to reinvigorate teacher education in alignment with the vision are presented for the three key arenas that affect preparation: federal policy, state policy, and teacher preparation programs themselves.

### A Vision for the Future

1. All teachers are prepared to act on the belief that all students, including students with disabilities, belong in general education classrooms.
2. All teachers are prepared to treat all students, including students with disabilities, as capable learners who are entitled to high-quality instruction and access to challenging content that fully prepares them for careers and postsecondary education.
3. All teacher candidates complete their initial preparation with the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully enter the profession and meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities.
4. State and federal policy invest in high-quality teacher preparation for all candidates, while assuring that every new teacher is qualified with demonstrated skill to educate students with disabilities.
5. All providers of teacher education embrace preparation for diverse learners as a core component of their mission, prioritizing it, strengthening it, and funding it accordingly.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for Federal Policy Makers

1. Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, and other federal programs that support teacher quality should prioritize the preparation of general educators to be effective in improving outcomes for diverse students, including students with disabilities.
2. Federal definitions of terms related to teacher quality, such as *highly qualified teacher* and *effective teacher*, should require a performance assessment to ensure general educators are effective in instructing diverse learners.
3. Maximize the use of partnerships between PK-12 and higher education institutions to leverage higher education's experience and resources to ensure general education teachers are effective in teaching students with disabilities.

### Recommendations for State Policy Makers

1. Develop policies and implement programs that will ensure that every teacher of record is skilled in instructing diverse students, including students with disabilities.
2. Assess the effectiveness of general education teachers in achieving results with diverse students, including students with disabilities, in all teacher evaluation systems.
3. Identify general and special education teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and provide the funding to enhance their career professional development, in order to form a cadre of dually certified teachers who provide instruction in general education classrooms and serve as models for novice teachers.

### Recommendations for Providers of Teacher Education

1. Invest in teacher education programs to develop strong clinical partnerships with PK-12 schools consistent with the recommendations of NCATE's 2010 Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning.
2. Support the development of innovative preparation programs that bring together teacher educators in the curriculum areas, multicultural education, bilingual education, teaching English learners, and special education as active working teams to frame a truly inclusive teacher education agenda.
3. Support teaching and teacher education research priorities.

## Introduction

The education of students with disabilities has held a prominent place of concern in the United States since the first federal legislation to protect their educational rights was passed in 1975.<sup>1</sup> This law and its implementing regulations specified that students with disabilities should be educated with their nondisabled peers in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate. In addition, funds were set aside to prepare special education teachers to fulfill the new federal requirement to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students regardless of type or severity of disability.

Since this time, the focus has been on preparing an adequate supply of special education teachers to meet this challenge. Less attention has been paid to the preparation of general education teachers, who also teach students with disabilities. While the adequate supply of special education teachers remains a challenge and warrants continued attention, 96% of students with disabilities spend at least part of their day in general education classes,<sup>2</sup> and general education teachers serve as the teacher of record on students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which outline the supports and services students will receive annually to meet their goals. Unfortunately, the academic performance of students with disabilities is significantly below that of other students—even for students whose disabilities should not prevent them from learning alongside their peers and achieving similar academic outcomes.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon raises important questions about the skills and support needed for general education teachers to effectively instruct students with disabilities in our nation's diverse classrooms.

Today, the academic performance of too many students with disabilities does not meet expectations. For example, a student with a learning disability—when provided with effective instruction, accommodations, and supports—should be expected to graduate from high school with a regular diploma, ready for college and a career. Yet the graduation rate for students with learning disabilities—the largest group of students with disabilities identified under

the law (43%)—is only 64%, and for students with orthopaedic impairments it is only 68%,<sup>4</sup> each a full 10% below that of the general population.<sup>5</sup> In addition, students whose education is designed to meet alternative standards for high school graduation—such as those with intellectual disabilities—are often held to even lower expectations, making it difficult for them to pursue postsecondary education or enter the job market. Data from the 2005 National Longitudinal Transition Study<sup>6</sup> show that although the participation rate of students with disabilities in postsecondary education has increased, it still lags behind that of other students, and the unemployment rate for adults with disabilities is higher than for other groups—14.5% for persons with disabilities compared to 9.0% for persons without a disability.<sup>7</sup>

This policy brief asserts that the time has come to consider additional, innovative approaches to improving the outcomes for students with disabilities *by focusing on the preparation of general education teachers* because of the overwhelming evidence on school effectiveness that classroom teachers are the single most important factor influencing student achievement.<sup>8</sup> Yet how general education teachers are prepared to work with students with disabilities has been largely overlooked. This brief urges investment in the preparation of general educators as key to improved outcomes for students with disabilities. It examines the challenges for teacher education in preparing general education teachers to teach students with disabilities in today's diverse classrooms, and it sets forth opportunities and recommendations for improvements in policy and practice for their preparation.

The brief is organized around five elements of a vision for preparing general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Each element considers key challenges that must be addressed if the vision is to be realized. Recommendations for the three key arenas that impact preparation—federal policy, state policy, and teacher preparation programs, particularly those located in higher education—are presented.



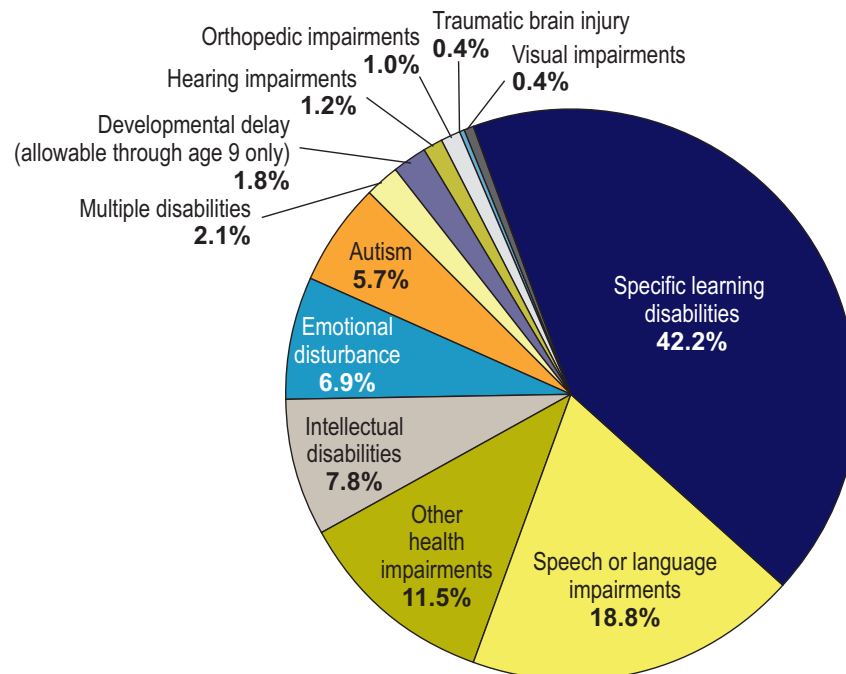
## A Vision for the Future

### 1. All teachers are prepared to act on the belief that all students, including students with disabilities, belong in general education classrooms.

Today the demographic profile of students in our nation's schools is more complex than ever before. The idea of the regular classroom as offering the best opportunity for learning, and therefore the one to which all students are entitled, is supported by research<sup>9</sup> that suggests that students who do not have access to this environment, and those who are excluded from it, are disadvantaged not only in their immediate educational opportunities but long into adult life. This disadvantage is particularly acute for students with disabilities, a group of over 6 million students defined by 13 categories in federal legislation who make up more than 13% of all school students ages 3-21.<sup>10</sup>

Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2001 emphasize the importance of a more inclusive approach to education. IDEA requires annual assessments for all students with disabilities and also reinforces that schools must provide greater access to the general classroom; however, most states did not include students with disabilities in annual assessments until ESEA required standardized annual assessments in mathematics and reading for Grades 3-8 for all students, including students with disabilities. Since that time, public scrutiny of and discussion about access to the general education curriculum for students

### Students Receiving Special Education Services in the United States, by Disability Category



Source: www.IDEAdata.org, 2009 Part B Child Count, students ages 6-21



with disabilities has intensified. However, research indicates that one of the greatest barriers to inclusive education is that too many teachers feel they have not been sufficiently prepared to address the diverse needs of students.<sup>11</sup> As federal legislation such as IDEA and ESEA increasingly emphasize that students with disabilities are expected to be taught and learn the general education curriculum and achieve grade-level standards, *teacher education has an important role to play in ensuring that classroom teachers are better prepared for the challenges of teaching diverse groups of students* who, contrary to some misconceptions, can perform well in inclusive classrooms.<sup>12</sup>

The notion that special education students are first and foremost general education students was forcefully advanced by the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education in 2002.<sup>13</sup> The Commission noted the need for an increase in efforts for early identification and prevention prior to referral to special education. In 2002, the National Research Council highlighted the need to “integrate general and special education services and apply high-quality instruction based on evidence-based practices to assure and achieve better academic outcomes for all students.”<sup>14</sup> Preparing *every* student for the promise of college or a career requires that general education teachers view the full range of students they teach as *their* responsibility. Classroom teachers must be prepared to accept that all students differ—that responding to differences among learners is an essential aspect of teaching all children and something that they routinely do already for students who are not labeled. While students may need support from special educators and other specialists to fulfill this responsibility to students with disabilities and other diverse learners, general education teachers are not exempt from responsibility for all students' learning. Reforming the preparation of general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities requires addressing the following challenges.

## The Challenges

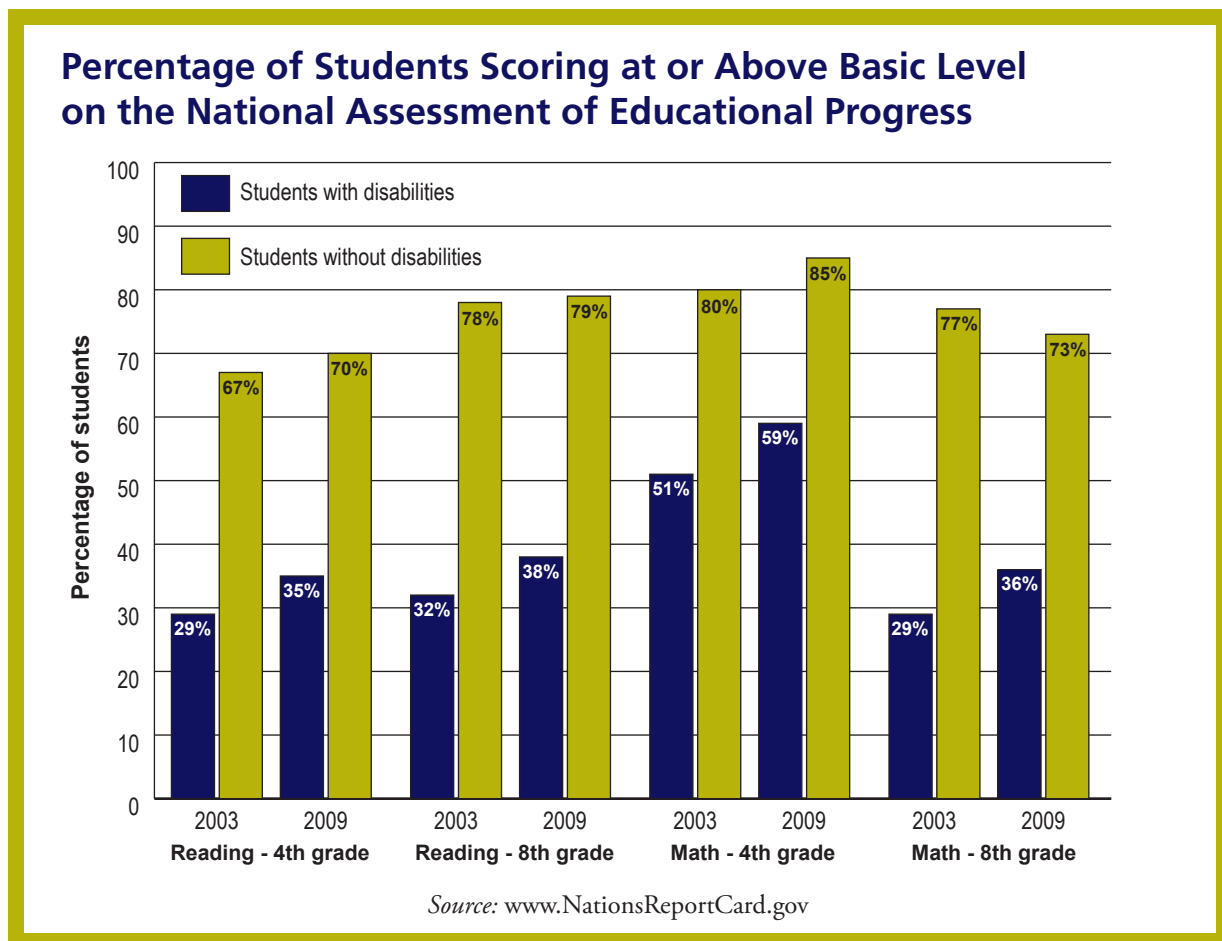
### “It's Not My Job”—Teacher Education Program Structures and Teacher Licensure

Although teachers routinely work with a wide range of students in their classrooms, their teaching license often limits them to work in an elementary

or secondary school, as a bilingual specialist, a special education teacher, or a general education teacher.<sup>15</sup> Even where teacher education programs offer candidates the option for multiple licenses, teachers tend to identify themselves as being one kind of teacher or another. This mentality is a key barrier to innovation in preparing teachers for working with diverse populations. Schools and colleges of education often maintain separate programs of initial teacher preparation that directly mirror both the separate ways in which educational services are structured and delivered to students and the ways in which states license and certify teachers.

Preparing teachers according to categories of learners such as bilingual, special education, or English language learners reinforces the idea that different groups of teachers are needed for different types of learners and that the normally wide range of students found in so many of today's general education classrooms in the United States cannot be met in the absence of such specialization.<sup>16</sup> As a result, teachers may resist efforts to include students with disabilities—or students who are English language learners, or students who require bilingual education—in their classrooms on the grounds that they are not qualified or sufficiently prepared to teach them. In fact, one study found that less than one third of teacher preparation programs formally require their general education candidates to work with students with disabilities during their student teaching.<sup>17</sup> Equally important, categorizing students does not wholly define what teachers must do to provide a good education. As the persistent low achievement of students with disabilities indicates, it has proved limited in its power to overcome the fundamental barriers that are put into place when students are divided into groups based on personal attributes, such as autism or attention deficit disorder.

Finally, in this regard, serving students with disabilities is fundamentally about building strong classroom communities. When students are taught by teachers who recognize the unique learning needs of each and every individual, they learn that the effort required for learning may be different for each student—and it is effort that should be celebrated. Therefore, an important part of teacher professionalism includes an ethic of persistence and a belief in the learning capacity of every student in their classroom. The passion for serving diverse learners is a professional commitment supported by a professional knowledge base that makes such practice possible.



### Unintended Consequences of Closing the Achievement Gaps Among School Groups

Achievement results in reports such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the testing requirements of ESEA clearly show that students with disabilities are a vulnerable group in U.S. schools compared with their same-age peers. In addition, in a recent survey of students, those with learning challenges reported more worries about college and career, less confidence in achieving their goals, less preparation and support for college, and lower opinions of the quality of their education than other students.<sup>18</sup>

While such outcomes call for change, the increased pressure on schools to show improved results on achievement tests means that teachers may experience pressure to exclude students who are struggling.<sup>19</sup> In such situations, students with disabilities are not the only vulnerable group. Students whose first language is not English are also achieving poorly on standardized measures of academic performance.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the achievement gap between

White and African American students and between White and Hispanic students in the nation remains wide.<sup>21</sup>

The pressures teachers feel to “get the job done” in the current accountability climate—in which the stakes keep getting higher for teachers, and international comparisons shape perceptions of how well the nation’s schools are preparing students to participate in the global economy—are also factors that affect achievement. One unintended consequence of the pressure to show increased student performance on academic achievement measures has been an increase in the exclusion of students who do not do well on these measures. In the United States, as in many other countries, standards-based reforms intended to improve national competitiveness and close the achievement gap between the highest performing students and those who do not perform as well have created some perverse incentives. Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that dropout rates for students with disabilities far exceed those reported for all students<sup>22</sup> and that high school graduation rates remain a problem.<sup>23</sup> Learning to grapple with

these conditions is an important part of both teacher education and teacher professional development.

Although one clear value of standardized achievement tests has been to lay bare the differences between groups of learners, they have not allowed teachers to be readily acknowledged for growth that remains below established goals. Neither have they been universally designed to create greater access to the test and allow students to more fully demonstrate what they know. Nor are they widely administered with appropriate accommodations that would yield

more accurate assessment results. Modifications of the accountability system to explicitly include provisions to acknowledge teachers for student growth, even when it is below grade level, would help create a more positive environment for general education teachers to more readily support including students who have disabilities.

Today, teachers are being asked to do more than ever before with less than ever before as financial support for public education is dwindling across the country,<sup>24</sup> and they are voicing concerns about the

## Profile of Learning-Challenged Students

### College and Career Expectations and Worries

- Twice as likely to say their highest level of education will be no more than a high school diploma (15% vs. 7%)
- More likely to have thought about dropping out of school (16% vs. 9%)
- More likely to worry a lot about being able to get a good job when they finish school (47% vs. 40%) and being able to get into (38% vs. 29%) or succeed in (39% vs. 32%) college
- Less likely to say it is very likely they will go to college (62% vs. 78%)
- Just as likely to think it is absolutely essential that each and every student graduates from high school ready for college and a career (37% vs. 42%)
- Less likely to be very confident that they will achieve their goals for the future (30% vs. 50%)

### Preparation and Support for College

- Less likely to have spoken with a teacher (43% vs. 50%) or school counselor (43% vs. 51%) about what classes they should take and other things to do to be ready for college
- Less likely to have seen examples of real college-level assignments and student work (33% vs. 41%)

### Teaching and School Quality

- Give their teachers a B- on teaching individual students according to their needs and abilities – similar to other students
- More likely to say their teachers' expectations are higher than what they think they can meet (43% vs. 37%)
- More likely to rate the overall quality of education at their school as fair or poor (24% vs. 16%)
- Just as likely to say they very often receive enough attention from their teachers in class (37% vs. 43%)
- Less likely to give their teachers an A for believing all children can learn (35% vs. 46%)
- Less likely to say their teachers make learning exciting (65% vs. 72%)
- Less likely to give their teachers an A on preparing them in English (34% vs. 51%) and math (35% vs. 48%)

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Source: *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers (2010), Part 2: Teaching Diverse Learners*. Copyright 2011 by MetLife. Used with permission.

challenge of getting the job done and getting it done well.<sup>25</sup> The complexity of what it means to include all learners in today's classrooms is a challenge not only for general education teachers, but also for the teacher education programs that prepare them. Preparation programs must equip teachers with the essential skills to counteract the effects of the "silos" by which schools are organized and students are separated. Reinvigoration and innovation in preparing general education teachers are needed to conceptualize their role as competent to teach all students.

## Lessons From Europe

The question of how to prepare general education teachers for working with students who have disabilities is a challenge faced not only by the United States. International developments also present a compelling case for addressing how general education teachers are prepared to work with students with disabilities as part of a broad diversity agenda.

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education is undertaking a 3-year, 26-country study, "Teacher Education for Inclusion Across Europe," with the final report due later this year.<sup>26</sup> This study is based on a consideration of the kind of general education teachers needed in 21st-century schools and the kinds of teachers that are needed for inclusive education. In these efforts, inclusive education is defined as a "principled, rights-based approach" built on a set of values that include a respect for diversity. This approach is consistent with Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which calls upon states to ensure that persons with disabilities "can access an inclusive quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live."<sup>27</sup> To date, 147 countries have signed, and 99 have ratified, the Convention—clearly establishing the ideal of inclusive education as key to equality of opportunity for persons with disabilities.

The 2008 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 48th International Conference on Education, "Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future," called upon the international community "to adopt an inclusive education approach in the design, implementation, monitoring, and assessment of educational policies." This important international conference concluded with six recommendations specific to teacher education and development.<sup>28</sup> As a result, teacher edu-

cators in many parts of the world are beginning to share ideas and support innovations and developments in teacher education for inclusive education.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike the situation in the United States, European initial teacher education is not all divided into different types of preparation programs (e.g., special education, urban education, bilingual education). In the United Kingdom, for example, teachers are prepared to be general education elementary or subject specialist secondary teachers. They may go on to earn an additional credential in special education once they earn their initial teaching "qualification" (as teacher licensure is known in the United Kingdom), but the issue of separate initial qualification as either a special or a general education teacher does not exist as it does in the United States. In the United Kingdom, teacher preparation for special education at the undergraduate level was abolished in the 1980s, partly because it was seen as an institutional, organizational barrier that inappropriately freed the rest of the education system from taking responsibility for all children's learning. In abolishing the option for special education as an initial stand-alone qualification, the idea was that teachers would participate in professional development in special education as they moved through their careers in general education, and over time, as they became more experienced, they might decide to specialize.

Initial teacher education in the United Kingdom is firmly linked to higher education, and as a result of greater integration across European countries both within and outside of the education sector, the trend has been to increase consistency among higher education programs across Europe. As colleagues come together to work on adopting consistent structures in higher education, and as information about course content is shared, it has become increasingly clear that new courses to prepare teachers for the diversity agenda are needed. Current policy debates in the United Kingdom reflect concerns that placing the education of students with disabilities into a broader diversity agenda might weaken the protections that have been needed to make sure such students could access education. At the same time, there is a recognition that general education teachers need to be prepared to meet their responsibilities to achieve high standards for all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and other students who may struggle in school.

What lessons might U.S. policy makers take from these developments? First, there are important advantages to including disability as part of



the diversity agenda. By promoting the idea of disability as part of diversity, we begin to break down the barriers that have treated students with disabilities as different from all other students. More important, we reinforce the idea that children with

disabilities are part of the broader diverse community of learners that all general education teachers encounter and that teaching them is to be expected rather than seen as an extra and perhaps unreasonable responsibility.

## 2. All teachers are prepared to treat all students, including students with disabilities, as capable learners who are entitled to high-quality instruction and access to challenging content that fully prepares them for careers and postsecondary education.

The goal of education in the United States, as in other countries, should be to include educating students with disabilities as part of a broader diversity agenda for education—an agenda that has been limited in this country by approaches that have been designed to address the specific needs of particular groups rather than focusing on systemic reform for the new realities of the school population. Federal funding focuses on the preparation of special education teachers, for example, addressing only one aspect of what students with disabilities need to achieve a good-quality education in inclusive schools. Students with disabilities also need highly skilled, well prepared general education teachers—with whom they spend most of their time—to view them as capable learners and as full members of the classroom community, rather than as the primary responsibility of special educators.

Although the actual time in general education classrooms will vary for individual students with disabilities, some 57% of these students spend more than 80% of their day in general education classrooms (see graph, next page).

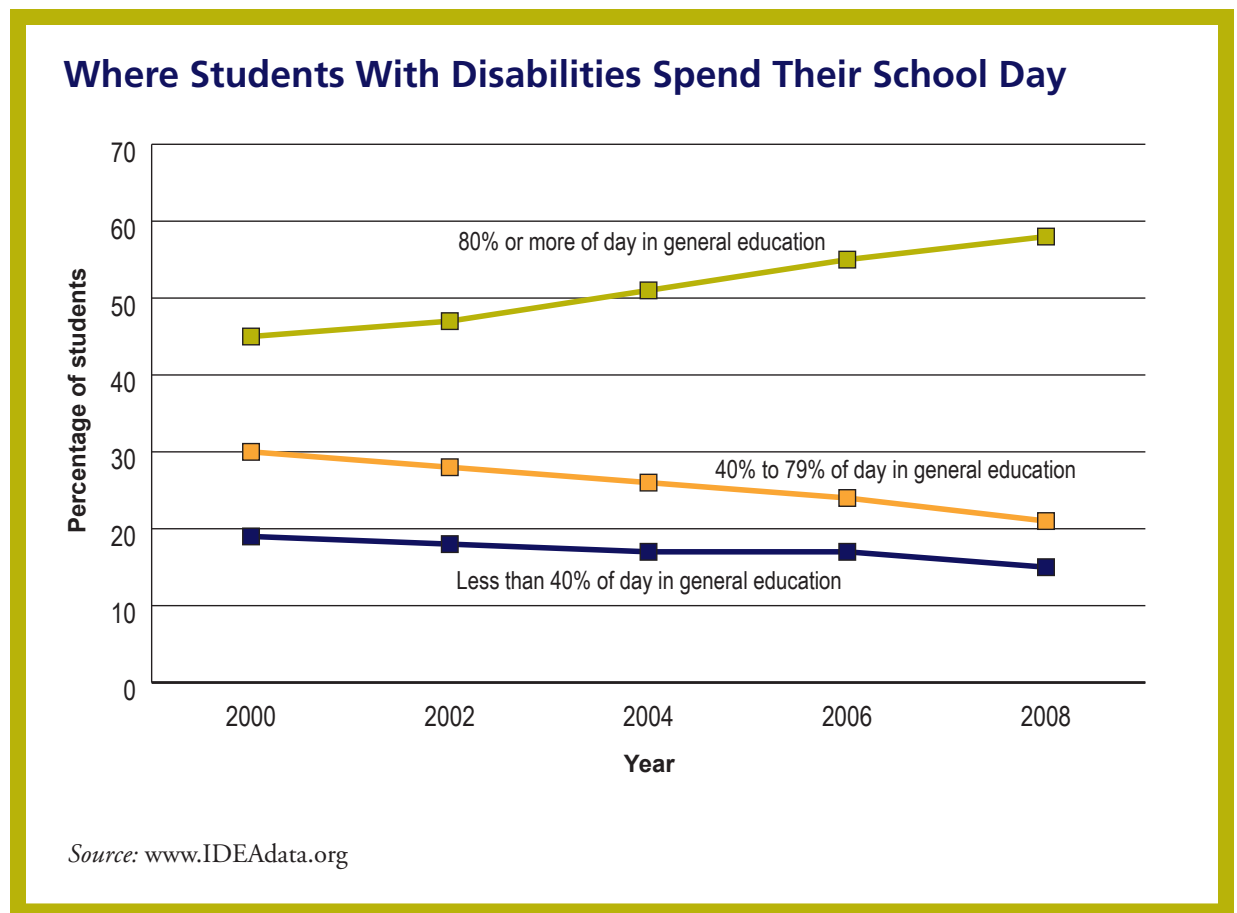
General education teachers need to support all children's learning. They must provide a challenging academic curriculum that motivates and interests all students, and they also should be prepared to work creatively with specialists to achieve this goal. At the same time, special educators need to reconsider the role that they can play in 21st-century schools and have teaching the academic curriculum as the central focus of their preparation. Reinvigorated, innovative preparation programs for both general and special education teachers can help tackle the problems of underachievement for all students.

## Reinvigorating Teacher Education: What Do Distinctly Good Teachers Look Like?

Reinvigorating teacher education depends on a vision of what distinguishes teachers who are well equipped to meet the needs of all students, especially those who struggle in school. The qualities that characterize such teachers involve a complex interplay of the specific attitudes, knowledge, and skills that have been identified in the research on teacher education for inclusion.<sup>30</sup> Beyond holding the fundamental belief that every child who comes through the classroom door is a child who belongs in that classroom, such teachers hold high expectations for all of their students and demonstrate a willingness to work with students with disabilities to ensure that they can reach those expectations.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, there is evidence that students with disabilities can perform across the spectrum of proficiency. One analysis of fourth-grade mathematics scores compares the performance of special education students and general education students, pointing out that students with disabilities perform across the spectrum from low proficiency to high proficiency.<sup>32</sup> While special education students are disproportionately low scorers, some general education students are also performing at the lowest levels, and some special education students are also performing at very high levels of proficiency. This evidence counters the common belief that students with disabilities cannot learn to high standards.

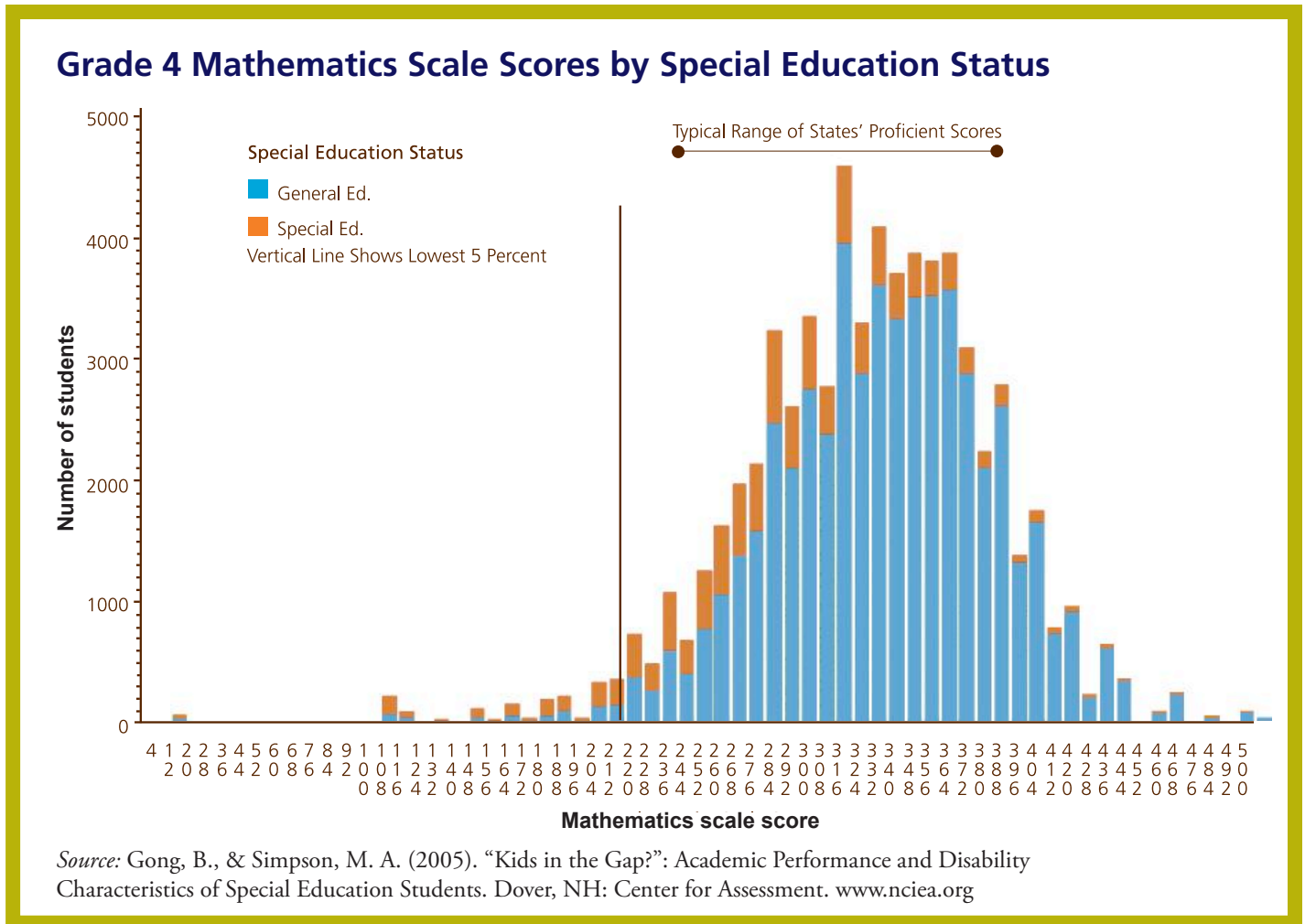
Distinctly good teachers also recognize that student diversity is the norm rather than the exception. For students who struggle, teachers must be skilled in providing instruction that is responsive not only to the academic standards expected, but also to the



students themselves—their prior experiences, their cultural and community knowledge, their individual interests—and be able to use this kind of student knowledge as a bridge to new academic learning. They anticipate their students’ high-priority instructional needs and accommodations, allow students to express their knowledge in a variety of ways, use multiple technologies, implement peer tutoring programs, and engage in other evidence-based interventions. They recognize that many of the instructional methods they use can be effective with a wide range of students, and they consciously design instruction for a variety of learner needs from the outset of their planning.<sup>33</sup> In other words, they expand their view of what is generally available to all students.<sup>34</sup> This way of teaching is demanding because in order to embrace it, teachers must set aside the overarching assumption that students of similar age can and will learn similar content in a relatively straightforward manner. Viewing all students as capable learners who deserve and can learn challenging content,<sup>35</sup> such teachers do not let the labels that may be used to describe particular groups of students divert them from this goal.

To teach in this way, teachers must be highly skilled practitioners who can embed specific evidence-based teaching practices within a broad view of the academic curriculum that both challenges and motivates all of their students. To meet the needs of their most challenging students, teachers continuously monitor student progress and routinely respond to their assessment of student learning by adjusting instruction accordingly.

The ability to do all of this arises from a complex combination of skills. In general teacher education, for example, current research on “high-leverage teaching practices” by Deborah Ball and her colleagues is pointing the way to preparing teachers for specific and robust teaching tasks that have implications for the success of students with disabilities, including practices that span classroom management, content planning, and instruction and assessment for learning.<sup>36</sup> As schools respond to specific instructional expectations to make the general education curriculum accessible to a diverse school population, good teachers can also rely on approaches such as Multi-Tier System of Supports (commonly known as Response to Intervention),



Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, and Universal Design for Learning, all of which draw on evidence-based instructional strategies that can be used by general and special education teachers alike to support students with disabilities. These school-wide approaches were designed to keep struggling students in the general education classroom all or most of the time, to provide interventions to individual students when needed, and to reduce the number of children who are mistakenly identified as having learning disabilities when their learning problems are actually a result of cultural difference or lack of adequate instruction.

In Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS), teachers monitor progress frequently to make appropriate changes in instruction and apply these ongoing assessments to important educational decisions. The results of monitoring student progress are used to make decisions about the need for further evidence-based instruction in general education, in special education, or both.<sup>37</sup>

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) assists school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students.<sup>38</sup> In PBIS, classroom management and preventive school discipline are integrated with effective academic instruction to create a positive and safe school climate to maximize success for all students.

## DEFINITION

### Multi-Tier System of Supports

A comprehensive system of differentiated supports that includes evidence-based instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessments, research-based interventions matched to student needs, and educational decision making using student outcome data.



## DEFINITION

### Universal Design for Learning

From Section 103(a)(24) of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008:

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING.—The term “universal design for learning” means a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that—

(A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and

(B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient.’

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for designing curricula that provides cognitive as well as physical access to learning to enable all students to gain knowledge, skills, and motivation for learning. Using the power and flexibility of technology to make education more inclusive and effective for all learners, UDL includes multiple means of representing content, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement, and it provides new ways for teachers to customize their teaching for students with a range of abilities, interests, and backgrounds.<sup>39</sup> In 2008, UDL was defined in the Higher Education Act (see box above).

Another critical set of teaching skills has to do with general education teachers working collaboratively with their colleagues, as part of a team, to put into practice inclusive education that is challenging and motivating for students. When general education teachers take primary responsibility for the learning of their students, they should do so as part of a professional learning community alongside their special education colleagues. In this approach to professional development, staff across the entire school have been successful working together on assuring student progress.<sup>40</sup> This learning community includes not only special education or bilingual education teachers but also parents and families who are viewed as expert sources of knowledge.

As a uniquely complex job, teaching demands a high level of collaboration, particularly when students need additional supports to improve outcomes

on challenging content. In this vision of teaching, both general and special education teachers possess a shared base of professional knowledge for teaching that is anchored in the general education curriculum; from this shared base they can collaborate to ensure students’ learning of this curriculum. Moreover, collaborative models of teaching, in which general educators and support personnel coordinate their work to support all students in diverse classrooms, have emerged as a promising set of practices in schools. These models can include coteaching, in which general and special education teachers share responsibility for instruction, as well as creating instructional teams in middle and high schools in which the special education teacher is a permanent member of the team of subject specialist teachers.<sup>41</sup> In a recent survey, teachers identified four key areas where additional resources and tools could help them meet the needs of diverse learners.<sup>42</sup> Sixty-five percent of teachers cited increased time for collaboration as something that would have a major impact on their ability to address the learning needs of individual students.

Effective general education teachers are also prepared to participate collaboratively as part of a team in an IEP process to work with special educators, related services personnel, parents, and administrators to develop and implement learning plans for special education students. Despite the importance of this collaborative process, fewer than 11% of teacher preparation programs report requiring such participation as part of the field experience for teacher candidates.<sup>43</sup>

Learning to teach well is a process of skillfully blending knowledge of children’s learning and development with knowledge of their communities, the curriculum, and pedagogy in robust teacher preparation that includes school placement experiences to put these skills into practice. It takes knowledge, practice, and feedback for teacher candidates to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to ensure that all students are able to learn challenging, interesting, and motivating academic content in school. One important goal, then, is to ensure that general education teachers are well-prepared at the preservice level to utilize the full range of these teaching practices and strategies to support the learning of students with disabilities.

### 3. All teacher candidates complete their initial preparation with the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully enter the profession and meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities.

Although policy makers and researchers are now focused on exploring and reporting on the connection between the quality of teachers and the learning of their students, the 2010 report of the National Research Council's Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States, *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy*, clearly identified the crux of the problem at the heart of this brief: "The quality of the nation's teachers has been the subject of sharp critiques, and so have many preparation programs. Yet, teacher preparation is often treated as an afterthought in discussions of improving the public education system."<sup>44</sup>

#### Teachers Report Lacking Skills in Instructing Students With Disabilities

Numerous studies have reported that general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach the diversity of students in their classrooms effectively. In 2008, half of middle and high school teachers reported that the learning abilities of their students were so varied that they could not teach them effectively.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, teachers increasingly realize how important it is to be able to address the needs of diverse learners. In a recent survey, 91% of teachers reported that strengthening programs and

resources to help diverse learners who have greater needs should be a priority.<sup>46</sup>

Teachers themselves, then, understand the need for more robust preservice experiences to prepare them for their work in increasingly challenging classrooms. Learning to teach the changing student population well will take new approaches to clinical preparation to ensure that teachers have adequate opportunities to gain these essential practices.

#### The Significance of Clinical Preparation

Focusing teacher preparation on classroom practices—and actively engaging teacher candidates in these practices—is required to produce new teachers who are capable of improving student outcomes.<sup>47</sup> Although there are many pathways to a career in teaching, new teachers from all pathways must enter the classroom with sufficient practice behind them; learning how to teach well *before* being given full responsibility for a classroom is paramount. The knowledge and skills teachers require to address student diversity are not learned either on the job or from academic classes alone. They are the result of ongoing professional development, over time, that begins with preservice preparation and continues throughout a teacher's career. Such professional development is not learned "on the fly," but is acquired through deep and long-term engagement

#### Teachers Need Tools, Strategies to Meet Needs of Diverse Learners

According to the 2010 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, a majority of teachers believes that the following resources would have a major impact on their ability to effectively address the different learning needs of individual students:

- Opportunities for collaborative teaching (65%);
- Access to online and other technology-based resources that allow them to help personalize education according to the learning profiles of their students (64%);
- Better tools for understanding students' learning strengths and needs (63%); and
- Instructional strategies to teach effectively in a classroom where many students speak a language other than English (62%).

Source: *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers (2010), Part 2: Teaching Diverse Learners*, p. 11.

and reflection that challenges assumptions about teaching and learning.

Regardless of the pathway, high-quality teacher preparation should take place within serious, sustained clinical partnerships between teacher preparation programs and school districts in order to provide extended, high-quality clinical experiences over long periods of time.<sup>48</sup> Learning to teach is not easy work; as Deborah Ball and Francesca Forzani have noted, “skillful teaching requires appropriately using and integrating specific moves and activities in particular cases and contexts, based on knowledge and understanding of one’s pupils and on the application of professional judgment.”<sup>49</sup>

Such a transformation of teacher preparation would need to be accompanied by improved teacher performance assessments that specifically include demonstrations of intending educators’ abilities to work across the full range of students and foster their learning across subject areas.

The first nationally available preservice Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) is in development and is being tested in 21 participating states on the campuses of 90 institutions of higher education. The subject-specific instrument calls upon teacher candidates to apply all that they have learned in their preparation to demonstrate that they can effectively support student learning. This assessment system requires candidates to demonstrate their ability with all struggling learners, including students who have disabilities. In addition to raising the bar for teacher preparation, the TPA, based on the successful Performance Assessment for California Teachers, will be predictive of prospective teacher effectiveness and can be used for teacher licensure as well as for the improvement of teacher preparation programs.<sup>50</sup>

## New Roles for Special Educators

Achieving a new vision for general education teachers—one that enables them to build educational environments that result in significant learning gains for the full range of students they teach—also

requires a reinvigoration of the preparation of special education teachers. What should the role of special education teachers be in an educational system that is focused on making sure that every child learns and is ready for college or a career?

As the practice of general education teachers is reframed to encompass a broad diversity perspective, a simultaneous reframing of the role of special education teachers should also occur, especially regarding their knowledge of the general education curriculum. In order for special educators to work effectively with their general education colleagues, their base in the general education curriculum should be strong and sound. Although the “highly qualified” requirements of IDEA and ESEA have been helpful in the expectation for special educators to acquire content knowledge at both the elementary and secondary levels, much more needs to be done to ensure a base in general education. Just as general education teachers need preparation programs that support them in taking responsibility for the learning of all students, special education teachers need core knowledge of the general education curriculum and how to make it accessible to students. Currently, 17 states\* require persons seeking special education licensure to first complete a general education license,<sup>51</sup> a trend that holds promise for their preparation and that moves beyond preparation that has traditionally, at least for many programs, focused on instructional strategies in isolation from the general education curriculum.

The focus on collaborative teaching in recent years also requires consideration of how new roles for special education teachers will be shaped. Although the research on the effectiveness of such practices as coteaching, for example, is mixed,<sup>52</sup> the use of these practices has increased in PK-12 schools. For aspiring teachers to succeed in collaborative teaching, they need opportunities to practice different approaches as part of their professional development. As various collaborative practices evolve, the expectations for what takes place in the general education classrooms will change, as will the relationship between general and special education.

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\* These states are Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

#### 4. State and federal policy invest in high-quality teacher preparation for all candidates, while assuring that every new teacher is qualified with demonstrated skill to educate students with disabilities.

### A Patchwork of Policy for Teacher Preparation

Countries whose students are high achievers and where there are also small gaps between the highest and lowest achievers, such as Finland and Singapore, generally share a strong national commitment to the teacher workforce. In these countries the teaching profession is seen as having high status, and becoming a teacher is highly competitive.<sup>53</sup> Teacher preparation and continuing professional development are well funded by government, are university based, and have strong links to schools. In this country, states hold the predominant authority that regulates teacher preparation, quality, and professional development, and they differ significantly in their policies.

In the United States, states and teacher preparation programs differ in what they require of general education teachers regarding their preparation to teach students with disabilities. Currently, most states and most preservice programs require either a course or course work in special education as part of the general education teacher preparation curriculum.<sup>54</sup> Requiring a single course is the most prevalent way of addressing the issue,<sup>55</sup> as 73% of elementary programs and 67% of secondary programs have this requirement.<sup>56</sup> Only 20% of preservice programs require courses or course work to prepare teachers to work with English language learners.<sup>57</sup>

Although the United States has no comprehensive policy on teacher preparation, a range of federal policies and programs do influence it. In 2008, when Congress reauthorized the Higher Education Act, two provisions were added to explicitly promote the preparation of general education teachers who are proficient in teaching students with disabilities. The first is a requirement in states' annual report cards on teacher quality. States must report on the extent to which teacher preparation programs prepare general education teachers to teach students with disabilities effectively, including training related to participation as a member of an IEP team.<sup>58</sup> The second provision requires institutions of higher education that prepare teachers to assure the U.S. Secretary of Education that general education teachers receive

training in providing instruction to diverse populations, including students with disabilities. Additionally, institutions of higher education must assure the Secretary that prospective special education teachers complete course work in core academic subjects and receive training in providing instruction in core academic subjects.<sup>59</sup> These requirements were not accompanied by resources or assistance in developing strategies for achieving these goals, and it is hard to determine their impact. But they do reflect the concern of national policy makers in this arena.

While numerous federal programs fund teacher development, one has included a focus on supporting the preparation of general educators to be able to instruct students with disabilities and English language learners effectively: the Teacher Quality Partnership grants authorized by Title II of the Higher Education Act in 2008.<sup>60</sup> These grants are also unique in that they are the only federal grants that directly invest in strong clinical preparation, including 1-year residency programs. However, this program receives limited funding and is recommended for consolidation in the Obama administration's "Blueprint for Reform" (March 2010).

### Federally Funded Influences on the Preparation of General Education Teachers to Instruct Students With Disabilities

For the most part, federally funded initiatives that are intended to improve the preparation of general educators to be effective in teaching students with disabilities have been generated through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, not by an office with primary authority over general education such as the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. This separation reinforces the "silo" phenomenon in education that often relegates initiatives to the purview of special education rather than treating them as relevant to general education.

As early as 1975, the Office of Special Education Programs funded the "Regular Education Preservice Grants" program, or "Deans' Grants," with the goal



of including special education content in the general teacher education curriculum.<sup>61</sup> From 1975 to 1982, more than 200 such projects were funded across the country. The Deans' Grants created momentum for preparing general educators to teach students with disabilities and represented an important initial strategy to ensure that general education teachers had the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to do so. But these efforts proved to be insufficient. One unintended consequence of a single, required course is that it tends to reinforce the idea that students with disabilities are so different from their peers that a general education teacher is not qualified to teach them; the other is that such a course does not require rethinking the entire preservice curriculum in relationship to teaching diverse learners.

Between 2002 and 2007, another federal initiative supported a collaborative project among the Council of Chief State School Officers and several professional organizations in general and special education. The Center for Improving Teacher Quality was designed to promote partnerships among state departments and higher education, and across general and special education, to support reform in teacher education focused on collaborative programs for addressing diversity in PK-12 classrooms. This project focused on examining and adjusting state policies and higher education practices to support teacher education reform, resulting in such outcomes as changes in licensure structures in some states and in redesign of some programs to closely align general and special education.

In the most recent federal initiative funded in 2007 by the federal Office of Special Education Programs, "325T" projects have supported colleges and schools of education in redesigning programs to meet the requirements of IDEA and ESEA for all teachers to become highly qualified and for general educators to be better equipped to meet the needs of students with disabilities. These projects promote broad collaboration across general and special education and also identify faculty in the arts and sciences as important partners. However, as with other federal and state reforms, these grants promote structural change as an initiative of special education, placing the responsibility for the reform at the margin rather than at the center of general education.

In response to these partial supports, a number of university-based providers have begun to bridge general and special education by creating well-defined joint components. Such ventures might be a shared field experience in the schools during which preser-

vice general and special education teachers collaborate to serve a student identified with a disability in a general education classroom,<sup>62</sup> or a specific teacher education class taught collaboratively by two teacher educators—one from general teacher education and one from special education.<sup>63</sup> Although these are promising reform strategies, they often take place within the pre-existing, traditional and separated teacher education curriculum for general and special education. In addition, today some programs identify themselves as providing dual certification, but in reality their graduates are asked to complete two traditional, heavily siloed, and unrelated programs—one in general education and one in special education.<sup>64</sup> This *discrete program model* does not forward an inclusive agenda and, in fact, tends to perpetuate the false separation between general and special education.<sup>65</sup>

## Program-Level Redesign

The most promising developments are full-scale program redesign efforts in which teacher educators across general and special education collaborate on new designs for entire teacher education programs. These new program designs employ innovative curriculum configurations that address the preparation of general and special education teachers through a shared core curriculum in general education that ensures that new teachers are better prepared to work with students who have disabilities, as well as with other students who struggle in school.<sup>66</sup> While some large-scale program redesign efforts began as early as the 1990s, the trend has increased significantly, bolstered by the 325T grant program.

Such redesigned programs have approached reforming the preservice curriculum and dual certification in different ways.<sup>67</sup> In *integrated programs*, prospective general and special education teachers study a redesigned, common core curriculum together to become general education teachers, and only those who want to become advanced specialists go on for additional studies to develop specialized expertise and an additional license in special education built on this common base of knowledge.<sup>68</sup> In fully *merged programs*, all graduates obtain both a general and a special education license by completing a single, completely unified curriculum; there is no distinction between a special and general education teacher.<sup>69</sup> Importantly, what these two program redesign models have in common is that teacher educators participate together to develop a

preservice curriculum that addresses the practices all teachers should possess if they are going to be better prepared to work with students who have disabilities, and indeed, with all of their most challenging students.

These emerging program redesigns are significant because they reveal a growing willingness on the part of teacher educators in both general and special education to work together to improve the quality of teaching for students who have disabilities. They represent significant opportunities for rethinking how general education teachers are prepared to work with diverse groups of students and how teacher educators in special education can work collaboratively with colleagues in general education to support the development of teachers who feel qualified and well-prepared for the challenges of teaching in inclusive general education classrooms.

Many of these promising integrated and merged program redesign projects, however, are taking place without sufficient support, which limits what can be achieved in terms of systemic reform, even with the best of intentions and the best of curriculum innovations. To take full advantage of the opportunity that program redesign across general and special teacher education offers, it will have to be viewed as an opportunity for deep program transformation in the service of improved outcomes for all students.<sup>70</sup>

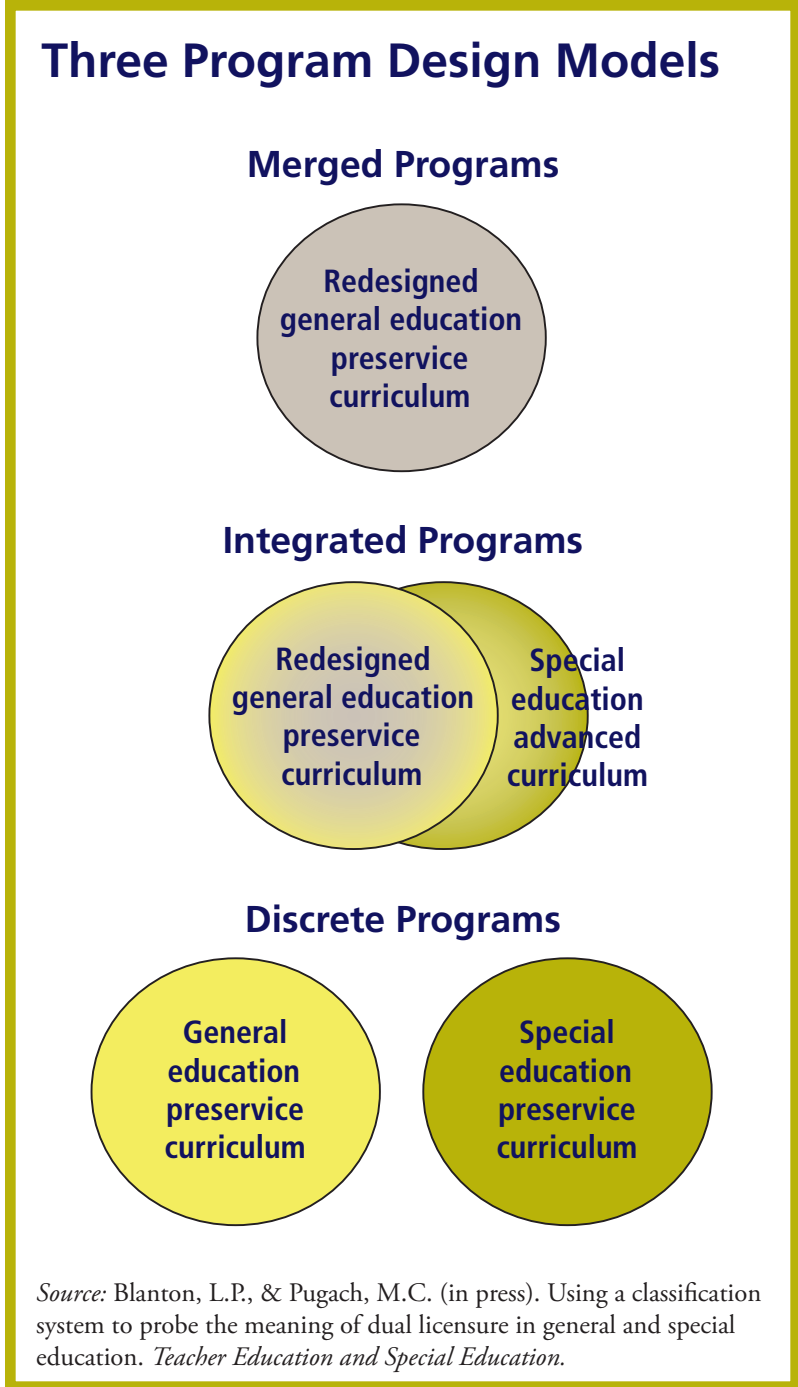
### National Standards That Address Diversity and Disability

National standards for teacher education also serve as a lever to maintain the expectation that graduates of teacher education should be prepared for the diversity of students in their classrooms. The early redesign of standards by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 1983, and again in 1987, expanded the language of the standards to include the term *diversity* and referenced *all* learners. Such changes, which remain in place today, are meant to span all diversities, including disability.

The Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) project of the Council of Chief State School Officers articulated expectations for preparing teachers for diversity in its 1992 original model standards, both across the 10 standards and in a separate standard. In a 2001 project, InTASC formed a joint task force with the Council for Exceptional Children to interpret and expand on these model standards as a way of clarifying what

every teacher should know and be able to do to work with students with disabilities.<sup>71</sup> That task force, made up of higher education faculty and teachers from both general and special education, was one of the first attempts to look at the relationship between what every teacher should know and be able to do and what special education teachers should know and be able to do to teach students who have disabilities well.

The 2011 revision of the InTASC model standards<sup>72</sup> incorporates a repeated focus on teacher



## PROGRAM PROFILE

### University of Utah

The commitment at the University of Utah to redesign preservice preparation was “to focus more on what all educators have in common rather than what makes them different.”

In this integrated program model, which resulted from a college-wide effort, all teacher candidates for general and special education now complete a shared, common core of professional course work, including field experiences; this professional core program precedes any teaching specialization students elect. Specializations include early childhood, primary, secondary, and special education. In special education, students can elect specialized licensure in early childhood, mild to moderate, severe, visual impairments, or hearing impairments. The vision of teaching that is emphasized in this program “affirms a diverse, multicultural society” and is based on a commitment to meeting each student’s needs through a lens of social justice.

In this common core, preservice students learn to develop an integrated curriculum, one that has the potential to be highly motivating as it relates the core academic subjects alongside the arts and creates meaning through thematic teaching. They also learn the principles of Universal Design for Learning as it relates to the tiered model of Response to Intervention. Strong school-university partnerships support students’ continuous field experiences throughout the program. Program faculty are committed to studying the impact of their practice—not only with their individual graduates, but also with the partnering school districts—to assure continuous program improvement.

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*Source:* Hardman, M. (2009). Redesigning the preparation of all teachers within the framework of an integrated program model. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 583-587.

## PROGRAM PROFILE

### Syracuse University

In Syracuse University’s undergraduate Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program, all candidates earn both an elementary and a special education license for Grades 1-6 in one fully merged preservice curriculum—the only option for elementary certification.

This merged elementary program has existed since 1990, when its first class of those to be dually licensed entered. It is an urban program focused on both typical students and students who have special needs and who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. In addition to this central focus, the program describes its school partnerships, called Schools of Promise, as being developed “to improve elementary schools for all students, especially students who have traditionally not been successful in schools, including students with disabilities, students learning English, students of color, and students from low-income families.” The university’s School of Education is known as a national leader in inclusive urban education.

This merged program emphasizes differentiated instruction, collaboration, and a social justice perspective on meeting students’ needs. To earn both a general and special education license, all candidates complete field experiences in general education classrooms as well as special education classrooms. Because of the overarching commitment to inclusive education, preservice students have ongoing access to resources, institutes, and ongoing activities specifically targeting building inclusive educational opportunities.

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*Source:* Meyer, L. H., Mager, G. M., Yarger, G., Sarno, M., & Hext-Contreras, G. (1997). Syracuse University’s inclusive elementary and special education program. In L. P. Blanton, C. C. Griffin, J. A. Winn, & M. C. Pugach (Eds.), *Teacher Education in Transition* (pp. 18-38). Denver, CO: Love Publishing Company. See also <http://soeweb.syr.edu/>.



## PROGRAM PROFILE

### Teachers College, Columbia University

The Elementary Inclusive Preservice Education Program at Teachers College is based on a commitment to “a different vision of what classrooms can be: where equity pedagogy is the norm, where human differences are expected, and where the curriculum assumes diversity and pluralism as starting points.”

In this integrated program model at the master’s level, candidates participate in intensive field experiences in the New York City public schools. Every candidate completes the same core program for elementary certification for Grades 1-6 and is prepared for inclusive teaching. Candidates can elect dual licensure by adding an intensive semester called the Critical Special Education (CSE) semester, and they can move from single to dual licensure (or vice versa) relatively easily as they gain more experience and can better decide what teaching role they wish to take on when they complete the program. The assumption is not that every candidate wants to be—or should be—a special education teacher, but the path is readily available to those who choose it.

The 2008 position statement for the entire program explains that “work of this nature requires a good deal of imagination, innovation, agency, activism, ownership, intellectual and political engagement, and commitment to working collaboratively with fellow students and educators, children, and families.” Program commitments across general and special education include preparing teachers for three core roles: inquiry, curriculum making, and social justice. More than simply integrating special education into the elementary preservice curriculum, the program as a whole is committed to helping its graduates understand and act on the bias that regularly exists in the institution of school. The curriculum-making emphasis acknowledges that curriculum is not static or merely a response to standards and standardized testing. Instead, curriculum design must regularly adjust to children’s changing needs.

Today about one third of program candidates elect dual licensure, and a new inclusive education program for middle and high school teachers has recently been inaugurated.

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Source: Oyler, C. (in press). Teacher preparation for inclusive and critical (special) education. *Teacher Education and Special Education*.

## PROGRAM PROFILE

### The Inclusive Practice Project, Scotland

In 2006, the Inclusive Practice Project in Scotland was funded to develop new ways of preparing all teachers in response to concerns about underachievement and marginalization. The aim was to reform teacher preparation by working with all teacher educators to explore how teachers and schools can become more inclusive of children with disabilities and others who find learning difficult. The course is based on key assumptions about what all teachers need to know and be able to do:

- Difference must be accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in any conceptualization of learning.
- Teachers must be convinced that they are capable of teaching all children.
- Teachers must develop creative new ways of working with others.

The course themes challenge existing beliefs about how teachers are prepared and whom they are qualified to teach. A key theme is that difference must be seen as an essential part of human development; it rejects notions of fixed ability and its associated practices. Another theme stresses that all teachers should be responsible for all students, and difficulties in learning are dilemmas for teaching, rather than shortcomings in learners. It rejects practices that provide something different for some students, and it requires teachers to extend what is available for all learners.

Teachers are trained to seek new ways of supporting all children’s learning by working with and through others to enhance the learning of everyone. Traditional divisions between “mainstream” teachers—those responsible for most students—and “specialists” who work with those having “special needs” are replaced with an orientation to teaching that expects adults to work together to find better ways of supporting all children.

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Source: Florian, L., & Rouse, M. (2009). The inclusive practice project in Scotland: Teacher education for inclusive education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 594-601.

**From the InTASC Model  
Core Teaching Standards:**

**The teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards.**

**From the NBPTS Core  
Propositions:**

**National Board Certified Teachers [...] recognize the individual differences that distinguish their students from one another and they take account for these differences in their practice.**

skill in working with diverse students. Standard 2 is targeted to learning differences and holds that all teachers must understand exceptional learning needs (both disabilities and giftedness) and know how to use strategies and resources to meet those needs.

Finally, the first “core proposition” of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards concerns teachers’ commitment to teaching all students. It states that Nationally Board Certified Teachers “are dedicated to making knowledge accessible to all students”<sup>73</sup>—language that echoes the goal of IDEA in terms of making sure that students who have disabilities access the general education curriculum. Although they pertain to the ongoing professional development of more experienced teachers, the

National Board’s core propositions illustrate a career-long professional concern with teachers meeting the needs of all students.

Given what appears to be a consensus on national standards to prepare teachers for diversity, there continues to be a significant gap between policy and practice. Many of the challenges faced by those who wish to narrow this gap are structural. Teacher education programs exist within the constraints of a system that perpetuates silos, which can reinforce the notion that different kinds of students need to be separated for instruction by different teachers. In reality, however, transformation will occur only when considerable thought is given to rethinking the roles of general and special educators.

**5. All providers of teacher education must embrace preparation for diverse learners as a core component of their mission, prioritizing it, strengthening it, and funding it accordingly.**

### **Common Entry Standards**

There is consensus that new teachers must be well-prepared for working with students who have disabilities, students who are English language learners, and students who are from the nation’s lowest socioeconomic levels—no matter what route to teaching prospective educators take. However, there is less consensus on what would constitute a common entry standard into the profession. ESEA and IDEA both require “highly qualified” teachers, but the interpretation of this requirement and the extent

to which states meet it varies widely. Even teachers who are in the beginning or the midst of their preparation can be counted as highly qualified, and there is no requirement that highly qualified teachers demonstrate proficiency in working with diverse learners. This situation contradicts good evidence that fully prepared teachers are more effective with their students than those still in training<sup>74</sup> and that quality teachers not only know the content they will teach, but also possess critical knowledge of how to teach that content in classrooms.<sup>75</sup>

In today's classrooms, new teachers are teaching more diverse groups than ever before, and they are reporting that they do not feel adequately prepared for the job. The silos that have prevented this from happening in the past need not do so in the future. However, moving forward on this agenda to improve teacher education in support of improved student outcomes will require more than tests of teacher performance. It will require new investments in teacher education, particularly in regard to the content and structure of preservice preparation.

## Strong Professional Teacher Education Programs

Recent activities to improve the preparation of teachers to work with students who have disabilities should be viewed in the broader perspective of the history of teacher education. Over time, as knowledge about curriculum, teaching, and learning has developed, the preparation of teachers has also evolved from a 19th-century model of apprenticeship to a largely university-based endeavor supplemented by a mix of school and university partnerships. Locating teacher education in the university is an important achievement in the professionalization of teaching, but it has also resulted in devaluation of the clinical work done in partnership with PK-12 schools that is so essential to teacher education. Until university tenure and promotion rules value clinical preparation activities, colleges and schools of education will struggle to get the balance right.

Today there are many alternative pathways preparing teachers through course work, distance education, and on-site mentoring. Alternative routes into teaching are heterogeneous in length, support, and program intensity, and they vary in quality. Federal policy allows candidates in alternative certification programs to serve as the teacher of record while completing their preparation, and many states utilize this practice. Given today's challenge of preparing teachers for a more diverse population of students than ever before, among them students with disabilities whose outcomes are not up to par, the logic of regularly allowing untrained teachers to take on the

full responsibility for teaching in diverse classrooms simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Alternative certification practices designed to address shortage problems may have the unintended effect of exacerbating rather than closing the gap in outcomes between different groups of pupils. What is important is that all teacher education programs, whether they are traditional or alternative, deliver curriculum that is motivating and evidence-based in a coherent programmatic fashion and develop new teachers with demonstrated skill in generating student learning gains for our most challenging students.

## Robust Funding of Teacher Education Programs

The preparation of teachers has long been an underfunded enterprise in the United States, and it is understandable that teachers often feel less than fully prepared to reach their most challenging students. There is a need for universities to invest in schools and colleges of education to ensure their funding reaches levels similar to that of other professional preparation programs.<sup>76</sup> Too often higher education views schools and colleges of education as "cash cows," bringing in money that is invested in other programs across campus rather than receiving funds commensurate with their enrollment.

Persistent underfunding makes it difficult for teacher education faculties to provide the highest quality of rich, guided, clinically based practice required to develop teachers for the diverse populations of students that they will encounter. In addition, the lack of adequate funding not only undermines the partnerships needed between higher education and PK-12 schools to provide high-quality clinical practice for teacher candidates, but it also limits their partnership in supporting teachers in their first years of teaching when they are honing their skills and are the most vulnerable for leaving the profession.<sup>77</sup> In the absence of making teacher preparation a funding priority in higher education, challenges will always exist in the nation's capacity to prepare highly skilled teachers for its increasingly diverse PK-12 school population.

## Recommendations

What will it take to achieve the vision of having teachers prepared to teach all of their students well, especially those who have disabilities and other diverse students? We know that it takes a good teacher to understand and respond to the complexity of educating every student. It takes a highly educated teacher to balance the demand for high performance on standardized tests with the more complex problem-solving skills that effective teaching requires. And it takes a strong

teacher to raise questions in the face of the institutional biases<sup>78</sup> in schools that often put students at a disadvantage based on race, socioeconomic class, culture, gender, and/or disability status and to create a classroom where every student who comes through the door can thrive. Achieving the vision for preparing general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities is within our reach, but it will require changes in policy and practice.

## Recommendations for Federal Policy Makers

- 1. Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, and other federal programs that support teacher quality should prioritize the preparation of general educators to be effective in improving outcomes for diverse students, including students with disabilities.**

Numerous options are available for targeting resources. When the resources are targeted, strong clinical components lasting a year should be required, similar to the requirement in the Teacher Quality Partnership grants funded by Title II of the Higher Education Act. New programs such as Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation could include a priority to target funds to ensure that general education teachers are prepared to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Title II of ESEA could include a provision to target funds for this purpose. Any consolidations of teacher quality programs, such as the Teacher and Leader Pathway program proposed by the Obama administration for ESEA reauthorization, could prioritize funds to prepare general educators to teach diverse learners, including students with disabilities. The Teacher Quality Partnership grants could be funded at a more substantial level, as they require recipients (which are partnerships between higher education and high-need PK-12 schools) to prepare all teachers to utilize UDL and PBIS. MTSS should be included as necessary in Title I and Title II of ESEA and in any literacy program as an allowable use of funds.

The Teach to Reach program, authorized for the first time in the Higher Education Act Amendments of 2008, was designed specifically for the purpose of preparing general education teachers to be effective with students with disabilities. It provides grants to general education and special education departments at institutions of higher education, in partnership with high-need school districts, for the specific purpose of preparing general education teachers in evidence based strategies. This program could be funded, as it has not yet been since its creation in 2008.

Finally, the Department of Education could set aside a portion of funds targeted to the preparation of special educators (such as personnel development and preparation funds under Part D of IDEA) and a portion of funds targeted to general educators (such as Title II ESEA funds) and develop a unique competition to invest in new models of preparation based on innovations emerging from national and international research on teacher preparation. Using the special and general education instructional strategies discussed above, these models could strengthen the preparation of both general educators and special educators to work in new roles and configurations on behalf of students with disabilities.

**2. Federal definitions of teacher quality such as *highly qualified teacher* or *effective teacher* should require a performance assessment to ensure general educators are effective in instructing diverse learners.**

Ensuring that such a provision is meaningful could be accomplished by having general education teachers pass a valid and reliable performance assessment prior to becoming a teacher of record. Such an assessment would require candidates to demonstrate that they can achieve learning results with diverse learners, including students with disabilities. Teacher evaluation systems developed by states to measure effectiveness could include requirements related to demonstrating effectiveness in instructing students with disabilities and working collaboratively with others, such as special education teachers and related services providers, to achieve results for students.

**3. Maximize the use of partnerships between PK-12 and higher education institutions to leverage higher education's experience and resources to ensure general education teachers are effective in teaching students with disabilities.**

Programs could be designed to mobilize higher education's capacity (schools of business, arts and sciences, education, medicine, law) in service of solving the most challenging PK-12 matters, such as turning around low-performing schools, raising the performance of a specific subgroup of students, increasing high school graduation and the college-going rate of PK-12 students, and ensuring that general education teachers are proficient with students with disabilities. A school district could work with a higher education partner to articulate the priority needs, and together they could develop a strategy for bringing higher education resources to bear on problem solving. In the area of teacher and leader preparation, the partnership could develop a strong clinical setting at various schools in the district so that new teachers could learn their craft under the supervision of master teachers. As suggested in the 2010 NCATE Blue Ribbon Report,<sup>78</sup> these partnerships could ensure that institutions of higher education are closely linked to the workforce needs of PK-12, preparing teachers in subjects and with skills that the district needs. In order to receive these funds, institutions of higher education could be required to revise tenure and promotion rules so that faculty involved with PK-12 districts are rewarded.

## Recommendations for State Policy Makers

### **1. Develop policies and implement programs that will ensure that every teacher of record is skilled in instructing diverse students, including students with disabilities.**

States vary widely in terms of entry requirements for teachers into the classroom. In some states, teachers who are still in preservice programs are serving as teachers of record. Some states allow an individual to become a teacher simply by having a college degree in any subject and passing a basic paper-and-pencil content test. In other states, full certification is required with extensive clinical preparation. While both alternative and traditional programs can be exemplary in preparing general education teachers to instruct students with disabilities, all teachers of record need to have demonstrated skill in this area prior to actually teaching students. A valid and reliable performance assessment administered prior to serving as a teacher of record could accomplish this goal. In addition, new teachers could benefit greatly from strong induction and mentoring programs in their early years, working with a master teacher who has demonstrated effectiveness in teaching students with disabilities.

### **2. Assess the effectiveness of general education teachers in achieving results with diverse students, including students with disabilities, in all teacher evaluation systems.**

Establishing this standard as part of teacher effectiveness will promote the idea that general education teachers are teachers of all students. Assessing teachers on their effectiveness for all students, including students with disabilities, will help to ensure that they are prepared to teach everyone together—rather than to teach only *most* students and to assume that the responsibility for teaching students with disabilities lies primarily with special educators.

### **3. Identify general and special education teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and provide the funding to enhance their career professional development in order to form a cadre of dually certified teachers who provide instruction in general education classrooms and serve as models for novice teachers.**

National Board Certified teachers represent some of the country's most skilled teachers and teacher leaders. Launching a project that identifies and supports this group of teachers to expand their certification will at the same time create teacher leaders who understand these issues. As part of this effort, National Board Certified teachers who are already dually licensed should be identified as leaders for this project.



## Recommendations for Providers of Teacher Education

### **1. Invest in teacher education programs to develop strong clinical partnerships with PK-12 schools consistent with the recommendations of NCATE's 2010 Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning.**

Teacher education is often underfunded at institutions of higher education. Faculty are not rewarded for their involvement in clinical preparation. Investments should be made that are at similar levels to other professional preparation programs. Support for extensive clinical practice should be comparable to that for the clinical preparation of practitioners in other professions such as medicine.

### **2. Support the development of innovative teacher education programs that bring together teacher educators in the curriculum areas, multicultural education, bilingual education, teaching English learners, and special education into active working teams to frame a truly inclusive teacher education agenda.**

The notion that some children “are not my job” has built silos in the preparation of teachers and specialists, as well as in the delivery of services in PK-12 schools. In partnership with PK-12 schools, teacher preparation providers need to develop coordinated teacher education programs that embrace learning for every child and support strong clinical approaches to preparing teachers for the realities of classrooms.

### **3. Support teaching and teacher education research priorities.**

Innovation is a hallmark of colleges and universities, and the timing is critical for priorities to focus on research and development in teacher education, especially with the diversity of today's schools. Only if research in teacher education is supported and taken seriously can we achieve the vision outlined in this brief.



## Conclusion

Preparing all of America's students to leave high school "college and career ready"—to enter a competitive and global economy as productive citizens and successful workers—is a tall order. This challenge has captivated the imagination of policy makers, educators, and the public with different ideas about how to provide a good-quality education for all.

The demands of this challenge clearly require the development of new and innovative responses to preparing teachers for every student they teach. While important advances have been made in align-

ing the preparation of general and special education teachers, much more work is needed to marshal these efforts into a broad conception of inclusive education that moves beyond addressing "special" and "general" education. Working together in a supportive policy environment, teacher educators in the curriculum areas, in multicultural education, in bilingual education and teaching English learners, and in special education can create innovative programs of teacher education that are responsive to the needs of every student, but that do not isolate and separate how we teach them in our schools.

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