

Making Sense of Licensure

What Research Says About Current Trends

IN THIS WATCH

Licensure requirements vary across states—Do you know how they differ?

Licensure refers to the credentials that states or comparable jurisdictions issue to qualified school personnel. Although the history of teacher licensure dates back to 1825, only in the latter part of the 20th century has significant attention been focused on the licensure of special education teachers.

Today, differences exist in how states define and award licenses. At a time when the profession is faced with significant special education teacher shortages and is considering alternative routes to certification, an understanding of the status of special education licensure may help inform discussions. Read on to gain insights from the research.

Did You Know that State Licensure Requirements Vary?

Sorting out licensure requirements can be challenging. A review of the last 35 years of research in special education teacher licensure revealed several patterns of requirements. For example, special education licensure may be awarded by:

- **Specific category of disability.** The exact titles of licenses (e.g., learning disabilities) often vary considerably from state to state. Some states offer a generic special education license as one of the categorical options.
- **Non-categorical or cross-categorical approach.** Some states of-

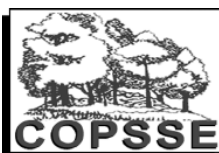
fer non-categorical licenses in areas such as mild-moderate disabilities (e.g., mental retardation, emotional disturbance, specific learning disability). States with primarily non-categorical licensure can and usually do have specialty endorsement areas for certain types of disabilities or certain types of personnel (e.g., early childhood special education).

- **Area of emphasis according to student age.** Although many states award K-12 or PreK-12 licenses, some offer separate licenses at the elementary and secondary levels. Separate licenses in early childhood special education are most common, and may be further defined by specific ages (e.g., birth through three). A few states award licenses to secondary transition specialists.

Requirements for licenses also vary from state to state. Requirements tend to cluster in the following areas:

- **General education certification.** Some states require candidates to be certified in either elementary or secondary education in addition to meeting certification requirements in special education.
- **Assessment.** States may require any combination of the following: college degree, completion of a state-approved teacher education program, classroom experience, and passage of

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examinations (e.g., basic skills, specialty area, content related to teaching). In some cases, states may have additional requirements, such as a minimum grade point average, satisfactory completion of specific courses, and the demonstration of specific competencies.

An analysis of research conducted during the last 35 years indicated the following special education licensure trends:

- Most states offer PreK-12 or K-12 special education licensure. Few offer licensure of secondary transition personnel.
- Visual impairment is the most common categorical license.
- Increases were noted in the number of states awarding some form of categorical license in early childhood special education. The number of states awarding categorical licenses in learning disabilities increased during the first 25 years, but remained constant during the last decade.
- The number of states awarding categorical special education licenses increased. Also, increases were found in the number of states offering both categorical and non-categorical special education licenses.
- The number of states awarding licenses in physical disabilities and mental retardation declined.

Do You Know the Status of Current Special Education Licensure Trends?

A comprehensive survey was conducted in 2002 to update and expand upon the special education licensure knowledge base. All 50

states and the District of Columbia participated to some extent in the survey. Findings revealed current trends in the following areas:

- **Licensure requirements in flux.** More than half of the states reported that changes in special education teacher licensure were underway.
- **Use of national standards.** More than half of the states indicated that the standards promulgated by the Council for Exceptional Children, National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, and—to a lesser degree—the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards had been consulted when making changes to licensure requirements.
- **Basis for issuing licenses.** Most licenses require satisfactory program completion at a state-approved teacher preparation program. Completion of specific courses and/or credit hours within a state-approved program curriculum are additional requirements in a majority of states. A growing number of states (about one-third) are moving toward a demonstration of required competencies in special education rather than simply completion of courses.
- **Type of license.** Most states offer both categorical and non-categorical licenses. In general, categorical licenses are aligned with the categories of disabilities identified in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and almost all states have licenses in the categories of hearing impaired and visually impaired. Some states award generic licenses by level of disability (e.g., mild, severe) and/or age (e.g., early childhood).


- **Assessment requirements for licensure.** Great variation exists from state to state. Examples of typical assessments include degree, designated grade point average, standardized test scores, performance assessments, and assessments of basic skills and pedagogy.

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A majority of states require some form of special education preparation—standards to be met, coursework, etc.—for initial general education licenses as well as for recertification.

For More Information


Information reported in this brief was based on the COPSSE research synthesis, *The Status of Licensure of Special Education Teachers at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, by William L. Geiger, Margaret D. Crutchfield, and Richard Mainzer. The document is available on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.



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