

# The Status of Licensure of Special Education Teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

In addition to our authors and reviewers, many individuals and organizations have contributed substantially to our efforts, including Drs. Erling Boe of the University of Pennsylvania and Elaine Carlson of WESTAT. We also have benefited greatly from collaboration with the National Clearinghouse for the Professions in Special Education, the Policymakers Partnership, and their parent organizations, the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently the U. S. Department of Education [USDOE] issued a report, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge*, which criticized current state systems of licensure as “outdated” with low standards, posing barriers to the admission of qualified candidates. It found promise for a new model of teacher licensure in alternative routes that require passage of state-required examinations but often do not require many of the pedagogical or clinical practice components found in most traditional teacher preparation programs. The new model proffered in the report is based on the best characteristics of current alternative route programs: “high standards for verbal ability and content knowledge” and “streamlined certification requirements” (U. S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 19). *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge* has directed attention to the adequacy of our traditional systems for licensing teachers and the potential of alternative routes.

This report summarized here is intended to help inform discussions about conventional and alternative licensure models in the area of special education. By providing current information on requirements and options for licensing special education teachers, this report will enable policy makers and practitioners interested in special education to participate knowledgeably in the national dialogue about the licensure and quality of teachers. The report shares the results of two national studies. The first study focuses on models and requirements for the conventional licensure of special education teachers. All 50 states and the District of Columbia participated in this study. The second study focuses on alternative licensure practices for special educators in a sample of ten states. (Because the literature on special education licensure models includes many studies of states and similar governmental units of the U. S. and, in at least one instance, other countries, the term *jurisdictions* was generally used.)

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS

Since the 1960s, there have been dozens of studies on a variety of aspects of jurisdiction models and requirements for licensure of special education teachers and requirements related to special education for the licensure of general education teachers. These studies can be clustered by scope of inquiry. Although some studies do not fit neatly into a cluster, clustering studies is a useful organizational tool for an historical review of research on licensure requirements. Six clusters of inquiry were identified.

### **Cluster 1: Special Education Licensure in Specific Areas of Disability**

For more than three decades, there has been an interest in licensure for teachers of students with learning disabilities. At several intervals between 1969 and 2002, reports in special education were published on state and other jurisdiction certification requirements for areas of disability. Among the areas in which special education teachers can become certified in some jurisdictions are: visually impaired, hearing impaired, orthopedically disabled, mentally retarded, learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, behavioral disorders, and speech/language.

### **Cluster 2: Categorical and Non-Categorical Approaches to Licensure**

The Fifth Edition of *The NASDTEC Manual on the Preparation and Certification of Educational Personnel* (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 2000) identified at least 42 states and the District of Columbia as issuing categorical special education credentials; 7 jurisdictions did not. In 2001 Mainzer and Horvath examined jurisdiction special education licensure models using data from *The NASDTEC Manual* along with data compiled by the Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]. They concluded that there was an identifiable trend toward multi-categorical licensure, especially for teachers of students with mental retardation, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, serious emotional disturbance, and specific learning disabilities.

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### **Cluster 3: Areas of Special Education Licensure that Emphasize Ages of Students with Disabilities**

For the last 20 years, the topic of licensure requirements for early childhood special educators has received consistent research attention. Birth through five years was the most commonly reported age range for licensing early childhood special educators. The next most common age range was birth through eight years or a comparable designation. Little attention has been given to licensure requirements for secondary transition specialists. In 2002, the first study was conducted of state licensure structures and content requirements for secondary transition personnel.

### **Cluster 4: Assessment Requirements for Special Education Licensure**

Very few studies have explored assessment requirements for licensure of special education teachers. Among the criteria used by some jurisdictions are combinations of the following: (1) a college degree, (2) minimum grade point average, (3) required basic skills tests, (4) completion of an approved teacher preparation program, (5) experience in working with students in classrooms, (6) passage of a basic skills examination, (7) passage of either a specialty area examination or an examination of content related to teaching.

### **Cluster 5: Broad, Comprehensive Studies of Special Education Licensure**

This cluster includes broad studies that examine all areas of special education licensure in jurisdictions and/or multiple aspects of special education licensure, including aspects identified in other clusters.

### **Cluster 6: Required Special Education Preparation for General Education Teachers**

In a growing trend, general educators in some jurisdictions are being prepared to better educate students with disabilities in their classrooms. Among some of the preparation methods for general education licensure or re-licensure that have been identified by previous studies are: (1) an introduction to special education, (2) one or two courses in special education, (3) a class in exceptionalities, (4) special education competency requirements, and (5) inclusion of students with disabilities in general education environments.

### **Summary Observations**

Thirty-five years of research on licensure requirements for special education teachers and special education requirements for general education teachers reveals:

- The most common areas of categorical licensure have been visual impairment and hearing impairment.
- Over the period reviewed, the number of jurisdictions awarding licenses in the area of learning disabilities increased; however, the number of jurisdictions issuing such licenses has remained relatively constant in the last decade.
- More recent studies indicate that the number of jurisdictions awarding licenses in physical disabilities and in mental retardation declined from earlier reports. The data may also be unclear in the area of emotional disturbance.
- The number of jurisdictions awarding some form of non-categorical license in special education has increased.
- Mixed models of special education licensure have become more common. Many jurisdictions have moved from a model that was based solely on categories of disability to a model that also includes one or more forms of non-categorical licenses.

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- The number of jurisdictions awarding licenses in early childhood special education increased noticeably in the 1980s. The models of licensure in this area show considerable variability, especially in the age/grade ranges covered.
  - A strong preference for Pre-12 or K-12 configurations of special education licensure was noted.
  - Little attention has been given to the licensure of secondary transition personnel.
  - Few studies have examined jurisdiction assessment standards for licensure in special education.
  - The number of jurisdictions requiring that general education teachers receive preparation to educate students with disabilities has increased.

## **CURRENT REQUIREMENTS FOR CONVENTIONAL LICENSURE**

It has been several years since a comprehensive study of licensure of special education teachers has been undertaken. Current data on the requirements and models for conventional licensure of special education are needed in order to evaluate the adequacy of licensure requirements for special education teachers and to engage knowledgeably in the broader debate on the value of licensure systems, recently stimulated by the USDOE report, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge* (2002).

The study investigated recent changes in jurisdiction licensure requirements; changes in licensure requirements for special education teachers; use of recommendations from national organizations for the licensure of special education teachers; bases for granting conventional licenses in special education; models, areas and levels of licensure in special education; assessment requirements for special education licenses; licensure in early childhood special education; required preparation for general education teachers to provide instruction to students with disabilities; and preparation of special educators in the areas of general curriculum and pedagogy.

### **Summary Observations**

A substantial majority of jurisdictions have adopted licensure structures that include a mixture of categorical and non-categorical licensure options. This situation has evolved largely through the addition of non-categorical options during the last three decades. The growth of non-categorical licensure options may provide jurisdictions and local education agencies with flexibility needed to address chronic shortages of special education teachers.

Jurisdictions have continued to show a strong preference for expansive age/grade range levels of licensure in special education. All jurisdictions award grades 1-12 or more expansive licenses in at least one area of special education. Some jurisdictions undergoing major reforms in their licensure structures are converting to more restricted age/grade levels or are adding these options. The impact of these changes on the supply and quality of special educators is a worthwhile area for future study.

Licensure in the area of early childhood special education is now common among jurisdictions. This area of licensure has grown dramatically in the last two decades. At the beginning of the 21st century, at least 80% of the jurisdictions issued licenses in this area.

Ninety percent of the jurisdictions now require or soon will require some preparation of general educators to teachers of students with disabilities. However, a sizable minority of the jurisdictions lack similar requirements that special education teachers receive preparation in general education curriculum or pedagogy. It would not be surprising if jurisdictions begin to enhance requirements for the preparation of special education teachers in general education curriculum and instruction.

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Jurisdictions have significantly increased requirements for the assessment of teacher candidates in the last two decades. The most frequently required assessment is in the area of basic skills. More than 40% of the jurisdictions do not have requirements for the assessment of candidates' knowledge of special education. Several jurisdictions have adopted or are exploring performance assessments that will assure competence in these areas. These initiatives are supported by standards adopted by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC).

Required assessments of the knowledge and abilities of special education teacher candidates, an area that has been given little attention in the past, merits increased emphasis in future investigations. There are substantial variations among jurisdiction assessment requirements for special education teachers. Some jurisdictions require only bachelors degrees from approved programs; others require successful performance on multiple standardized tests. However, jurisdictions do not agree on which standardized tests candidates must take and display little or no accord with regard to scores required for licensure. There appear to be many instances where challenging assessments and high standards for performance are lacking in jurisdiction requirements for licensing special education teachers. In these situations, the criticism of licensure systems presented in *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge* appears to be justified.

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO LICENSURE

Because there is relatively little research available on models of alternative licensure of special education teachers, a focused study of the intersection of policy and practice around the issue of alternative routes to licensure [ARL] for special education teachers was undertaken in 2001.

### Methodology

Ten states were selected for in-depth investigation. These states were selected to provide a representative sample based on the following parameters: large vs. small population; categorical vs. non-categorical special education licensure frameworks; endorsement vs. freestanding licensure framework; rural vs. urban; heavy vs. little involvement in alternative path programs; and high vs. low need for special educators.

Appropriate personnel to be interviewed in each state were identified. In most cases, this individual was the Director of Teacher Licensing or the Director of the Professional Standards Board.

The following 12 questions formed the basis for the telephone and e-mail interviews:

1. Is the information copied from *Alternative Teacher Certification: A State-by-State Analysis 2001* (Feistritzer and Chester, 2001) an accurate description of the current ARLs in your state?
2. Are there other routes to licensure not included in this list? Please describe briefly.
3. Which ARLs apply to special education teachers?
4. Does your state have a procedure that permits students to obtain full licensure by taking courses only (sometimes called a course credit or course count path)?
5. Describe the current ARL programs in your state that prepare special educators (e.g., institution or entity providing training, length of training, etc.)
6. When were these programs begun?
7. What standards were used to develop the program(s)?
8. How many individuals have completed each program in the last three years?
9. Are there any licensing criteria graduates of these program(s) must meet that graduates of traditional programs are not required to meet?
10. Does your state ensure that graduates of ARLs are of at least the same quality as graduates of traditional programs? If so, please describe.

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11. Describe how your state evaluates the individuals who complete these programs. Can you share any evaluation data with CEC?
  12. Does your state track completers of these programs to evaluate retention and/or attrition by program?

### **Summary Observations**

Many states are using ARL programs to deal with critical shortages of teachers. Some states are proactively addressing this problem by developing standards, criteria, and procedures for ARLs; the state then works with selected local districts and/or IHEs to implement the programs. In other states, general standards and policies for ARLs have been established at the state level; and local school districts and/or IHEs design and implement their own programs that meet the state standards. All graduates of the special education ARL programs in the states that we investigated must meet the same standards as graduates of traditional preparation programs in their state. However, program requirements for field work and course delivery can be very different. Graduates of ARL programs, in general, must take the same tests and reach the same performance levels as graduates of traditional training programs. These tests are the primary source of accountability for graduates of the special education ARL programs. Only one state had data on the number of graduates. None of the states had data that compared the retention rates or test scores of graduates of ARL programs and graduates of traditional preparation programs.

## **LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **Limitations of the Studies in this Report**

Research on the topic of special education licensure does not lack challenges. Specialized jargon is a major obstacle to developing an understandable national picture of licensure practices. Jurisdictions use terms related to licensure that often do not have common definitions across borders. Both of the studies in this report may have been affected by misunderstandings associated with jargon. A second challenge that must be addressed when studying special education licensure is identification of informed respondents. The accuracy of the results is affected by the extent of the informants' knowledge regarding requirements for conventional licensure of special education teachers and alternative routes to licensure for special education teachers. Because the difficulties associated with communication and with locating knowledgeable respondents are formidable, research methodologies that enhance the likelihood of accurate communication with well-informed respondents must be used. Mailed surveys may be less effective than strategies that utilize more direct personal communication. As a final cautionary note when considering the results of the studies in this report, remember that many jurisdictions reported that licensure changes were underway. In some jurisdictions, the landscape for licensure in special education may not be today what it was a year ago or even a few months ago.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The history of research on models and requirements for conventional licensure of special education teachers and related matters contains many examples of narrow, targeted studies (e.g., licensure for teachers of students with learning disabilities) and multidimensional, more comprehensive studies. Targeted studies may be less intimidating to potential respondents and provide information on important details of special education licensure. Comprehensive studies may help us to understand interconnections within jurisdiction systems of licensure. Both types of investigation are valuable in helping professionals better understand the panorama of special education licensure.

Research on alternative routes to licensure is in an early stage. Based on information obtained through our pilot study, jurisdictions vary in their policies and practices. The complexity that results from these variations requires that, in the future, both comprehensive and targeted studies be undertaken to further explore the options adopted by jurisdictions.



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Whether investigators undertake targeted or comprehensive studies of conventional licensure requirements or alternative routes to licensure, it is important that findings be reported for individual jurisdictions in order for results to be understood clearly and for historical comparisons to be made. This form of reporting will enable jurisdictions to verify the results and will enable changes in a jurisdiction's licensure requirements to be tracked over time. It also allows for aggregation of licensure information and for reliable determination of national/regional trends.

It is time for an historical overview of special education licensure to be constructed based on jurisdiction-identifiable information. In the last three decades, several studies have reported results by jurisdiction. The comparison of results across these studies will enable us to better understand changes that have occurred. By constructing a baseline of data from the past and present, we will be able to judge the likely impact of proposed changes in licensure such as that espoused by the USDOE (2002) in *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*. Most importantly, by understanding where we have been and where we are, we should be able to plan future models/frameworks of licensure that will enhance learning by students with disabilities.

### **Questions for Future Investigation**

Presently, with regard to special education, there is insufficient information available to confirm or refute definitively the USDOE's assertions with regard to the failure of licensure systems and the benefits of a new model based on elements of alternative routes to licensure. Many questions need to be answered in order to rejoin the positions advocated in *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*. The paper suggests these topics for future research:

- Relationships between the preparation and licensure of special education teachers and the performance of students with disabilities
- Relationships between licensure standards and the abilities of general educators to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities effectively
- Relationships between licensure models and the supply of special education teachers (both short-term and long-term)
- Relationships between the adoption of ARL procedures in the jurisdiction special education model and program quality.

By better understanding these relationships, we will enhance our collective ability to judge the effectiveness of all models for preparing and licensing special education teachers, including those models criticized and those advocated in USDOE's report, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge* (2002).