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# Introduction

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

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

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





# Meet the Students



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

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

Specific learning disabilities

Hearing impairment

Other health impairment

Deaf-blindness

Autism spectrum disorder

Orthopedic impairment

Emotional disturbance

Intellectual disability

Speech or language impairment

Traumatic brain injury

Visual impairment or blindness

Multiple disabilities

Deafness

Most special education students fall into the specific learning disabilities category—which could include dyslexia,



# Where SPED Teachers Teach

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

IDEA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act require public schools to offer all students

# Where SPED Teachers Teach

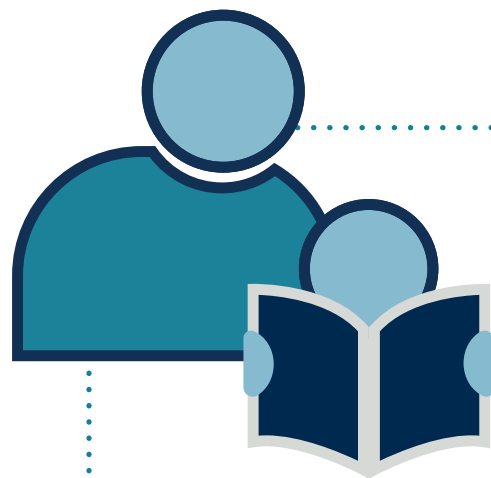
SPED teachers work in a wide variety of settings depending on their students' needs. Some prepare short lessons or activities to work on specific academic or behavioral skills with individual students or small groups. They might go into a general education classroom to work with students or pull students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

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

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

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

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





# Special Education Behind the Scenes



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

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



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# Special Education Behind the Scenes



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

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

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

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

# What Makes a Good SPED Teacher?

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



## **PASSION AND PURPOSE**

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



## **PATIENCE**

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



## **ADAPTABILITY**

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

# What Makes a **Good SPED Teacher?**



## **ORGANIZATION**

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



## **INDEPENDENCE AND RESOURCEFULNESS**

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



## **STRONG PEOPLE SKILLS**

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

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

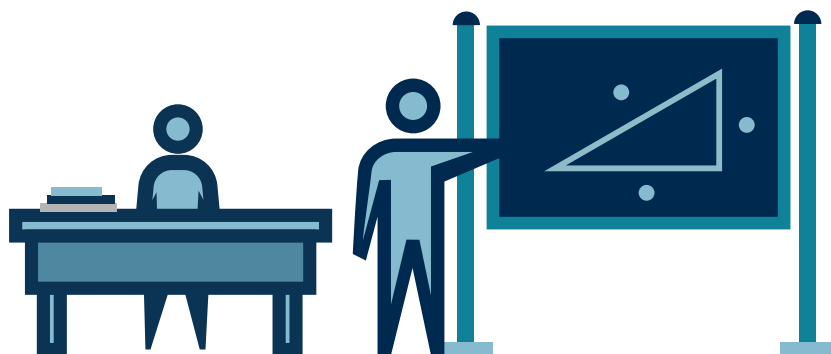
Most teachers considering special education already know that they like working with kids, and many of them have a personal reason for wanting to work with students with disabilities. But if you want to get a better idea of the challenges you'll face and the true demands and rewards of the job, spend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

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

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



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



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

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

If you can, observe a variety of special education settings. Contact your local school and explain your interest. Most schools will require a background check, but, with permission from the SPED teacher, some will allow ts 70 from the SPED teacher

SPED teachers need either a bachelor's or a master's degree and a state teaching license in the area of disability. Most SPED degrees let teachers work with students in grades K–12; students are separated into categories of mild, moderate, or severe disability, as the skills needed to serve these

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