

Rethinking Special Education Certification in Texas



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Executive Summary

Texas public schools provide special education services to almost 500,000 students. Despite these services, students with disabilities perform significantly lower on state assessments in reading and mathematics than their same-aged peers. To address this discrepancy and improve both student outcomes and teacher preparation, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) developed a [Strategic Plan for Special Education](#) based on input from stakeholders across the state.

Two goals of the strategic plan relate to preparation and staffing of educators of students who receive special education services. Specifically, the strategic plan called for the following:

- **Educator Preparation:** TEA will explore options related to possible improvements in educator preparation and continuing education, in partnership with the State Board for Educator Certification. TEA will explore updates to the continuing education requirements for certified teachers in Texas to include a more explicit focus on special education practices.
- **Sufficient Special Education Staffing:** TEA will convene a special education personnel forum and will invite the State Board for Educator Certification, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Colleges of Education from across the state, and professional organizations. This policy forum may discuss and develop a report with recommendations about how Texas will meet the staffing needs in special education.

To address these charges, TEA convened a series of forums from October 2018 to January 2019. Forum participants included individuals within the field of special education who provided a set of recommendations intended to strengthen Texas' special education certification process.

The forum participants suggested the following recommendations for changing special education certification:

1. Currently, special education certification is offered in early childhood (EC) through Grade 12 (candidates in *visually impaired* and *deaf and hard of hearing* have different requirements). The forum participants recommended that certification be offered through both grade-band and level of support specific pathways:
 - a. EC through Grade 8, mild/moderate support needs;
 - b. EC through Grade 8, high support needs;
 - c. Grade 6 through Grade 12, mild/moderate support needs; and
 - d. Grade 6 through Grade 12, high support needs.

2. Currently, candidates seeking initial special education certification must pass two examinations to receive a license: *Special Education EC–12* and *Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR)* and complete an EPP program. Teachers wishing to add a supplemental special education certification must only pass the aforementioned examinations. If an individual is providing content instruction in a special education classroom setting as the teacher of record, a valid certificate that matches the subject and grade level of the assignment is also required. The forum participants recommended the following changes:
 - a. Candidates would need to pass a *Special Education Foundations* exam, which would require, among other pedagogical competencies, a demonstration of foundational reading and mathematics skills.
 - b. The forum participants recommended that teacher candidates seeking initial licensure be required to complete coursework in order to take the certification exam (i.e., *Special Education Foundations*). Candidates would also be required to pass a content examination that corresponds with their grade-band choice. Passage of both exams and corresponding coursework would provide the candidate with an intern license.
 - c. After intern educators have taught for a year, they would take the *Special Education Focus* exam, which would correspond with their desired grade-band and disability level of support. Successful completion of this examination would result in a standard teaching license.
 - d. Teachers wishing to seek a supplemental special education certification would need to complete continuing professional education (CPE) and pass the *Special Education Foundations* exam, a content test that corresponds with their chosen grade-band, and the *Special Education Focus* exam.

The proposed changes do not apply to candidates in *visually impaired* and *deaf and hard of hearing*, who have different requirements for certification.

3. Presently, candidates wishing to seek certification in the area of *visually impaired*, a supplemental certification, must complete two examinations. There were no recommended changes.
4. Currently, candidates wishing to seek initial or supplemental certification in *deaf and hard of hearing* are required to complete three examinations. The forum recommended only that candidates wishing to seek this certification would not do so by examination alone and would be required to complete either coursework (initial certification) or CPE (supplemental certification) as well.
5. Currently, there were no requirements listed for candidates wishing to seek certification in *deaf-blindness*. The forum participants recommended that *deaf-blind* be a supplemental certificate that would combine coursework and a required exam.



Background and Methodology

There are approximately five million students served by Texas' public schools. Of those five million, 9.23% are students with disabilities. The majority of students with disabilities fall into three disability categories: specific learning disabilities (32%), speech and language impairment (20%), and other health impairment (14%). Students with disabilities represent a diverse group of learners and are served both in the general education classroom through inclusion-based services and in resource rooms. However, the achievement gap continues to persist between students with disabilities and their same-aged peers in reading and mathematics and across grades. Compounding the problem is the low number of special education teachers. While the numbers of students in special education increased by 5.7% from 2014 to 2017, the number of certified special educators decreased by 1% during the same period. TEA has identified teacher preparation as a possible lever to increase student achievement. A change in teacher preparation would, in effect, compel a change in licensure and certification. TEA, along with members of the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), conducted a series of forums with stakeholders in special education to examine the current certification requirements in Texas. The forum participants were charged with reconceptualizing special education certification to better serve students, better prepare teachers, and respond to the teacher shortage in special education.

Participants

TEA recruited forum participants with input from a broad range of special education organizations and associations. Overall, 31 participants were recruited and represented a diverse group of stakeholders, from superintendents to parents. (A full list of participants is included in Exhibit 5 on pages 12-13.)

Data collection

Data were collected from five forum sessions (three in-person and two virtual sessions) as well as from pre- and post-work that members completed. Post-work often included having forum participants engage with their school and community members to continue to gather more diverse stakeholder feedback.

Opening webinar. In the opening webinar on October 9, 2018, participants were introduced to each other and oriented to the current educational climate and certification requirements in Texas.

Forum 1. Forum 1 was held in person on November 2, 2018, and focused on special education certification. The guiding question that participants grappled with was: *What is the vision for the exemplar beginning special education teacher, and which certification options support that vision?* As part of their post-work, participants were asked to interview people from their

school districts and communities about special education certification. A survey was sent out and collected to capture information related to the subsequent interviews. The survey results revealed that 46% of respondents preferred a certification structure that allowed for both grade-banded and disability-specific certification.

Forum 2. In Forum 2 on December 14, 2018, participants were asked to consider personnel and staffing issues in light of the proposed certification recommendations. The guiding questions were: *How do potential special education certificates affect personnel and staffing? After educators receive their initial certification, how can continuing professional education (CPE) be structured to ensure continuous development of best practices?*

Forum 3. Forum 3 asked participants to evaluate CPE and certification by exam. The guiding question for the in-person forum was: *How should the current rules for certification by exam be adjusted for the recommended SPED certification?* Post-work required forum participants to share the proposed certification recommendations with their home and school community members. As with the first forum, participants received a survey in order to capture information obtained through those interviews, the results of which informed the content for the closing webinar.

Closing webinar. In the closing webinar, the final list of recommendations was reviewed by the forum facilitators. Participants had the opportunity to discuss at length the potential benefits and unintended consequences of and unanswered questions about each set of recommendations, which are summarized in the following sections.



Current Texas Certification Requirements

Initial Certification

Special education teacher candidates who wish to seek initial certification can do so by being admitted to an educator preparation program (EPP) or by passing a subject matter test called the *Pre-Admission Content Test* (PACT). Once teacher candidates in an EPP have completed their coursework, they take the *Special Education: EC–12* certification examination. Candidates who pass will receive an intern certificate. Intern teachers must then take and pass the *PPR* examination and a content test (as applicable) to be considered for a probationary certificate. In order for candidates to receive their standard teaching certificate, they must pass the *EC-12 PPR* and successfully complete all coursework in their EPP.

Supplemental Certification

Educators licensed in other disciplines that wish to seek a special education certification must pass the *Special Education: EC–12* examination.

Teacher candidates of students with *visual impairments*

Candidates wishing to seek certification in *visually impaired* must seek supplemental certification to be licensed and must complete two examinations: the *Visually Impaired Texas Examination of Educator Standards (TExES)* and either the *183 Braille TExES* or the *283 Braille TExES*.

Teacher candidates in *deaf and hard of hearing*

Candidates wishing to seek certification in *deaf and hard of hearing* are required to complete three examinations: the *181 Deaf and Hard of Hearing TExES*; the *072 Texas Assessment of Sign Communication (TASC)* or the *073 Texas Assessment of Sign Communication-American Sign Language (TASC-ASL; required for assignment but not for certification)*; and the *160 PPR EC-12 TExES*.



Proposed Certification Requirements

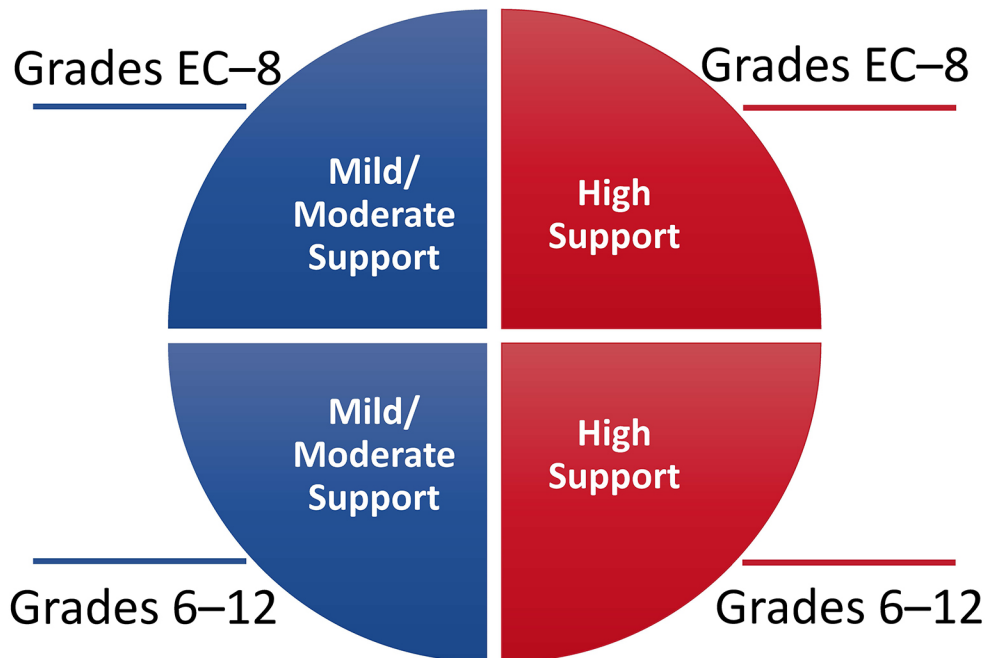
Grade banding and level of student support

Exhibit 1 provides an overview of the certification requirements proposed by the forum participants. Instead of the current certification for special educators (which covers EC– Grade 12), the forum participants recommended that certification be offered in specific grade bands and levels of support, which would result in four certification areas. As noted in the summary, all certification areas (initial and supplemental) would require coursework or CPE and the passage of a set of required examinations.

Benefits of the proposed reconceptualization: grade bands and level of student support:

- Special educator candidates seeking initial certification will receive more specific and in-depth preservice preparation for their grade band and level of student support and therefore will be better equipped to serve a student’s needs and
- Special educator candidates seeking supplemental certification will receive professional development in their chosen area of certification through the completion of CPE and a series of examinations, as completion of examinations alone will no longer be sufficient for certification.

Exhibit 1. Proposed Certification Areas



Considerations for the proposed reconceptualization: Grade bands and level of student support. Forum participants noted the following considerations:

- More specificity in certification may unintentionally perpetuate the special educator teacher shortage.
- More specificity may lead to hiring challenges, especially in districts that historically struggle with finding qualified special educators.
- Having separate grade bands (e.g., EC through Grade 8 and Grade 6 through Grade 12) for students with high support needs may not be necessary due to the similar academic needs for this population of students.
- EPPs will need to deal with potentially smaller numbers in programs, which could be difficult given the institutional requirements for minimum enrollment numbers.
- Adjustments may need to be made to the Accountability System for Educator Preparation to incorporate flexibility and exceptions for EPPs.

“By narrowing the grade level certification, teachers will be able to put more emphasis on studies for the grade levels they want to teach. By being disability-specific certified, it will allow teachers to be more knowledgeable in the various disabilities.”

– Forum participant

- The current implementation timeline will not allow larger institutions sufficient time to develop and receive approval for new coursework.
- The state has already attempted specialized certifications in the 1980s and 1990s, which were phased out in favor of the current *EC–Grade 12* certification.
- The certification process might be simpler if, like other states, Texas required a master’s degree for special education certification.
- CPE requirements and demand will largely increase. How will those be monitored?



Proposed Required Examinations

Initial

In addition to the proposed grade-band and specific level of support certification areas, the forum participants also recommended a new set of required examinations. Exhibit 2 displays the proposed changes. As noted, teacher candidates (with the exception of candidates in *visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, and deaf-blind*, who will have different requirements) would complete two tests before receiving their intern certification:

- the Special Education Foundations examination and
- the applicable content pedagogy examination by grade-band and subject matter.

The Special Education Foundations examination is recommended to include foundational pedagogy for special educators as well as content knowledge of the science of teaching reading and the foundations of numeracy. Additionally, teacher candidates would need to complete a *core subject* examination for their area of certification. Examination choices would include:

- EC through Grade 6 core subjects
- Grade 4 through Grade 8 core subjects
- Grade 7 through Grade 12 mathematics
- Grade 7 through Grade 12 English language arts
- Grade 7 through Grade 12 other core subject

As a requirement for issuance of a standard certification, teacher candidates must also complete the *Special Education Focus* test. For this examination, teachers would choose the test that corresponds with their chosen area of assignment (EC–8 mild/moderate, EC–8 high needs, 6–12 mild/moderate, or 6–12 high needs).

For teacher candidates in both *visually impaired* and *deaf and hard of hearing*, there were no recommended changes to their examinations.

Exhibit 2. Proposed Examinations for Certification Areas

Required Assessments for Intern Certification	Required Assessments for Standard Certification
<p><i>(Two tests)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education Foundation examination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Would have foundational components • Core subjects test <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Must demonstrate knowledge of core subjects for area of assignment – Could be EC–6 core subjects, 4–8 core subjects, or 7–12 math or 7–12 English language arts 	<p><i>(One test)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special education focus test <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Teacher chooses one of the four foci <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » EC–8 mild/moderate » EC–8 high needs » 6–12 mild/moderate » 6–12 high needs

Supplemental

Teachers wishing to add a supplemental certification in any area (e.g., *special education*, *visually impaired*, or *deaf and hard of hearing*) would need to complete the appropriate CPE before taking the required examinations. For teacher candidates in *deaf-blind*, it was recommended that a new examination would be required that corresponds with the new recommended supplemental certification.

Benefits of new examinations

The forum participants saw several benefits of the recommended examination structure. First, they agreed that the *Special Education Foundation* examination should include foundational reading and mathematics skills content. This choice will undoubtedly encourage EPPs to educate all special education candidates, regardless of grade band, in essential reading and mathematics concepts, which the forum participants saw as directly correlated with the ability of educators to teach learners with special needs effectively. Additionally, participants saw the benefits of having teachers complete the *Special Education Focus* test after their first year of teaching. This would allow a teacher to be hired in any one of the grade-banded or specific disability categories before taking the specific foci examination.

Considerations for new examinations

The most prevalent consideration centered around the expense of completing multiple examinations, which forum participants felt might dissuade candidates from entering the field

and might adversely impact potential teachers from low-income and minority families. To a lesser degree, there were questions regarding already licensed special educators and how to ensure that they would be “grandfathered in” and not be required to complete the new examinations.



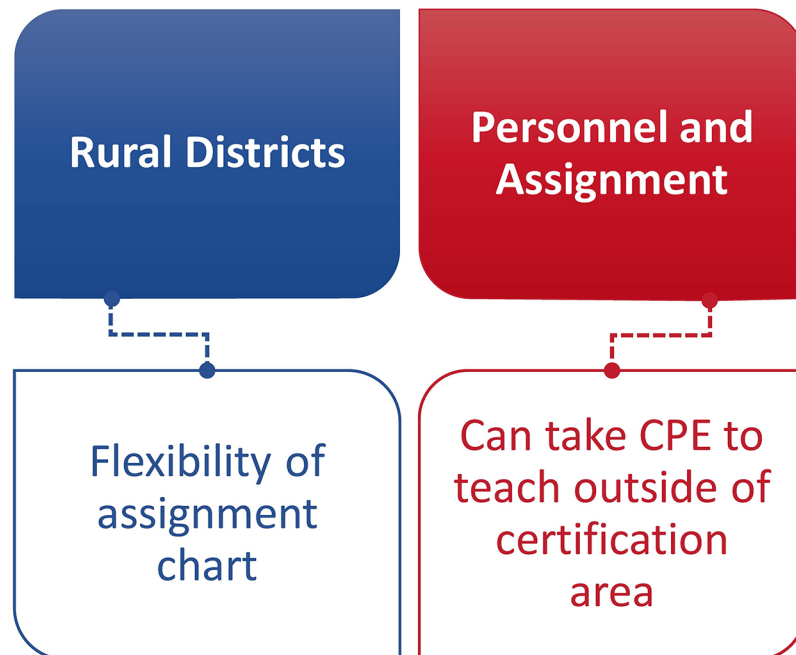
Flexibility and Exceptions

Forum participants recognized a need to allow flexibility and exceptions within the new certification structure in order to provide more targeted teacher preparation while providing districts the flexibility to hire the best candidate for any position. Exhibit 3 shows the two areas where flexibility was recommended: (1) rural districts and (2) personnel and assignment.

Flexibility is recommended for rural districts because they often

- have persistent teacher shortages in special education or
- do not have enough students in special education to necessitate educators with certification in specific areas.

Exhibit 3. Areas Where Flexibility Is Recommended



For rural schools, the forum participants recommended flexibility in the teacher assignment and hiring processes. They maintained that educators filling special education positions in rural

schools should still continue to pursue proper certification and will be able to do so through both CPE and the passage of appropriate examinations.

The forum participants also recommended that districts be given flexibility when an educator does not possess the specific certification for a grade band and level of support that aligns with the current needs of the school. It was recommended that if a teacher's certifications do not apply to 80% or more of the students served, then that teacher would have one year to acquire the correct certifications through CPE and the required examinations.

Flexibility and exceptions will allow teacher certification requirements to be more specific while still meeting the needs of Texas' diverse districts. The forum participants also noted the need for a state CPE structure in order to maintain integrity and to efficiently respond to the needs of both teachers and districts.



Defining Mild, Moderate, and High Levels of Support

The proposed certification structure allows for specificity not only of grade band but also of student level of support. Teacher candidates would choose their desired student support level, but significant discussion was given to how students would be categorized within this proposed structure (Exhibit 4).

The levels of support would not be based on federal definitions of high-incidence and low-incidence disabilities but would be student dependent and based on need. The forum participants recommended that the levels of support be determined by the Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee through the creation of a guidance tool or rubric.

A rubric could be created for each disability category to help synthesize a student's needs and present level of functioning. Categories could include academics, behavior/social skills, physical ability, adaptive behavior, accommodations/modifications, and the instructional setting.

Although this rubric could be created for each disability category, it also could be used in conjunction with other tools to help guide the committee in determining the student's level of support. Other data sources could include parent input, teacher input/observations, student self-assessment, level of services, full individual and initial evaluation (FIE), or functional behavior assessment (FBA) and behavior intervention plan (BIP) data.

Exhibit 4. Categories of Information for Determining a Student’s Level of Support

Rubric	Other Data Sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics • Behavior and social skills • Physical ability • Adaptive behavior • Accommodations and modifications • Instructional setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent input • Teacher input and observations • Student self-assessment • Level of services • FIE • FBA/BIP data

Benefit of guidance tool or rubric

The participants recommend that having a tool would provide structure and guidance in the decision-making process. The rubric or tool would consider many facets of the student’s life and require parent input.

Considerations for guidance tool or rubric

The ARD committee could misidentify the level of student support needed and provide a potentially adverse educational experience for that child. Additionally, the participants noted that students could have a spectrum of needed supports and may not clearly fit into the designations of mild, moderate, or high needs. Last, the participants feared that eventually the level of support could become tied to coding within the state and ultimately to funding. Further work will need to be completed to implement this tool.

Summary

Improving student outcomes in Texas will require changing how special educators are prepared and thus how they are certified. The forum participants have provided a set of recommendations that aim to

- keep students first,
- prepare special educators for authentic practices to the greatest extent possible through specificity in certification,
- increase long-term retention of special educators,
- allow flexibility and exceptions when appropriate, and
- require new examinations that would impact how EPPs prepare teacher candidates.

There are several benefits to be gained from this new certification structure but also considerations and unanswered questions. The forum participants urge the State Board for Educator Certification to consider all the information in this brief before making a decision.

Exhibit 5. Special Education Policy Forum Participants

Name	Role	Organization	Region
James Anderson	Campus special education administrator	Magnolia ISD	6
Janie Baszile	Teacher 6–8	Galena Park ISD	4
Debra Bauer	Director of Special Programs	Goliad ISD	3
Jessica Beaty	Teacher EC–5	Cypress-Fairbanks	4
Brenda Benavides	Special Education Coordinator	United ISD	1
Glenna Billingsley	EPP	Texas State	13
Vicki Brantley	Special education field service agent	Region 8 ESC	8
Joann Brewer	Special education specialist	Region 13 ESC	13
Beth Brockman	Assistant superintendent for employee services	Plano ISD	10
Leah Cloes	Teacher 9-12	Fort Worth ISD	11
Rachel Collins	Teacher EC–12	Round Rock ISD	13
Glenda Cook	Teacher EC–5	Poteet ISD	20
Nacona David	EPP	Region 20 ESC	20
Maria Faqrer	EPP	Relay	20
Kami Finger	District special education director	Lubbock ISD	17
Melissa Fogarty	EPP	Texas A&M University	6
Ambra Green	EPP	The University of Texas at Arlington	11
Demetrius Hicks	Teacher 6–12	Yes!Prep	20

Name	Role	Organization	Region
Diann Huber	EPP	iTeach	11
Jacqueline Light	Counselor	Ector County ISD	18
Heather Malcolm	Teacher 9–12	Northside ISD	20
Chris Masey	Parent	N/A	13
Toni Miller	Dyslexia coordinator	Kemp ISD	10
Vickie Mitchell	EPP	Sam Houston State University	6
Claire Romero	General education bilingual teacher EC–5	Austin ISD	13
Diana Serrano	Parent	N/A	19
Heather Sheffield	Parent	Eanes ISD	13
Abbey Smith	Teacher EC–2	Pflugerville ISD	13
Katie Tackett	EPP	The University of Texas at Austin	13
Debra Tridico	Teacher 9–12, higher education	Grapevine-Colleyville ISD	11
Annette Unger	Educational diagnostician	Pleasanton ISD	20
Lesley Zentz	Interventionist	Klein ISD	4

Note. EPP = educator preparation program; ESC = education service center; ISD = Independent School District.

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