



# End double – and lower – standards for special education teachers

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Almost 6.4 million students—[about 13% of students overall](#)—receive special education services. Meanwhile, [nearly the same percentage](#) of the teacher workforce works in special education classrooms. Considering the need for these professionals and the specialized skills required of them, you'd think expectations for preparing and licensing special education teachers would be at least as high as they are for other teachers, if not higher.

In fact, states set an appallingly low bar for licensing special education teachers— a categorically lower bar than for general education teachers. How is it that less is required for the very teachers whose students need more?

Nearly two thirds of all states do not sufficiently differentiate between the knowledge and skills needed to teach elementary grades versus secondary grades. These states send a loud and clear message that, when it comes to special education, the knowledge and preparation a teacher needs for a first grade classroom is similar to what's needed for an 11th grade classroom. Would this be an acceptable premise for general education? Of course not.

State requirements are even more dismal when it comes to content knowledge preparation. While it has become commonplace for states to require general education elementary teachers to pass a content knowledge test, only 14 states require the same of special education elementary teachers.

At the secondary level, the problem is even worse. Unlike their counterparts in general education, they are usually generalists rather than single-subject teachers. Only three states—**Missouri**, **New York** and **Wisconsin**—require grade-appropriate tests in all core subjects for a secondary special education license. Five other states require tests in at least one subject. That means that the overwhelming majority of special education high school math teachers, for example, may know shockingly little math.

How can we expect our special education students to meet the same standards as general education students when we have a double—and decidedly lower—standard for their teachers?

For decades, districts have been unable to find enough special education teachers, explaining but not excusing states' unwillingness to raise standards.

But some are willing. **New York**, for example, has done more than any other state to raise expectations for special ed teachers, raising the bar for content knowledge and preparing teachers to be effective reading teachers, an area of particular need for special education students. **Indiana**, **Missouri** and **Rhode Island** are also on the right track. These states have recognized that the real problem goes well beyond recruitment. Special education teachers also have to be set up for success during their training and preparation. Special education students deserve well-trained teachers, and aspiring special education teachers deserve to be adequately prepared to successfully do their jobs.



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