



How NCTQ scores on the Content for Special Education Standard

[Standard and indicators](#)

Data used to score this standard

Evaluation of special education programs on Standard 9: Content for Special Education uses the following sources of data:

- Undergraduate and graduate catalogs
- Degree plans provided by institutions of higher education (IHEs)
- Relevant IHE websites (e.g., websites for the college of education or registrar, or graduate school application pages)
- Syllabi (when available and as necessary)
- Textbook listings made available by the IHE bookstore
- Admissions–relevant documents, including transcript review forms
- State regulations regarding content preparation of special education teacher candidates

Who analyzes the data

Two [general analysts](#) evaluate each program using a detailed scoring protocol from which this scoring methodology is abstracted. For information on the process by which scoring discrepancies are resolved, see the “scoring processes” section of the [General Methodology](#).

Scope of analysis

There are three¹ scoring pathways for **undergraduate** and **graduate** programs for this standard. The choice of pathway depends on the nature of special education certification in the IHE’s state:

- The first pathway relates to programs in states requiring special education teachers to be certified only for the elementary grades or only for the secondary grades. For programs in such states, content coursework requirements for special education candidates being prepared for the elementary grades are evaluated under Indicator 9.1, much as they are evaluated for elementary teacher candidates under Indicators 6.1 and 6.3 of the Elementary Content Standard. (See the [scoring methodology](#) for Standard 6: Elementary Content.)

¹ The three pathways and the standard’s three indicators are not matched one-for-one. For example, the first pathway evaluates elementary and secondary special education programs in states in which all special education programs fall into one of those two categories, whereas Indicator 9.1 sets a content preparation standard for a special education teacher candidate who will be certified to teach in the elementary grades, whether in an elementary program or in a K-12 program.

- In the case of special education candidates being prepared for the secondary grades, coursework requirements are evaluated under Indicator 9.2 for preparation in two minors (15 or more semester credit hours, or SCHs) in two different core subjects, much as they are evaluated under Indicators 7.6 and 7.7 for middle school teacher candidates seeking multiple-subject certification. (See the [scoring methodology](#) for Standard 7: Middle School Content.)
- The second pathway relates to programs in states that allow special education teachers to be certified for either the elementary grades, the secondary grades or for grades PK-12. The evaluation in the first two cases – preparation only for elementary grades or only for secondary grades — is similar to that outlined in the bulleted section above. However, programs that offer grades PK-12 certification, effectively choosing to offer an overly broad certification when the state provides for a more suitably narrow certification, fail the standard *a priori* on the ground that the program’s structure is flawed.²
- A third pathway relates to programs in states that only allow special education teachers to be certified for grades PK-12. For programs in such states, content coursework requirements for teacher candidates are evaluated under Indicator 9.3 for their adequacy in both elementary content preparation and secondary content preparation. (Again, as in the first pathway, the [scoring methodology for Standard 6](#) and [Standard 7](#) provide general guidance for this evaluation.)

Because of state regulations, these programs have no choice but to offer an overly broad special education certification. For that reason, prefatory comments accompanying program-specific scoring comments developed for every program to provide feedback on the *Review’s* evaluation emphasize the state’s role in making adequate content preparation of special education teacher candidates an insuperable challenge.

For information on the framework for special education certification in each state, refer to the [Teacher Licensing Structure Infographics](#).

² NCTQ acknowledges that school districts may prefer to hire special education teachers certified to teach grades PK-12 because this provides more flexibility in filling otherwise hard to fill secondary special education positions. However, one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who would argue that hiring the PK-12 certified teacher is in the best interests of students with special needs, especially students with special needs at the secondary level.

Pathways for analysis of content preparation of special education teacher candidates

	State regulations allow IHEs to prepare special ed teacher candidates to teach at these grades	How NCTQ evaluates content prep or program structure
Pathway 1	Elementary	Special ed teacher candidates evaluated on the same basis as elementary teacher candidates
	Or	
	Secondary	Special ed teacher candidates evaluated on the same basis as dual-subject middle school teacher candidates
Pathway 2	Elementary	Special ed teacher candidates evaluated on the same basis as elementary teacher candidates
	Or	
	Secondary	Special ed teacher candidates evaluated on the same basis as dual-subject middle school teacher candidates
	Or	
	Elementary and Secondary (PK – 12)	Program structure is flawed and by choice of this prep approach the standard is not satisfied
Pathway 3	Elementary and Secondary (PK – 12)	Special ed teacher candidates evaluated on the same basis as elementary <u>and</u> dual-subject middle school teacher candidates

All undergraduate and graduate programs in the sample of 99 special education programs evaluated in this edition of the *Review* could be evaluated on this standard.³

³ Four of the programs in the original sample of 103 special education programs were removed after we determined that they had been incorrectly categorized as initial certification programs. For information on selection of the sample, see the [General Methodology](#).

Common misconceptions about how analysts evaluate the Content for Special Education Standard:

- *Special education teachers do not need the same level of content preparation as elementary or secondary teachers so it's not important to evaluate their preparation for content.* It is often thought that even special education teacher candidates who are preparing to teach students with the most common learning disabilities should primarily focus on curriculum and instruction or pedagogical strategies, and/or that they can take content coursework solely designed for teacher audiences. But the implication of this approach is that special education *students* cannot be expected to meet the demands of PK-12 standards, which is not fair to them. Particularly with the advent of the Common Core State Standards, the content preparation of all teachers, including special education teachers, has to be rigorous.
- *By rating teacher preparation programs on a standard for which state regulations regarding PK-12 special education certification are so salient, NCTQ's rating process is unfair.* Since we have found eight programs in six states with PK-12 special education certification that require candidates to get either an elementary or secondary endorsement, it is not true that programs have no choice but to simply recommend candidates for PK-12 licensure. Our rating process for these eight programs took into account the responsible decisions their leaders made to focus their candidates' content preparation on a narrower grade span. Moreover, teacher preparation programs have a role to play in advocating for changes to licensure frameworks that do not serve the interests of students.⁴

⁴ We are aware that a number of programs in at least one state (**Ohio**) have advocated without success for a different licensure or endorsement framework that would allow them to better focus preparation on the elementary or secondary grade span and to signal as much to teacher candidates and hiring school districts.

Examples of what satisfies or does not satisfy the standard's indicators

Elementary content preparation (Indicator 9.1)

For examples of adequate elementary content preparation for special education candidates programs, refer to the examples of what satisfies or does not satisfy Indicators 6.1 and 6.3 in the [scoring methodology](#) for Standard 6.

Secondary content preparation (Indicator 9.2)

For examples of adequate secondary content preparation for special education candidates, refer to the examples of what satisfies or does not satisfy Indicator 7.6 or 7.7 in the [scoring methodology](#) for Standard 7.

Sufficient focus on either elementary or secondary preparation (Indicator 9.3)

Analysis for programs in a state with elementary, secondary and PK-12 special education certifications

✓ - fully satisfies the indicator	✗ - does not satisfy the indicator
A special education preparation program in the state of Washington offers a program entitled “Master’s in Education, K-8/Special Education Teacher Certification,” and the program’s content coursework requirements satisfy all aspects of Indicator 6.1.	A special education program in the state of Washington offers a program entitled “Bachelor of Arts in Education, Special Education P-12.” The program does not satisfy the standard because it offers an overly broad certification when a narrower certification can be made available under state regulations.

Analysis for programs in a state with only a PK-12 special education certification

✓ - fully satisfies the indicator	✗ - does not satisfy the indicator
Content coursework requirements for a special education preparation program in Ohio satisfy all aspects of Indicator 6.1 and also entail two 15 SCH minors in two different core subject areas.	Content coursework requirements for a special education preparation program in Ohio do not satisfy all aspects of Indicator 6.1 and do not entail two 15 SCH minors in two different core subject areas.