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*Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities*



## Legal Brief

### **New Interdisciplinary Certification Strengthens Teacher Effectiveness for Supporting Young Children with Autism and Developmental Delays**



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The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a joint position statement emphasizing the necessity for educators to be trained in supporting inclusion. They highlighted that practitioners should receive education and training on evidence-based practices (EBPs) to promote effective, inclusive education opportunities for children who receive special education services, particularly those with low-incidence disabilities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

While inclusive practices have become more prevalent in schools, general education teachers report feeling underprepared or lacking confidence when it comes to effectively supporting the social/emotional, behavioral, and learning needs of young students with extensive support needs. This sentiment is often due to limited experience (Killoran & Zaretsky, 2014). According to Mader (2017), many teacher preparation programs do not provide adequate training in working with children who have behavioral challenges, autism, and developmental delays. Thus, general educators may enter the classroom without adequate training and preparation to teach children with disabilities.

#### **A Policy to Enhance Teacher Preparedness**

To address these gaps, a handful of states have begun implementing interdisciplinary early childhood certification

programs that integrate both general and special education. For example, the Tennessee Board of Education (TBOE) approved Policy 5.502, merging PreK–3 Early Childhood and PreK–3 Early Childhood Special Education teacher certifications into a single Interdisciplinary PreK–3 teacher certification (IPreK3; Tennessee State Board of Education, 2024). This policy mandates that institutions of higher education (IHEs) design programs incorporating DEC, NAEYC, technology, and state literacy standards. Notably, all courses must encompass both general and special education content, ensuring special education is embedded throughout coursework, rather than taught in isolation. Although Tennessee's model is one example, similar initiatives have been proposed or implemented in other states to address the national shortage of early childhood special education teachers.

#### **Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs**

States implementing interdisciplinary certification programs require IHEs to revise existing coursework to integrate both general and special education disciplines, as well as state literacy standards. A key component of these interdisciplinary programs is instruction on working with young students with extensive support needs. Some universities have adopted co-teaching models, where early childhood and special education instructors teach courses collaboratively. This approach allows faculty to

provide instruction while modeling inclusive teaching practices; thus enabling preservice teachers to observe and practice co-teaching strategies. Access to innovative, practice-based teacher preparation supports PreK–3rd grade teachers in effectively supporting students with a wide range of developmental needs in inclusive settings.

### Benefits of Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

Inclusive early childhood education programs have demonstrated substantial benefits for all children. For instance, researchers highlight that when young children with significant disabilities are educated in inclusive settings, developmental and learning gains are often observed (US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education Joint Statement, 2023). Additionally, inclusive PreK programs provide natural settings for children with autism to learn social and academic skills needed in future classroom settings (Second Wave Media, 2024). The US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education released a joint statement stating, “High-quality inclusion that begins early and continues into school likely produces the strongest outcomes (2023, p. 7). According to this report, students with disabilities who spend greater time in inclusive settings, tend to demonstrate higher academic achievement and cognitive gains and are likely to have a greater probability of employment and higher wages later in life (Nahmias et al., 2014; US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education Joint Statement, 2023). Additionally, exposure to typically developing peers for students with autism can lead to other benefits such as improved social, communication, and imitation skills (e.g., Nahmias et al., 2014).

### National Implications and Future Directions

While Tennessee’s interdisciplinary certification is an emerging model, fewer than ten states currently offer similar pathways for early childhood educators. Expanding these programs at a national level could help address the critical shortage of early childhood special education teachers. Teachers with interdisciplinary training are better equipped to create developmentally appropriate, robust, and inclusive environments where all children can learn, regardless of their level of support needs.

Inclusive classroom placements for young children with extensive support needs typically have a lasting impact. Students with autism and developmental delays who are educated in inclusive settings exhibit gains in social skills, greater peer acceptance, and access to developmentally appropriate, grade-level curricula. Legislation promoting such interdisciplinary certifications could benefit all students, resulting in a better-prepared teaching workforce for the nation’s youngest learners.

Increasing federal and state investment in teacher preparation programs that emphasize inclusion could have lasting

benefits for the early childhood workforce. This investment can come in the form of grants and other financial supports to obtain Inclusive PreK–3 certification, alternative pathways to certification, and extensive mentoring and support for new teachers. Policymakers at the state and national levels should consider integrating interdisciplinary certification models into national teacher licensure discussions to better prepare educators for the diverse needs of PreK–3 students.

In sum, interdisciplinary certification programs present a promising approach to improve the quality of teacher preparation for supporting young children with extensive support needs in inclusive classroom settings. Expanding interdisciplinary early childhood certification in more states would plausibly enhance the quality of early childhood education. Consequently, the learning, social/emotional, and behavioral outcomes for all children, particularly those with autism and developmental disabilities, would be optimized. ■

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