










IRIS CENTER FOR TRAINING ENHANCEMENTS


Special Educators for Inclusive Education: Roles, Responsibilities, and Competencies: Views from the Field


This summary of a much longer report condenses findings culled from a focus group of seven preservice faculty members, plus a structured telephone interview with an eighth; a face-to-face focus group of nine parent leaders; and structured telephone interviews with five special education teachers, two preservice trainees, and four personnel from State Improvement Grants (SIGs) or related programs (N=28 participants). All told, these participants represented twenty-one states and the District of Columbia.

Major Roles and Responsibilities of Special Educators for Inclusive Education

-  **Advocacy and high expectations:** The special educator is responsible for encouraging high expectations throughout the school—including for students with disabilities—and for encouraging the *practical* realization of those expectations. She is also an advocate for inclusive education and for empowering students with disabilities.
-  **Collaboration:** A major responsibility of the special educator is to collaborate with the general education teacher to (a) share understandings of disabilities and their implications for learning and (b) create access to the content areas of the curriculum. She must also work with related services and with school teams to improve instruction and learning. To do so entails taking on a number of roles: co-teacher, team teacher, consulting teacher, facilitator, mediator, liaison, case manager, mentor for new teachers, and “go to” person.
-  **Individualized education plan:** The special educator plays a crucial role on the IEP team, bringing all of the parties together for the student’s best interest, designing the student’s plan, monitoring its stipulations, and making certain that IEPs are implemented with fidelity. She is usually the manager of multiple IEP teams.
-  **Instruction:** The primary responsibility of the special educator in the inclusive classroom is to ensure effective differentiated instruction aligned with the core curriculum—and to set realistic goals that move students with disabilities toward their fullest academic and life-skills potentials.
-  **Student engagement and dropout prevention:** The special educator is often in the best position to engage or re-engage students with disabilities in learning, to identify students at risk of dropping, and to plan meaningful learning experiences for students.
-  **Transition to postsecondary:** Special educators have special roles and responsibilities in the preparation of students for postsecondary transition, including instruction beginning in the elementary grades and active participation in the transition program at the secondary level.


 **Working with families:** The special educator fulfills a strategic role in family involvement and engagement in the education process. This includes (a) communicating clearly and positively with families, (b) helping parents to take part in the team for their children's education and to act as parent coaches; (c) serving as a resource and someone to whom parents can turn for advice about services for their children and for guidance as to how parents can assist their children academically and behaviorally at home, (d) appreciating the stresses faced by families, and (e) mediating disagreements between parents and the school about educational planning or services


 **Community connections:** As a case manager, the special educator is a link between the school, parents and families, community services, supplemental services, and other resources. This responsibility includes developing a sensitivity to the culture of the community.


 **Support for school leaders:** Special educators can support school administrators in various ways such as by (a) advising on the legal ramifications of truancy and discipline procedures and other aspects of IDEA, (b) sharing knowledge of evidence-based inclusive practices, (c) detailing the implications of the State Performance Plan and what its indicators mean for inclusive practice, and (d) mediating with families.


Competencies:

Knowledge and Skills for Carrying Out the Roles and Responsibilities


 **Collaboration:** Special educators must have skills in communication, consultation, collaboration, coaching, facilitation, mediation, reflective listening, and networking skills for working with general educators, related services, and all school personnel. They must also be able to take part fully in co-teaching and teaming. They must feel comfortable approaching the general education teacher with suggestions in a way that the teacher doesn't feel intruded upon.


 **Individualized education plan:** The special educator must have a working knowledge of procedural safeguards, as well as skills in developing instructional and behavioral IEPs, including the capacity to engineer diagnostics. She must be capable of working with general education teachers and support staff to ensure that IEPs are implemented with fidelity. She must be willing and able to involve students in IEP development.


 **Case management:** The special educator must be skillful in working with and converging the resources of school staff, families, and community agencies. She must understand resource mapping and should be able to help students to transition into and out of programs, services, and grade levels.


 **Behavior/ discipline:** Special educators must have an understanding of functional behavioral assessment and be able to develop behavior plans. They must have skills in classroom management, preventive discipline, and student conflict resolution. They must


understand antecedent behaviors and the relationship between learning problems and behavior problems. Also crucial is an understanding of wraparound services, social skills monitoring, and instruction.


 **Data-based decision making:** The special educator must have the ability to evaluate her students' current levels of function in math, reading, vocabulary, writing, listening, and speaking. She must be able to ask herself the right questions (e.g., , collect and analyze data, and adjust instruction and interventions. She must know how to use technologies for data management.


 **Differentiation:** The special educator should have some understanding of human growth and development, how disabilities fit into that spectrum, and how the characteristics of various disabilities affect instruction. She must be skillful in making curriculum adaptations, sequencing instruction, scaffolding, analyzing tasks, chunking lessons, selecting materials, and making adaptations and modifications. The special educator must know something about scientifically based practices and how to translate research findings into practice.


 **Instructional/ assistive technology:** The special educator needs to understand something about instructional technologies, assistive technologies, and Universal Design for Learning.

 **Engaging/ involving students:** The special educator must be skilled in managing time on task and immediate feedback loops. She must be able to manage peer and cross-age tutoring and to help her students develop test-taking skills. She must know how to use cognitively and culturally appropriate motivational strategies. Knowledge of strategies for building self-esteem.


 **Response to intervention:** Special educators must be comfortable reviewing cases and making recommendations, making sure the intervention fits, and helping the general educator know that it's an intervention over which he or she has "ownership." They must be knowledgeable about curriculum-based measurement and progress monitoring.


 **Secondary school:** The special educator must have an understanding of the curriculum, the pacing of same, and where special education services should intersect with it. She must be able to provide instruction in learning strategies.


 **Transition to postsecondary:** The special educator requires an understanding of and skills in transition assessment, career development, self-determination, self-advocacy, student-directed IEPs, benefits planning, and life management skills. She must be willing and able to advise students on course selection (often in collaboration with school counselors). She must have the ability to connect with community resources and higher education.


 **English language learners:** Important also is the ability to use assessment data to distinguish between language differences and disabilities. The special educator should


comprehend the differentiations in academic instruction for English language learners with disabilities.

 **Health:** Special educators must know their students' health problems, conditions, and fluctuations in health status. They must know, too, what medications those take and what effects those medications have on behavior and learning.

 **Diversity:** Special educators must understand and appreciate the culture of the community. They must be sensitive to the effect of poverty on students' learning and behavior. They must also collaborate to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education.

 **Parent involvement:** The special educator must be able to involve parents and families in the whole education process. She must understand what parents and families bring to the table and be able to work with them as part of a team. She should be skillful family-centered services and practices and in home visits. The special educator should be an efficient and sensitive communicator, mediator, and facilitator. She must be able to work with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

 **Organization skills:** Important also is the ability to multi-task. The special educator should know how to use technologies for information management and how to conduct Web-based searches for resources and evidence-based practices.

 **Standards:** All educators should know the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) standards and apply them. All educators should also know their state's curriculum standards and the requirements and accommodations provisions of their state and district assessments-