

What Is a Special Education Teacher?

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Special education teachers (also called special educators) have specialized training to work with students who have learning, behavioral, emotional, and/or physical disabilities. A special education teacher primarily works with students who qualify (through a series of tests) for special education assistance.

Special educators work in a variety of settings depending on the needs of their students and the preferences of their school district. Some special educators have their own classroom (e.g., resource room), pull the students out of their regular classroom, and assist them at particular times during the school day with their individual learning needs. Others may work in the regular education classroom with the general education teacher to support the students with special needs. Some

special educators have a group of students with more complex behavioral, emotional, learning, or physical disabilities in a “self-contained” classroom. These students’ needs are greater and may require the assistance of additional qualified teachers and assistants.

Regardless of the setting, all of the special educator’s students have an *Individualized Education Plan* (IEP). This is a legal document stating the diagnoses, goals for the students, accommodations the students will receive, and assessment plans to measure the students’ progress towards their goals. This plan ensures that students continually progress and eventually attain the goals set for them within the school year. Special educators are in charge of scheduling meetings between teachers, parents, and other members of the IEP team, several times throughout the school year to evaluate and adjust the IEP. Parents are able to request an IEP meeting at any time during the school year.



What Do Special Educators Do?

Special educators work with students who have a variety of individual *learning styles*, *learning levels*, and *physical and intellectual disabilities*. These disabilities range from mild learning disabilities to severe physical needs. Therefore, the special educator must use many different teaching techniques—“individualizing” each student’s instruction according to his/her IEP. Some special educators pull students from regular education classes to conduct small group or one-on-one interactions. Students work directly with the teacher on specific skills in academics or social behaviors. This practice is losing popularity because of a new trend in education—the *inclusion model*.

The inclusion model moves special educators into the regular classroom, so that the students with special needs may take part in the instruction and activities of the regular classroom.

This “inclusion” makes it possible for students with special needs to have exposure to grade-level content and grade-level peers, improving the students’ overall performance in attaining IEP goals.

Where Do Special Educators Work?

The vast majority of special educators work in a public school setting. Some private schools have funds to hire special educators. If a child attends a private school that does not have special education support, he/she is still able to obtain special education services from the public school. Many special educators work as tutors, either on their own or for third party companies (Sylvan, etc.) that specialize in one-on-one instruction with students who are having trouble in regular education subject areas.

In addition, a small number of special educators work as student advocates—teachers trained to represent parents at IEP and other educational meetings. Advocates are paid representatives who help parents understand the educational jargon at an IEP meeting. The advocate’s knowledge of the law, terminology, and student/parent rights, is valuable in establishing realistic goals for the student. Advocates make sure that the student is receiving all the special education services which he/she needs based on the child’s current level of performance. To find an advocate near you, visit <http://www.yellowpagesforkids.com/> and select your state from the drop-down menu.

What Should I Expect from Special Education?

Special educators who work with students with severe disabilities teach basic concepts of *self-care* and *self-help skills*. Special educators expand the student’s learning experience in all aspects of daily life, including social skills, communication skills, and self-care skills. Special educators who work with students with severe special needs often become very involved with the students’ families in order to maximize student potential.

Questions to Ask a Special Educator

- How do I know if my child needs special education services?
- How do I know if my child is eligible for special services?
- Who will test my child to determine his/her eligibility for special services?
- What happens during an evaluation?
- My child is eligible for special education. What next?
- What happens if my child is not eligible for services?



- How will you classify my child's need for special services?
- What is your specialty area (learning disabilities, behavioral disabilities, mild mental impairment, etc.)?
- What is an IEP?
- What is a "change" in the student's IEP?
- Once in special education, will my child always be in special education?
- How much time will my child be out of the regular education classroom?

Other Helpful Handy Handouts®

HH #118 *The Teacher Says My Child May Have a Learning Disability! What Does That Mean? What Do I Do?* (http://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdfs/118_Learning_Disability.pdf)

HH #157 *Everything You Wanted to Know About an IEP Meeting but Were Afraid to Ask* (http://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdfs/157_IEP.pdf)