The high demand for certified special educators compels enhancing training, certification and post-grad programs to meet the needs of students who require ongoing and varied support.

Across the U.S., 2.4 million students are diagnosed with specific learning disabilities. According to the CDC, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder affects 11 percent of children ages 4-17. Roughly one in five students is diagnosed as having dyslexia. Autism spectrum disorder affects one in 68 children, and in New Jersey, that ratio shrinks to one in 41.

Every day, countless students enter their learning environments with a range of non-verbal learning challenges, emotional and behavioral disorders, physical disabilities and other special needs. Every one of these students deserves to be understood. And every teacher deserves the tools, strategies and information necessary to understand their needs.

For decades, New Jersey has been at the forefront of pioneering methods in special education training. As a result, implementation of inclusive classrooms, co-teaching settings and least restrictive environments have increased, and special needs students have flourished. At the same time, rates of learning disabled diagnoses are rising, and cutting-edge methods of early intervention have resulted in implementing IEPs at the first sign of delay. As research continues to suggest inclusion practices lead to greater success among special education students, and more and more special education students enter the general education learning environment, the need for highly qualified educators who understand their needs intensifies.

Today, special education certification has become all but synonymous with teacher certification. And a growing number of university administrators regularly receive calls from principals and district supervisors requesting teacher candidates who have dual certification that includes special ed.

"In every general education class, you'll have someone with special needs," says Joan Moriarty, Ed.D., Associate Dean of the School of Education at Caldwell University. "As a principal, I would want the person with that background information to be able to work with students. We get calls from principals all the time, 'Do you have somebody who is certified special ed.' during the year – at every grade level."

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, students diagnosed as having learning disabilities (LD) are more than twice as likely to be suspended than their peers without LD diagnoses, leading to their increased risk of academic failure due to loss of instructional time. Adequate support for these students begins early and accompanies them throughout every phase of their education.

While no training can prepare teachers for each and every situation they might encounter during their careers as special educators and inclusion teachers, programs across New Jersey are continually embedding new and varied real-world scenarios within their curriculum models to offer teachers the most comprehensive and useful preparation – experiences they can take with them into the classroom. Julie Norflus-Good, Ed.D., the Director of the Master of Arts in Special Education (MASE) program at Ramapo College, observes how grad students are pursuing the hands-on training they need to become effective interventionists and supportive educators.

“We look at the different types of programs that are out there – the different programs that students are placed in – and have that in the back of our minds as we’re teaching,” she says. “This way, we’re not just addressing the typical learning disabled classroom or the typical autistic classroom. With any disability, there’s a large range of needs and a large range of learning styles, so people need to be able to address that.”

Increasing requirements

Because the special education landscape is so vast, and, in many cases, clear and concise answers simply aren’t enough to resolve ongoing issues, the most effective teacher training compels students to develop sets of possible solutions, many of which require trial and error and a bit of high-stakes goldilocking. One example of a real-world situation MASE students recently encountered was a classroom in which some students were high-functioning verbal while others were non-communicative.

“We asked, ‘How do you deal with that, and how do you make it work in all situations?’” Dr. Norflus-Good explains. "We discussed and debriefed, 'What could we do to make this better? How could we have said it differently? How could we have done this differently?' So the role-playing in different activities and putting them in different environments really helps them.”

Curriculum development at the graduate level is one of multiple factors revolutionizing special education training. Because the global understanding of LD students and the scope of their needs has become more nuanced, New Jersey has begun upgrading legislation to better prepare teachers across the state. One of...
these upgrades, in particular, has bolstered and refined the undergraduate curriculum to adopt increased requirements for teachers of students with disabilities (TOSD) certification.

"I think the state of New Jersey has done a wonderful job in recognizing the needs of all students by increasing requirements of undergraduate students, because they need 21 credits to get a teacher of students with disabilities certification," says Dr. Moriarty. "So that requires us to amplify and enhance our general education classes to make them for gen ed. and special ed. students." And while Caldwell's program doesn't require that undergraduate students pursue TOSD certification, Dr. Moriarty and her colleague, Dr. Sharon Maricle, strongly encourage them to do so because they know, in today's teaching landscape, teachers are far more marketable and will enjoy greater opportunities for varied positions as certified TOSDs.

"Informally speaking with other administrators, many of them say there is a need, when they look to hire (candidates) who have a background in special education," says Dr. Maricle, who works as Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Graduate Programs for Special Education at Caldwell. "So affording opportunities for – and encouraging our students to get – dual certification is really important."

Programs like Caldwell's are positioning more and more preservice teachers to enter the workforce as well-rounded educators. But, as Dr. Norflus-Good could confirm, the sharp increase in need for teachers who are trained as certified special educators by no means begins and ends at the undergraduate level. And a developing trend is sending in-service teachers back to school to receive special ed. training to better serve the needs of all their students.

"I see many times in the graduate area, students are coming back," says Dr. Maricle. "They have their certification in elementary education or general education, but they are being told they should look into special ed. So they’re coming back to us to get their TOSD at the master’s level. You also find principals sometimes talk about the need to have additional training for staff in the district to help support students who have significant disabilities, especially in the area of ABA when one gets their TOSD."

**Life-long learning process**

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), as a method of intervention, has been instrumental in supporting students who face, among other hurdles, social, academic and communication challenges. Many graduate-level programs are strengthening and creating new opportunities for ABA certification. Dr. Maricle views these advances as a victory for special needs students.

"I think that is pointing to the fact that we really want to support teachers being trained in helping our students with disabilities," she confirms.

Another burgeoning field in the growing LD landscape is special education leadership. Doctoral programs are inviting educators who are looking to become leaders at the district level to pursue their administrative training in special education.

"We recognize managing special education programs and creating partnerships as one of the content areas, as well as district administration personnel or navigating special education in legal processes," says Dr. Moriarty. "So this is a field that you continue growing and learning in; it isn't, you just get a TOSD and you know everything there is to know. It's a life-long learning process."

Research, among other factors, tends to drive both curriculum development and state legislation. But in some cases, advances in research alone have led to the increased need for special education training. In recent years, early intervention has emerged as a powerful strategy for supporting students with special needs as they begin their academic development at the K-3 level. One example of early intervention having a direct impact on LD student learning is in the area of dyslexia.

"Children who are identified (as having dyslexia) with their treatment beginning before third grade can eventually catch up to their chronological-age peers," says Mary Farrell, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Dyslexia Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University. "Children treated after third grade will learn how to read, but their rate of fluency will never quite be what it could be if the treatment were begun earlier."

Dr. Farrell, who helped create the recently drafted New Jersey Dyslexia Handbook, cites two critical takeaways from its contents: a model for universal screening and a recommendation for immediate intervention.

"Any child who is not passing the screening or not performing at the level expected in the classroom, it's recommended that they get structured literacy instruction immediately, before formal evaluation," she adds.

As critical interventionists in reading and literacy – and myriad other areas of student development – classroom teachers require hawk-eye observation training that’s not limited to serving those students who have IEP classifications. Countless of New Jersey's youngest students are still waiting for someone to intervene on their behalf. "I think that a good 80 percent of learning disabilities are really reading disabilities," says Dr. Farrell.
The need for more comprehensive special education training and teacher support has never been greater. In addition to the myriad undergraduate-, graduate- and post-graduate-level degree and certification programs available at area universities, the following professional development opportunities can help offer teachers ongoing support and invite turnkey solutions into classrooms, schools and districts.

- New Jersey Council for Exceptional Children will offer its Spring Conference 2018 on March 12 from 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. at Ramapo College. Offering more than 40 PD sessions on topics ranging from behavioral disorders and inclusion to assistive technology and multi-sensory, the conference features information and guidance for every educator at every career level. For more information, visit www.njcec.org and to register, visit www.njcec2018springconference.eventbrite.com.

- Children’s Dyslexia Centers of New Jersey serve students and teachers from five locations across the state: Burlington, Hasbrouck Heights, Northfield, Scotch Plains and Tenafly. Through partnering with these centers, the Center for Dyslexia Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University currently is offering educators scholarships for free training in the areas of dyslexia screening and structured literacy instruction. For more information, visit the Center for Dyslexia studies homepage at www.fdu.edu or www.childrensdyslexiacenters.org.

- The Rutgers Conference on Reading and Writing offers educators the opportunity to earn PD hours, network with colleagues, hear and interact with keynote speakers and work together in breakout sessions. In addition to this large-scale conference, Dr. Lesley Morrow also puts together a minimum of four PD theatre series throughout the year, dubbed “standup performances,” giving teachers multiple opportunities to learn and connect with one another.

- Dr. Lauren McFadden, Associate Professor of Elementary and Special Education at Seton Hall University, recommends both new and experienced teachers join one or more of the following associations that would offer them access to cutting-edge research and PD opportunities: Learning Disabilities Association (LDA), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI).

“A child might be diagnosed as having a learning disability with difficulty in reading and writing. And a high percentage of the kids with dyslexia also have ADHD.”

Get a fresh look

Inclusive classrooms, K-3 intervention and a more comprehensive understanding of many learning disabilities and special needs are key factors that have helped create a modern culture of support for special ed. students and increased the need for special ed. training. And “teacher,” as a professional title, has come to comprise innovator, data synthesizer, experimenter and solutionist.

But those attributes by no means suggest teachers have become impervious to frustrations that arise when they themselves are left to sink or swim. In the inclusion or co-teaching setting,
teachers have the potential to experience tremendous frustration if their school handles a program's execution poorly, fails to offer adequate support during transition and/or delays implementing a system of ongoing support and training.

"Some of the problems with regards to inclusion is (lack of) communication and the non-training of teachers," says Dr. Norflus-Good. "Going in to collaborate together, if they don't have the same background and aren't on the same levels with each other, that becomes a problem. Part of it is training. Part of it is whether the school district can support it from a deeper level, meaning that they need time to plan together; they need resources to work together. You can't just send two people into a classroom together and say, 'OK, now let's make it work.' It's not going to work that way. They need time to figure it out and work together and build a relationship with each other."

Similar to the support they offer their own students at every step along their academic paths, the support for special ed. and inclusion teachers begins during preservice training, and extends throughout their careers. Continuing support and continuing education will enable teachers to stay in step with latest research and teaching trends that will have a positive impact on their students' learning.

And adjustment takes time. When a teacher receives next year's list of 20 students, eight of whom have an IEP, panic may strike even the most experienced educator at the prospect of figuring out how to translate each IEP into effective action that truly supports the student. On the flip side, a special ed. co-teacher may feel devalued when a student asks a question like, "Are you a real teacher?" These kinds of concerns can affect many teachers, new and experienced, and without proper training and adequate ongoing support, teachers can become overwhelmed. One way to resolve these issues as they arise and offer regular outlets for effective collaboration and support is through professional development.

"There's a constant need for PD," says Lesley Morrow, Ph.D., Rutgers Graduate School of Education Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for Literacy Development. "Teachers do need to get a fresh look at things and to (be able to) update. They're very isolated in their school and in their classroom."

Professional development services throughout New Jersey offer invaluable training and support for teachers, particularly those who haven't received their TOSD certification. From one-on-one coaching and turnkey sessions to small workshops and global conferences, professional development services help teachers remain on track, on trend and well supported so they can continue developing ways to ensure individual successes for their special needs students.

Special ed. students want what everyone wants: understanding. And they need what every student needs: effective support. That support may begin developing in university curriculums and at professional development sessions, but only the teachers themselves can deliver the full impact of that support to their students – and their students need that support now more than ever.

"Teachers constantly have new things being thrown at them," says Dr. Morrow. "They're looking for the silver bullet that's going to help all the kids. The teacher is the silver bullet. How the teacher delivers instruction will determine how well children will do."

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