

# Encyclopedia of Educational Leadership and Administration

## Special Education

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Special education is an integral component of the public education system. It includes the collective means by which children and youth with disabilities are provided an appropriate public education. Though special education as a professional practice has existed over a century, only in the past 30 to 40 years has it assumed a position of prominence and relevance in our schools.

The history of service to persons with disabilities extends back to the eighteenth century. Early attempts at humane treatment were initiated by Philippe Pinel and his student Jean Itard in their work with the mentally ill. Their methods of treatment were widely known, accepted, and employed in both Europe and North America.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, the father of modern psychiatry, applied and extended the work of Pinel and Itard in the United States after the Revolutionary War. Rush developed the concept of *moral therapy* (based on Pinel's philosophy of "moral treatment") and public education and support of children and youth with behavior problems. This was the initial suggestion that individuals with disabilities were due the same educational rights and privileges as other children.

Samuel Gridley Howe and Edward Seguin continued the growth and expansion of intervention programs for persons with disabilities in the nineteenth century. In 1832, Howe established Perkins School for the Blind in Boston and worked for the establishment by Massachusetts of the first state-supported school for persons with mental retardation in 1859. Upon the initiation of these two programs, the state of Massachusetts became the pioneer and leader in serving persons with disabilities. However, public school intervention programs became a reality only after the first compulsory attendance laws were passed in the late nineteenth century.

Seguin immigrated to the United States in 1850 to work with Howe at the Perkins School. He later worked as an administrator in state schools for the mentally retarded. Seguin's belief that persons with mental retardation were capable of meaningful learning led him to develop the first special education programs to focus on the development of self-help skills and vocational abilities.

While much of the history of special education has focused on the contributions of individual professionals, since 1950 (the date of the founding of the Association for Retarded Citizens), the field's history [p. 945 ↓ ] has revolved around legislation and litigation. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy signed the first federal legislation to solely address the needs of persons with disabilities: PL 88–164: The Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act. This law:

- Provided for the construction of community mental health centers
- Provided for the construction of research centers and facilities relating to mental and developmental disorders
- Provided for the training of teachers and other professionals to work with persons with disabilities
- Provided for research and demonstration projects related to the education of persons with disabilities

The prime result of this legislation was the establishment of University Affiliated Programs (UAP) at major research institutions across the nation. These UAPs conducted research and trained the professionals that significantly enhanced services to persons with disabilities.

A second legislative act that had a lasting impact on special education in the public schools was PL 93112 (Section 504): The Civil Rights Provision of the Vocational Rehabilitation Amendments of 1973. Basically, Section 504 declares that no individual can be denied access solely on the basis of a disability to any program or activity that receives federal funds. Section 504 opened the doors of vocational and trade schools for students with disabilities as well as setting the stage for mainstreaming and inclusion.

The most significant legislation related to special education. PL 94–142: The Education for all Handicapped Children Act, was passed in 1975. PL 94–142 was designed to:

- Ensure that all persons with disabilities were provided with a free, appropriate public education in the least-restrictive environment
- Ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities and their families were protected through due process

- Ensure the effectiveness of educational efforts concerning persons with disabilities

All the policies and procedures of PL 94–142 must be adhered to by local education agencies and monitored by state education agencies under the supervision of the U.S. Office of Education. PL 94–142 includes seven mandates:

- 1. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): This means that all education and related services must be provided to a student with a disability at public expense and that these services must be appropriate to the student's individual needs.
- 2. Age Requirements: This mandates that schools must serve all persons with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21.
- 3. Due Process: These are the procedural safeguards that are guaranteed to persons with disabilities and their parents with regard to identification, evaluation, and educational placement.
- 4. Least-Restrictive Environment (LRE): This means that persons with disabilities are to be educated in the environment that affords them the opportunity to develop at the optimum level and most closely approximates a normalized learning environment.
- 5. Individual Education Program (IEP): This is mandated as a document that must be developed annually and reviewed periodically to ensure that each individual's needs are being met.
- 6. Nondiscriminatory Evaluation: This means that a person with disabilities must be given diagnostic and evaluation instruments that do not discriminate along racial or gender lines, in a manner that follows equitable procedures (the referral to placement process).
- 7. Zero Reject: This means that local education agencies cannot refuse to serve any person with disabilities within their jurisdiction.

PL 94–142 also outlined the various disabilities that were eligible to be served under the legislation. The reauthorization of PL 94–142 as PL 101–476: The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included a revision and expansion of the disability categories. These categories include:

- Autism: “a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.”
- Deaf-blindness: a condition where students exhibit “concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.”
- Deafness: a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
- Emotional disturbance: a constellation of characteristics involving inappropriate interpersonal relationships, feelings, behaviors, unhappiness, or depression over a long period of time and to a marked degree that are not due to intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- Hearing impairment: an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but that is not included under the definition of deafness.
- Mental retardation: significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
- Multiple disabilities: when a child exhibits more than one major type of disability that results in a need for special education services that cannot be delivered in one of the impairment areas alone (e.g., a child who is mentally retarded and blind).
- Orthopedic impairment: students who exhibit congenital anomalies or some type of physical disability, such as clubfoot, missing limbs, poliomyelitis, cerebral palsy, and fractures.
- Other health impairment: limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems. These difficulties are severe enough to impact educational performance.
- Specific learning disability: difficulties in learning (often reading or math) that cannot be accounted for by any other disability.

- Speech or language impairment: a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI): students who have acquired a brain injury due to “physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment” that stems from closed or open head trauma and is not due to congenital issues or injuries induced by birth trauma.
- Visual impairment: an impairment in vision that even with correction adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.

With this revision, language was changed to reflect a “people first” orientation, autism and traumatic brain injury were added as disability categories, rehabilitation counseling and social work were added as related services, and transition services were added as a direct service intervention for those covered by the act. IDEA was amended in 1997 and went through a second reauthorization in 2004.

Litigation also has had a significant effect on the operation of special education programs in the public schools. Among those court cases involving persons with disabilities and having the greatest impact on schools and schooling are:

- *Honig v. Doe* (1988): The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the “stay put” provision of PL 94–142 and held that schools were limited to 10 days of suspension in relation to students with disabilities and that exceeding this limit denied such students their right to a free, appropriate public education. The court further rejected the “dangerousness” concept as an exemption to the “stay put” provision.
- *Board of Education v. Rowley* (1982): In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court defined the term “appropriate education” contained in PL 94–142. The court held that the state satisfies this requirement via personalized instruction and adequate support services.
- *Irving ISD v. Tatro* (1984): In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court held that certain medical services were covered by PL 94–142 as related services if they allowed students with disabilities to be placed in less restrictive educational environments and that failure to provide such services violated

the equal access provision of Section 504 in the Rehabilitation Amendments of 1973.

- *Timothy W. v. Rochester School District* (1989): In this case, the U.S. First District Court held that under PL 94–142, all children with disabilities must be provided with a free, appropriate public education that meets their individual, unique needs and that the ability to benefit from such services was irrelevant.
- *Daniel R. R. v. Texas State Board of Education* (1989): The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in this case that schools need not mainstream all students with disabilities without regard for whether the regular education setting provides the leastrestrictive educational environment or meets the condition of “appropriateness” as defined in the *Rowley* case. In essence, the court held that placement decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis grounded in each student's unique individual needs.
- *Oberti v. Clementon Board of Education* (1993): In this case, the First District Court of the United States held that school districts must make a “reasonable effort” to include students with disabilities in the regular classroom environment and to ensure that to as great an extent as possible, such environments are of educational benefit to these students.
- *Florence County School District 4 v. Carter* (1993): The Supreme Court of the United States found that parents who unilaterally withdraw their children from a school district that provides an inappropriate education (as defined by PL 94–142 and the *Rowley* case) and place that child in an alternative program that meets the child's unique, individual needs are entitled to the reimbursement of their costs by the original school.

One of the most important aspects of special education in the public schools stems from the requirement in PL 94–142 that students with disabilities be provided with a “continuum of alternative educational placement options.” This requirement is based upon the premise that the nature of the least-restrictive educational environment differs on an individual basis and that a range of possible place options is necessary to increase the chances that an appropriate environment can be identified for each student. Educational professionals have proposed and implemented a cascade model of educational services in which the levels interface.

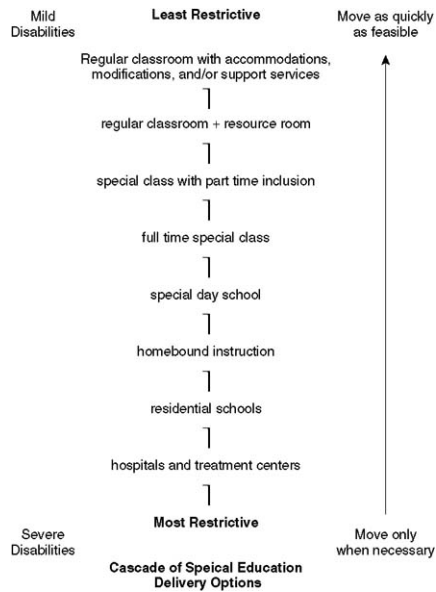
In this model, students are placed in the program that seems to best meet their unique educational needs. In many instances, the placement option selected serves as an



environment in which those skills critical to moving to a less restrictive educational environment are taught and refined. Once the student has mastered those requisite skills for a less restrictive environment, he or she is moved to that environment and the instructional process begins anew with a new target environment. In some cases, students with disabilities fail to succeed in settings that are believed to be their least-restrictive educational environment. In such cases, students are moved to a more restrictive environment to better address their individual needs and to teach the skills necessary to return to their initial placement.

Instructional methodology and practice in the field of special education focuses on addressing four areas of student learning. These are:

- 1. Acquisition: the initial learning of the information, process, or procedures that is the target of instruction
- 2. Proficiency: the mastery of the information, process, or procedure that is the target of instruction
- 3. Maintenance: the ongoing functional use of the information, process, or procedure that was previously taught
- 4. Generalization: the ability to use the information, process, or procedure in novel ways or situations



All areas of instruction must be planned for and included in the IEP. The ultimate goal of all special education is to allow the student to live a life that is as independent of supports as possible. Therefore, the development and mastery of specific skills and the generalization of those skills to the “real world” are of prime importance.

Special education, like all areas of professional endeavor, has been marked by specific milestones that have moved professional practice forward and fundamentally changed the manner in which persons with disabilities are served. Those milestones for special education include:

- Applied behavior analysis
- Normalization
- Learning strategies
- Vocational transition and career education
- Early childhood intervention

Each of these perspectives has had a significant, positive impact on the philosophy and practice in the field of special education.

Applied behavior analysis, or the application of the principles of behaviorism to “real-world” problems of social importance, has been a mainstay of effective intervention programs for persons with disabilities for over 40 years. From the development of academic skills, to classroom management techniques, to facilitating community/vocational integration, applied behavior analysis has been instrumental in improving the lives of persons with disabilities. Techniques such as task analysis have allowed teachers to break down complex skills to their constituent parts. Combining the task-analytic process with the techniques of chaining and positive reinforcement have facilitated the development of self-help skills (feeding, toileting, dressing, tying shoes, selecting appropriate clothing, etc.); vocational skills (making change, taking orders for food, cleaning tables, etc.); and community skills (buying a drink from a vending machine, shaking hands with people one meets, riding a bus to work or home, ordering and eating in a restaurant, etc.) in persons with the most severe mental disabilities. Through the behavior analysis of those contingencies that exist naturally in “real-world” environments and programming these contingencies into instruction, teachers have been able to ensure that these skills are maintained in settings outside of the schools and are generalized to new settings.

Normalization is a concept that has had one of the most positive impacts on persons with disabilities over the past 30 years. Developed by Wolf Wolfensberger, normalization is essentially using culturally normative means to create or maintain culturally normative behaviors and characteristics. The application of the principle of normalization to the education of persons with disabilities had a significant, positive impact on their quality of life. The use of community-based group homes for persons with disabilities reduced the population of residential institutions by 80% between 1975 and 2000. The application of the principle of normalization resulted in training programs for persons with disabilities that emphasized vocational and community adjustment skills. This resulted in an increase in the number of individuals with disabilities who were contributing to the good of society. Normalization, with its emphasis on integrating individuals with disabilities into society to as great an extent as possible, was the foundation for today's inclusion (mainstreaming) movement in the public schools.

Learning strategies, content enhancement, and the strategic instruction model are among of the most notable innovations in the field of special education. These approaches were pioneered and refined by Gordon Alley and Don Deshler from 1972 to

the present. Based on the research of Ann Brown and Judith Flavel on metacognition, learning strategies refers to an instructional approach in which the academic content serves as the vehicle to teach persons with disabilities how to decode, store, retrieve, and use the information included in textbooks and instructional activities. Learning strategies are basically techniques in which the student is taught how to identify pertinent information in a text or a lecture, communicate an interest in classroom activities nonverbally to teachers and peers, and effectively address test questions to demonstrate their knowledge. The philosophical foundation of the learning strategies approach is to help the student become an independent learner. The Kansas University Center for Research on Learning has validated 32 different learning strategies to address student behaviors, ranging from test-taking skills, to note-taking skills, to listening skills, to organizational skills for class materials. The learning strategies approach has been extended to address the needs of persons without disabilities yet at risk for academic failure.

Another notable innovation in special education was the development and implementation of vocational transition/career education programs for persons with disabilities. Initially developed by Oliver Kolstoe and refined by D. E. Brolin and Gary Clark, these programs addressed the life span needs of persons with mild to moderate disabilities. These programs targeted secondary students with disabilities and provided them with information concerning social, academic and physical job requirements, working conditions, and job stability. This program led to progressively longer internship job placements during the student's high school career, so that those skills taught could be practiced in the work setting, and was combined with individual vocational adjustment counseling. For this reason, these programs were often described as “work-study” programs. The goal of the vocational transition/career education programs was to ensure that all students in the program had a viable employment option upon graduation.

Early childhood intervention for persons with disabilities emerged from the work of Harold Skeels, Samuel Kirk, Benjamin Bloom, Joseph Hunt, and B. M. Caldwell. Based on the premise that the impact of disabilities could be minimized via intensive early intervention and experiences, early childhood special [p. 949 ↓ ] education has become a critical component in the delivery of appropriate services to individuals with disabilities and their families. Research has indicated that structured, positive early experiences

and stimulation can reduce or minimize the physical, affective, and cognitive impact of disabilities. A lack of such stimulation or training can result in a cumulative deficit that is difficult to remediate during the school years and often persists over the life span.

Early intervention programs are designed to address the needs of both children with obvious disabilities and those who are simply “at risk” for developing a disability in the future. Early intervention programs also established innovations such as direct involvement of parents via training and consulting and the integration of children with and without disabilities in educational settings. In the first instance, the training of parents in those skills critical to optimum child development essentially addressed the need to ensure that a child's “natural, first teacher” is one of good quality. Parents who understand their child's needs and how to meet those needs can provide continuous, appropriate intervention for their child in the home environment. In terms of the integration of children with and without disabilities in the same early childhood classroom, the focus was on providing models of age-appropriate, normal behaviors to those children with disabilities. Drawing from Wolfensberger's concept of “normalization” and Bandura's social learning theory, these “normal models” were essentially utilized as standards for children with disabilities to copy. The teacher could then reward any attempts of these children to imitate age-appropriate developmental skills.

The philosophy and practice of special education is currently undergoing an upheaval due to the influence of the work of W. Edwards Deming, Thomas M. Skrtic, and, increasingly, the perspective of postmodernism. Each of these influences has caused special education professionals to think, reflect, and consider the nature of the assumptions and beliefs upon which their field is founded.

Deming's influence has been most profound in his focus on quality and emphasis on systems and systems thinking. For Deming, educational organizations are systems that must be understood before reform efforts can be successful. These systems are designed to produce a given product. In his “Experiment With the Red Beads,” Deming demonstrated that inflexible systems in which change was superficial produced a consistent rate of defective products (much like the persistent dropout rate in our schools). These defective products must either be discarded or repaired. From Deming's perspective, special education is a subsystem in the schools where “repair work” is done. However, Deming warns about the nature of repair work in that:

- Repair work is twice as costly as doing something right the first time.
- The proposed repairs are seldom accomplished.

This perspective and its associated problems well describe the nature of many special education programs and the outcomes for students with disabilities in our schools. Students with disabilities experience more academic and disciplinary problems than those without disabilities, they are more likely to be excluded from traditional educational programs and placements, and they are more likely to experience a wide range of social problems over the life span.

Skrtic has examined the nature of special education practice and philosophy within the context of school culture and organization via the framework of critical pragmatism. Skrtic holds that the critique of modern knowledge requires a reconsideration of the basic assumptions of the field of special education. Specifically, he questions whether special education itself is a rational system and is critical of the proposition that disabilities are usefully understood as pathological conditions. Skrtic further holds that the historical traditions that underpin the knowledge base in special education differ significantly from those that underpin elementary and secondary education. Rather than being an alternative program model for persons who possess disabilities, Skrtic holds that special education emerged primarily to contain and conceal the failures of conventional elementary and secondary education practice. In addition, should educational systems attempt to become more inclusive and democratic, an adhocracy or learning organization must necessarily develop. Professional culture and practice in special and general education would mirror the adhocracy's focus on innovation, personalization, and inclusion through collective problem solving. The adhocracy configuration is the inverse of the bureaucratic organizational structure of public schools, which focuses on the standardization of practice. Skrtic proposes the nonfoundational approach of critical pragmatism for dealing with the paradox of special education and establishing true personalization and innovation of practice in our education systems.

Much of Skrtic's work involves the contradiction between the contextual nature of disability and conventional special education practice and how the field's inclusive ideal is stymied by its own theory of knowledge and the manner in which schools are structured. A related perspective influencing special education, postmodernism, also

relies on contextual understanding and how the social construction of knowledge influences professional philosophy and practice. The conflict in the profession of special education revolves around the challenge that postmodernism presents to its modern tenets. Many special education professionals fear that the postmodern perspective involves a rejection of those practices that have been validated as effective and that it represents a retreat from the scientific, empirical approach to disability studies. The postmodernists counter that this objectivist, functionalist approach is neither objective nor effective and that an alternative perspective that examines professional biases and conventional practices is necessary for the field to advance. This debate will inevitably continue and influence philosophy and practice in the field.

Currently, the field of special education is a prominent component of the public education system. The majority of the federal monies that are provided to the public schools are targeted for special education. As schools become more inclusive in nature, it is anticipated that the field will grow concurrently and that philosophy and practice will change to meet the new demands of educating all children in a unified system.

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See also

- [behaviorism](#)
- [child development theories](#)
- [deaf education](#)
- [Deming, W. Edwards](#)
- [disabilities, of students](#)
- [discipline in schools](#)
- [discrimination](#)
- [early childhood education](#)
- [emotional disturbance](#)
- [giftedness, gifted education](#)
- [individual differences, in children](#)
- [intelligence](#)
- [learning, theories of](#)
- [learning environments](#)

- [mainstreaming and inclusion](#)
- [mental illness, in adults and children](#)
- [psychology, types of](#)
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- [psychometrics](#)
- [resiliency](#)
- [schooling effects](#)
- [staffing, concepts of](#)
- [state departments of education](#)
- [tutoring](#)
- [underachievers, in schools](#)

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