CAREER KIT

Special Education Teacher Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Special Education Teacher

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

To become a special education teacher in a public school, you need at least a bachelor's degree, a state-approved preparation program in special education with student teaching, passing scores on your state's licensing exams, and full state certification or licensure in special education. Federal special education regulations require public school special education teachers to hold full state certification, which can be earned through an alternative route. The traditional path takes about four years; career changers with a bachelor's degree can often qualify in 1–2 years.

Timeline	4 years (traditional) or 1–2 years with an existing bachelor's degree
Typical cost	$5,000–$120,000+ (most of it is the degree; alternative routes cost far less)
Education	Bachelor's degree plus a state-approved special education preparation program
License	State special education teaching license or certification (varies by state)
Median pay	$67,170 per year
Job outlook	0% (2025–35), little or no change; about 37,100 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Check your state's special education license types

Time: 1–2 weeks

States license special education teachers in different ways: some issue a general K–12 special education license, others split by grade band or by disability category, such as mild to moderate, severe, deaf and hard of hearing, or visual impairment. Look up the license you want on your state department of education's site, plus its approved programs and required exams.

2. Earn a bachelor's degree

Time: 4 years · Cost: $5,000–$120,000+ total tuition depending on school

A bachelor's degree is required for every public school special education teacher. The most direct route is a major in special education, often combined with elementary education so you graduate eligible for two licenses. Coursework covers disability categories, behavior support, reading interventions, assessment, and special education law.

3. Complete a state-approved special education preparation program

Time: 1–2 years

If your degree is in another field, you can complete a post-baccalaureate certification program, an alternative certification program, or a master's degree in special education that leads to initial licensure. BLS notes that all states offer alternative routes for people who already have a bachelor's degree. Make sure the program is approved in the state where you want to teach.

4. Do your student teaching or supervised internship

Time: 12–16 weeks (some residencies run a full year)

Expect at least one semester in a special education setting such as a resource room, co-taught general education class, or self-contained classroom. You will help write and carry out IEP goals, collect progress data, and adapt lessons. Some alternative routes let you teach on an intern license while a mentor supervises you.

5. Pass your state's licensing exams

Time: 1–3 months of study · Cost: $130–$400 in exam fees

Many states use ETS Praxis special education tests, such as Special Education: Foundational Knowledge (5355); others use their own exams. Some states also require a content test (for example, elementary multiple subjects), a reading instruction test, or a basic skills test. Check your state's list and passing scores before you register.

6. Apply for your special education license

Time: 2–8 weeks for processing · Cost: $50–$250 including fingerprinting

Submit transcripts, program completion verification, exam scores, and fingerprints for a background check. Under federal IDEA regulations, a public school special education teacher must hold full state certification or licensure in special education, without emergency, temporary, or provisional waivers, and at least a bachelor's degree. Alternative-route certification counts. Some states require a master's degree after hiring for a professional license.

7. Apply for special education teaching jobs

Time: 1–3 months

Special education is a hiring priority in many districts, so openings often appear year-round. Apply to districts, charter schools, and special education cooperatives. Bring a sample IEP goal with progress monitoring data (with no student names), a behavior support example, and references from your student teaching.

8. Keep growing and renew your license

Time: Ongoing

Complete your state's professional development or continuing education to renew your license. Many teachers add endorsements such as autism, applied behavior, reading specialist, or early childhood special education, or earn a master's in special education, which moves you up most district salary schedules.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree (total tuition)	$5,000	$120,000	Typical range, varies by school/state; in-state public universities are at the low end
Alternative certification program in special education	$3,000	$10,000	Typical range, varies by program/state; for people who already hold a bachelor's degree
Master's degree in special education (initial licensure or advanced)	$10,000	$50,000	Typical range, varies by school; some districts and federal grants help pay
Praxis Special Education: Foundational Knowledge (5355)	$130	$130	ETS fee; your state may require a different special education test
Additional content or reading tests	$0	$300	Typical range, varies by state; for example Praxis 5001 costs $180
License application and fingerprinting	$50	$250	Typical range, varies by state
Total	**$18,180**	**$180,680**	

Requirements

Education	At least a bachelor's degree is required for public school special education teachers. Many majored in special education; others complete a post-baccalaureate or master's program that leads to licensure.
License	Public school special education teachers must hold full state certification or a license in special education. Federal IDEA regulations bar emergency, temporary, or provisional waivers for these teachers. License types and categories vary by state. Private schools typically do not require a license.
Exams	Most states require at least one special education test, and many add a content or reading instruction test. Many use Praxis; some states use their own exams.
Student teaching	Traditional programs require supervised student teaching in a special education setting. Some alternative routes allow teaching on an intern license under supervision.
Master's degree	Not required for an initial license in most states, but some states require one to reach a professional or permanent license after hiring.
Background check	Fingerprint-based criminal background checks are required for school employees and licensure.
Skills	Patience, data tracking, behavior management, clear writing for IEPs, teamwork with parents and specialists, and calm under pressure.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Choose your license and route

Days 1–30

Goal: Know which special education license, program, and exams you need.

- ☐ Find your state's special education license categories and pick one
- ☐ Decide on your route: bachelor's degree, alternative certification, or master's with licensure
- ☐ Compare three approved programs on cost, length, format, and job placement
- ☐ List the required exams and passing scores
- ☐ Request official transcripts
- ☐ Shadow a special education teacher or volunteer in a special education classroom

Phase 2: Build knowledge and experience

Days 31–60

Goal: Start coursework, learn IEP basics, and get school experience.

- ☐ Enroll in your program and set a weekly study schedule
- ☐ Read a plain-language overview of IDEA: IEPs, evaluation, and least restrictive environment
- ☐ Take a practice test for your special education exam and register for a date
- ☐ Apply for paraprofessional, behavior aide, or substitute jobs
- ☐ Practice writing measurable IEP goals with a mentor's feedback
- ☐ Complete fingerprinting and background check

Phase 3: Get licensed and hired

Days 61–90

Goal: Pass exams and build an application districts want.

- [ ] Sit your first licensing exam
- [ ] Write a one-page resume highlighting IEP, data, and behavior experience
- [ ] Prepare a portfolio: sample IEP goal with data chart, behavior plan, adapted lesson (no student names)
- [ ] Ask a supervising teacher for a recommendation letter
- [ ] Apply to districts, charters, and special education cooperatives
- [ ] Ask districts about special education stipends, loan forgiveness, or residency programs
- [ ] Practice the interview questions in this kit

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- [ ] Official transcripts from every college attended
- [ ] Bachelor's degree diploma or proof of expected completion
- [ ] Preparation program enrollment or completion letter
- [ ] Licensing exam score reports
- [ ] Fingerprint and background check clearance
- [ ] State license application and fee receipt
- [ ] Resume and cover letter
- [ ] Two or three recommendation letters
- [ ] Portfolio with a sample IEP goal, progress data, and behavior support plan (de-identified)
- [ ] Government-issued photo ID

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

Praxis Special Education: Foundational Knowledge (5355)

What it is: ETS computer-delivered test with 120 selected-response questions in 2 hours on foundational special education knowledge. Used by some states; passing scores are set by each state. Fee is $130.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks. Know IDEA basics (IEPs, least restrictive environment, evaluation timelines) and disability categories well.

Other Praxis special education tests

What it is: ETS offers additional special education tests for specific areas, and states choose which ones they require for each license category.

How to prepare: Check your state's requirements page on the ETS Praxis site before studying.

State-specific special education exams

What it is: Some states use their own special education licensing tests instead of Praxis.

How to prepare: Use the official preparation manual from your state's testing site.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a special education teacher?

Tip: Give a specific student or experience that shaped your decision.

2. How do you write a measurable IEP goal?

Tip: Show the parts: condition, behavior, criterion, and how you will measure progress.

3. How do you collect and use progress monitoring data?

Tip: Name a tool or method and explain how the data changed your instruction.

4. How do you handle a student in crisis or escalating behavior?

Tip: Talk about prevention, de-escalation, keeping everyone safe, and following the behavior plan.

5. How do you work with general education teachers?

Tip: Describe co-planning, sharing accommodations, and regular check-ins.

6. How do you lead or prepare for an IEP meeting?

Tip: Mention gathering data, inviting family input early, and keeping the meeting student-centered.

7. How would you respond to a parent who disagrees with the IEP team?

Tip: Listen, document concerns, explain options, and follow procedural safeguards.

8. How do you manage paraprofessionals in your classroom?

Tip: Show you give clear roles, schedules, and feedback, and treat them as part of the team.

9. What is the least restrictive environment and how do you apply it?

Tip: Explain that students should learn with nondisabled peers as much as appropriate, with supports.

10. How do you teach reading to a student far below grade level?

Tip: Mention structured, systematic phonics and frequent progress checks.

11. How do you keep up with IEP paperwork and deadlines?

Tip: Describe a calendar system and how you protect compliance dates.

12. Tell us about a time a strategy did not work.

Tip: Show you looked at data, changed course, and what happened next.

13. How do you take care of yourself in a demanding role?

Tip: Be honest and practical; districts worry about burnout and want to hear a plan.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed 16 weeks of student teaching in a K–5 resource room serving 18 students with IEPs
- Wrote and monitored measurable IEP goals in reading and math under a licensed special education teacher
- Collected weekly progress monitoring data and graphed results for IEP meetings
- Co-taught a 4th-grade inclusion class, adapting lessons and assessments for students with disabilities
- Implemented behavior intervention plans and reduced classroom incidents for one student by half over 8 weeks
- Worked two years as a paraprofessional supporting students with autism in a self-contained classroom
- Communicated weekly with families and contributed to annual IEP reviews
- Passed Praxis Special Education: Foundational Knowledge on the first attempt

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Choosing a program that does not lead to the license category you actually want
2. Assuming an emergency or provisional permit is enough long term; federal rules require full state certification
3. Skipping special education law and IEP basics before interviews
4. Bringing no data or IEP samples to show what you can do
5. Ignoring burnout risk and taking on more caseload than you can manage without asking for support
6. Not asking about stipends, loan forgiveness, or residency programs that pay for training
7. Sharing identifiable student information in a portfolio

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Special Education Teachers**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/special-education-teachers.htm

- **U.S. Department of Education: IDEA**

https://sites.ed.gov/idea/

- **ETS Praxis: Special Education: Foundational Knowledge (5355)**

https://praxis.ets.org/test/special-education-foundational-knowledge-5355.html

- **Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)**

https://exceptionalchildren.org

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $49,230	**$67,170 per year**	More than $105,020

Outlook: BLS projects little or no change (0%) in employment of special education teachers from 2025 to 2035, but about 37,100 openings each year, mostly to replace teachers who leave the occupation. There were about 584,100 special education teacher jobs in 2025. Some districts offer stipends or hiring incentives for special education teachers; ask when you apply.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/special-education-teachers.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.