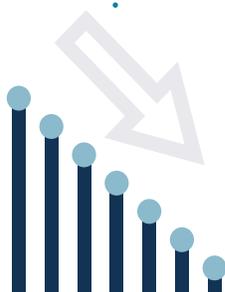


Addressing the
CRITICAL SHORTAGE OF
SPED
TEACHERS

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Introduction



There is a nationwide shortage of qualified special education (SPED) teachers.



There is a nationwide shortage of qualified special education (SPED) teachers. In 2017, all but four states reported special education personnel shortages to the [U.S. Department of Education](#).

This teacher shortage poses myriad problems for district leaders and education policymakers. It widens the achievement gap for students with disabilities and developmental delays, puts additional strain on classroom teachers and school personnel, and could put schools and districts in compromising legal situations—to name but a few of the less-than-ideal outcomes.

And it looks as though the shortage will continue to grow.

According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), demand for special educators is expected to grow 3 percent by 2029, driven by a growing need for special education services. WGU's Master of Arts in Teaching with a Concentration in Special Education (MAT SPED) program was created to help close this gap. The program is geared toward aspiring special education teachers who hold a bachelor's degree and current teachers who want to switch to SPED teaching or advance their careers.

Fully online, affordable, and competency-based, the graduate degree seeks to widen the path to teaching special education and ensuring that more qualified professionals are teaching in schools.

The growing education gap



According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are almost 444,000 special education jobs in America.

That might seem like a lot, but most of those jobs are found in just a few states. States with high populations (such as Texas, Florida, and California) and perennial educational leaders (such as Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Illinois) have a disproportionately high concentration of full-time special education teachers, per [Bureau of Labor Statistics data](#). But even these states still have trouble meeting student demands.

And the COVID-19 pandemic could create bigger challenges in the coming years.

“The pandemic caused many states and school systems to shut down. This will likely increase the achievement gaps for

all learners, and specifically those with disabilities,” says Roben Daubler, chair of the MAT SPED program at WGU. “There have been lots of discussions about how to best serve students online, but not enough discussions about how to ensure that students with disabilities are having their IEP (Individualized Education Program) goals met.”

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 14,300 new special education jobs will be created by 2029—perhaps even more, once the dust settles from the Coronavirus pandemic.

The question is, will these jobs be occupied by qualified professionals? Or will even more people be asked to take on responsibilities they haven’t been trained for?

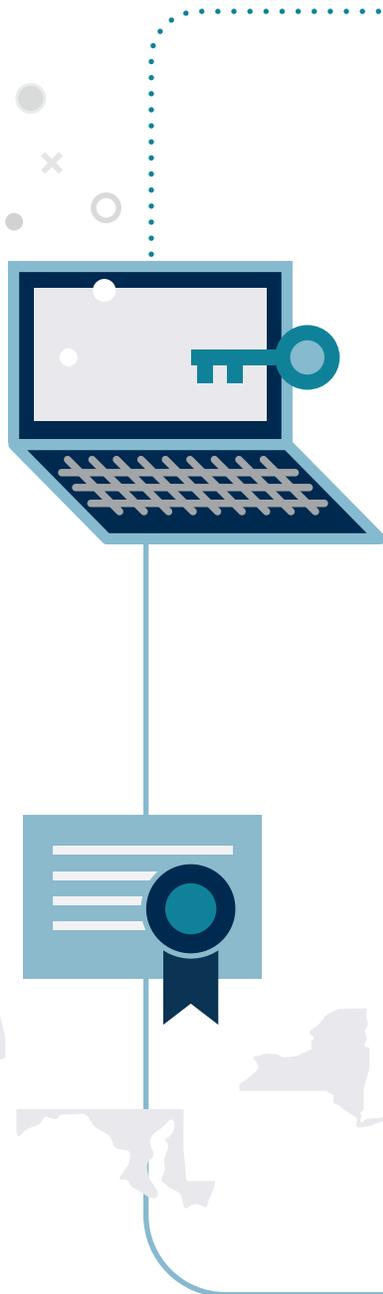
Common pathways for SPED teachers



Many people who gravitate toward SPED teaching typically have experience working with students with disabilities. They're looking to benefit their community, and they believe that developing skills and acquiring the necessary credentials will help them turn their passion into a career.

One problem is that the talent pool simply isn't big enough to meet the demand. Another challenge is that, without access to convenient, online solutions to further their education, many current teachers don't feel like they have the time or energy to pursue another degree. These challenges need to be addressed in order to help close the nationwide gap of special education teachers in the coming years.

Teacher shortages are a well-known problem all district leaders and policymakers face. Further complicating matters, the qualifications to become a special education teacher vary by state. Usually, a bachelor's degree from an accredited four-year institution, state certification, and a specialization credit is the baseline for SPED teaching. But in three states—Connecticut, Maryland, and New York—SPED teachers need to hold a master's degree, *Education Week* reports.



Common pathways for SPED teachers

TWO POTENTIAL TALENT POOLS:



Teachers who
are already licensed
but teach in a
different subject



Other professionals
with a bachelor's
degree, but not a
teaching credential

To reverse the shortage, the pipelines into teaching must be widened. But what new demographics can district leaders and policymakers tap to address this shortage?

Two potential talent pools could provide the answer: teachers who are already licensed but teach in a different subject, and other professionals with a bachelor's degree, but not a teaching credential. WGU's MAT SPED program is perfect for both types of professionals wanting to further their education. This convenient online solution can help reverse the nationwide teacher shortage.

It's common for experienced teachers to decide that their passion lies in teaching students with exceptionalities. For some, the additional pay and the more varied daily routine might motivate them to switch tracks. Some people who earned bachelor's degrees and started non-teaching careers might decide later in life that they want to teach special education, but becoming a SPED teacher might not seem like a feasible option because of time and financial constraints.

Both demographics could be natural fits that help address the nationwide special education teacher shortage—with the right education.

Remote, flexible learning is a must



The MAT SPED program gives these students an opportunity to earn an special education license without taking redundant classes or obtaining a second bachelor's degree.



Teachers and recent college grads who want to further their education have plenty of graduate degree programs to choose from. But many programs lack flexibility, which is a problem for both groups. Many are working full-time jobs and might even be raising a family by the time they decide to pursue a master's degree. Some also have significant student loans left over from their first degree.

That might explain why WGU experienced an 82 percent increase in demand for its SPED program between 2012 and 2018.

WGU's MAT SPED program was created to solve a specific need. Approximately one in eight students enrolling in the [Bachelor of Arts in Special Education](#) program already had a bachelor's degree. The MAT SPED program gives these students an opportunity to earn an special education license without taking redundant classes or obtaining a second bachelor's degree.



Remote, flexible learning is a must



College grads seeking a license

When qualified special education teachers aren't available, schools usually thrust paraeducators, part-time staff, long-term substitute teachers, first-year teachers, or full-time teachers into the role—often with minimal training and guidance. In these cases, students with special needs may not get the kind of focus and individualized instruction they need.

In inclusive classrooms, students with exceptionalities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers. This is a positive development—research by Dr. Rebecca Watts, a regional vice president at WGU, shows that students with disabilities can benefit from remaining in an inclusive classroom up to 80 percent of the time.

However, inclusion classrooms are often overcrowded and receive limited support from additional staff. When this happens, students with exceptionalities don't receive the one-on-one support they need in general education classrooms. And their teachers, who are likely already being overworked, feel unprepared to meet these needs.

"It is not enough to keep students with disabilities in the 'regular class' for the majority of the day if the professionals in the room aren't equipped to work together to provide students with what they need," Watts writes in her research. "Spending hours each day in a learning environment that engenders frustration and a sense of failure is akin to measuring the time a commuter sits in a traffic jam each morning. Just as the commuter isn't nearing the goal destination, a student placed in a regular classroom without the support of a team of prepared professionals is safe and warm but isn't optimally progressing in learning and development."

What if we turned to college graduates who don't have teaching credentials to help fill the SPED teacher void instead of part-time staff and overworked teachers? At WGU, students can obtain their initial licensures and start teaching special education in two years or less.



Remote, flexible learning is a must



Current teachers

Educators are notorious for having little time for busywork that doesn't add to their teaching practice.

Some apply the same sentiment to furthering their education. Many teachers don't go back to school because they feel as though they don't have time—especially when that time will be spent in general elective classes or rehashing pedagogical theories in which they're already well-versed.

WGU's emphasis on competency-based education offers a solution for current teachers, who can move through their coursework—which is intensive, fast-paced, and focused on fundamental issues in special education, methodology, and skill development—at their own pace.

Teachers will still need to meet their states' licensure requirements, but experienced ones may be able to move quickly through the beginning courses of the program.



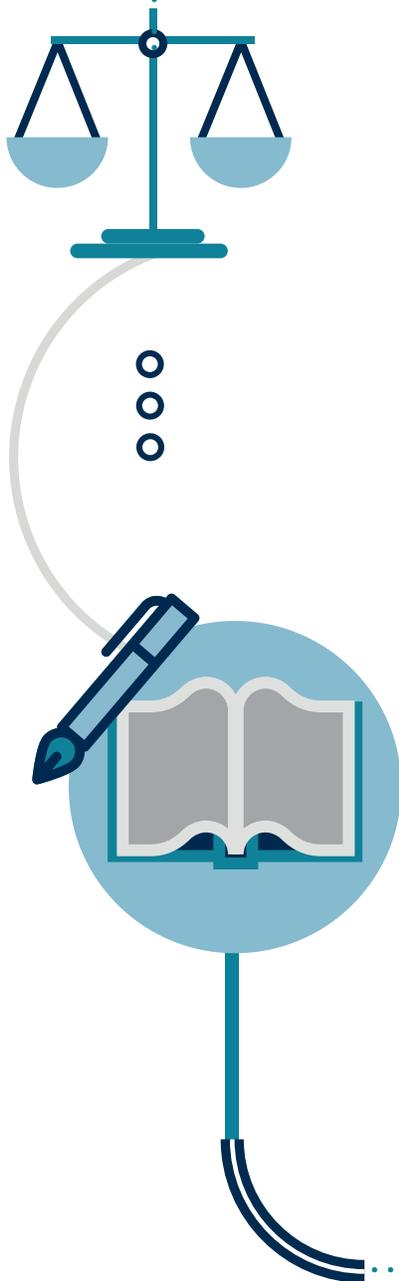
Current SPED teachers without credentials

It is surprising how many unlicensed special educators there are in the United States.

California alone has approximately 800,000 students with special needs statewide. Yet [EdSource](#) reports that 60 percent of first-year special ed teachers in California—more than 5,100 educators—don't have a special education teaching credential.

WGU's MAT SPED program could be a great option for uncredentialed SPED teachers. A master's degree can boost a salary and bolster a résumé, and it could even qualify teachers for additional stipends, depending on the state in which they live.

Legal ramifications



The benefits of the MAT SPED program go beyond in-classroom learning and support.

Special educators also receive extensive training on the legal aspects of special education, such as writing IEPs, sharing expertise in how to individualize instruction, and knowing best practices for behavior management—making them a vital resource for administrative staff, teachers, and parents.

Protected by the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, individualized education programs lay out the program of instruction, support, and services that students with exceptionalities need to thrive, according to understood.org. Educators and parents must agree with the goals, and public schools must follow them. Parents have an important voice in the IEP meeting, as they are the ones that know the student best. If there is ever a disagreement on how to best serve the student, parents have the right to mediation at the expense of the school.

Putting qualified SPED teachers in every school will give district leaders and parents peace of mind. Special educators serve as legal liaisons and facilitate meetings between parents and administrators. They also advocate for students by ensuring that their IEPs are updated and followed.

6 key benefits of the MAT SPED program

Here are six reasons WGU's MAT SPED program can be an attractive option for recent college grads, current teachers, or current SPED teachers without a credential.

1



IT'S AFFORDABLE.

Graduate school is expensive—and it often forces people to put off going, if they end up going at all.

The cost of college—even after accounting for grant aid—is especially burdensome for low-income students, according to a study from the [Institute for Higher Education Policy](#). And a 2020 [OneClass](#) survey found that 56 percent of students said that they might not be able to continue college because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WGU's master's programs are, on average, [a small fraction](#) of the price of those offered by other schools, and a variety of [scholarships](#) and other forms of financial aid are available.

2



IT'S FLEXIBLE (AND 100% ONLINE).

Remote learning is more popular than ever.

In 2018, nearly 7 million of the more than 19 million students enrolled at postsecondary institutions took at least one online course, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#). The flexibility provided by online coursework makes higher education more accessible to young professionals with busy schedules, like teachers and other young college graduates.

Because it's competency-based, students can finish the MAT SPED program at their own pace; highly motivated students can graduate in under two years.

6 key benefits of the MAT SPED program

3



IT'S HIGHLY MARKETABLE.

Some prospective students don't pursue a degree because they're not convinced it will help them find a job or advance their career.

Because the program grants an initial license in special education, which is crucial to landing a job, MAT SPED graduates won't have to worry about that. What's more, earning a master's degree increases a teacher's base salary an average of \$2,760 in their first year, according to the [National Council on Teacher Quality](#), and could yield a bump of nearly \$7,400 a year by the time they reach their max pay. Many districts also award stipends to teachers working in special education or hard-to-fill jobs.

4



IT USES INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY.

WGU's MAT SPED program uses innovative technology to give students firsthand experience. For example, the program uses Mursion, an augmented reality simulation tool, to afford students the opportunity to lead an IEP meeting—building efficacy and empowering WGU's students as they enter the special education teaching arena.

5



IT'S A PART OF WGU'S TEACHERS COLLEGE.

WGU's MAT SPED program is just one of the robust offerings of [WGU's Teachers College](#).

Another example is the [bachelor's program in special education for students with mild to moderate exceptionalities](#), which is designed for prospective teachers who don't yet have their teaching degrees. This proves that the college already has experience delivering high-quality instruction to future special education teachers.

In fact, as of 2018, WGU is the third-ranked institution among all those granting master's degrees in special education. Students can trust that they are in capable hands and receiving instruction from world-class faculty.

6 key benefits of the MAT SPED program

6



IT FOLLOWS INDUSTRY STANDARDS.

Speaking further to the credibility and thoroughness of WGU'S MAT SPED program is its alignment with two gold-standard industry credentials.

The first is the [Council for Exceptional Children's \(CEC\) Professional Preparation Standards](#), a set of rigorous standards for the safe and effective practice of special education in the United States.

"CEC is the gold standard of expectations for professionalism for teachers of special education," says Daubler. "Throughout the program, WGU abides by and follows the code of ethics that is embedded in the program. That is important to us in order to ensure that our students are prepared when they enter the profession."

The MAT SPED program also uses the [edTPA](#) as a measure of competence. The edTPA is a national performance-based, subject-specific assessment and support system that measures whether teachers have the skills and knowledge to succeed in the classroom.

Graduates of the program can feel confident that the skills they're learning are backed by the most current data and held to the most rigorous standards.



A new solution



WGU's MAT SPED program is a modern solution for the nationwide shortage of special educators. Aiming to draw from two new talent pools, the program will help expand the pipeline so that more qualified special educators enter the workforce. Recent college graduates, current teachers and special educators without a license or credentials can all benefit from it.

District leaders and policymakers need to act now to address the special education teacher shortage. Doing so will help close the achievement gap for learners with disabilities, ease the burden placed on teachers and school officials, and reduce the risk of legal complications in districts and schools.

"We need to really make sure we are providing an adequate, appropriate education for all learners," says Daubler. "MAT SPED and the strategies it equips teachers with will help all students in their classroom, not just a handful of students. That should be the biggest goal of a district: to help all students, to serve them well, and to meet their needs."

LEARN MORE

about the Master of Arts in Teaching
Special Education program at WGU.