Meeting the Needs of Virginia’s Children with Disabilities: 
The Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program

Institution

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Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program Team

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Describe your program, including its mission, goals, structure, and collaborative aspects:

Each day in Virginia’s schools, more than 16,000 students with disabilities, including mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance, are taught by over 2,000 educators who have minimal preparation for the challenges they face. In many cases, these teachers have had only one special education course as part of their preparation to meet the diverse needs of their students. Concomitantly, Virginia schools and teachers, like all schools and teachers across the United States, are subject to the increasing pressure of the heightened teacher preparation standards presented by No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act.

At issue is the need for highly qualified and fully licensed special education teachers, which is expanding at a faster rate than the capacity of traditional teacher preparation programs to respond. The Commonwealth of Virginia has addressed this crisis by granting these teachers conditional licenses to allow them to begin teaching while completing the requirements for full licensure.

Mission

Old Dominion University’s (ODU) response to the growing educational needs of Virginia’s children with disabilities and the shortage of special educators was to design and to implement the Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program (CSEEP). The primary mission of this program is to provide a readily accessible path to full licensure and highly qualified status for the more than 2,000 conditionally licensed special education teachers across the Commonwealth and, in doing so, to ensure a high quality education for Virginia’s children with disabilities. The CSEEP program is a clear success: to date, CSEEP has enabled almost 700 teachers to achieve full licensure, highly qualified status, and to acquire the skills necessary to educate their students with disabilities.

Goals

CSEEP program goals are to:

- utilize satellites, television, interactive technology, the Internet, and other electronic communication to provide high quality special education courses to identified individuals throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia;
- establish a collaborative relationship among the Commonwealth’s public and private school systems, the Virginia Department of Education, and Old Dominion University to facilitate full licensure for all special education teachers in Virginia who hold conditional licenses;
- integrate content knowledge, technology standards, instructional strategies, and the Virginia Standards of Learning throughout the course work, using evidence-based practices;
- evaluate all components of the project including curriculum design, course content, teacher application of knowledge and skills, and overall success in providing full endorsement for special education teachers in Virginia; and
- assess P-12 student academic and non-academic change over time in grant participants’ classrooms.

Structure

The program’s design is intended to overcome the significant geographic, opportunity, and cost barriers that prevent these teachers from having access to the special education courses necessary to complete the requirements for full licensure. Many of the teachers participating in
CSEEP are place-bound in locations that are distant from established degree programs. These individuals are working professionals who are limited in the time they can devote to taking courses and often are unable to assume the costs of additional coursework. To address these barriers, key components of CSEEP include: classes scheduled at times convenient for working professionals, a network of distance learning sites throughout the Commonwealth, tuition assistance for grant participants, and support within the school environment.

The program’s courses are broadcast from studio classrooms on Old Dominion University’s main campus in Norfolk, Va. Full-time faculty members, who are experienced in their disciplines and in distance learning technology, teach the courses. Classes are tailored to the needs of teaching professionals and delivered in synchronous mode with asynchronous components, allowing for interaction between students and faculty. Three to five licensure courses are offered each semester at times convenient to working professionals. Additional classes (5-8) are offered during the summer and on Saturdays. The courses are structured in a traditional, uncompressed format, which has allowed over 250 CSEEP finishers to complete additional coursework and receive masters’ degrees in special education. One finisher commented, “I have never felt that the program sacrificed quality in response to the demand for teachers. Thank you for seeing that your teachers are well-educated and prepared for the practical applications of what they have learned.”

Teachers accepted into CSEEP take classes close to their homes or schools at community colleges, higher education centers, or military bases through ODU’s distance learning network, thus eliminating geographic barriers. A rural southwestern Virginia participant remarked, “Excellent program that serves critical needs for residents of geographic areas not accessible to a graduate [special education] program.”

Just as time and place were eliminated as barriers to completing the courses necessary for full licensure, the obstacle of teachers’ limited finances also was addressed. CSEEP provides approximately 85 percent of the tuition for each class that meets VDOE licensure requirements. One teacher wrote, “Without the CSEEP program’s financial support, it would have been impossible for me to complete licensure. I continue to recommend it to new teachers.”

In order that grant participants be supported within their school environments, every teacher who enters the program must submit the application of a colleague (approved by the principal) at his/her school who will act as a mentor. The CSEEP mentor must have full endorsement in the area(s) that the participant teacher is seeking licensure. All mentors undergo an orientation in which they learn to provide classroom level support, observe teachers, and provide data on their mentee’s performance.

Collaborative Aspects

The Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program is a collaborative effort that includes the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), public school systems and private schools in Virginia, national and state advisory boards, and Old Dominion University’s Darden College of Education, College of Arts and Letters, and College of Sciences. The CSEEP program, implemented in 1997, is a distance-learning teacher preparation program that is delivered via Old Dominion’s satellite televised instruction network (TELETECHNET) to 32 sites spanning the Commonwealth.

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides the funding that underwrites tuition assistance to teachers and for grant administration. Old Dominion University’s Colleges of Education, Arts and Letters, and Sciences work with the special education program and ODU’s distance learning network to provide the content and delivery method. Virginia’s public
schools and accredited private programs are the source for curriculum design, principal and mentor support, and evaluation. National and state advisory boards provide oversight for grant operations and plans. With the support of the national and state advisory boards, the VDOE, public and private schools, mentors, and principals, CSEEP is able to generate timely and systematic program adjustments needed in order to prepare special education teachers to provide quality instruction for Virginia’s students with disabilities. One national advisory board member praised the innovative nature and quality of course work stating, “It’s the best program I’ve seen.” The following flowchart (Figure 1) illustrates the collaborative aspects of the program.

Figure 1. Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program: Collaborative Flowchart

Data collection for the program is rigorous. Teachers, mentors, and principals complete pre- and post-task rating forms derived from the Council on Exceptional Children’s (CEC) Performance-Based Standards for special education teachers. Data indicate that not only do CSEEP finishers rate themselves as better prepared to implement CEC standards at program completion, but their principals and mentors agree: teachers who completed licensure requirements through the CSEEP program are providing high quality instruction.

Teachers and schools have welcomed the innovative and user-friendly approach that the Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program has developed to prepare special education personnel. CSEEP, as an alternative licensure program, has been accredited by the Virginia Department of Education, reviewed by the National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education (NCATE), and accorded national recognition by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Since its inception, CSEEP has received continual funding from the Virginia Department of Education. The almost 700 special educators who have completed full licensure in learning disabilities, mental retardation, and/or emotional disturbance represent two thirds of Virginia’s 93 public school divisions and 31 accredited private education programs. These special educators have impacted the education of more than 16,000 students with disabilities.
What evidence do you have of the program’s positive impact on its teacher candidates or in-service teachers?

The Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program (CSEEP) assesses teachers’ learning on evaluative instruments derived from the Council for Exceptional Children’s (CEC) Performance Based Standards. These seven standards are recognized as evidence-based practices in special education and include: 1) Instructional Strategies in which the teacher is able to select, adapt, and use methods and materials according to characteristics of the individual with disabilities; 2) Learning Environments/Social Interactions address the degree to which the teacher is prepared to design learning environments that encourage active participation in individual and group activities and modify the classroom to manage behavior; 3) Language indicates the ability of a teacher to identify and teach essential concepts, vocabulary, and content across the general curriculum; 4) Instructional Planning addresses the extent to which the teacher is able to identify and prioritize areas of the general curriculum and make accommodations for individuals with disabilities; 5) Assessment indicates the teacher’s preparedness to administer nonbiased assessments and interpret and use information from these formal and informal instruments to inform instruction; 6) Professional and Ethical Practice determines the degree to which the teacher is able to demonstrate commitment to developing the highest education and quality-of-life potential of individuals with disabilities; and 7) Collaboration assesses the teacher’s ability to plan and conduct collaborative conferences with individuals with disabilities and their families and to implement appropriate programs and assessments.

*Participant Task Rating Form*

Teachers complete the Pre-Task Rating Form at the beginning of their participation in CSEEP and the Post-Task Rating Form at the completion of the program. The form consists of 65 items, which are computed into one mean for each of the seven CEC standards, and an overall score yielding a total of eight scores for each test administration. A paired samples dependent t-test was computed comparing the means on the Pre-Task Rating Form with the means on the Post-Task Rating Form for the 170 participants in the sample. All of the competencies were statistically significant at p<.01, indicating that participants were significantly better prepared to implement all of the standards after completing their teacher licensure through CSEEP (see Figure 2). These data suggest the program has a direct impact not only on the quality of the teacher, but also on the quality of the special education instruction that grant participants provide to their students. As one participant put it, “I love working with children who have special needs and I feel that ODU has given me the opportunity to expand my knowledge to best serve my students.”

*Figure 2. Participant Task Rating Form Results*

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**Mentor Observation Form**

As peer coaches and classroom-level experts, mentor assessments and observations of CSEEP participants are invaluable. Mentors complete a Pre/Post Task Rating Form for their mentees and three observations per semester. A summative evaluation form is completed by the mentor on each of his or her participants at the end of each semester of grant participation. A representative sample of the summative evaluation forms was gathered to assess mentors’ perceptions of their participants’ progress on each of the CEC standards. Of the 76 mentors included in the sample, 79% stated that their participant showed consistent progress or mastery of instructional strategies, learning environments and social interactions, language, instructional planning, and collaboration. Ninety percent of the mentors felt that their participant showed consistent progress or mastery of assessment, 93% of mentors indicated consistent progress or mastery of professional and ethical practice (see Figure 3). The means for each of the standards were extremely high, ranging from 4.30 to 4.63 on a 5-point Likert scale.

**Figure 3. Mentor Summative Evaluation Form Results**

![Mentor Summative Evaluation Form Results](image)

Additional data gathered from the mentors indicate that over the course of a semester, there was improvement in participants’ level of teaching competence in the pk-12 classroom. These data were used to compile the Mentor Pre/Post Task Rating Form, which was implemented in fall 2004. Sample competencies from this instrument that are related directly to the impact of participants on P-12 student learning are: evaluate instruction and monitor progress of individuals with disabilities; sequence, implement, and evaluate individualized learning objectives; implement systematic instruction in teaching reading comprehension and monitoring strategies; and use performance data and information to make modification in learning environments. Preliminary data analysis of the Mentor Pre/Post Task Rating Form indicates improvement on each of the seven standards.

**Employer Satisfaction Survey**

The teachers who have completed the CSEEP program clearly are more prepared to implement high quality teaching practices, but a major strength of the program assessment process lies in the triangulation of outcome data between participants, their mentors, and their employers (principals). The Employer Satisfaction Survey, implemented in 2002, was designed to compare performance between CSEEP finishers and their respective colleagues in the workplace. This survey was mailed to each teacher’s principal after the participant completed the CSEEP program and consists of seven aggregate items based on the CEC/NCATE standards in the areas of instructional strategies, learning environments and social interactions, language, instructional planning, assessment, professional and ethical practice, and collaboration. The principal rated both the CSEEP participant and other special education colleagues on level of
classroom competence to implement the standards on a scale from inadequate to exceptional. The data include employers’ ratings of over 200 participants who finished from spring of 1997 through summer of 2004. Employers consistently rated CSEEP participants higher than their colleagues on all seven of the content standards (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Employer Satisfaction Survey Results

One employer remarked, “I have personally witnessed so much growth in the teachers who have participated in the CSEEP program. Changes are evident during IEP meetings and in-school staffings. I know our teachers are more knowledgeable and confident due to the valuable information they have learned through their CSEEP classes.” The following comment made by a high school principal recently recognized as Virginia Principal of the Year captures the sentiment of the majority of building level administrators, “Having worked with a number of teachers enrolled in the CSEEP program, I know that they will be extremely well-prepared for the challenges posed by today’s students.”

CSEEP Finisher Survey

A follow-up survey was conducted in summer 2003 with CSEEP finishers (N=167). These data indicated that over 88% of the respondents are fully licensed and teaching in their specialty areas; that CSEEP helped them to obtain full licensure; and that course work provided through CSEEP increased their ability to provide effective classroom instruction. Finally, the vast majority of CSEEP participants stated that the mentor program provided appropriate support throughout the CSEEP experience and, perhaps most important, almost all of the finishers polled (90%) indicated that the completion of their licensure program through CSEEP increased the likelihood that they would remain in the field of special education. These data reflect an extremely positive outcome for Virginia’s students with disabilities as it indicates that their teachers will remain on the job to gain the cumulative experience and knowledge to continue to deliver high quality, evidence-based instruction increasing greatly the likelihood of success for all students.
What evidence do you have of the program graduates' ability positive impact on P-12 pupil learning?

Ms. Jinni Smith, Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program (CSEEP) finisher and Teacher of the Year for the Southeastern Cooperative Education Programs provides first-hand evidence of the effect of the program on her students: “I feel that my participation in the Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program at Old Dominion University has had a direct impact on my students. It was through this program that I gained the professional knowledge and skills to serve the population of students with which I work. While I feel that the grant program has been instrumental in my professional preparation, it is through the success and gains of my students thus far that this contribution is evident.”

The performance-based content standards developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) reflect knowledge and skills that correspond both to accreditation standards and evidence based classroom practices. The Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program’s curriculum and assessment practices have been developed around these standards in order to ensure quality instruction for Virginia’s children with special needs. Data to support the CSEEP curriculum were collected from 727 Virginia special education directors, principals and assistant superintendents. Analysis of these data provided an examination of the curriculum in the licensure program and the relative emphasis placed on specific skills within each course. An evidence-based “goodness-of-fit” was established between the university classroom and the P-12 classroom components of the teacher preparation program. Special education graduate students, including CSEEP participants, who completed the Old Dominion University Graduate Student Satisfaction Survey indicated that the program prepared them well to be special education teachers (92%) and related directly to current classroom practice (97%).

Drawing on the performance-based standards established by the Council for Exceptional Children, survey data collected from administrators, and a review of the research on teacher classroom practices, the CSEEP team incorporates a series of case study activities in all courses that include a practicum experience. Evaluation of the quality of teacher performance within and across these overlapping courses is based on the teacher’s ability to document positive change in students’ behavior. For example, several courses address issues that relate to classroom management of instruction and include a practicum experience in which teachers are required to conduct an academic or non-academic behavior change project. The purpose of these projects is to measure student growth, to compare student performance to a desired level, and to make adjustments in instruction based on that comparison. Research shows that direct and repeated measurement is one of the most powerful strategies to predict student progress as a function of classroom instruction. Thus, CSEEP participants are taught to collect academic performance data and to apply decision rules to make timely decisions about their instruction, as the following examples illustrate.

**Academic Behavior**

Using an Academic Behavior Performance Graph (Figure 5), the teacher recorded both the correct and error oral reading rate of one of her students (Baseline 1); next, verbal praise was introduced for 5 or more continuous correct responses (Praise 1) which produced an immediate increase in correct reading rate and, simultaneously, a decline in the error rate. To confirm that contingent praise had a positive effect on the student reading, the teacher briefly withdrew the use of contingent praise (Baseline 2), resulting in a decline in corrects and an increase in errors. With the reintroduction of contingent praise (Praise 2), a dramatic improvement in the student correct oral reading can be seen. The significance of this simple evidence-based strategy is two
fold: (a) more fluent readers are better at comprehension and (b) the reading experience is more enjoyable. All grant participants are required to assess their students’ performance using methodologies such as the one described.

Figure 5. Academic Behavior Performance Graph*

![Graph Image]

(*Student, teacher, and school names have been changed.)

Additionally, instructional strategies courses within the CSEEP curriculum all address the reciprocal relationship that exists between student learning and behavior problems. Given that learning and behavior problems often coexist, university instruction emphasizes the fact that the most powerful classroom management tool is successful academic instruction. Research and experience indicate that students who experience classroom success are far less likely to act out and disrupt instruction.

Instructional Analysis to Increase Opportunities to Respond and Correct Responses

Using an Instructional Analysis Form, teachers identify two to three students in their classroom and systematically collect data on the following to ensure that all students are given equal opportunities to be successful learners: (a) opportunities each student has to respond to instruction; (b) the ratio of correct to error responses; and, (c) the number of praise statements they deliver to each student. Next, teachers analyze the nature of their instruction and make adjustments that reflect best practices, namely, that students have at least two opportunities to respond per minute and that students are able to respond correctly at least 75% of the time. Figure 6 contains an example of an Instructional Analysis Form completed by a CSEEP teacher.
Figure 6. Instructional Analysis Form*

(*Students’ names have been changed.)

Once the teachers modify one or more aspects of instruction, they collect a second set of data on the same four variables of classroom instruction as seen in Figure 6. Data collected across 35 classrooms and teachers and five different subject areas revealed several very positive outcomes (Figure 7). While the number of opportunities for success remained essentially the same, the number of correct pupil responses rose and, at the same time, the number of error responses declined markedly. Equally significant, the number of teacher praise statements increased sharply as well. Finally, anecdotal teacher reports indicate a drop in the number of disruptive acts. Viewed together, these findings strongly suggest that CSEEP teachers are able to implement proven effective strategies and improve student academic performance.

Figure 7: Academic Intervention: Aggregated Instructional Analysis Data

Teacher-Pupil Interaction Analysis to Increase Student Engagement and Student Success

A series of case-learning exercises embedded in program course work allows teachers to gather and analyze classroom data to distinguish among various instructional settings and to select the most effective learning strategies for their students (see Figure 8). Data on appropriate and inappropriate responses are taken over several intervals in a variety of instructional settings, (i.e., large group instruction, learning centers and small group instruction). The type of response is detailed, along with the consequence of the response, to provide further data on alterable instructional variables. The goal is to maximize student engagement and, therefore, learning, by manipulating the instructional setting.
Data compiled from 60 students yield insight regarding instructional options most likely (i.e., teacher-directed small group instruction) versus less likely (i.e. independent learning centers) to produce positive student outcomes. Positive outcomes relate to increased student engagement, correct responses, and, conversely, fewer inappropriate responses. Subsequent observations using the same data collection form allow teachers continually to monitor the effectiveness of their classroom instruction and make adjustments as needed.

Summary

The Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program is founded on a model of success: the success of the program participants as teachers and the academic and non-academic success of their P-12 students with special needs. Using the standards developed by the Council for Exceptional Children as the basis for an evidence-based curriculum and assessment, CSEEP successfully has overcome the barriers that prohibit conditionally licensed teachers from gaining the additional course work they need to become fully licensed and, in doing so, has improved the quality of instruction for over 16,000 of Virginia’s students with disabilities.

The program also successfully has addressed heightened teacher preparation standards by providing the Commonwealth with highly qualified special educators, which, in turn, allows increased accreditation status of Virginia’s school divisions by No Child Left Behind standards. The Superintendent of Schools in Smyth County, Virginia, has attributed his division’s full accreditation to the program. Dr. Thomas Elliott, Assistant Superintendent of Teacher Education and Professional Licensure (VDOE) stated, “Virginia’s students with disabilities are experiencing better academic and non-academic outcomes as a result of the licensure practices of the Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program. I believe that this program is one of the most beneficial investments in children that the Virginia Department of Education has made.”