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# **Special Education Certification**

## **Questions & Answers**

STATE OF IOWA  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

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State of Iowa  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION  
Teacher Education and Certification Division  
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Des Moines, Iowa 50319

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN THE CERTIFICATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSONNEL

Contained in this discussion you will find a number of questions frequently asked in the area of special education and certification by prospective employers and employees. Hopefully the brief answers following each question will reduce the confusion in these areas to a significant degree. If there are further questions in the area of special education certification that this pamphlet does not answer for you or if the questions here suggest others to you, please do not hesitate to contact me. My office phone is: 515-281-3245.

Is a graduate from an institution approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) automatically awarded whatever endorsement they request or for which the institution recommends them?

No. I should indicate that, contrary to the opinion of many employers in the field, there has been no substantive, significant change in our process of certification in the past several years. We have, since the late 1950's, followed the procedure as outlined in this citation from the Iowa Departmental Rules.

13.12 (2) Iowa Departmental Rules

Colleges in other states. Certificates are issued on records showing graduation from teacher-education curriculum in colleges in other states which are members of the regional accrediting agencies of the territories in which they are located, and which are accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, provided such records show that the Iowa requirements have been met. (underlining mine)

(NOTE: These rules were first adopted in 1954.)

As you can see, accreditation by NCATE is not viewed by this office as a blanket endorsement of the appropriateness of training at institutions bearing their approval or carrying their accreditation. The NCATE "seal" is used as an indication to us of the general quality of a training program and is not used by this office as an indication of specific preparation having been met. The latter cannot be assumed from an NCATE "seal of approval" because programs with many modes of preparation, of at least minimal quality to achieve accreditation, involve curricula that are significantly different from each other. For example, some institutions (in other states) recommend individuals for teaching credentials at the elementary level in the regular classroom on the basis of successful student teaching in special education. Other institutions require (as does Iowa) student teaching in regular education at the elementary level if the individual is to be recommended for service at this level in this setting. Some institutions (again in other states) will recommend for endorsement #35 (K-12 special education) with as few as 15 semester hours in special education while others in the same state refuse to do so unless the individual has completed at least 30 semester hours in special education. Numerous other examples are available.



This office does not (and has not) accepted the fact that a special education training program is NCATE accredited and therefore simply awarded an endorsement. In the area of special education we could not justify the issuance of endorsements or approvals based on NCATE accreditation of the training program involved as NCATE does not accredit specific programs in any area of exceptionality. That is, the eight areas in which NCATE grants accreditation for programs are as follows: elementary teacher; secondary teacher; elementary principal; secondary principal; supervisor/curriculum director; guidance counselor/student personnel; school psychologist; and, superintendent. There is no specific accreditation for programs preparing teachers to work in the areas of speech pathology, instruction to the visually impaired, teaching the mentally handicapped, etc.

If NCATE accreditation is not a guarantee of certification in the state of Iowa, of what use is NCATE accreditation to an applicant?

From an authorization point of view it is, to be honest, of little use. Hopefully the standards to which the institution was held in the educating of its students was of benefit to the student as compared to schools not meeting the NCATE standards. Under current rules and regulations, failing to graduate from an NCATE accredited institution means that the professional has to complete successfully one year of service under a temporary certificate before a ten year professional certificate would be issued (providing that individual does not have one successful year of experience in another state on a valid certificate). Under the revised rules recently adopted by the State Board of Public Instruction, the importance of NCATE accreditation has been reduced such that the year of successful internship is no longer required for individuals not graduating from NCATE institutions. The current use of NCATE accreditation is to delimit one form of a "recognized program".

I could swear there is a system whereby an administrative official of a degree-granting institution simply recommends the individual for certain types of certification and they are granted automatically. Am I wrong here?

No, you're not. You are referring probably to the Iowa Approved Program Approach. For programs at Iowa institutions approved by this office (through evaluation of program proposals, on-site visits, personnel and student interviews, follow-up visitations, etc.) certification is automatic, provided the designated recommending official at the school of concern has validated, by his/her signature, the fact that the student in question has indeed completed the required course sequence satisfactorily. This program approval service was at one time available to schools in other states and was most often taken advantage of by training institutions in contiguous states. Students from these programs were treated as if they had graduated from an approved program located in Iowa. For a number of reasons this service is no longer made available to any but Iowa institutions. The program approvals, conducted by this office have no explicit connection with NCATE, as a school's program may be approved by this office, while the school itself may not carry NCATE accreditation (not perhaps because it would not meet the standards but, because the program is voluntary, accreditation may not have been applied for). For example, Loras College in Dubuque is not NCATE accredited but several of its teacher education programs have been approved by this office (endorsements 20, 32, 33, and 55 as well as twenty different approval areas).

A summary of the Iowa approved program system by institution, endorsement and approval is being prepared in chart form and will be distributed to all school superintendents, directors of special education and area administrators in the near future.



At what stage of the employment process must an Iowa teacher become certificated?

Iowa law is very clear on this point and reference to the issue appears in the Iowa Code, Chapter 294.1 where, under the heading "Qualifications--Compensation Prohibited", the following appears; "no person shall be employed as a teacher in a common school which is to receive its distributive share of the school funds without having a certificate of qualification...issued by some...officer duly authorized by law. No compensation shall be recovered by a teacher for services rendered while without such certificate...."

If I need information about the current certificate status of an individual, how may I obtain it?

Depending upon the urgency of the need, you should feel free to request information either by phone or correspondence to this office. When requesting information about individuals please give their first, middle, maiden, and last names as it facilitates the search through our records. Address, social security number, training program from which graduated, date of birth, etc. are not necessary to provide us (unless you have no information other than a first and last name and both are rather common) as our files are not organized in a manner allowing us to locate folders using these bits of information. If at all possible, please provide us with the folder number (on the face of the certificate) as this is the most rapid manner in which to locate an individual's file. If you desire information only about the certificate status of an individual(s) and do not desire to talk about the contents of the folder, you need not request to talk to me directly as the clerical staff can provide this information.

As there is a considerable personnel need in special education, I often find myself needing to hire teachers trained outside the state who do not have Iowa certification. If I cannot offer them a contract until they are certificated how should I handle hiring a professional who does not have a certificate at the time of the interview?

I would suggest that in your Position Vacancy Notification forms and in your advertisements of Positions Available or in your correspondence to these individuals in response to an initial inquiry, you require of them that the certificate status be cleared up prior to interview by your office or that it at least be initiated by that time, if indeed you are to abide by the law and not issue contracts to individuals who are not certificated.

Isn't this an expensive procedure for the applicant; to require them to be certificated when indeed they may not be offered the position or they may decline the offer because it is not attractive?

It may be an expensive procedure but I don't think it is an unreasonable one. Every profession has its "costs of doing business" and this is one of them in the teaching profession. When you consider the freedom to teach afforded each certificate holder, it is quite a reasonable cost. If all of your teachers had certificates prior to the interview or the issuance of a contract, it would simplify matters and save a lot of disappointments for individuals who cannot receive a certificate because of deficiencies who have not applied for same until after the school year starts.



Speaking of denials of certification requests, is there some process available for appeal by the employer or by the applicant to an original denial of certification?

Yes. The system works essentially as follows. First, a denial is issued by a consultant in the division of Teacher Education and Certification based on evaluation of the materials presented in support of the application. If the employer or applicant desires to appeal the original denial they need simply indicate so in a return letter to this office and present in that return letter a rationale supporting reversal of the denial and should also include in this letter additional supporting information. A Certification Review Committee will be convened to review the individual's situation with the added perspective of the rationale submitted by the employer or the applicant and any additional information submitted since the original evaluation. The Certification Review Committee is comprised of the individual originally evaluating the material and at least two other individuals, one from the division of Special Education in the exceptionality or service area of concern and the second an additional consultant from the division of Teacher Education and Certification with considerable experience in evaluating credentials. The outcome of this meeting may be issuance of a certificate consistent with the original request of the applicant. Alternatively, the group may reaffirm the original decision. Lastly, there may be some middle ground reached of temporary authorization pending completion of certain courses or demonstrated expertise in certain areas.

If the Certification Review Committee denies for a second time the applicant's requests for certain endorsements or approvals, the applicant may appeal a second denial upon submission of additional information and supporting rationale. In this case, however, both the applicant and his/her employer will be requested to appear before the Review Committee to discuss the issue in greater detail and with more immediacy. The same three potential outcomes are available, in this instance.

If denial is the result of this third evaluation, the applicant's only recourse is to appeal directly to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. If the State Superintendent should deny certification the next appeal would need to be made to the State Board of Public Instruction. Relief through the courts should be sought only after exhausting these "administrative remedy" channels.

I should indicate that, although errors are made, this office makes every attempt to evaluate each application in its entirety and to consider the potential ramifications of denial in each case coming before it so that successful appeal of a denial is generally difficult and will depend upon submission of considerable supporting information and documentation not originally available to the division.

Does Iowa have any reciprocity with other states?

No. The state of Iowa does not issue certificates based purely upon the individual's having met the certification requirements for a particular type or level of service in some other state. The only area in which such reciprocity exists for the state of Iowa is with substitute certificates where it is required that an individual have taught on a valid, regular status certificate prior to their being issued a certificate for substitute teaching in the state of Iowa. Although reciprocity may be a viable, eventual option in several areas of regular education, the requirements in the instructional and support service areas of special education differ so widely among states that it becomes very difficult to justify initiating reciprocity procedures in special education.



You have mentioned substitute, what are some of the relevant variables in this area?

First, the general axiom of "certificate before contract" as noted above applies in this case also. The individual must apply for a certificate allowing substitute service just as he or she must to function on a regular basis. The same application and fee are required. The certificate, however, is valid in the substitute's case for only six years rather than the ten year validity for a regular professional certificate. The substitute may work only 90 days during the school year and may be hired only to replace fully certificated personnel. That is, they may not be employed to begin a school year even if it is anticipated they will do so for only a short period. Because substitutes are envisioned as functioning only for short durations in whatever job settings they accept, they are not required to have approval areas consistent with the exceptionality areas of the youngsters that they have been assigned to teach. However, the law does require that the level of endorsement be appropriate. That is, an individual certificated at the high school level to teach German may be hired to substitute in a classroom for the mentally handicapped provided it is at the high school level. Substitutes certificated at the elementary level may work only on a substitute basis with elementary students and the same prevails for secondary level. This office is certainly not advocating the use of secondary level German teachers to teach in special education classes at the secondary level even for a short period of time. However, because of the difficulty in finding fully qualified personnel for such a short period the law does allow this inconsistency.

It is my understanding that many employers have had difficulty getting their employees to qualify for endorsement #35. Is this true? Why?

Yes, a number of applicants have had difficulty qualifying for the 35 endorsement. One of the requirements for this endorsement is not widely appreciated and our office must take as much responsibility as anyone for failing to disseminate the information adequately. An individual need not have endorsement 35 on a teaching certificate to work in the area of special education. Any of the support services areas such as school psychology, hearing clinician, etc., have their own endorsements such that requests to qualify for endorsement 35 are unnecessary in these areas.

In the instructional areas, the only advantage conveyed by the 35 endorsement is authorization to provide instructional services to youngsters in all grade levels. It is the vertical authorization of the endorsement which has caused difficulty. Because the authorization is vertical, this office requires evidence of vertical preparation, just as it does for other vertical authorizations (industrial arts, art, music, and physical education). If the individual has not had vertical experience in special education supervised by a training institution, this office cannot authorize awarding the 35 endorsement. In this case the individual should attempt to qualify for either endorsement 10 (regular classroom elementary level instruction) or endorsement 20 (regular classroom secondary level instruction). Provided the individual can qualify for either of these endorsements, the basic endorsement may be appended with an approval area consistent with the exceptionality area training. The real difficulty arises when an applicant has completed a program designed to prepare them exclusively in special education and exclusively with elementary age youngsters. The state of Iowa does not currently have an endorsement for these individuals.

Requiring training institutions to verify the vertical nature of teaching experience is perhaps the most frequent reason for delay in evaluation of applications. Therefore, if an individual does not need endorsement 35 to perform in your school system the capacities you will require of him or if he cannot qualify for endorsement 35, everyone's time might be saved by asking the individual in question to request either endorsement 10 or endorsement 20 as a base.



Why is a teacher working with a 15 year old youngster in special education required to have a certificate valid for service at the secondary level? Certainly, many of these youngsters are functioning in basic skills at the elementary level.

While the academic performance of youngsters such as you mention may indeed be within the elementary range in some or all areas, the 15 or 16 year old youngster in special education classes is, in many instances, about to leave the world of formal education and enter the world of work. His educational needs are not therefore similar to the 8 year old third grader nor are they similar to his own needs when he was 8 years old in special education classes. The various skills related to seeking and maintaining employment in the "real world" are his prime educational need. In many cases, the "academic" skills needed by these youngsters are those related to preparation for the work world or for further skill training in centers other than the public high school.

Also, the emotional, physical, and social needs of adolescents (whether in regular or special education programs) are quite different from those of the 8 year old child (whether in regular or special education).

Because the social, emotional, physical, and educational needs of secondary "age" special education youngsters are considerably different from those of elementary age youngsters in special education, this office requires that individuals assigned to the secondary level have either endorsement #20 (secondary level regular classroom instruction) or #35 (K-12 special education) as a basic endorsement.

If the state of Iowa has no status available for the elementary only, special education only individuals, how are we handling requests for certification from these people?

Temporary certification with endorsement #35 is available for these individuals. There are several conditions which must prevail before this endorsement can be awarded on a temporary basis. First, the individual must be under consideration for imminent employment in a capacity consistent with his training (elementary level exceptional students) and we must receive a letter from the employer assuring us that this job assignment will not change through the length of the proposed contract. Also, the applicant must agree to take the necessary course work needed to qualify for the endorsement on a regular certificate and in most cases this will include work in special education (including supervised practicum) wherein the exclusive concern is with secondary age youngsters. Also, as is the case with all requests for temporary authorization, this office must be in receipt of a letter from the employer indicating that a diligent but fruitless search has been made to secure a fully qualified individual.

Applicants in this situation must realize that, should the State Board of Public Instruction not accept the proposal to create a new endorsement, they will not be allowed to continue with the 35 endorsement on a temporary basis and by that time must qualify for the vertical special education authorization as it is currently available. That is, individuals issued the 35 endorsement on a temporary certificate because of exceptional circumstances will not be "grandfathered" at a later date. The applicant should also realize that this endorsement, while under a period of study by this office, will have to be requested on a yearly basis with submission of a \$15 filing fee each year until completion of the secondary level requirement and the individual qualifies for the endorsement on a regular certificate. Temporary certificates in this case will be renewed yearly upon completion of two courses leading to full certification status.





