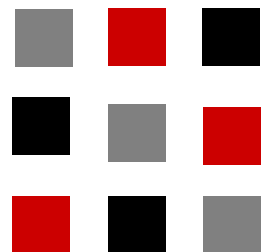


# Early-Career Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Preparation and Practice

## Spring 2022 Special Education Recent Graduate Survey Results

Prepared by the Utah Education Policy Center



# Overview

The Utah Education Policy Center's (UEPC) Spring 2022 Special Education Recent Graduate Survey provides a detailed look at the experiences of early-career special education teachers across Utah.

This survey is one component of a larger portfolio of work focused on the special education teacher pipeline that the Utah Education Policy Center is conducting in partnership with the Utah State Board of Education.

This survey was open to all special education teachers who completed their preparation programs in 2017 or later to ensure that their experiences were recent enough to recall and reflect upon. In this survey, teachers shared their experiences with their teacher preparation programs and their first teaching positions.

This report highlights key survey findings and concludes with considerations for policymakers and practitioners.

## Research Questions

- What were special education teachers' experiences in their teacher preparation programs?
- How prepared are special education teachers for their various professional responsibilities?

## UEPC Special Education Recent Graduate Survey Topics

- Experiences with preparation program, including perceptions of:
  - Clinical teaching experiences
  - Cooperating teacher
  - Instructional quality
  - Faculty/staff
  - Peer relationships
  - Program structure/costs
  - Overall program quality
- Experiences with first teaching position following preparation, including:
  - Decisions about where to apply
  - Ease of finding position
  - Extent to which position aligned with preferences and clinical teaching experiences
  - Perceptions of preparedness to meet CEC standards





In January 2022, 1,962 early-career special education teachers were identified to invite to the UEPC's Special Education Recent Graduate Survey. After accounting for invalid email addresses and ineligible educators (e.g., had not completed a special education preparation program in 2017 or later), 1,801 educators remained in the sample. Of these individuals, 325 responded to the survey, resulting in an 18% response rate.

Respondents represented all Utah special education preparation programs as well as several out of state programs.

Most respondents (62%) earned a bachelor's degree as part of their preparation program.

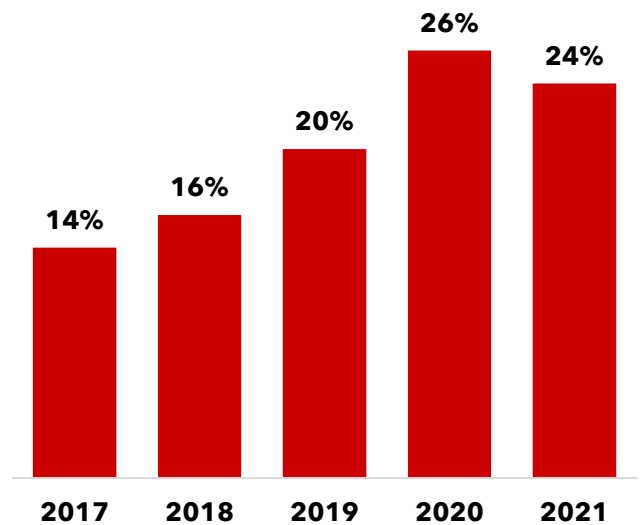
All data presented in this report comes from the survey responses of 325 educators who completed a special education preparation program in 2017 or later.

**325**  
respondents

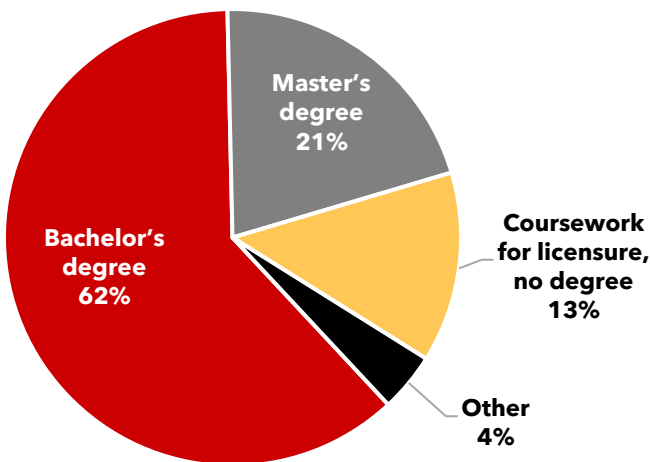
**Programs Attended by Participants**

Program	Percentage
Utah State University	20%
Western Governors University	19%
Weber State University	14%
University of Utah	11%
Brigham Young University	9%
Southern Utah University	6%
Other	5%
Utah Valley University	4%
Westminster College	4%
Brigham Young University - Idaho	4%
Grand Canyon University	4%
University of Phoenix - Salt Lake	<1%

**Year of Preparation Program Completion**



**Degree Earned as Part of Preparation Program**






**Participants**

Most survey participants (76%) attended their preparation programs on a full-time basis. Nearly all (97%) completed a K-12 teaching license. Nearly half of participants took on loans, averaging more than \$25,000 in debt. Notably, 44% of participants received a scholarship or grant.



More than half (54%) of participants had prior experience in education, and many continued to work in education while completing their programs.

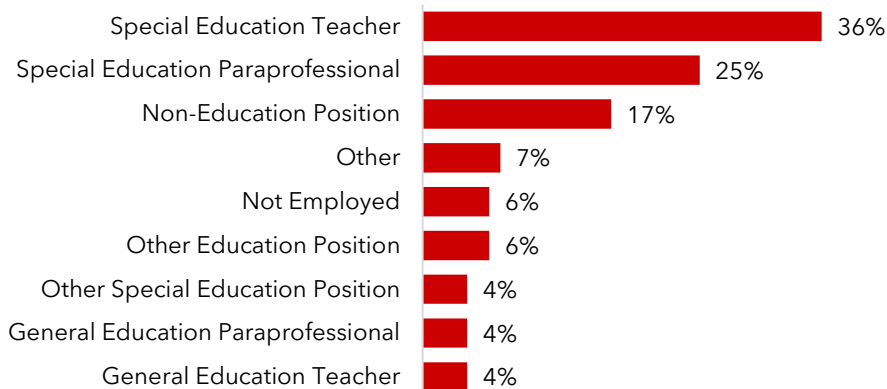
Participants most commonly received endorsements in mild/moderate disabilities (63%) and severe disabilities (21%).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 76% attended full-time</li> <li>• 24% attended part-time</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 97% completed K-12 licenses</li> <li>• 3% completed preschool licenses</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 44% received a scholarship/grant</li> <li>• 43% took on loans</li> <li>• 9% were supported by an internship</li> <li>• 7% received other financial support</li> <li>• 4% received a stipend to student teach</li> <li>• 2% received a fellowship</li> </ul>

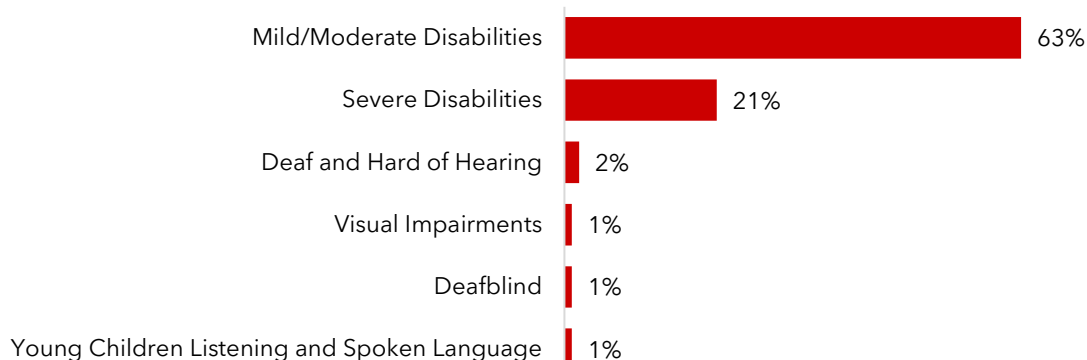
**\$25,110**  
average student loan debt among those who took on loans

**54%**  
of participants were already working in the education field before they started their program

### Employment Status during Preparation Program

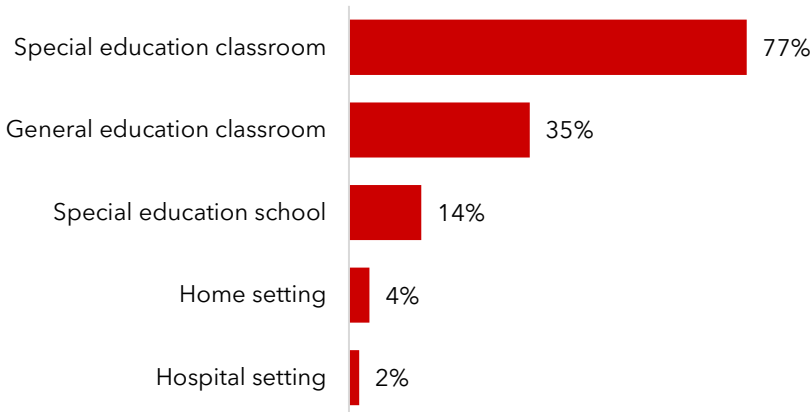


### Endorsements Earned during Preparation Program



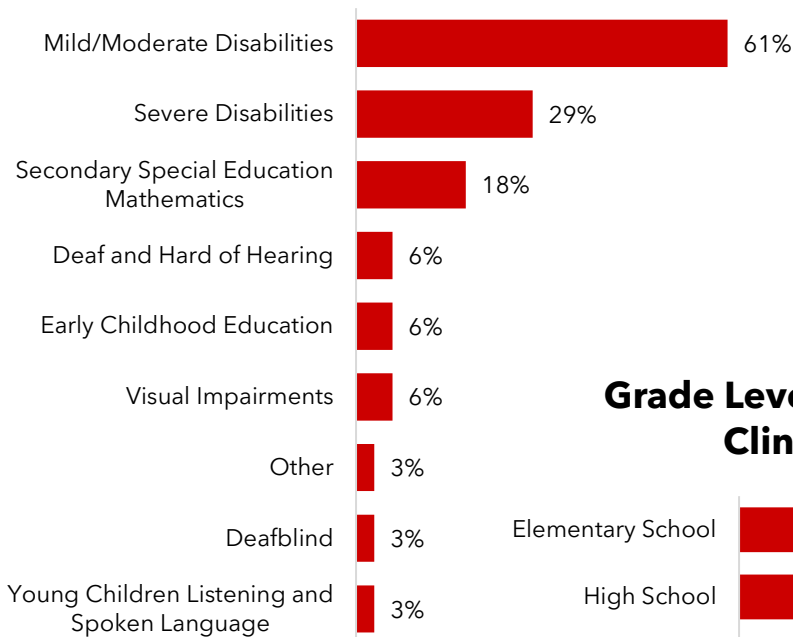
Clinical teaching experiences, which all survey participants reported participating in, took place in a variety of settings with a range of student populations. Most individuals (86%) agreed that their clinical teaching experiences were positive. Perceptions of their cooperating teachers were positive among 82% of respondents. Open responses suggest that those who were generally dissatisfied with their clinical teaching experiences were already working as special education teachers and received little support or guidance.

### Clinical Experience Settings



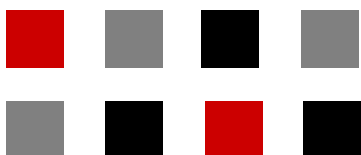
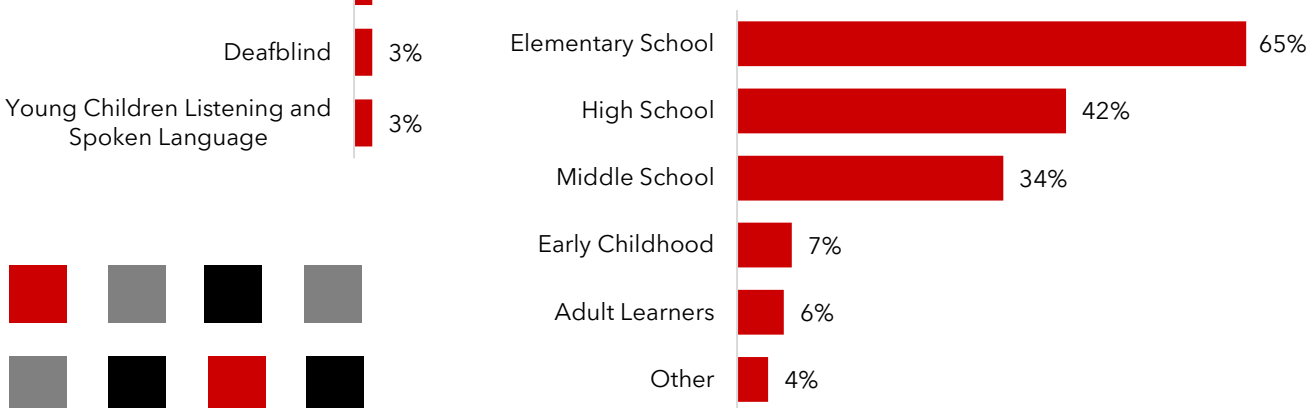
**86%**  
 had positive experiences overall in their clinical teaching experiences

### Student Populations Served during Clinical Experiences



**82%**  
 felt well supported by their cooperating teacher(s)

### Grade Levels/Ages Taught during Clinical Experiences



# Perceptions of Preparation Program

Survey participants shared their perceptions of their preparation program across five domains: instructional quality, faculty/staff, peer relationships, program costs/structure, and overall program quality. The values below represent the proportion of respondents who agreed with most/all survey items in each of these five domains.

Perceptions of faculty/staff was generally high with 92% of participants agreeing with these items. In contrast, peer relationships were a relatively weak area. Just two-thirds of respondents agreed with items in this domain. Open-response items suggest that this is due to many individuals completing their preparation programs online (e.g., "I did not have many interactions with other students as I was doing an online self-paced program.")

Proportion of respondents who agreed with items measuring...	Sample Survey Items
<b>88%</b> <b>Instructional Quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Instructional strategies were varied and appropriately engaging.</li><li>• I was asked to reflect on practice and analyze how to improve it.</li><li>• The program integrated theory and practice.</li></ul>
<b>92%</b> <b>Faculty/Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The faculty/instructors were responsive to students.</li><li>• The faculty/instructors were respectful of diversity.</li><li>• The faculty/instructors valued and supported me.</li></ul>
<b>67%</b> <b>Peer Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I developed close relationships with other students in the program.</li><li>• My interactions with fellow students have had a positive influence on my professional growth.</li><li>• My interactions with fellow students have had a positive influence on my personal growth.</li></ul>
<b>82%</b> <b>Program Costs/Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The program locations were convenient.</li><li>• Costs incurred by me were affordable.</li><li>• Admission requirements were reasonable.</li></ul>
<b>73%</b> <b>Overall Program Quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• My preparation program...<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• prepared me well for the duties and responsibilities of a special education teacher.</li><li>• gave me the knowledge and skills to be ready on day one in my role as a special education teacher.</li><li>• strengthened my identity as a special education teacher.</li></ul></li></ul>



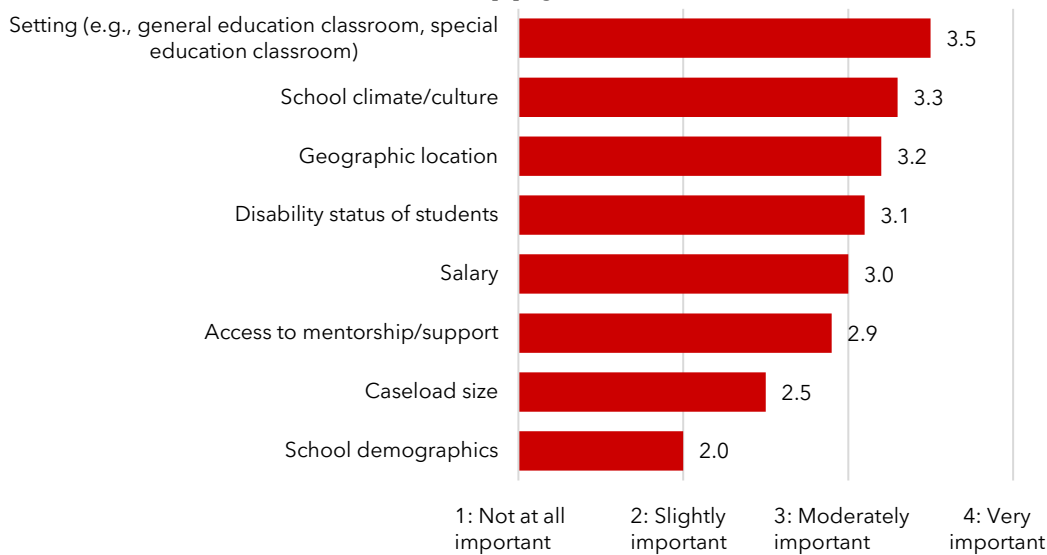
Survey participants rated the importance of various factors in deciding where to apply for their first teaching positions after completing their preparation program. New special education teachers placed high importance on the setting in which they worked, followed by school climate/culture, and geographic location.

**58%**  
**reported that finding their first position after preparation was easier than expected**

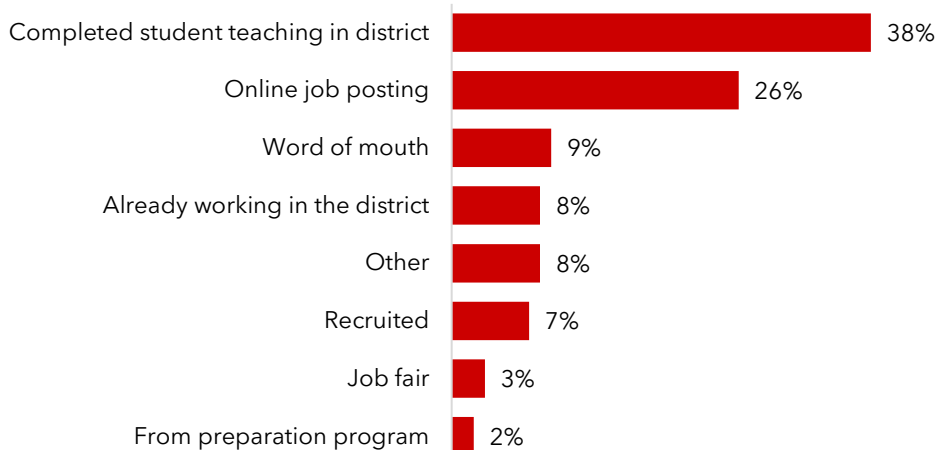
Most new special education teachers learned about their first position through their student teaching experiences (38%) or an online job posting (26%).

More than half (58%) of participant indicated that finding their first position was easier than they expected.

### Reported Importance of Factors in Deciding Where to Apply

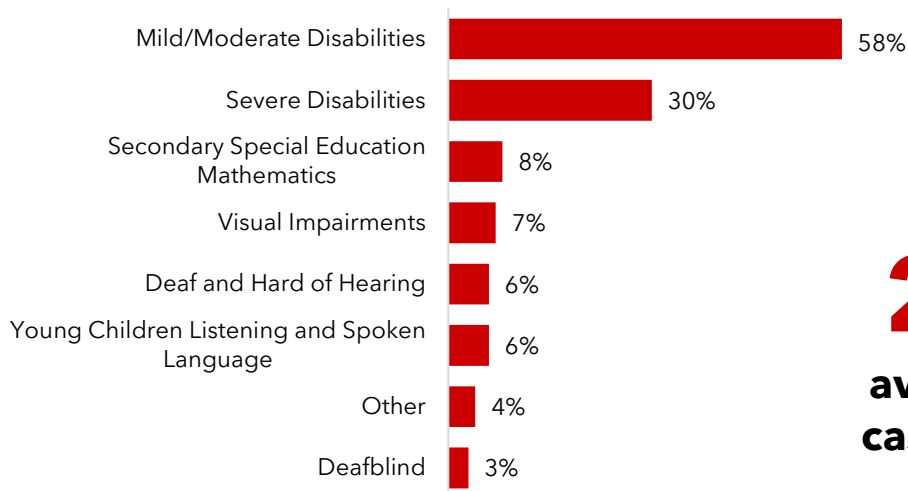


### How Participants Learned about First Positions



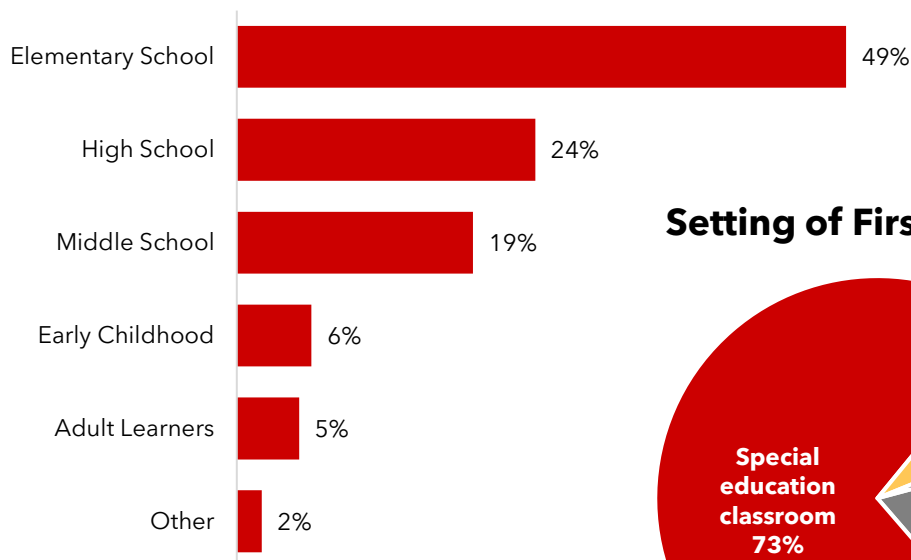
In their first teaching positions after completing their preparation programs, most new special education teachers worked with students with mild/moderate disabilities (58%) or severe disabilities (30%). On average, new special education teachers had a caseload of 22 students. Nearly half (49%) were employed in elementary schools. Newly licensed special education teachers most commonly taught in special education classrooms.

## Student Populations Served in First Position

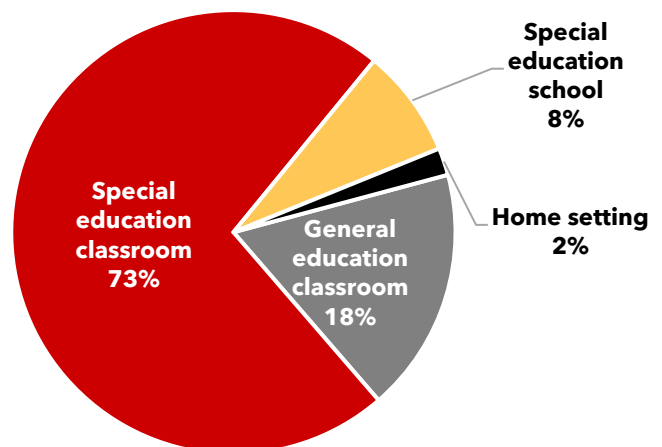


**22**  
average caseload

## Grade Levels/Ages Taught in First Position



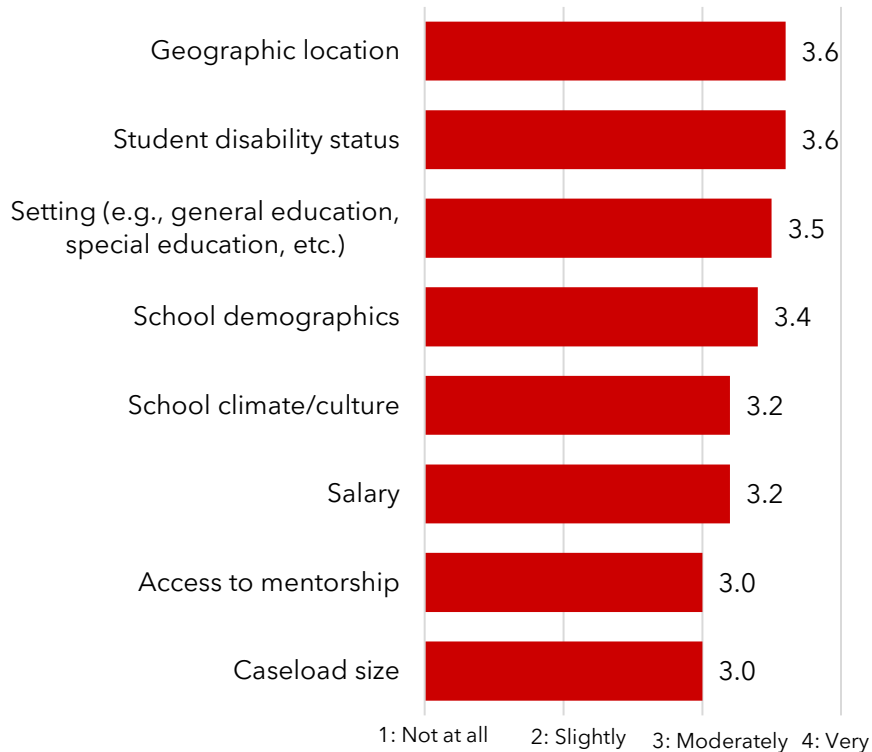
## Setting of First Position





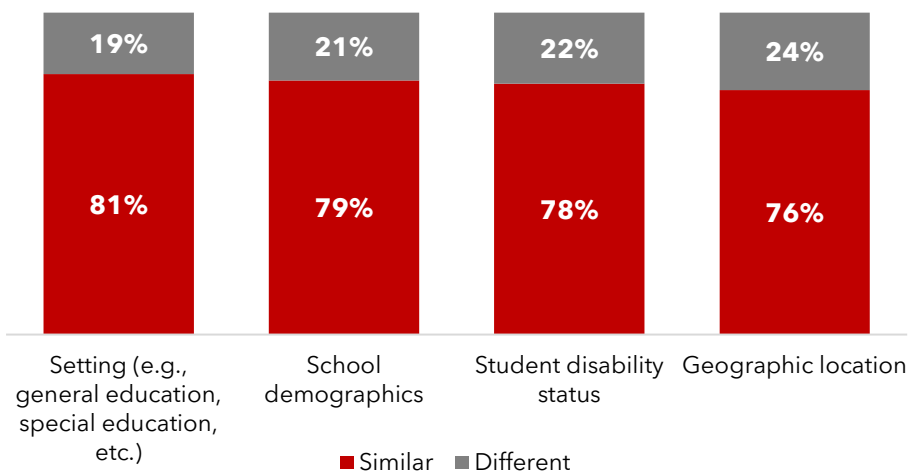
Survey participants rated the extent to which their first teaching positions aligned with their preferences for their first position. New teachers were generally satisfied with the location of their position and the student populations they worked with. New teachers were less satisfied, however, with their access to mentorship and caseload sizes.

### Match between First Position and Preferences



Survey participants also indicated the degree to which their first teaching positions were similar to their clinical teaching experiences during their preparation programs. For most educators (76-81%), first teaching positions matched clinical teaching experiences in terms of setting, school demographics, student disability status, and location.

### Match between Clinical Teaching and First Position

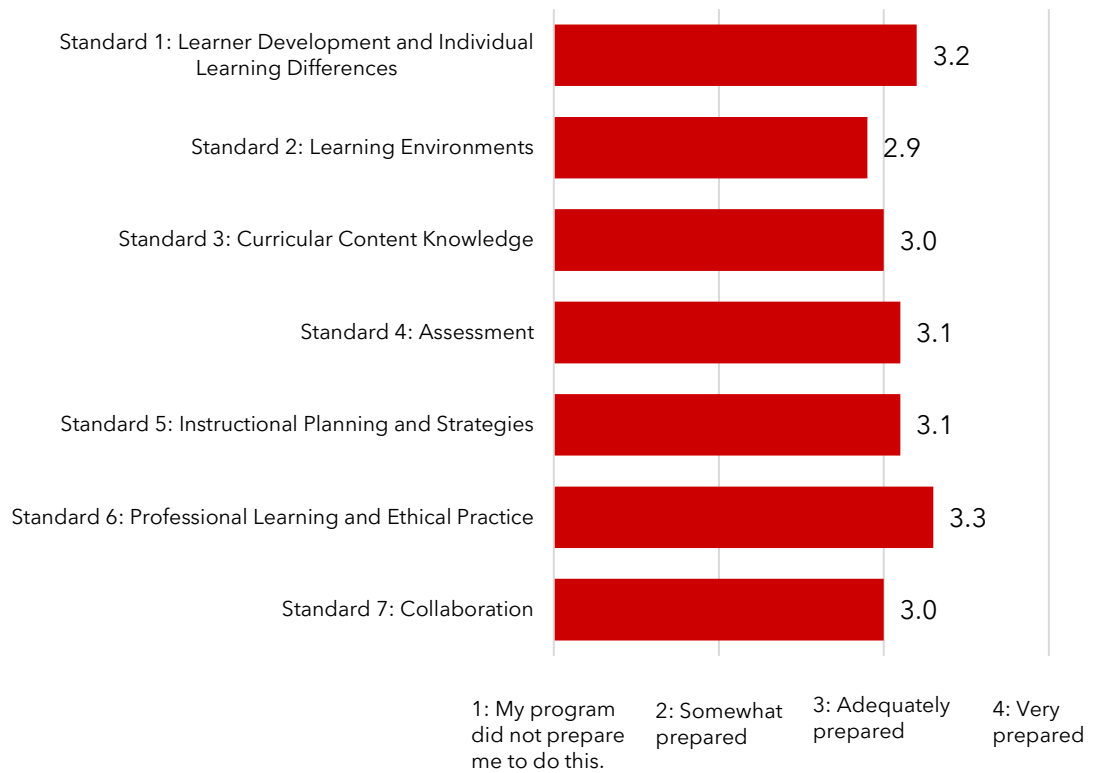


Survey participants rated their level of preparedness in seven domains corresponding to the Council for Exceptional Children's Initial Preparation Standards.

On average, special education teachers felt most prepared to engage in the practices associated with Standard 6: Professional Learning and Ethical Practice (average response = 3.3 on a 1-4 scale). In this standard, educators use foundational knowledge, ethical principles, and practice standards to inform their practice and lifelong learning.

In contrast, special educations typically felt less prepared to address Standard 2: Learning Environments (average response = 2.9 on a 1-4 scale). This standard focuses on the educator's ability to create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments in a variety of educational settings.

## Preparedness to Meet CEC Standards



For more information about the Council for Exceptional Children Standards, please visit: <https://exceptionalchildren.org/standards>

Survey participants were invited to reflect on how prepared they felt for their first teaching positions upon completing their preparation programs. The quotes highlighted here illustrate how many new special education teachers felt underprepared for aspects of their work such as IEPs/paperwork and student behavior issues.

"The expectations and **the thousand other responsibilities** are far beyond reasonable - and **no one warned me**. If teachers really knew what they were getting themselves into, maybe there wouldn't be such a **high burnout rate**."

"More practical **classroom management**, progress monitoring, **writing IEP goals**, assessing placement, and assessing and addressing behaviors would have been much better. **Someone without a background in education would in no way be ready** to enter the classroom as a special education teacher."

"I feel I could have been better prepared to **utilize IEP programs** to write an IEP and how to utilize paras, volunteers, and classroom helpers. **The first time I had a para in my classroom I had no idea what to have them do.**"

"It would have been great to see what **IEP preparation software** looks like and how to use it effectively. I was **unprepared for the reporting and file review aspects** of being a special education teacher."

"**I don't feel like I was as prepared to handle behavior issues** within special education. I also feel like my school district could've done a better job at training me because every district handles behaviors differently."

"They need to teach more about **running IEPs and communicating with staff and parents**. Practicum placements need to be longer and the practicum students need more responsibility."

"The program I completed was great. I just wish that I could have had **a little more behavioral training**. I have had to learn a lot that hard way and have felt very unprepared."

# Conclusions and Considerations

Nearly half of educators reported taking on loans averaging just over \$25,000. Increased financial support, or even loan forgiveness, for special education teachers may encourage greater recruitment and retention in the field.

Those who are working as special education teachers while completing their preparation programs may benefit from increased support from a cooperating teacher.

Preparation programs that rely primarily on online coursework might consider additional strategies for fostering peer relationships among their students. These social networks can serve as an additional support system as students transition into practice.

New special education teachers would likely benefit from increased access to mentorship and reduced caseload sizes. These aspects of educators' first teaching positions did not always align well with preferences and may impact satisfaction.

Additional pre-service and in-service training on IEPs and student behavior would support new special education teachers. These were areas in which educators often felt underprepared.

Given the reported preparation levels of new special education teachers, additional in-service support in creating safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments in a variety of educational settings (CEC Standard 2) would be beneficial.

## Next Steps for the UEPC's Special Education Recent Graduate Survey

- Highlight best practices in special education preparation programs
- Identify relationships among teacher mobility and perception of preparation program/preparedness

