The Department of Special Education has three Preliminary Education Specialist programs in Mild Moderate Support Needs (MMSN), Extensive Support Needs (ESN) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and active intern programs in each of these areas on the main campus. Candidates complete most of their courses together with peers from one or two other program areas with separate courses for assessment and methods courses only. Candidates graduate with an understanding of optimal educational programs and services for individuals with disabilities and their families from birth through age 22. As an example, candidates in the Mild to Moderate and Extensive Support Needs Credential programs take a course in Transition focused on post-secondary outcomes. In addition, all candidates are aware of the importance and benefits of intervening early and supporting the learning of foundational skills.

To meet our mission we follow a practice-based approach (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar & Kiely, 2015) guided by an eco-behavioral philosophy influenced by an understanding of implementation science (Cook & Odom, 2013). Our understanding is the didactic information alone does not result in the effective use of the evidence-based practices we aim to implement. Opportunities to apply knowledge and skills with support from a coach, supervisor, or mentor are necessary. In addition, creating multiple opportunities to practice implementing effective strategies is a requirement for building fluency of practice.

Program Design

Leadership. Leadership in this credential program includes a program coordinator who reports to the Department Chair and collaborates with all colleagues in the department. The Program Coordinator for the ESN Credential Program is responsible for: ensuring CTC standards and TPEs are addressed in course content, advises candidates in the program and potential students inquiring about the program, and establishes student teaching and practicum opportunities with schools and places candidates to meet the field experience program requirements.

Communication. Although we have multiple credential programs in our department, SPED faculty members make decisions as a group (1) during our newly established Credential Faculty meetings (4th Wednesday of the month for SPED credential program faculty) and (2) during our All Faculty meetings (2nd Wednesday of the month for all T/TT faculty). Additionally, the Department Chair holds regular meetings with all faculty (including lecturers who teach classes in the department), where issues related to program development and course content changes are discussed. We are active researchers who follow the teacher-scholar model and believe that program candidates benefit from the cutting-edge information they receive from our research efforts.

Structure. Consistent with the framework for practice-based teacher preparation developed by the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform (CEEDAR) (Benedict, Holdheide, Brownell, & Foley, 2016) we aim to use a variety of instructional methods in our courses linked to applied assignments that are scaffolded in a manner that builds educator competence culminating in the solo student teaching experience in their final semester

length practicum. Following the recommendations of the CEEDAR framework we have collectively identified the essential targets of our programs that provide a focus of our programs. These targets include: (1) taking a strengths-based approach; (2) the use of culturally responsive practices; (3) the use of evidence-based practices; (4) the ability to differentiate instruction; (5) data-based decision-making and progress monitoring; and (6) effective collaboration skills and respect for, the lived experience of individuals with disabilities and their families.

Stakeholder Input. Over the past several years in preparation for SPED candidates taking the CalTPA (Fall 2022 was first cohort), in addition to preparing for our Literacy Certification, (certified in Summer 2025) and Residency pathways (ECSE, ESN, MMSN), SPED faculty have met with various stakeholders including Community College colleagues and school district personnel. There were several meetings with stakeholders who provided input on the continued development of our credential programs and how to best support our candidates to meet both district needs and CTC competencies.

Course Work and Field Experience

All candidates are required to take prerequisite courses including a course from the Department of Dual Language and English Learner Education (DLE 915) that focuses on strategies for working with English learners. They enter the program as a cohort and complete the remaining required courses either in one year or two years (see Course Sequence for the one-year program).

The field experiences, practicum or clinical practice hours are scaffolded throughout the credential programs. SPED 502 is a required pre-requisite course for all credential programs and meets the Early Field Experience requirement. The course provides 18 hours of observation in the field in a variety of educational settings for individuals with disabilities across ages and includes general education environments. The ESN program requires two semesters of student teaching (SPED 980B) taken in the Fall and Spring semesters of their final year. In the Fall students are in student teaching placements 3 full days a week and in the Spring they are in their student teaching placements 4 full days a week. All courses have applied assignments that candidates implement within the practicum settings (e.g., curriculum based assessments, functional behavioral assessments, ecological inventories, unit planning etc). ESN candidates are also enrolled in a 4 unit seminar (SPED 970B) each semester which helps support them in taking and passing the CalTPA exam and provides additional support for student teaching. This seminar focuses on helping the candidates apply what they are learning in their practicum settings by making materials, creating unit plans, designing schedules, creating communication boards, etc.

Extensive Support Needs Credential

Course Number and Number of Practicum/Field Work Hours

SPED 502: Early Field Experiences 18 hours (6 observations)

SPED 980B: Fall Student Teaching 270 hours (18 hours a week for 15 weeks)

SPED 980B: Spring Student Teaching 360 hours (24 hours a week for 15 weeks)

Total 648 Clinical Hours

Student teaching placements are determined through a collaborative process between the candidates, school district partners, and program coordinators. Several districts in San Diego County in which the College of Education and SPED department have collaborative relationships (e.g., Residencies, Strategic Staffing, Intern Agreements) are prioritized for SPED candidate placement. Candidates are able to share their preferences for both geographic region and age level for student teaching. Program Coordinators then reach out to district leaders to determine the best fit and Mentor Teacher for placement. All Mentor Teachers at minimum must have met the 10 hour CTC training requirement, in addition to being approved by the school site principal and district HR.

University Supervisors for each of the credential areas are hired and vetted by the Department Chair. They often come recommended by credential program coordinators and many are alumni of SDSUs credential and masters programs. University Supervisors attend a minimum of two trainings each semester (see Fall 2025 slides) and are enrolled in a Canvas Home Room for University Supervisors across credential programs in the COE.

All candidates, University Supervisors hired by the Department and Guide teachers receive a Practicum Handbook prior to beginning the student teaching experience. This handbook outlines the field experience sequence and describes the timeline for assuming responsibilities during student teaching and lists the responsibilities for the a) candidate b) university supervisor and c) the guide teacher (see Practicum Handbook and Intern Handbook). In addition to the Practicum Handbooks, candidates, University Supervisors, and Guide Teachers follow a Pacing Guide which outlines what candidates should be focusing on each week of the Fall and Spring student teaching semesters. In addition, the role and responsibilities of the program coordinator, as the person who oversees the practicum and addresses any issues that may arise, are described in the handbook.

Assessment of Candidates

Program competencies are assessed in multiple ways throughout the credential program. Key courses have signature assignments tied to rubrics that require the practice and demonstration of meeting the required CTC standards TPEs. Cohorts who began the program in Fall 2022 or later are also assessed through the CalTPA Cycle 1 (math) and Cycle 2 (literacy). ESN candidates have a very high pass rate: in the 2024-25 academic year, eight of the nine candidates passed cycle one on their first attempt, and all nine passed cycle 2 on their first attempt. Candidates are also evaluated throughout their entire year of student teaching using a credential specific competency evaluation rubric (see ESN Competency Rubric). This tool is utilized by University Supervisors when they are conducting teaching observations, as well as when engaging in coaching and mentorship meetings with the candidates.

Candidates learn about the Signature Assignments, CalTPA and Candidate Evaluation Rubrics during the mandatory orientation meeting held in the Spring prior to starting the program as well as during their Fall student teaching seminar (SPED 970B).