

**GUEST EDITORIAL**  
**STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS OF STUDENTS**  
**WITH PHYSICAL AND HEALTH DISABILITIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has been involved in the development of standards for teachers of students with exceptional learning needs since 1922. These standards drive the curriculum of institutions of higher education and state licensing requirements. The Division for Physical and Health Disabilities assisted in developing standards for teachers working with physically and/or medically involved students in 1995 and is currently involved in the re-validation of these standards. This article provides a brief history of the CEC standards and suggestions for how teachers use standards to improve their practice, as well as their role in developing standards. The validation is explained, with a plea for help from current teachers of students with physical and health disabilities.*

What does a teacher need to know to work with a student with a physical or health disability? The first thought might be, "What kind of disability does the student have?" Even if the category of disability is known, such as physically handicapped, other health impaired, or traumatic brain injury, we still need answers to "Is it mild, moderate, or severe?" Further questions might be: "Does the disability affect the child's learning? Does the student need modifications or accommodations?" And then the primary question becomes, "Does a teacher with a traditional teaching license have the skills needed to work with this child?" The answer to the last question is probably not. A teacher with a special education license is likely to be called in to help the

classroom teacher make adaptations, but does the special education teacher have the needed skills?

### **A BRIEF HISTORY**

Standards are a significant part of education at every level, from Early Childhood Content Standards at the preschool level, to standards for the preparation of teachers at the university level. Accountability in the educational field is foremost in everyone's mind, and has resulted in revisions of laws, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (20 U.S.C. §6301, 2001). But standards and accountability are not new concepts. In 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) stated "the establishment of professional standards for the field of special education" as one of the "fundamental aims of CEC" (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003, p. 143). Since 1954, The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has worked with teacher education programs to develop quality programs that "provide assurance to the public that the graduates of accredited institutions have acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn" (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001, p. 1). Providing guidelines for the licensing of teachers and ensuring alignment of licensing requirements and professional standards is also a part of NCATE's responsibility (Wise, 2006). NCATE currently works with 33 specialized member organizations to approve teacher preparation programs in the specialized disciplines (math, early childhood, etc) (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2007).

In 1976, CEC and NCATE formed a partnership for approving training programs for teacher education, based on the CEC standards (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003). CEC developed the first set of standards for teachers of children with special needs in 1966, which were accepted by NCATE in 1980. CEC created the Professional Standard Committee in 1983, with the charge to implement CEC's Code of Ethics, Standards for Professional Practice, Standards for the Preparation of Special Education Personnel, and Standards for Entry into Professional Practice. All of these were developed for the purpose of helping teacher preparation programs train teachers for children with special needs and to assist state licensing boards identify the specialized knowledge and skills for entry level special education teachers. This resulted in the *Common Core of Knowledge and Skills Essential for All Beginning Special Education Teachers*, adopted in 1992 by the CEC Professional Standard Committee.

While the Common Core was helpful for educators and accreditors, it was thought to be too broad for meeting the needs of some students with special needs. To address this issue, the Knowledge and Skills Subcommittee (KSS) of the Professional Standards and Practice Standing Committee (PSPSC, formerly the Professional Standard Committee), began to develop specialty sets of knowledge and skills to supplement the common core in 1993. This task was taken on by the specific divisions working with the diagnosis identified in the disorders (ex., competencies for teachers of children with behavior disorders were addressed by the Council for Children with Behavior Disorders), with the KSS assisting the division with formatting and cross referencing to avoid redundancy with the Common Core. Later, these specialty standards were developed into Individualized General Education Curriculums and Individualized Independence Curriculum standards, for programs that offered non-categorical licensing in the areas of mild/moderate and moderate/severe disabilities. All of the specialty standards are in addition to the Common Core, not as a replacement (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003).

CEC standards are used in 47 states to influence special education teacher preparation programs. Institutions are required to meet the CEC standards for state approval of their teacher education program, and the states use the CEC standards to facilitate development of state teaching standards. This results in the CEC standards being used in most teacher preparation programs to guide curriculum and assignments.

## **A REVIEW OF THE STANDARDS**

The CEC standards are divided into 10 domains aligned with the INTASC (Interstate New Teacher and Assessment and Support Consortium) Core Principles: foundations, development and characteristics of learners, individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environments and social interactions, communication, instructional strategies, assessment, professional and ethical practice, and collaboration. Standards are written as narratives for teacher preparation programs to use when developing a performance assessment system, as well as specific statements of content, written either as a knowledge (what teachers need to know) or skill (what teachers need to be able to do) statements (Johnsen, 2004). For example, in the area of Foundations, a knowledge standard is “Models, theories, and philosophies that form the basis for special education practice,” with a skill being “Articulate personal philosophy of special education” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003, p. 36). A complete set of CEC standards can be

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found at <http://www.cec.sped.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ProfessionalDevelopment/ProfessionalStandards/EthicsPracticeStandards/SpecialEdTeachers/default.htm>. Common Core standards are listed for all teachers, with additional standards for teachers of children with specific disabilities added to the standards for each domain when appropriate.

### **TEACHERS' USE OF STANDARDS**

Although the original intent was to provide competencies for pre-service teachers to meet to become licensed teachers, the CEC standards have become a tool for working teachers and related service personnel as well. Crutchfield (2003) reports the standards “can be a powerful tool for special educators to request and receive the professional development opportunities they need to update their current skills and learn new skills required for the challenges they face every day” (p. 40). Teachers are encouraged to use the standards as a self-evaluation, and then use the results to develop a personalized and relevant professional development plan. Beginning teachers can determine with which domains they feel the least competent in their skills; veteran teachers can increase their knowledge and skills, or add a challenge to their professional development training. Teachers thinking of, or assigned to, a different type of disability category can use the standards to help focus their training, or teachers may want to move into a more advanced role, or specialize in an area of need for their district. Standards/competencies are also available for diagnosticians, administrators, technology specialists, and transition specialists.

Standards can also be used to help teachers and related personal reflect upon their performance and skills. Conderman and Morin (2004) suggest “start with standards” as the number one way to begin to reflect upon practice. Reflection helps teachers adapt and modify their instructional techniques to meet the needs of all students, and has long been considered an essential skill for any teacher.

Blanton, Sindelar, and Correa (2006) suggest the use of professional standards as an evaluation tool of teacher quality. Concerning the CEC and INTASC standards, they state “Conceptions of beginning teacher quality represented in these standards are detailed, coherent, and complete” (p. 122). However, a link to student outcomes would need to be researched and developed.

## TEACHERS' ROLE IN DEVELOPING STANDARDS

The Council for Exceptional Children has always been an organization with a membership predominately coming from the teaching field. When the first Knowledge and Skills Subcommittee was formed, it consisted of representatives from each CEC division, and past CEC Teachers of the Year. This group “gathered material from literature; state, provincial, and local governments; institutions of higher education; and elsewhere” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003, p. 145) to develop a set of 195 statements related to knowledge and skills needed by professionals working with children with special needs. This set of statements was sent as a survey to a 1,000 person sample of CEC membership to determine the membership’s responses to the importance of each standard. The 195 standards were thus cut to 107, which became the original Common Core. Updates have occurred since that time, with the membership and significant others surveyed whenever there is a change or a new set of standards developed. Currently, each division in CEC is re-validating its set of standards, modifying as needed to make the standards applicable in today’s educational context. Surveys are sent to representative members of CEC to obtain practitioner opinions as to the importance of the items, with items kept or deleted dependent on the results of the survey.

## VALIDATION PROCESS

As previously stated, divisions are being asked to re-validate their standards at this time (2006–2008). A set work group from each division has been formed, with other key stakeholders identified for input into the standards. The first step for this group is to review the current standards. Have changes occurred in the field that make some of the standards obsolete or require the addition of new knowledge or skill statements? Is it time to look at developing an advanced set of standards, for those who have been working in the field for a while and are ready to take on more responsibility, or become more specialized?

Once the knowledge and skills have been identified by the set work group and key stakeholders, the validity of each standard must be documented by one of three types of support: literature/theory based, research-based, or practice-based. Literature/theory evidence consists of theories or philosophical reasoning. Evidence includes information from position papers, descriptive reviews of the literature, or policy analysis. Research-based evidence includes peer-reviewed studies that used appropriate research methodologies,

and that have been replicated and found to be effective. Practice-based support is documented by promising practices that have a small number of studies or nomination from the field. Promising practices can be from a variety of sources, including model programs, and are widely used with practical evidence of effectiveness. Professional wisdom is included under practice-based, but must have validation from a variety of sources.

After the research has been collected, the proposed knowledge and skill statements are brought back to the Knowledge and Skills Subcommittee for editing and cross referencing to preclude redundancy with the common core. The proposed competencies are then sent as a survey to interested parties for their opinion as to the validity of the statement for the specified field of study. Current practice has found that an email survey is the most productive, with a higher return rate from the selected audience.

Results of the survey are then reviewed by the KSS. Items considered not important are dropped, well received items are kept, and those with variable responses are discussed. This set of standards proceeds to the Professional Standards and Practice Committee. Validated here, the skill set is included in the Council for Exceptional Children standards, available on the website, and is published in the next edition of *What Every Special Educator Must Know*. States' education agencies and institutes of higher education modify their requirements and programs to ensure quality teachers for children with physical and health care needs.

### **HOW YOUR VOICE CAN BE HEARD**

Have some thoughts on what teachers of students with Physical and Health Disabilities need to know? This field is considered low-incidence, but covers a wide range of disabilities and diseases that affect educational performance. Does a teacher of a student with Traumatic Brain Injury need to have different knowledge and skills from a teacher with a student with asthma or cancer? Probably, and it is up to us, the membership of the Division for Physical and Health Disabilities, to be sure that all skills are represented in the standards.

If you have ideas of skills that should be included in the DPHD standards, or if you would like to be a survey member to determine the importance of suggested standards, email me at [baldwiJL@notes.udayton.edu](mailto:baldwiJL@notes.udayton.edu). We could also use members who are willing to look for the research to validate our statements. A validation form is on the DPHD website at <http://education.gsu.edu/PhysicalDis/> for you to complete and email to the above address. Teachers and related service personnel working with students with DPHD, as

well as parents of the students, are the best source of information for what knowledge and skills are needed by the providers. Be a part of developing this critical set of skills that will be used by state boards of education and teacher preparation programs, so our students receive the best possible education.

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