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Creating Inclusive Educational Environments for Students With Disabilities: Examining Educators' Preparation in California

Preliminary Findings

The California Alliance for Inclusive Schooling (CAIS) was created 7 years ago as an independent group that could use data to measure progress toward state goals and support informed decision-making for state agencies. CAIS values efforts in other states to accomplish similar goals, such as the Ohio Dean's Compact. After 7 years of sustained and focused effort, CAIS is consolidating its efforts based on what we have learned. Our renewed focus is to advocate for forming a statewide group to develop an annual report on the State of Inclusive Education in California. This group includes deans and other statewide leaders and begins with leveraging the efforts of the CEEDAR IHE faculty leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

Nationally, 1 in 7 of students in PK–12 schools are students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), as is the case in California. With this prevalence of students with disabilities in PK schools, all educators encounter and create spaces where students of many abilities belong and reach their potential. Creating educational environments where individuals have opportunities to flourish is the foundation of the purpose of education, and so, it becomes a shared responsibility to prepare those working in schools to create inclusive school climates to fulfill the promise of education. Practically, the more learning and growth for all students, the greater benefits that accrue to individuals and society from the contributions made economically and socially by individuals who are equipped to be citizens who work and contribute to the world in many ways.

Unfortunately, too often, educational environments do not fully realize their potential to include all individuals in ways that foster each person's highest potential.

This lack of inclusion and belonging is often experienced by individuals who are somehow different from the norm, be it through ability or background (Allen et al., 2016; Goodenow, 1993). This misalignment between our hopes for education and the reality of policy and practice is one of the great contemporary challenges facing educators. This paper examines system misalignment, particularly in preparing educators to shape inclusive PK–12 environments in California.

In alignment with the California Department of Education (CDE, 2015), we define inclusion as "a coherent system of education, [in which] all children and students with disabilities are considered general education students first; and all educators, regardless of which students they are assigned to serve, have a collective responsibility to see that all children receive the education and the supports they need to maximize their development and potential, allowing them to participate meaningfully in the nation's economy and democracy" (p. 7).

(Mis)alignment Between PK–12 Schools and Higher Education

Although California's PK–12 system has moved toward inclusive practices, higher education institutions face different systemic pressures and are working to integrate these complex shifts into their long-standing structures and programs. Further alignment of PK–12 and higher education systems remains a perplexing and complex challenge, given the different government, fiscal, and reward systems that drive each sector. Striving to bridge this gap are initiatives like CAIS, whose work focuses on bridging K–12 and higher education systems. Here, we highlight the pressing need for further systems alignment by pointing to PK–12's need to further enhance inclusive schools and the higher education system's preparation of teachers to help shape the future of inclusive schools in California.

K–12 Inclusion Context In California

→ **15%**
Students are served by IDEA

→ **14%**
California students are served by IDEA

→ California lags national inclusion metrics, such as 80% or more of student time in the least restrictive environment, which is 59% for California and 67% nationally.

→ Growth in 80% or more of student time in the least restrictive environment has also lagged national improvement.

Three and Five Year Measure 5a (80% Time in Least Restrictive Environment): 2023 Data for Nation and California (Reported as Percentage Growth)

Category	Value
3 Year Growth Nation 5a	2
3 Year Growth Calfironia 5a	-0.37
5 Year Growth Nation 5a	4
5 Year Growth California 5a	2.22
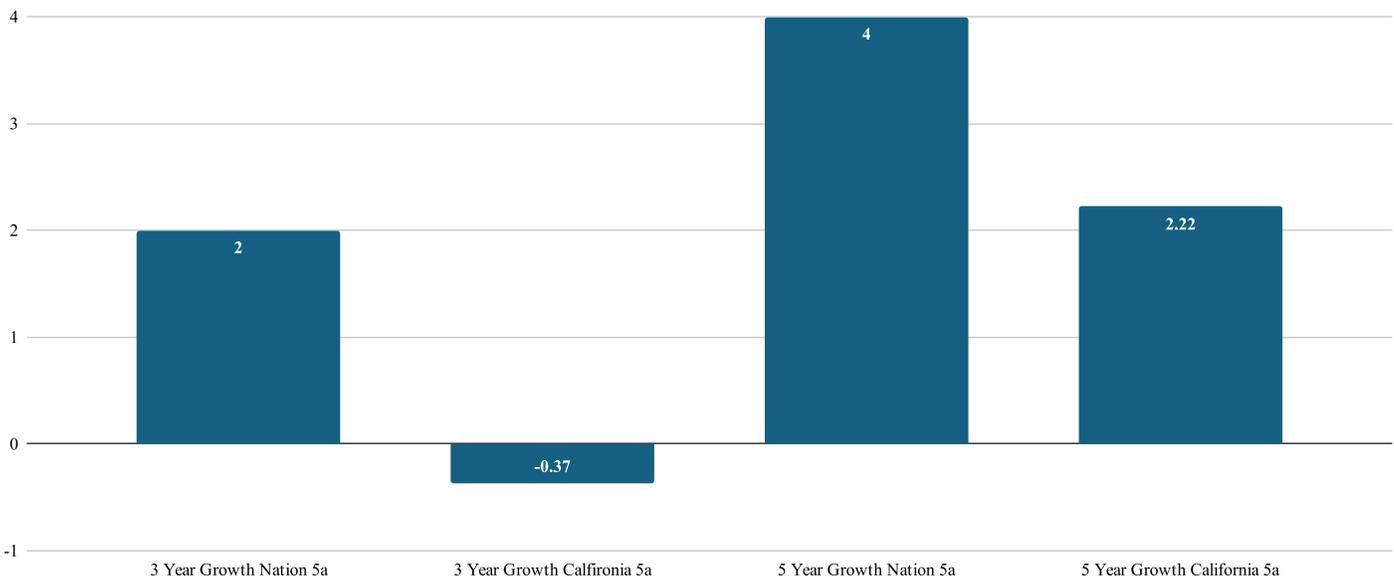
If California wants to emerge as a national leader in inclusion, then creating student experiences in the least restrictive environments is a good indicator to track; as such, preparing the workforce to create inclusive educational experiences for students is a key ingredient. The California Department of Education has made significant investments in advancing K–12 schools' inclusion efforts, including technical assistance efforts such as Supporting Innovative Practices (SIP).

SIP Highlights:
- Directly supports over 90 school districts and other educational organizations to advance their inclusion work with grant funding, direct technical assistance, and professional learning.
- Provides demonstration sites of evidence-based inclusion practices so educators can "see" inclusion in practice.
- Has an inclusion organizational blueprint for action and assessment tools to provide direct guidance to educators on advancing inclusion work in schools.

Advancing Teacher Preparation With Inclusive Education

California's initiatives to align with inclusive education in PK–12 schools must include the highest quality inclusive education teacher preparation. This preparation can consist of specific strategies such as:

→ Dual enrollment in a program offers preparation and credentialing in general and special education.

→ Preservice curricula reflect cotaught courses and shared alliances and expertise between general and special education faculty.

→ Teaching preparation clinical experiences in strong, inclusive school classrooms model evidence-based inclusion practices.

→ Common trunk preparation includes a unified set of universal Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs) that provide a shared foundation across all credential pathways, including Multiple Subject, Single Subject, and Education Specialist programs.

→ Residency programs are embedded in inclusive school environments.

→ Demonstration sites can provide teacher education candidates with examples of high-quality, evidence-based, inclusive practices in action.

We specifically examine teacher preparation programs that enable future teachers to earn dual licensures in a blended or dual credential program. These educator preparation pathways prepare candidates to earn two teaching credentials simultaneously, typically a Multiple Subject Credential (which authorizes teaching all subjects in a self-contained elementary classroom) and an Education Specialist Credential (which authorizes teaching students with disabilities, such as mild/moderate or extensive support needs). These programs are designed to equip teachers with essential knowledge, high-leverage skills, and professional dispositions necessary to effectively teach students with and without disabilities in inclusive classroom settings (Blanton & Pugach, 2011).

Teacher Preparation Pipeline

Although no single teaching credential prepares individuals to work in inclusive classrooms, it is informative to see the trends associated with teacher credentialing in California to provide context for the pathways currently preparing educators. The California Teacher Commission data indicate significant variability in new teacher credentials over the past 5 years.

The 5-year trend in new credentials has fluctuated nearly 20% up and down, and ultimately does not show growth in the number of newly prepared general education or special education teachers.

Why Dual Enrollment

Over the last 10 years, an increasing number of institutions in California have offered dual credential programs, which stems from a combination of policy, workforce in high-need areas, and equity-driven motives. One primary motivation of dual credential programs is to mitigate the chronic shortage of special education teachers across the state. According to data from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), special education remains among the highest-need areas, with many districts relying on teachers holding emergency or provisional permits. The state aims to create a more adaptable and better-prepared teaching workforce by allowing candidates to pursue both credentials simultaneously.

Another driving factor is the movement toward inclusive education. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and California's own Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) initiatives have emphasized the need for educators to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Dual credential programs aim to prepare teachers who can effectively differentiate instruction, collaborate across disciplines, and foster inclusive learning environments from the outset of their careers.

California's efforts are also aligned with the goals of educational equity and access. Students with disabilities—particularly those from historically underserved communities—often experience disproportionate disciplinary action, placement in restrictive settings, and lower academic outcomes (Office of Special Education Programs, 2020). Teachers with dual credentials are better positioned to address these disparities by applying inclusive pedagogy in general education settings. Recent literature has highlighted that dual certification is associated with positive outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly with academic gains in math (Kirskey & Lloyhdauser, 2022). These teachers feel more prepared to teach students with disabilities and are more likely to report positive perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities compared to teachers with only an elementary teaching credential (Gilmour & Lam, 2025; Kirskey & Lloyhauser, 2022).

Regardless of the certification pathway, the focus should be on ensuring high-quality teachers. Dual credential programs have the potential to frame dual certification as a transformative approach to fostering equity and inclusive education; however, the majority of dual credential programs in the United States present it as a practical means to obtain two teacher licenses without elaborating on inclusive teaching practices (Gomez-Najarro et al., 2023). To understand the nuances of dual credential programs, Pugach and Blanton (2009, 2012) and their colleagues, Gomez-Najarro et al. (2023), extensively analyzed U.S. dual credential programs and proposed a typology that distinguishes discrete, integrated, and merged models of dual credential programs. These models are defined by the degree of faculty collaboration and curricular integration between general and special education, not by licensure outcomes or administrative structures.

Conceptualizing Dual Credential Programs

Dimension	Discrete/Add On	Integrated	Merged
Coursework	Separate coursework for general and special education; little to no overlap.	Some shared courses; parallel curricula with coordinated content.	Fully unified curriculum blending general and special education content.
	Programs retain curricular division between courses required for students pursuing general and special education.	Significant curriculum overlap between general and special education.	Require the same body of knowledge.
Clinical Practice	Separate field experiences in general and special education settings.	Coordinated placements that provide exposure to both settings.	Joint placements where both fields are practiced simultaneously in inclusive settings.
Faculty Collaboration	Faculty Collaboration Minimal collaboration between general and special education faculty.	Moderate collaboration; coplanning for shared courses.	High-level collaboration; team teaching and shared responsibilities.
Program Structure	Two distinct programs are housed separately, possibly in different departments.	Aligned programs with some cross-program structures or advising.	One cohesive program with a single admissions process and unified advising.
Philosophical Approach	Maintains traditional boundaries between disciplines.	Recognizes the need for cross-disciplinary learning.	Emphasizes a unified vision of inclusive education.
Candidate Experience	Dual certification requires navigating two siloed paths.	Candidates receive coordinated instruction in both areas.	Candidates experience a seamless blend of both disciplines.
Degree of Integration	Low	Moderate	High

- Discrete programs are parallel but separate, preserving the boundaries between general and special education.
- Integrated programs coordinate learning experiences across disciplines but maintain some separation.
- Merged programs fully unify general and special education preparation into a cohesive experience, reflecting a strong commitment to inclusive education.

A Review of California's Dual Credential Programs

→ **California State University**

8 Dual Credential Programs out of 23 Total Educator Preparation Programs Examined

→ **Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities**

13 Dual Credential Programs out of 48 Total Educator Preparation Programs Examined

→ **University of California**

0 Dual Credential Programs out of 10 Total Educator Preparation Programs Examined

To investigate the development and trajectory of inclusive education and dual-licensure teacher preparation, and to inform policy and practice in California, the research team employed an integrated mixed-methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The team reviewed survey data from teacher preparation programs, websites, and CTC records to examine dual credential programs in the State. In total, we examined 81 universities offering an initial teaching credential, resulting in 23 CSUs, 48 AICCUs, and 10 UC schools. (https://aiccu.edu/page/ourcolleges).

Of the 81 educator preparation programs reviewed, 21 (26%) offered dual credentials—mostly (18) at the postbaccalaureate or graduate level—with considerable variation across programs.

Key Descriptive Findings

PROGRAM SPECIFIC FINDINGS

→ FINDING 1

Program variation

Dual credential programs reflected greater divergence than similarity with respect to nomenclature, program coursework, clinical experience expectations, and their recognition by CTC as an approved "combined" program. Among the self-identified dual programs, there were multiple structures and onramps to earning a dual credential. Very few programs evidenced explicit collaboration and a unified general and special education preparation into a single, cohesive experience that reflected tenets of inclusive teacher preparation.

→ FINDING 2

Curricular coherence

Collaboration between general and special education was most evident across programs with a shared "common trunk" of courses emphasizing inclusive education and equity, fostering more integrated preparation and interdisciplinary skills for teaching all learners. On the other hand, traditional dual pathways positioned one credential as primary and the other as an add-on, reinforcing general and special education boundaries and limiting curricular alignment.

→ FINDING 3

Accelerated timeline and efficiency

Many dual programs are structured to shorten time-to-degree, allowing candidates to complete both credentials more quickly than pursuing them separately. Some offer integrated master's or undergraduate pathways enabling candidates to earn dual credentials, and, in some cases, a degree within 2 years or less. The dual program structure provides additional credentials, experiences, and preparation and optimizes time-to-degree.

→ FINDING 4

Increased course and workload demands

Pursuing two credentials means satisfying two sets of licensure requirements with specialized coursework and student teaching requirements, which translates into a heavier workload and longer time to completion (e.g., 45 semester units over 3-4 semesters), making these programs more demanding in terms of time, effort, and cost—possibly discouraging future applicants from pursuing the program.

Key Descriptive Findings

→ **FINDING 5**

Complex field placement and scheduling

The vast majority of dual programs (90%) maintained separate general and special education settings across semesters for their final practicum, perpetuating binary systems and roles for future teachers and students with and without disabilities. Only two dual programs offered student teaching placements in cotaught inclusive settings.

SYSTEM FINDINGS

→ **FINDING 6**

Enhanced employability and flexibility

Dual programs that explicitly integrate coursework (e.g., common courses across both credentials) reinforce teaching versatility, preparing teachers to work effectively with diverse student populations across multiple settings. Many program websites marketed their dual credential pathways primarily as a transactional benefit for both employers and dual licensed teacher candidates.

→ **FINDING 7**

Sustaining programs and supporting students

Programs reported low or declining enrollment, citing program intensity, high costs, and limited incentives compared to standalone credential programs. Although a few offered funding through teacher residency programs, other dual credential programs allowed candidates to work as special education interns while completing clinical hours and coursework, helping offset tuition.

→ **FINDING 8**

Credentialing complexity and misalignment

Programs consistently reported a lack of clear, consistent guidance from CTC, particularly regarding how to align requirements across two credential pathways. Discrepancy in nomenclature of dual credential programs and what CTC recognized as approved "combined" programs adds to the lack of clarity and visibility between institutional representation of program offerings and official state recognition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Recommendation 1 – Program Level

Need for cross-program collaboration: Crafting a truly integrated dual program requires intentional partnerships between general and special education faculty (Reese et al., 2018). Some programs stressed that implementing an effective dual certification program demands high levels of collaboration across departments.

- EPP program leaders and faculty should conduct curriculum audits across general and special education programs using an equity framework for inclusive education.
- CTC should develop a dual credential program authorization that builds seamlessly upon general and special education programs (i.e., the process must be integrated, not additive).

Recommendation 2 – Common Trunk Recommendation

To fundamentally strengthen teacher preparation, programs must reimagine and adopt a unified core curriculum. Aligned with TPEs, this integrated core, or "common trunk," is the critical mechanism for equipping all teacher candidates with essential knowledge, high-leverage skills, and professional dispositions to serve diverse learners in inclusive settings effectively.

- A common trunk should be an expectation of all programs as part of their CTC accreditation process.
- Program outcomes and related data collection processes for teacher preparation programs should include clear common trunk competencies and outcomes.

Recommendation 3 – Clinical Placement Recommendation

Given the logistical and financial barriers for many preservice teachers to complete extended student teaching in multiple settings and the 600 or more hours for dual credential candidates, the state should provide tailored support for candidates in dual credential programs in completing clinical practice requirements, so that teacher candidates are not financially disadvantaged during extended clinical placements.

- K-12 state special education technical assistance projects should have a deliverable to identify districts, schools, and classrooms as model inclusion sites for clinical placement.
- Higher education institutions should establish and validate processes (e.g., program metrics) to identify and confirm high-quality, inclusive placements in teacher preparation programs.

Recommendation 4 – State-Level Recommendations

California's legislation should address both the cost and the administrative barriers that can support the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of students in dual credential programs.

- Direct funding (e.g., stipends, scholarships) to overcome the financial barrier of unpaid student teaching, making it more feasible for candidates to add the extra time and placements that dual credentials often require.
- Enact CTC-recommended streamlined routes and regulatory changes so candidates can complete both credentials more efficiently.
- Teacher residency programs should be required to have an inclusion focus, including placement in identified model inclusion sites.
- Create a streamline process that removes barriers to apprenticeship and other preparation pathways.

CONCLUSION

With 1 in 7 students in PK–12 schools being students with disabilities and the State of California not yet assuming a leadership position nationally, as measured by key inclusion measures, multidimensional approaches to advancing student success for all students, and specifically for students with disabilities, are imperative. Our focus in this project has been to examine dual credential preparation programs as a means to consider how to have the very best prepared educators advance inclusion. Our findings illuminate the following key ideas for educational leaders to consider:

First, state and national data suggest that California still has significant work to do to strengthen its inclusion efforts to create the very best inclusive environments for all students—work which depends on coordinated systems change at all levels and collaborative partnerships among PK–12 districts, higher education institutions, and state agencies.

Second, dual credential programs provide a promising preparation route for educators, but are highly varied in their construction. Enhancing clarity of experience through clear definitions and design of dual credentials has the potential to enhance and scale up dual credential programs.

Third, to engage in deep curriculum redesign with a common curriculum and inclusive clinical placements, higher education must invest in sustainable structural supports to support capacity for faculty collaboration and professional learning that models and integrates inclusive pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning.

Fourth, teacher residency programs are a key location for high-quality teacher preparation, and this model should include a focus on inclusion education practices and environmental experiences.

To advance a more inclusive teacher workforce, state and institutional policies must address organizational and financial barriers that limit the development and accessibility of credential program pathways for obtaining dual licensure. Comprehensive guidance and support processes, including targeted resources and financial assistance to candidates, are key strategies for transforming teacher preparation and cultivating teachers who foster success and belonging for every student.

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