

SOME JOBS ARE A CALLING
TEACHING CALIFORNIA'S SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS
by Kris Marubayashi, Co-Director, California Center for Teaching Careers



Dedicated Special Educators

Have you ever wondered what kind of dedication and passion it takes to become a teacher? What kinds of people are needed to teach our children and how do we encourage them to make that step and enter the classroom?

Now imagine what it would take to educate children with special needs. Is there a vision that comes to mind or is the picture unclear? Most people do not know the wide range of ways in which children with special needs are educated, and many do not know that our state is in drastic need of teachers to serve in these many capacities.

Through this article, we hope that you will not only better understand the work of special educators but also help answer such questions as, "What can I do to ensure the success of special educators?" and "Are there people I know who would be great special education teachers?" The stories of Monica Smith and Jeri Chase are just two of the many thousands that reflect the lives of teachers who are currently teaching in California classrooms. They are prime examples of the kind of special education teacher our students need.

Monica Smith & Jeri Chase

Most special education teachers see their career as a calling rather than a job. They enjoy interacting with children and revel in seeing the excitement in students' eyes when they learn a new concept or skill. Special educators will proudly tell you of the accomplishments of their former students. Prior to becoming teachers, many of them had personal connections with special needs children, as parents, relatives, neighbors, or friends. These experiences have made these individuals uniquely qualified to teach special needs children.

Monica Smith considers herself lucky. As a special education teacher, she has a unique job that allows her to learn something everyday from the students she works with. "My special education students are delightful," she reveals. "And worth their weight in gold."

Smith has been an educator since 1992 and began her career wanting to teach high school students German and English. She discovered her love of special education while working as a long-term substitute for special education classes, and went on to earn her credential in Special Education from CSU Sacramento. "I was called in every day to work with the children for quite a while," she says, "I discovered that I really loved working with them and decided to get my credential and teach full time."

Smith has taught in the Center Unified School District in Sacramento for five years, and currently teaches in Sacramento at Spinelli Elementary in a unique special education program that was started two years ago. The program integrates special education students into mainstream classrooms with one or two hours a week spent working on challenging areas. Smith admits that her colleagues may have been initially hesitant about having her students included in their classes, but they soon warmed up to the idea. "Once they realized I was there to help them and their students learn more effectively, they welcomed the idea," she said.

Smith says that she learns something from her kids every day and that they end up teaching her while she teaches them. She has had success with students who have started out as physically aggressive or with behavior problems and have now been successfully integrated into mainstream classrooms. Her students learn routines and structure to help keep themselves calm and on task.

There are other special education teachers who also bring a passion and fervor to their classrooms. Jeri Chase is another example of the kind of special education teacher we want teaching our children.

Chase feels that her decision to teach special education students was a calling and part of a family tradition. Chase comes from a family of educators. Her parents have more than 50 years of expertise in both the classroom and as administrators. Chase's mother was a special education teacher for more than twenty years and her father was an elementary school teacher for thirty. Through her mother's example and dedication, Chase found that teaching special education students was something that she enjoyed. Before she began her career as a teacher, Chase was a classroom aide working with special education students. From the beginning, it was apparent that she had a unique ability to communicate with and inspire the students she saw on a daily basis.

Since obtaining her credential through National University, Chase has worked with both severely handicapped and learning disabled students. Some of her former students have competed on the football and softball teams and one went on to be part of ROTC. The first group of students she worked with graduated from McClatchy High School last June. She currently works with both seventh and eighth grade students at California Middle School. With the reputation as a teacher with a lot of patience and innovative ideas, she has also been able to build relationships both with fellow educators and the parents of her students.

Meeting the Need for Special Education Teachers

California has been making significant strides in meeting the need for new teachers in the state. While many new teachers have been recruited to the profession, there is still a significant need in the area of special education. CalTeach is focusing its efforts to bring more teachers to special education and alleviate the shortage.

Statistics show that nationally the teacher shortage is approaching two million - epidemic proportions by any measure. In the field of special education, it is estimated that nearly 82,000 special education teachers are needed to fill positions nationwide. In California, over 3,900 special education teachers will be needed this coming year.

California needs more people like Smith and Chase to step up to the challenge and become special education teachers. Education is the future - of our communities, of our children, and of our state - and teachers are the core of our education system. We all admire and respect teachers. We certainly appreciate them. But we also need to be more active in encouraging friends and family members to become teachers. We need to advocate for our future generation, and pay particular attention to our children with special needs.

So, in closing, a couple of questions:

Do Jeri's and Monica's stories sound familiar to you?

Are you interested in helping all students achieve their greatest potential?

Will you, or someone you know, become the next special education teacher?

Make the difference of a lifetime. Teach!

For more information about becoming a special education teacher in California, please visit the CalTeach web site at www.calteach.com.

Sources: CalTeach, National Clearing house for Professions in Special Education, Data-Quest