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## Autism Endorsements: State Approaches

by *Eve Müller*

In 1992, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) first introduced autism as a federal disability category and mandated that states provide annual counts of children so identified. Since that time, the number of students identified with autism has grown significantly (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, 2002). Several states have responded to IDEA and/or to the increase in numbers of students with autism by offering an autism endorsement. The purpose of this document is to describe their approaches to autism endorsement. Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) conducted this analysis as part of its Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs.

### Data Collection

Based on information found in documents by NASDSE (1996) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) (2004), Project Forum identified seven states that appeared to offer autism endorsements. Follow-up calls to the seven states revealed that one of the states did not in fact offer an autism endorsement. A second state (*Texas*) reported that although it once offered an autism endorsement, the endorsement was no longer available. The remaining five states – *Delaware, Florida, Michigan, Nevada* and *West Virginia* – do currently offer endorsements in the area of autism. Project Forum developed an interview protocol with input from the Professional Development in Autism (PDA) Center at the University of Washington in Seattle (See Appendix A).<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted between June 30, 2005 and July 7, 2005 with state directors of special education and/or their designees.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Project Forum gratefully acknowledges the PDA Center for helping with the development of the interview protocol and review of an earlier version of this document.

<sup>2</sup> Project Forum also gratefully acknowledges the following individuals for participating in interviews and reviewing an earlier version of this document: Martha Toomey, Director of Exceptional Children and Early Childhood Workgroup, Delaware Department of Education; Brian Touchette, Education Associate, Delaware Department of Education; Evy Friend, Section Administrator, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, Florida Department of Education; Joanne Winkelman, Policy Coordinator, Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services, Michigan Department of Education; Rorie Fitzpatrick, Assistant Director of Special Education, Office of Special Education, Elementary and Secondary Education, and School Improvement Programs, Nevada Department of Education; and Jim Parker, Coordinator, Office of Special Education, West Virginia Department of Education.

## Findings

### Background

In the early 1980s, an autism endorsement was first authorized in *Michigan* and a combined endorsement for autism and severe disabilities was first authorized in *Delaware*. In the early 1990s, *West Virginia* offered a combined behavior disorders and autism endorsement and in 2003 autism became an independent endorsement within the state. *Nevada* first authorized an autism endorsement in 1996 and *Florida* first authorized an autism endorsement in 2002 (which will not be fully effective until 2011).

Interviewees identified one or more reasons for authorizing an autism endorsement. Four listed the increasing numbers of children with autism as a major motivation, although interviewees included three states with percentages of students identified with autism lower than the national average (*Florida, Nevada* and *West Virginia*).<sup>3</sup>

Other reasons for authorization were also noted:

- *Delaware* began its state-wide autism program in the early 1980s and the autism endorsement was created as a way of preparing personnel to staff the program.
- *West Virginia* is a categorical state with endorsements for all disability areas, so when autism was introduced as a category in 1992, the state added a corresponding endorsement.
- *Nevada* requires that a teacher's endorsement match the disability category of the majority of the students on his/her caseload and so it became necessary to create an endorsement to match teacher caseloads once the autism category was created.

Prior to introducing the autism endorsement, states reported that teachers working with students with autism were required to have a variety of endorsements. *West Virginia* required teachers of students with autism to have an endorsement for "emotionally handicapped." *Florida, Michigan, Nevada* and *Delaware* all permitted a range of endorsement options.

### Nature of Autism Endorsement

All five states reported that the autism endorsement was intended for special education teachers. In *Michigan, West Virginia* and *Nevada*, the endorsement can function as either a "stand alone" or "add-on" endorsement. In other words, it can be the only endorsement a teacher has, or it can

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<sup>3</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Education's website at [www.ideadata.org](http://www.ideadata.org), during the 2003 school year, .22 percent of students in Delaware were identified with autism; .17 percent in Florida; .27 in Michigan; .18 in Nevada; and .14 in West Virginia (the national average was .21 percent). In terms of actual numbers, there were 387 students ages 6-21 identified with autism in Delaware; 5,915 in Florida; 6,341 in Michigan; 891 in Nevada; and 507 in West Virginia.

be added-on as a secondary or tertiary endorsement to other endorsements such as mental retardation (MR), emotionally disturbed (ED) or specific learning disability (SLD). However, if a student chooses to complete the autism endorsement as a stand alone endorsement, additional special education coursework is usually required. Both *West Virginia* and *Nevada* noted that the autism endorsement most commonly functions as an add-on. *Delaware* and *Florida* both reported that their autism endorsements function exclusively as an add-on to certification in special education.

Three states reported that their autism endorsement was considered a requirement to be a “highly qualified” teacher, at least within certain contexts. For instance, *Michigan* requires all educators teaching in autism programs to have an endorsement;<sup>4</sup> *Nevada* requires that when 51 percent or more of a teacher’s caseload consists of students with autism, then the teacher must be endorsed; and *West Virginia* requires that all teachers teaching students with autism, in either generic special education classrooms or special classrooms for students with autism, have an endorsement.<sup>5</sup> *Florida*, which most recently introduced its autism endorsement, still has not determined in which contexts it will be considered a requirement to be highly qualified. However, the interviewee from *Florida* noted that the state would most likely tie the requirement to caseload, similar to what *Nevada* is currently doing. Although *Delaware* does not currently require the autism endorsement at the state level, a number of local education agencies (LEAs) throughout the state have put requirements into place at the LEA level.

Table 1 includes information on the age ranges covered by the five states’ autism endorsements:

**Table 1 – Age or Grade Ranges for Autism Endorsements**

Birth - 21	3-21	Pre-K-12	K-12
DE	NV	FL	MI, WV

### Coursework and Practicum Requirements

In terms of semester hours, *Michigan* requires the most (i.e., 30 semester hours unless it is a second endorsement, in which case only 18 semester hours are required). *West Virginia* requires 18 semester hours including nine autism-specific semester hours (unless it is a second endorsement, in which case only the nine autism-specific semester hours are required). *Delaware*, *Florida* and *Nevada* all require 15 semester hours.

Coursework in *Florida*, *Nevada*<sup>6</sup> and *West Virginia* usually includes a combination of autism-specific coursework (e.g., characteristics of individuals with autism, assessment and diagnosis of students with autism, curriculum development for students with autism, methods and strategies

<sup>4</sup> However, Michigan also permits students with autism to receive educational services in general special education classrooms where the teacher does not necessarily possess an autism endorsement.

<sup>5</sup> West Virginia does not require the autism endorsement for special education teachers who consult with a general education teacher in a general education classroom – even if he/she consults on behalf of one or more students with autism.

<sup>6</sup> Until 2004, Nevada did not require any autism-specific coursework as part of the autism endorsement. Fifteen months ago this changed and now two autism-specific courses are required.

for teaching students with autism and seminar on families and autism), more generic coursework (e.g., behavior management, positive behavioral supports [PBS], augmentative and alternative communication [AAC] and assistive technology [AT]) and practicum experience. *Delaware's* coursework is a bit less autism-specific, since the endorsement is for both autism and severe disabilities. *Michigan* differs from the other four states by requiring specific content knowledge, but no specific coursework. Unlike the other states, a test is administered as part of the endorsement process and institutions of higher education (IHEs) recommend candidates to the SEA for endorsement.

Three states (*Florida, Michigan* and *West Virginia*) require a three credit hour practicum working in a classroom with students with autism (included in the total numbers of required hours listed above), and *Delaware* requires a practicum working with either students with autism or other severe disabilities. *Nevada* has no practicum requirements.

Only two states mentioned a timeframe for the coursework and practicum requirements. *Delaware* notes that many LEAs impose a three-year maximum on the program and *Michigan* notes that while programs may be of any length, language pertaining to “highly qualified” specifies that teachers have only three years to be certified.

*Florida* and *Nevada* described the theoretical orientations of their autism endorsements as “eclectic,” while *Michigan* said its endorsement has no particular theoretical orientation. Both *Delaware* and *West Virginia* described programs that center on either applied behavior analysis or PBS.

### **Personnel Preparation Programs**

All five states described personnel preparation programs at one or more IHEs within the state designed to help teachers meet the requirements of the autism endorsement. *Delaware*<sup>7</sup> and *West Virginia* each have one program; *Nevada* has two programs; *Michigan* currently has three programs in place and two additional programs in the process of being approved; and *Florida* has several programs that are in the process of being approved.

Several states described the relationship between the state education agency (SEA) and its IHEs. In addition to the SEA's responsibility for developing certification requirements, approving programs and/or handling periodic reviews of programs, states described the following:

- *Michigan* was heavily involved in developing the Internet-based ACE Program. This program is a collaborative among six universities throughout the state offering coursework for the autism endorsement via Internet-based programs with the exception of the practicum requirement.
- *Nevada* invites representatives from its IHEs to participate in the Department of Education's special education advisory committee (SEAC).

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<sup>7</sup> Delaware noted that similar or related coursework is available at the state's other two IHEs.

- *West Virginia* serves as a sponsoring agency allowing its IHE program to offer classes off campus and through the Internet.

States offer a number of financial incentives for participating in these personnel preparation programs, though none are specific to the autism endorsement alone. For example, in *Delaware*, the state offers full reimbursement for coursework taken during the summer and partial reimbursement for coursework taken during the academic year. *Florida* IDEA and state improvement grant (SIG) dollars are used to support professional development partnerships at Florida's IHEs and many of the partnerships use funds to support tuition reimbursement for special education coursework. *West Virginia* reimburses teachers for endorsement in high need areas, including autism. *Michigan* initially provided incentive money for participation in the ACE Program, although that money is no longer available.

### **Additional Autism-Specific Credentials**

Two states described additional autism-specific credentials currently available:

- *West Virginia* added its autism mentor credential in 1992. This is a special credential available to experienced paraprofessionals.<sup>8</sup> Requirements include a minimum of 30 hours in autism-related staff development credits and two years of successful work with students with autism. Paraprofessionals submit evidence of their qualifications to the state's office of special education, which verifies the evidence and sends a letter to the LEA where the paraprofessional is employed. The LEA makes the final decision. Since its inception, *West Virginia* has trained hundreds of autism mentors.
- *Michigan* offers two additional options – teacher consultant in autism and an interdisciplinary certificate in autism. The teacher consultant in autism must have completed the autism endorsement, have three years of satisfactory teaching experience (including two in special education) and have an M.A. in education or special education. The teacher consultant is only permitted to do itinerant work. The interdisciplinary certificate in autism is for nonteachers with expertise in autism (e.g., occupational therapists [OTs], physical therapists [PTs], speech language pathologists [SLPs], general education teachers, music and art therapists).

### **Outcomes**

Due to the fact that in some states the autism endorsement has been around for almost 20 years and in other states the autism endorsement is very recent, the numbers of people who have received the autism endorsement varies significantly from state to state. Several states also reported that their information regarding totals was incomplete and probably underestimated actual figures. *Delaware* reported that more than 450 teachers have received the endorsement

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<sup>8</sup> West Virginia state code specifies that qualified paraprofessionals must be an Aide III (i.e., with six semester hours of college credit and one year of experience working in special education).

since its inception in the early 1980s (though because the endorsement is a combined autism/severe disability endorsement, it is hard to know exactly how many teachers with the endorsement actually work with students with autism). *Michigan* reported that more than 250 have received an autism endorsement and *West Virginia* reported that at least that number have received either the combined behavior disorders/autism endorsement or the stand-alone autism endorsement (available since 2003). *Nevada* reported that more than 150 have received the endorsement since its inception in 1996. *Florida*, which only introduced the autism endorsement in 2002, reported that 10 teachers have received the autism endorsement.

None of the interviewees felt that the autism endorsement has had a significant impact on the inclusion of students with autism. Asked whether the autism endorsement has had an impact on students with *other* disabilities – e.g., channeling educational resources away from them – interviewees agreed that the only impact on these students had been positive. For example, *Michigan* reported that OTs, PTs and SLPs are eager to take part in autism training programs because they find that the strategies are beneficial to students with all types of disabilities. Interviewees from several states did concur, however, that students with autism are a resource intensive population, with some of the lowest teacher/student ratios and some of the highest rates of one-on-one assistance.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

States described a number of barriers and/or challenges relating to the autism endorsement, including the following:

- For teachers in categorical states, the endorsement creates an additional burden because many teaching positions require that they possess multiple endorsements.
- Some teachers find it difficult to complete required coursework within the three-year timeframe imposed by SEAs and/or LEAs.
- Even with the autism endorsement and an increasing availability of IHE programs offering necessary coursework, states report that recruitment and retention of adequately prepared personnel remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas.
- Some feel that the autism endorsement may ultimately *contribute* to the teacher shortage in states where the endorsement is a requirement to be highly qualified.
- Some speculate that the endorsement has created more specialized programs because if a teacher has an autism endorsement, it is easier to cluster all students with autism on one teacher's caseload.
- A number of teachers complete the requirements for the autism endorsement but choose not to apply for the endorsement because they do not want to be assigned to autism programs associated with a disproportionately high number of due process hearings.
- There is a dearth of faculty with expertise in autism, and recruiting efforts have met with limited success at several IHEs offering and/or planning to offer preparation programs leading to the autism endorsement.

## Benefits

States also described a number of benefits to having the autism endorsement. For example:

- Most states reported having a more qualified, better prepared workforce for meeting the academic and social needs of students with autism.
- Coursework leading to the autism endorsement has exposed teachers to a wide range of strategies for working with students with autism.
- The endorsement has led to a heightened level of awareness among educators regarding the unique characteristics associated with autism.
- IHE programs' focus on behavior analysis and functional communication has benefited *all* students with disabilities, not just students with autism.
- Some speculate that personnel preparation associated with the autism endorsement may result in keeping more students with autism in general education classrooms.

## Concluding Remarks

In response to a growing number of students with autism and the need to serve these students, at least five states now offer an autism endorsement. Although coursework and practicum requirements vary from state to state, as do the specific characteristics of the endorsement (e.g., the contexts for which one is required to have an autism endorsement, the age range for which it is valid), the five states agree that the autism endorsement has helped them better meet the needs of students with autism as well as students with other disabilities. It is important to note, however, that representatives of the PDA Center believe an autism endorsement may oversimplify the complex issues involved in educating students on the autism spectrum and the diversity of needs represented in this population. While states described both positives and negatives relating to the autism endorsement, most seem to believe that the benefits outweigh the barriers and challenges – particularly by producing a more highly skilled workforce.

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Ph: 703-519-3800 ext. 312 or Email: [carla.burgman@nasdse.org](mailto:carla.burgman@nasdse.org)

**Appendix A –  
Autism Endorsement Interview Protocol  
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### **I. Background History of Autism Endorsement**

- When was the endorsement for autism first introduced in your state?
- What prompted the decision to create this endorsement (Probe: state-level leadership, parent and/or disability advocacy groups, personnel shortages, increases in numbers of students identified with autism, etc.)?
- What percentage of students with autism receive special education services within general education classrooms? Generic special education classrooms? Autism-only classrooms?
- Prior to your state's addition of an endorsement for autism, what type of endorsement(s), if any, was required for working with students with autism?

### **II. Nature of Autism Endorsement**

- Who is the endorsement for (Probe: teachers, para-educators, speech and language pathologists)?
- Is the endorsement considered a requirement to be “highly qualified” to work with students with autism?
- What age range does the endorsement cover (e.g., P-12)?
- What types of educational environments require an autism endorsement (e.g., general education classroom with one or more students with autism, special education classroom with one or more students with autism, special class for students with autism)?

### **III. Requirements for Autism Endorsement**

- What elements are required to obtain an endorsement?
  - Autism-specific coursework?
  - Practicum hours?
  - Other requirements?
  - Length of program?
- Does the coursework required to receive the endorsement have a particular theoretical orientation?

### **IV. Personnel Preparation Programs**

- Are there personnel preparation programs at one or more institutions of higher education (IHEs) in your state that are designed to help students meet the requirements of the autism endorsement? If so, please describe the state education agency's (SEA) relationship to these programs.

- Do educational personnel come from out of state as well as from within the state to pursue this endorsement?

## **V. Outcomes**

- Approximately how many educational personnel receive the endorsement for autism each year? How many total since the inception of the endorsement program?
- How does this endorsement affect students' with autism inclusion in general education?
- What is the impact of the autism endorsement on children with other disabilities (i.e., are resources being channeled away from these students)?
- What are the benefits of offering an autism endorsement (Probe: from the point of view of SEA, LEA, parents, teachers)?
- What are the challenges (if any) posed by requiring an autism endorsement?