

# *Introduction to* The Fundamentals of Special Education

**Terry** was a living legend at Magnolia Middle School. Everybody wondered what Terry would do next. Constantly asking questions, teasing other students, telling jokes, and generally disrupting the class were Terry's trademarks.



Whatever the level or kind of work her teacher assigns, **Donnelle** demonstrates superior academic performance. She works diligently on everything, sometimes redoing an assignment after the final grade has been recorded. Most of her classmates look to Donnelle for academic, athletic, social, and emotional leadership during the school day. Teachers like teaching Donnelle because she keeps them actively involved in their content areas.



**Antoinette** does not see well, but she is doing quite well in her classes at Jamestown High School with the assistance of her teachers. She has a warm personality and outstanding knowledge of science and mathematics. Dr. Roberson, the principal of the school, is legally blind and has encouraged Antoinette to attend his alma mater, Kansas State University.

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**Ann** is 20 years old and has been receiving special education services since elementary school. These services have helped her learn to function independently and make adjustments for her mental retardation. This year she is finishing high school. She and her family are asking important questions about what her life will be like without the support provided by special education staff. As Ann makes the transition from working and learning in school to living and working in the community, she will manage her new challenges just like the friends who will be graduating with her: courageously.

**E**very school has students like Terry, Donnelle, Antoinette, and Ann. These students are known for what they do, and what they do sometimes conflicts with what teachers and others believe they should do. Sometimes their disabilities interfere with their progress in school. Special education programs address problems and assist people with disabilities.

Most students—whatever their special needs—can be taught in the same classrooms as their neighbors and peers. If you teach in a general education classroom, you will probably teach students with disabilities. Providing special assistance to students who need it is one of the reasons that people become teachers.

Just like general education teachers, special education teachers have full days. Special education teachers may teach basic skills classes to help students learn to read, write, and do math better. They may teach learning strategies classes to help students develop skills they need for academics. They may also have classes of students who have social and emotional problems.

Special education teachers face the same concerns about their students as do other teachers. All students worry about what their friends think about them, their social lives, and their futures. A general education teacher deals with these concerns

but may also be concerned that students accept those who have special needs. General education teachers want to ensure that exceptional students are integrated into their general education classes and that all students develop the basic skills they need to succeed. Even though general education and special education classrooms are different settings, the types of students in them and the ways in which subjects are taught are similar. For example, both special and general education teachers structure their teaching to accommodate students' individual needs. All effective teachers do this. They use information from tests and classroom observations to plan instruction and to evaluate the effects of that instruction. And special and general education teachers both have to maintain orderly classrooms that support learning for all of their students.

There was a time when students of all ages and capabilities were educated in a single classroom. In many communities, the one-room schoolhouse disappeared because it became more and more difficult for a single teacher to meet the diverse needs of a large number of students. Educators believed that grouping students by age and by subject matter would make their teaching more effective. A by-product of this thinking was separate classes for students with special needs. This parallel system of general and special education continues today.