



Shaping theFuture

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Embracing and Providing for All Learners: The Basics of Meeting Specialized Needs

by Tracie Salgado

It's a new school year! Your hallways and classrooms are filled with the chatter of young voices, excited at the prospect of a blank slate in their new grade. It's an exciting time in the world of education.

Our Christian schools have a unique opportunity to boldly serve children not only with strong academics and a Christ-centered education but also with individualized support for students who learn differently. While special education is often associated with public schools and federally mandated services, Christian schools can and do play a unique role in supporting children with disabilities or learning challenges. By building a basic understanding of special education practices, Christian schools can extend their mission to nurturing the whole child spiritually, academically, socially, and emotionally.

Let's examine an overview of the basics of special education as it applies to Christian schools. We'll consider definitions, common learning needs, approaches to instruction, collaboration with families, and biblical principles that guide inclusive education.

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What Is Special Education?

Special education refers to instruction designed to meet the unique learning needs of children with disabilities or other learning challenges. These may include dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, speech and language disorders, and emotional and behavioral challenges.

Federal law mandates special education in the public school system through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, Christian schools are not bound by the same requirements. For this reason, many parents seek out Christian schools, hoping for a faith-based, nurturing environment where their child's differences will be recognized and embraced in the spirit of how we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made" ([Psalm 139:14](#)) in the image of God ([Genesis 1:27](#)). This creates an important responsibility: Christian educators are called to offer appropriate support where possible. [Proverbs 22:6](#) comes to mind.



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Common Areas of Student Need

As the beginning of the year settles down, students start displaying their abilities, and beginning-of-the-year test results are analyzed. A range of student abilities and learning styles will most likely be present.

Some of the most common areas where students may need support include:

Reading and writing challenges – Dyslexia and related difficulties can make decoding, fluency, and comprehension difficult. Structured literacy approaches are often most effective.

Mathematics difficulties – Dyscalculia or general struggles with number sense, calculation, and problem-solving may require targeted support.

Attention and executive functioning – Students with ADHD or related challenges may need help with organization, task initiation, time management, and impulse control.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – Students may struggle with social communication, sensory regulation, or flexible thinking.

Speech and language disorders – These may affect articulation, vocabulary, comprehension, and expressive communication.

Emotional or behavioral needs – Anxiety, depression, or behavioral challenges may interfere with learning and require compassion and structure.

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Approaches to Supporting Students

Our schools vary widely in resources, staffing, and expertise. Some may employ special education teachers or intervention specialists, others may partner with public school districts or private therapists for support while still others may try to handle the needs of students with learning differences in the classroom. Regardless of the model, several core practices form the backbone of specialized learning in any setting:

1. Differentiated instruction

Teachers adjust content, process, and product based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile. For example, a struggling

reader may listen to an audiobook while others read independently. Small group learning at any grade level is a great way to differentiate instruction based on student need. This is the first step in providing support for students who are struggling in the classroom.

2. Accommodations

These are changes in how a student learns or demonstrates understanding, without changing the curriculum expectations. Examples include specific extended time on tests, preferential seating, fidget tools, or extra breaks.

3. Tier 2 and 3 interventions

Some students require structured, evidence-based interventions in reading, writing, or math. These often involve small-group or one-on-one sessions designed to meet specific needs led by a trained teacher. When done

with fidelity and intense consistency these are the second and third steps in supporting students who are struggling. Should a student continue to show struggle after Tier 3 interventions, the team might want to consider outside testing.



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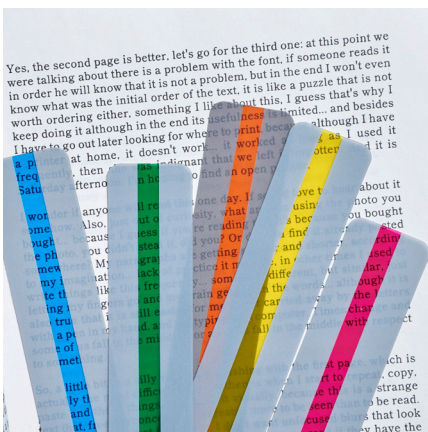
4. Collaboration with specialists

Sometimes, schools will partner with speech therapists, occupational therapists, or counselors to provide additional support. Many Christian schools collaborate with outside professionals who come on campus part-time.

5. Individualized Plans

Many Christian schools develop their own “student support plans” or “accommodation plans.” These documents are designed with a team of people (parents, classroom teacher, special education teacher, and administration when available) who work together to outline the child’s strengths and challenges with agreed-upon strategies. Private schools are strongly encouraged to not accept or use Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans. These are documents with many legalities attached to them.

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Partnering with Families

Parents are often the strongest advocates for their children, and collaboration with families is essential in a Christian school setting. Effective partnership includes:

Regular communication – Keeping parents informed about positive and negative progress, challenges, and strategies being used.

Shared goal setting – Working together to establish realistic goals that honor the child's dignity and potential.

Encouraging advocacy – Empowering parents to seek outside services or evaluations when needed.

Grace-filled conversations – Maintaining a spirit of encouragement and empathy, even when discussing difficult topics.

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Biblical Foundations for Inclusive Education

At the heart of Christian education is the belief that every child is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This truth affirms the dignity and worth of all students, including those with disabilities or learning challenges.

Several biblical principles can guide a Christian school's approach to special education:

Love and compassion – Jesus consistently reached out to those who were marginalized or overlooked. Supporting students with differences reflects Christ's love ([1 John 3:17–18](#)).

Stewardship of gifts – Each student has God-given abilities and potential. Schools help nurture these gifts for His glory ([1 Corinthians 12](#)).

The Body of Christ – As 1 Corinthians 12 teaches, the body has many parts, each

with a role. Inclusive education mirrors this truth, showing that all members are valuable.

Equity and justice

– [Proverbs 31:8–9](#) calls us to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Schools serve as advocates for vulnerable students.

When grounded in Scripture, special education becomes not merely a program but a ministry of grace and inclusion.



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Where to Go from Here

The basics of special education in Christian schools center around recognizing diverse learning needs, providing tailored support, collaborating with families, and grounding practices in biblical truth. While resources may be limited compared to public schools, Christian educators have a unique opportunity to minister to the whole child.

When Christian schools embrace special education, they affirm that every student is made in the image of God and is worthy of love, dignity, and purposeful instruction. In doing so, they not only fulfill an academic responsibility but also live out a Christ-centered calling to nurture and include all children in the body of Christ.



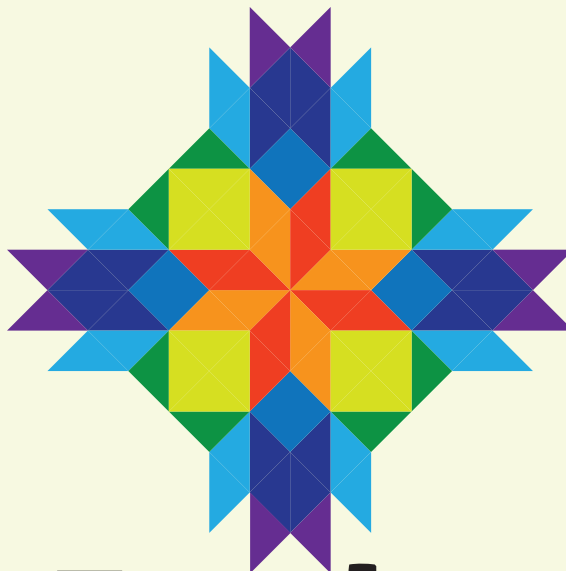
Dr. Tracie Wendorf-Salgado is Director of Special Education at Lutheran Special Education Ministries (LSEM) and brings several years of experience in

special education. Having taught for more than 25 years in two countries and three states, she has gained valuable insights and expertise in specialized learning for students with different learning abilities. She has consulted with various governors, school boards, and other stakeholders on special education, taught adjunct at two universities, and provided education and training to other classroom teachers. Dr. Salgado earned her doctorate from Grand Canyon University in Organizational Leadership. She is currently also an adjunct professor at Concordia University—Wisconsin in the special education department.

Review, Reflect, Resolve

- What processes can our school put into place to determine if a child needs extra support?
- What supports will we offer in our classrooms for students who are struggling?
- What one or two whole-class accommodations can we implement to better support our classroom learning environment?

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to seeing you!*



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