

# Guidelines for the Autism Endorsement

# July 2016

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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# I. Context and Purpose:

In 2010, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts established a *Special Commission Relative to Autism* with the mission to “investigate and study current support and services, identify gaps and make recommendations for strategies to support the development of appropriate, collaborative and timely supports and services across the lifespan of individuals on the [autism] spectrum.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Among the priorities established by the Autism Commission was improving autism knowledge in schools.

The Commission issued its report in 2013 and laid out a number of recommendations to address a wide range of priorities, including the recommendation that Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) establish a competency based Autism Endorsement for licensed special education teachers. The endorsement would allow teachers to obtain the competencies necessary to educate students in a manner consistent with the student’s potential and in the least restrictive environment, in accordance with federal and state special education law.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Autism Endorsement was included in the Autism Omnibus bill, *An Act Relative to Assisting Individuals with Autism and other Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities[[3]](#footnote-3),* and became law in August of 2014.

Under this law the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is required to “provide an endorsement in autism which shall include both coursework and a field experience for licensed special education teachers to acquire the competencies necessary to conduct assessments, develop appropriate individualized education programs, provide specially designed instruction and related services and consult and collaborate with other educators, including general education teachers, in order to meet the unique and complex educational needs of students with autism in the least restrictive environment.”[[4]](#footnote-4)  The statute goes on to further state that “competencies shall also include, but not be limited to, the impact of autism on verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, sensory experiences, behaviors, literacy and academic achievement.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The purpose of the Massachusetts Autism Endorsement is to enhance the knowledge of special educators working with students with autism. ESE is issuing these guidelines to support implementation of the Autism Endorsement.

# II. Guidelines to Develop an Autism Endorsement Course of Study:

The Autism Endorsement regulations, [603 CMR 7.14(5)](http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr7.html?section=14), set forth requirements including a prerequisite license, field-based experience, and subject matter knowledge competencies that include a thorough understanding of: (a) the foundations and characteristics of autism; (b) assessment of students with autism; (c) educational programs, services, and supports for students with autism; and (d) collaboration and coordination.

These Massachusetts Guidelines provide further detail on these required subject matter competencies and field-based experience and are intended to represent the content of four or five graduate level courses, as one option for designing a program. The Massachusetts competencies have been crosswalked with the Council for Exceptional Children’s (CEC) Autism Specialist Set. CEC is responsible for setting the standards for professional practice for special education teacher preparation programs nationally. These Massachusetts Guidelines detailed below will be used by ESE when approving Autism Endorsement programs.

**Prerequisite license**

*603 CMR 7.14(5) Autism Endorsement. Awarded to educators who meet the following requirements:*

*(a) Prerequisite license: An Initial or Professional license as a Teacher of Students with Moderate Disabilities, Teacher of Students with Severe Disabilities, Teacher of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, or Teacher of the Visually Impaired.*

**Field experiences**

*603 CMR 7.14 (5)(c) Field Experience Requirement for state credential:*

1. *Completion of a 150-hour field-based experience that includes a minimum of 75 hours in an inclusive setting with students with autism and 75 hours of additional experience in any type of school setting working with students with autism.*
2. *Teachers meeting the prerequisite license requirements outlined in 603 CMR 7.14 (5) (a) who can demonstrate at least one year of teaching experience working with students with autism shall complete at least 75 hours of field-based experience working with students with autism in any type of school setting, including at least 50 of which shall take place in an inclusive setting in lieu of meeting the field experience requirements set forth in 603 CMR 7.14(5)(c)(1).*

The field-based experience required for the endorsement is designed to give specific experience with students with autism. Due to the varying nature of presentation of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within individuals, candidates’ eligibility for the endorsement should be evaluated based on demonstration of course- and field-work experiences and assignments that comprehensively and specifically address the competencies outlined below. Field-based experiences for the autism endorsement should be organized, coordinated, and assessed by the Sponsoring Organization. A plan for providing candidates field-based experiences, including the goals and objectives of these experiences, must be included by the sponsoring organization in the program submission and approved by ESE. Programs should identify a means by which to assess candidates during their field experience and how it addresses the competencies identified in the subject matter knowledge requirements below.

**Subject Matter Knowledge Requirements for the Autism Endorsement**

**Foundations & Characteristics of Autism**

**Competency:**

*Understanding of autism including the co-morbid conditions associated with autism spectrum disorders and the differences between a medical diagnosis of autism and the definition of the term autism under state and federal special education laws. Knowledge of the unique characteristics of autism as related to communication, social/emotional development, behavior, sensory processing, cognition, and learning. 603 CMR 7.14(5)(d)(1)*

Candidates for the Autism Endorsement should develop a knowledge base in the following areas:

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| **Foundations and Characteristics of Autism Indicators:** |
| Understands current diagnostic criteria for autism, including unique characteristics as related to communication, social/emotional development, behavior, sensory processing, cognition, and learning and the range of presentation across the spectrum.  |
| Understands the differences between a medical diagnosis of autism and the definition of the term autism under state and federal special education laws |
| Understands how autism is distinguished from other conditions, including the potential for secondary mental health issues and other co-morbid conditions, and understands how they contribute to characteristic presentation, educational needs, and impact on multilevel family systems  |
| Knows the medical, neurodevelopmental and biological etiology of autism and impact on learning across the lifespan |
| Knows the history and range of theories, specialized and individualized programs, services, supports and interventions used across all settings including home, school and community supported by peer reviewed research to the extent practicable, to address academic, communication, behavioral, social, emotional and sensory issues |
| Knows the laws specific to autism at the federal and state level, including the Autism IEP Act (M.G.L. c71B § 3), and how they apply to practice |
| Understandsthelink between communication, social/emotional development and behavior  |
| Understands strengths and challenges related to specific diagnostic presentation and communication profiles, and that limited communication does not infer limited cognition  |
| Knowledge of how to use naturally occurring reinforcing social responses and feedback to foster ongoing language development |
| Understands typical and atypical patterns and features of receptive and expressive language, including use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) for students who are nonverbal or have limited speech and social pragmatics |
| Understands behavior and self-regulation includingadaptive behavior,self-injurious behavior, stereotypy, and behavior that interferes with learning from a functional perspective  |
| Understands the importance of using self-advocate (first-person) accounts and research to understand the nature and scope of behavior associated with autism  |
| Understands sensory processing, and sensorimotor development and the range of supports available in the educational environment as well as during transitions between environments |

**Assessment**

**Competency:**

*Assessment of students with autism including: an ability to identify, administer, and interpret a range of formal and informal tools in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner that assess the unique strengths, skills (including academic, social, behavioral and adaptive) and learning styles of students with autism ages 3-22. 603 CMR 7.14(5)(d)(2)*

*Knowledge of how ongoing assessment and data collection can be used to inform instruction, services and supports; monitor progress and rates and patterns of skill acquisition; and ensure the maintenance and generalization of skills across settings. 603 CMR 7.14(5)(d)(3)*

Candidates for the Autism Endorsement will develop knowledge and skills related to assessment based on known best practices and peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, that are specific to the population of students with autism, including:

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| **Assessment Indicators:** |
| Knows how to use a range of formative and summative assessments, including associated data collection activities, to inform instruction, services and supports; monitor progress and rates and patterns of skill acquisition; and ensure the maintenance and generalization of skills across settings that are best suited to unique characteristics of students with autism, and as identified in MGL c 71B § 3  |
| Understands the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on the evaluation of students with autism  |
| Knowledge of how to plan for transition, including assessment of outcomes, maintenance of skills, self-determination and personally relevant curriculum for students with autism |
| Understands the purpose of assessment in the classroom and the importance of assessing individual students strengths, skills, and learning styles  |
| Understands the role of functional behavioral assessment and its role in the development of behavior support plans |

**Programs, Services and Supports for Students with Autism**

**Competency:**

 *Design of effective educational programs and individual supports based on peer reviewed research to the extent practicable to support students with autism in the least restrictive environment. Knowledge of the range of specialized and individualized instructional strategies and supports for students with autism, including assistive technology, to address: the verbal and nonverbal communication needs; the need to develop social interaction skills and proficiencies including the skills and proficiencies needed to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment or teasing; the needs resulting from the student's unusual responses to sensory experiences; the needs resulting from resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines; the needs resulting from engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements; the need for positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports to address any behavioral difficulties; and other needs resulting from the student's disability that impact making progress in the general curriculum, including social and emotional skills. 603 CMR 7.14(5)(d)(4)*

Candidates for the autism endorsement will develop knowledge and skills related to programs, services, and supports for students with autism as supported by peer reviewed research to the extent practicable including:

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| **Programs, Services, and Supports Indicators:** |
| Knows the range of intervention techniques, strategies, and methodologies to increase access to curriculum and identifies and works to support/reduce behaviors that interfere with learning in students with autism. |
| Understands the range of services, supports, aids, programs and strategies that can support students with autism in academic and non-academic settings and how to promote student learning, generalization, and maintenance across multiple environments, including home & community  |
| Knows how to identify and select educational practices to meet the student’s unique needs in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible |
| Understands how to identify, select, and utilize appropriate individualized supports and services and create educational opportunities to support development of receptive, expressive and pragmatic language  |
| Understands the use of specialized and individualized social curriculum to support social development  |
| Understands how to use an array of positive behavioral interventions/strategies and supports, mutual respect, and safety to support behavioral needs associated with autism |
| Knowledge of appropriate AAC and AT devices, functional communication training and devices and services for meaningful academic, communication and social purposes across the school day, home and community settings |
| Understands how to implement and monitor strategies to foster successful development and generalization of vocational, adaptive, and community-based skills |
| Knowledge of how to implement individualized programs and services to address sensory needs in the educational environment, during transitions, and across school, home and community settings in collaboration with appropriate specialists and related service providers  |
| Understands the importance of literacy as a critical skill and how to facilitate meaningful reading and writing instruction for all students with autism, including those with communication challenges, as a primary goal  |
| Understands how to develops and/or implement specialized instruction to explicitly teach and practice pragmatic language and social interaction in natural and structured contexts  |
| Is able to articulate the concepts of peer reviewed publications and evidence-based practices and can demonstrate how to identify programs, services and supports that meet these standards. |

**Collaboration and Coordination**

**Competency:**

*Understanding and supporting the roles of other disciplines and professionals involved in the education of students with autism and facilitating coordination and collaboration of relevant IEP Team members, including parents or caregivers, related service providers and medical professionals, to meet the unique needs of students with autism in a culturally sensitive manner in accordance with M.G.L. c. 71B, §3, ¶6. 603 CMR 7.14(5)(d)(5)*

Candidates for the Autism Endorsement will develop knowledge and skills related to collaboration and professional leadership, including:

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| **Collaboration & Coordination Indicators:** |
| Develops skills to communicate in an effective and culturally and linguistically competent way with families, including using protocols for regular communication in the manner and frequency appropriate to meet the needs of the child and ensure generalization  |
| Recognize that families may need support to engage in the IEP process |
| Understands the importance of collaboration with professionals in the school and community to facilitate coordinated assessment and educational planning |
| Understands existing autism-specific information and peer-reviewed research, as well as autism related laws, including the importance of remaining current on new research and laws  |
| Understands the importance of the student and family perspective being represented in all education decisions, programs and services/coordination of services. In addition, understands the importance of and resources occurs across settings to respond to the fluid and dynamic needs of students with autism and their families |
| Develops and maintains relationships with organizations providing resources to individuals with autism within the community, including collaborative transition planning |

1. [Autism Commission report](http://www.mass.gov/anf/docs/mddc/autism-commission-report-full.pdf) page 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Autism Commission report](http://www.mass.gov/anf/docs/mddc/autism-commission-report-full.pdf) page 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Ch 226 of the acts of 2014](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter226) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Section 24 of Chapter 226 of the Acts of 2014 <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter226> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Section 24 of Chapter 226 of the Acts of 2014 <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter226> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)