

# Innovative Online Practical Teacher Training Program Helps Combat Special Education Teacher Shortage in Utah

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Kristen Rolf, OPTT director, and Tom Higbee, SPERC department head

Utah, like much of the nation, continues to face a persistent shortage of qualified teachers, with special education positions among the most difficult to fill. In response, in 2019 the Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling Department (SPERC) at Utah State University combined its alternative teacher preparation and distance education models into the Online Practical Teacher Training (OPTT) program. The program is designed to provide a pathway for individuals already working in schools—many of whom may not yet hold a teaching or special education license—to gain the necessary training and credentials while actively serving in the classroom.

Since 2019, the OPTT program has produced 188 licensed special education teachers with bachelor's degrees in special education, helping to fill the educator void across the state of Utah. In those years, students enrolled in the program have received more than \$1.7 million in tuition support from the Utah State Board of Education.

The OPTT program accepts applicants who are currently employed as special education teachers or special education paraprofessionals with or without a bachelor's degree. OPTT is unique in that it is entirely online, so enrolled students anywhere in the state of Utah can work full-time in the classroom—fulfilling their practicum

requirement hours—and then complete their coursework in the evenings. Students focus their coursework for licensure in one of three emphases: early childhood special education, K-12 students with mild/moderate support needs, or K-12 students with complex support needs.

Professor and SPERC Department Head Tom Higbee, who helped design the program, said, "What makes OPTT truly unique is our direct collaboration with our school district partners. Special education administrators partner with USU faculty to provide effective coaching and support to the OPTT students who are working in their district classrooms. They also help train OPTT students on the assessment procedures that are used within their district. When students finish the program, they can easily transition into teaching roles within the districts where they are already employed and where they already have support networks in place that can help them as new teachers."

"Our school district partners often tell us how important OPTT is for producing high-quality, effective special education teachers," added OPTT Director Kristen Rolf. "The opportunity to attend classes online and obtain licensure while employed is important for all our students, but it's especially meaningful in rural areas where attending a traditional, on-campus program is extremely difficult or impossible."

OPTT has been immensely popular and school districts are more than willing to jump onboard. Since the program began, OPTT administrators have partnered with 28 school districts and multiple charter schools across the state of Utah. Each participating school district or charter school is required to provide OPTT students with coaches who support the students personally with in-class observations and mentorship.

"Since we can't be everywhere across the state, it's good to have someone there in person," explained Julia Lyman, OPTT program coordinator at USU. "We couldn't do it without our district partners. They are really connected to the students and we're so grateful for that. Our goal is to partner with every school district in the state. We want to produce qualified teachers who are going to stay in the local area—anywhere in the state—and provide special education instruction to students."

USU students currently enrolled in the OPTT program are demonstrating how the flexible, hands-on training is preparing them for high-need special education roles across the state.

### Brooke Christensen: K-12 Mild/Moderate Support Needs Emphasis



Brooke Christensen

is a first-year student in the OPTT program, focusing on K-12 mild/moderate support needs. This fall she was hired to fill the special education resource teacher position at Copperview Elementary in Canyons School District, where she works with fourth- and fifth-grade students. Christensen has a bachelor's degree in business management and broadcasting/communications from Southern Utah University and an MBA from Westminster College. She also serves on the Sandy City Council, which allows her to engage directly in shaping local education policy while experiencing its classroom impact firsthand.

Christensen entered the field of special education a few years ago when she began substitute teaching in her son's resource classroom. The position turned into a five-month full-time job when the teacher unexpectedly resigned. The temporary position gave her extensive experience supporting the students and it changed her life trajectory.

"I chose the OPTT program because Utah State has an exceptional reputation for preparing strong, knowledgeable educators," Christensen explained. "I want the most comprehensive foundation possible as I begin my teaching career, and USU consistently provides that level of quality. The program also fits the realities of my life. My professors understand that I work full time, serve as an elected official, and balance the responsibilities of raising three children while supporting my husband. They are flexible, respectful of my commitments, and treat me as a professional whose time and efforts matter."

"The best part about teaching in special education—especially in a Title I school—is witnessing students gain genuine confidence in themselves and in their ability to learn," Christensen added. "Many of my students come in feeling unsure or defeated. Watching their faces light up, hearing the pride in their voices, and seeing them realize that they can succeed reminds me exactly why I chose this work. It is incredibly meaningful. Those moments make every challenge worth it because I know I am making a real and lasting difference in their lives."

### Lindsey Watts: K-12 Complex Support Needs Emphasis



Lindsey Watts, a

paraeducator at Lehi High School, is a third-year USU student pursuing her first bachelor's degree through the OPTT program. Watts is specializing in K-12 complex support needs and has spent the past two years working in the field, including the last year and a half at Alpine School District.

Watts joined the OPTT program after an unexpected move from the Logan USU campus forced her to reconsider how she would continue her education. "After talking with my academic advisor, we determined that OPTT would be a great fit for me because I already worked in a special education classroom," she said.

She recognizes that the program's hands-on structure has strengthened her classroom skills in real time. "OPTT is really great because you are able to apply the things you are learning almost immediately," Watts said. "Being able to gain experience while going to school has been a super amazing opportunity."

Watts added that she values the guidance she receives from faculty as she prepares for her own future classroom. Her love for teaching, she said, comes from watching students grow. "Each student is capable of accomplishing whatever they set their mind to, and I get to support them, which I think is so cool."

To learn more about USU's OPTT program, visit the [website](#).