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1
2 An act relating to children with developmental
3 disabilities; amending s. 381.9855, F.S.; revising the
4 scope of the Dr. and Mrs. Alfonse and Kathleen Cinotti
5 Health Care Screening and Services Grant Program to
6 allow grant funds to be used for screenings, referrals
7 for treatment, and related services for autism;
8 amending s. 391.302, F.S.; revising applicability of
9 definitions to conform to changes made by the act;
10 defining the term "department"; amending s. 391.308,
11 F.S.; revising requirements for the annual grant
12 application submitted by the Department of Health for
13 the Early Steps Program to conform to changes made by
14 the act; creating s. 391.3081, F.S.; providing
15 legislative intent; providing a purpose for the Early
16 Steps Extended Option; defining the term "child";
17 requiring the department to seek federal approval for
18 the Early Steps Extended Option; requiring the
19 department, jointly with the Department of Education,
20 to develop or amend any rule, policy, procedure,
21 written agreement, or contract necessary to implement
22 the Early Steps Extended Option; requiring the
23 department to seek additional federal grant funds for
24 implementation of the Early Steps Extended Option;
25 authorizing the department to implement the Early
26 Steps Extended Option regardless of certain federal
27 funding; requiring local program offices of the Early
28 Steps Program to include certain steps for transition
29 in the individualized family support plan for each

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child served by the Early Steps Extended Option;
specifying eligibility criteria for a child's
enrollment in the Early Steps Extended Option;
providing that a child becomes ineligible to reenter
the Early Steps Extended Option upon exiting;
requiring local school districts, in conjunction with
local program offices, to notify a child's parent or
legal guardian of his or her rights under certain
circumstances; requiring local program offices to take
specified steps for transitioning children out of the
Early Steps Extended Option within a specified
timeframe before they age out; requiring local program
offices, in conjunction with local school districts,
to modify or develop, as applicable, individual
education plans with specified elements for such
children; requiring local program offices and local
school districts to provide specified written
information to a child's parent or legal guardian if
the child is determined ineligible for school district
program services; requiring the department to include
a performance assessment of the Early Steps Extended
Option in a specified annual report; specifying
requirements for such assessment; providing an
appropriation; creating s. 1003.5711, F.S.; providing
legislative findings and intent; requiring the
University of Florida Center for Autism and
Neurodevelopment to oversee certain grants; requiring
the center to develop guidelines for grant
administration; providing eligibility requirements for

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grant applicants; providing that grants may be used for specified purposes; authorizing the center to prioritize grant allocations for specified purposes; requiring grant recipients to submit a specified report; creating s. 1003.5712, F.S.; providing legislative findings and purpose; requiring the University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment to fund specialized summer programs for children with autism spectrum disorder; requiring the center to publish guidelines for grant applications; requiring the center to provide technical assistance to grant applicants and recipients; providing eligibility requirements for the specialized summer programs; authorizing the center to set maximum grant amounts; requiring grant recipients to submit a report to the center within a specified timeframe; creating s. 1004.551, F.S.; creating the University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment; providing duties of the center; requiring the center to develop an autism micro-credential; providing requirements for the micro-credential; providing a stipend as determined in the General Appropriations Act; requiring the center to administer stipends; requiring the center to publish on its website an annual report; prohibiting the host state university from charging certain fees to the center; amending s. 1012.582, F.S.; requiring the Commissioner of Education to review specified curricula by a specified date; requiring the

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commissioner to report findings and recommendations to the Legislature; amending s. 1012.585, F.S.; revising the process for the renewal of professional certificates to include training in the knowledge and skills required to support students with autism; providing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

Section 1. Paragraph (a) of subsection (1) of section 381.9855, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

381.9855 Dr. and Mrs. Alfonse and Kathleen Cinotti Health Care Screening and Services Grant Program; portal.—

(1)(a) The Department of Health shall implement the Dr. and Mrs. Alfonse and Kathleen Cinotti Health Care Screening and Services Grant Program. The purpose of the program is to expand access to no-cost health care screenings or services for the general public facilitated by nonprofit entities. The department shall do all of the following:

1. Publicize the availability of funds and enlist the aid of county health departments for outreach to potential applicants at the local level.

2. Establish an application process for submitting a grant proposal and criteria an applicant must meet to be eligible.

3. Develop guidelines a grant recipient must follow for the expenditure of grant funds and uniform data reporting requirements for the purpose of evaluating the performance of grant recipients. The guidelines must require grant funds to be spent on screenings, including referrals for treatment, if

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appropriate, or related services for one or more of the
following:

- a. Hearing.
- b. Vision.
- c. Dental.
- d. Cancer.
- e. Diabetes.
- f. Renal disease.
- g. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.
- h. Hypertension.
- i. Heart disease.
- j. Stroke.
- k. Scoliosis.
- l. Autism.

Section 2. Section 391.302, Florida Statutes, is amended to
read:

391.302 Definitions.—As used in ss. 391.301-391.3081 ~~ss.~~
~~391.301-391.308~~, the term:

(1) “Department” means the Department of Health.

(2) “Developmental delay” means a condition, identified and
measured through appropriate instruments and procedures, which
may delay physical, cognitive, communication, social or
emotional, or adaptive development.

(3) ~~(2)~~ “Developmental disability” means a condition,
identified and measured through appropriate instruments and
procedures, which may impair physical, cognitive, communication,
social or emotional, or adaptive development.

(4) ~~(3)~~ “Developmental intervention” or “early intervention”
means individual and group therapies and services needed to

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enhance both the infant's or toddler's growth and development and family functioning. The term includes habilitative services and assistive technology devices, rehabilitative services and assistive technology devices, and parent support and training.

(5)~~(4)~~ "Habilitative services and devices" means health care services and assistive technology devices that help a child maintain, learn, or improve skills and functioning for daily living.

(6)~~(5)~~ Except as otherwise defined for the purposes of s. 391.3081, "infant or toddler" or "child" means a child from birth until the child's third birthday.

(7)~~(6)~~ "Local program office" means an office that administers the Early Steps Program within a municipality, county, or region.

(8)~~(7)~~ "Rehabilitative services and devices" means restorative and remedial services that maintain or enhance the current level of functioning of a child if there is a possibility of improvement or reversal of impairment.

Section 3. Paragraph (a) of subsection (2) of section 391.308, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

391.308 Early Steps Program.—The department shall implement and administer part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which shall be known as the "Early Steps Program."

(2) DUTIES OF THE DEPARTMENT.—The department shall:

(a) Annually prepare a grant application to the United States Department of Education for funding early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities, ~~from birth through 36 months of age,~~ and their families pursuant to part C

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of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Section 4. Section 391.3081, Florida Statutes, is created to read:

391.3081 Early Steps Extended Option.—

(1) LEGISLATIVE INTENT.—The Legislature recognizes that continuity of care promotes positive outcomes in the learning and development of infants, toddlers, and children. It is the intent of the Legislature to offer families of children with developmental delays or disabilities a choice for such children to continue services in the Early Steps Program beyond the age of 3 years old.

(2) PURPOSE.—

(a) The purpose of the Early Steps Extended Option is to continue enrollment in the Early Steps Program for those children who are eligible. Therefore, the provisions of s. 391.308 are maintained and incorporated in the Early Steps Extended Option.

(b) For the purposes of this section, “child” means a child from birth until the beginning of the school year following the child’s fourth birthday, as provided in 34 C.F.R. s. 303.211(a) (2) (ii).

(3) DUTIES.—

(a) The department shall:

1. Submit its application for federal approval to extend eligibility for services under part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act no later than July 1, 2026.

2. Jointly with the Department of Education, develop or amend any rule, policy, procedure, written agreement, or contract necessary to implement the Early Steps Extended Option

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in accordance with state law and part C of the federal
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

3. Seek additional federal grant funds, as available, for
the implementation of the Early Steps Extended Option, including
a state incentive grant. However, the department may implement
the Early Steps Extended Option regardless of the availability
or acceptance of supplemental federal grant funds, contingent
upon the appropriation of state funds.

(b) As part of the individualized family support plan for
each child served under the Early Steps Extended Option, a local
program office shall include steps for a child to transition to
part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education
Act or other future services by the beginning of the school year
following the child's fourth birthday.

(4) ELIGIBILITY.—The department must apply the following
eligibility criteria if specific funding is provided in the
General Appropriations Act:

(a) All of the following criteria must be met for a child
to continue receiving Early Steps Program services under the
Early Steps Extended Option:

1. The child must be determined eligible for early
intervention services through the Early Steps Program at least
45 days before the child's third birthday.

2. The child must be determined eligible for services under
part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education
Act.

3. Before the child's third birthday, the family must
choose to continue services through the Early Steps Extended
Option, which shall include an educational component to promote

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233 school readiness and incorporate pre-literacy, language, and
234 numeracy skills.

235 (b) A child becomes ineligible to reenter the Early Steps
236 Extended Option upon exiting the program. If a family chooses to
237 exit the Early Steps Extended Option before the beginning of the
238 school year following the child's fourth birthday, the local
239 school district, in conjunction with the local program office,
240 must notify the child's parent or legal guardian of his or her
241 rights under part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities
242 Education Act.

243 (c) A child may not receive services under part B of the
244 federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act while
245 receiving services through the Early Steps Extended Option.

246 (d) A child may not receive a state scholarship under s.
247 1002.394 while receiving services through the Early Steps
248 Extended Option.

249 (5) TRANSITION TO EDUCATION.—

250 (a) At least 90 days before the beginning of the school
251 year following the fourth birthday of a child enrolled in the
252 Early Steps Extended Option, the local program office shall
253 initiate transition planning to ensure the child's successful
254 transition from the Early Steps Extended Option to a school
255 district program under part B of the federal Individuals with
256 Disabilities Education Act or to another program as part of an
257 individual family support plan. Specifically, the local program
258 office shall:

259 1. Notify the Department of Education and the local school
260 district in which the child resides that the eligible child is
261 exiting the Early Steps Extended Option, unless the child's

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parent or legal guardian has opted out of such notification; and

2. Upon approval by the child's parent or legal guardian, convene a transition conference that includes participation of a local school district representative and the parent or legal guardian to discuss options for and availability of services.

(b) The local program office, in conjunction with the local school district, shall modify a child's individual family support plan, or, if applicable, the local school district shall develop or review an individual education plan for the child pursuant to ss. 1003.57, 1003.571, and 1003.5715 which identifies special education or related services that the child will receive and the providers or agencies that will provide such services.

(c) If a child is found to be no longer eligible for part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act during the review of an individual education plan, the local program office and the local school district must provide the child's parent or legal guardian with written information on other available services or community resources.

(6) ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTING.—The department shall include a performance assessment of the Early Steps Extended Option in the annual report specified in s. 391.308(5).

(a) The assessment must include:

1. The number and percentage of children eligible under part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act who receive services through the Early Steps Extended Option.

2. The number and percentage of children determined eligible to receive services under part B of the federal

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Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

3. The number and percentage of children determined
ineligible to receive services under part B of the federal
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

(b) The Department of Education shall provide to the
department data necessary for the evaluation of the Early Steps
Program and the Early Steps Extended Option, including, but not
limited to, the number and percentage of children who are
referred by either program and who elect to receive services
under part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities
Education Act.

Section 5. For the 2025-2026 fiscal year, the recurring sum
of \$720,282 and the nonrecurring sum of \$35,622 are appropriated
from the General Revenue Fund, and six full-time equivalent
positions are authorized, to the Department of Health for the
purpose of implementing the Early Steps Extended Option as
created by this act.

Section 6. Section 1003.5711, Florida Statutes, is created
to read:

1003.5711 Startup grant for autism charter schools.—

(1) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS AND INTENT.—

(a) The Legislature finds that students identified as
having autism spectrum disorder may require highly specialized
educational environments and resources to achieve their full
potential.

(b) It is the intent of the Legislature to support the
creation of schools exclusively serving this population by
providing startup funding to offset the costs of developing and
implementing these specialized programs.

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(2) ADMINISTRATION.—

(a) The University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment shall oversee the application, evaluation, and distribution of grants under this section.

(b) The center shall develop guidelines for grant administration, including:

1. Application procedures and deadlines.

2. Criteria for program eligibility and funding priorities.

3. Reporting and accountability standards for grant recipients.

4. A preapproval process to assist applicants with planning in the charter school application process under s. 1002.33(6) and (7).

(3) ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS AND USE OF FUNDS.—

(a) The guidelines developed by the center must, at a minimum, require applicants, before approval for a startup grant, to:

1. Demonstrate intent, in accordance with guidelines developed by the center, to establish or expand a charter school pursuant to s. 1002.33, or a laboratory school under s. 1002.32, to serve exclusively students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and classified as exceptional students under s. 1003.01(9).

2. Provide evidence of community need and stakeholder support, which may include letters of intent to enroll from families or organizations.

3. Submit a detailed plan outlining:

a. Instructional methods and proposed support services, including evidence-based practices for students with autism.

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b. Family engagement and strategies for coordinating necessary services for students outside of school hours and as students transition to adulthood.

c. Anticipated startup costs and a budget for use of grant funds.

d. Strategies for leveraging other federal and state funding.

4. Provide evidence of financial stability and programmatic expertise.

5. Attest to compliance with state and federal laws.

(b) Grants may be used for the following purposes:

1. Facility acquisition, renovation, or modification.

2. Purchase or development of specialized instructional materials, curriculum, assistive technology, and adaptive equipment.

3. Recruitment, salaries, and training of staff experienced in working with students with autism and significant cognitive disabilities.

4. Student transportation.

5. Ancillary equipment related to student safety.

(4) FUNDING AND GRANT AMOUNTS.—

(a) The grant is subject to legislative appropriation.

(b) The center shall annually determine the maximum grant amount for each school on the basis of the annual appropriation in relation to projected applications.

(c) The center may prioritize grants for schools in the following priority:

1. Programs serving rural and underserved areas.

2. Programs serving other underserved areas.

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3. Programs with demonstrable success in establishing and operating a charter school exclusively for students with autism and related disorders.

4. Programs that use existing facilities.

(d) An applicant may not receive funds until the applicant has received approval from a sponsoring entity to operate a charter school or modify an existing charter pursuant to s. 1002.33(6) and (7), or has established a school advisory body for a laboratory school in accordance with s. 1002.32(8).

(5) REPORTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY.—Grant recipients must submit an annual report to the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment detailing:

(a) How grant funds were expended.

(b) Enrollment and program outcomes following the first complete school year of operation.

(c) Challenges encountered and recommendations for improvement.

Section 7. Section 1003.5712, Florida Statutes, is created to read:

1003.5712 Specialized summer programs for children with autism and related disorders.—

(1) PURPOSE AND INTENT.—

(a) The Legislature finds that many children with autism spectrum disorder face challenges during the summer months due to limited access to extended school year programs, summer school, and traditional summer camps that can accommodate their needs.

(b) The purpose of this section is to support specialized summer programs that provide structured, supportive environments

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for these children, ensuring continuity of care, skill
development, and social engagement.

(2) ADMINISTRATION AND GRANTS.—

(a) The University of Florida Center for Autism and
Neurodevelopment shall administer a grant program to fund
specialized summer programs for children with autism spectrum
disorder who have significant emotional or behavior disorders or
cognitive disabilities.

(b) Grants may be awarded annually to eligible entities,
subject to available appropriations.

(c) The center shall develop and publish guidelines for
grant applications, including criteria for program eligibility,
use of funds, and reporting requirements.

(d) The center shall provide technical assistance to grant
applicants and recipients.

(3) PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY AND STANDARDS.—The guidelines
developed by the center must, at a minimum, require programs to:

(a) Serve children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder
for whom placement in a summer camp that is not equipped to
serve such children is inappropriate.

(b) Provide a structured schedule of activities that may
include, but are not limited to:

1. Behavioral and social skill development.

2. Recreational and leisure activities tailored to
individual needs.

3. Therapy-based support, including speech, occupational,
or behavioral therapies, when appropriate.

4. Family support and training workshops.

(c) Employ staff with relevant experience or training in

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working with children with autism and severe emotional,
behavioral, or cognitive disorders.

(d) Maintain a safe and inclusive environment, with
appropriate staff-to-participant ratios.

(e) Operate in compliance with all applicable state and
federal laws, including health and safety regulations.

(f) Provide a full-day program for at least 4 weeks.

(g) Leverage other available federal or state funding
sources, including Medicaid waivers, Individuals with
Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal funding, or
private contributions, to supplement state grants.

(4) FUNDING.—

(a) Grants are subject to legislative appropriation.

(b) Grants may be used for any of the following purposes:

1. Facility costs.

2. Staff salaries and training.

3. Curriculum or other instructional or activity costs.

4. Property and liability insurance.

5. Equipment purchase or rental.

6. Transportation for camp participants.

(c) The center shall prioritize awarding grants to programs
that:

1. Serve underserved or rural areas where specialized
summer programs are unavailable.

2. Provide comprehensive support services, including family
involvement and community integration.

(d) The center may set maximum grant amounts and require
matching funds contributions from grant recipients, dependent
upon available funds and projected participation.

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(e) In addition to criteria determined by the center, grant amounts may vary based on the services provided and the duration of the program.

(5) REPORTING AND OVERSIGHT.—Grant recipients must submit a report to the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment within 45 days after the conclusion of the summer program detailing:

(a) Program enrollment and participation.

(b) Use of grant funds.

(c) Outcomes related to participant engagement, skill-building, and family satisfaction.

Section 8. Section 1004.551, Florida Statutes, is created to read:

1004.551 University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment.—There is created at the University of Florida the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment.

(1) The center shall:

(a) Collaborate with state and local agencies that provide early intervention, educational, medical, employment, financial, and daily living services. The center shall also collaborate with other entities that provide autism research and services, including, but not limited to, the Florida State University Autism Institute, each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD), the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS), the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and the Department of Children and Families.

(b) Coordinate information and resources related to research, best practices, training, and public awareness to better support families of children with autism.

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(c) Develop strategies to promote public awareness of the signs of autism, the importance of early screening, and interventions and supports available to families. The center shall assist in the assignment of a toll-free number for autism support.

(d) Catalog and distribute best practices related to screening tools, diagnosis, and interventions.

(e) Review and approve applications for specialized summer programs for children with autism pursuant to s. 1003.5712. The center shall act as the fiscal agent for grant funds and develop minimum requirements for the creation of specialized summer programs.

(f) Develop an autism micro-credential to provide specialized training in supporting students with autism.

1. The micro-credential must be stackable with the autism endorsement and be available to:

a. Instructional personnel as defined in s. 1012.01(2);

b. Prekindergarten instructors as specified in ss. 1002.55, 1002.61, and 1002.63; and

c. Child care personnel as defined in ss. 402.302(3) and 1002.88(1)(e).

2. The micro-credential must require participants to demonstrate competency in:

a. Identifying behaviors associated with autism.

b. Supporting the learning environment in both general and specialized classroom settings.

c. Promoting the use of assistive technologies.

d. Applying evidence-based instructional practices.

3. The micro-credential must:

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523 a. Be provided at no cost to eligible participants.
524 b. Be competency-based, allowing participants to complete
525 the credentialing process either in person or online.
526 c. Permit participants to receive the micro-credential at
527 any time during training once competency is demonstrated.
528 4. Individuals eligible under subparagraph 1. who complete
529 the micro-credential are eligible for a one-time stipend, as
530 determined in the General Appropriations Act. The center shall
531 administer stipends for the micro-credential.
532 (g) Develop strategies to increase the workforce qualified
533 to provide autism-related services to children and adults in a
534 public or private setting.
535 (h) Develop and catalog professional learning activities
536 for health care, child welfare, and instructional personnel.
537 (i) Administer startup grants for autism charter schools
538 pursuant to s. 1003.5711 and provide technical assistance to
539 grant applicants and recipients. The center shall also review
540 access to federal funding sources for establishing charter
541 schools for students with autism and include in its annual
542 report recommendations for improving practical access.
543 (j) Catalog best practices for screening, referral, and
544 diagnosis; access to therapy services; and other licensed
545 practitioner services using private and public insurance, to
546 include access to services in schools.
547 (k) Beginning August 1, 2026, and each August 1 thereafter,
548 publish on its website a report detailing activities,
549 expenditures, and outcomes from the previous year. The report
550 must include the grants administered by the center and
551 recommendations for improvement.

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(2) The host state university may not charge any indirect administrative fees to the center.

Section 9. Subsection (5) is added to section 1012.582, Florida Statutes, to read:

1012.582 Continuing education and inservice training for teaching students with developmental and emotional or behavioral disabilities.—

(5) The commissioner shall review the curricula in continuing education or inservice education of instructional personnel based on recommendations required under this section. No later than December 1, 2025, the commissioner shall report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives on findings and recommendations for updates to instruction.

Section 10. Paragraph (a) of subsection (3) of section 1012.585, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

1012.585 Process for renewal of professional certificates.—

(3) For the renewal of a professional certificate, the following requirements must be met:

(a) The applicant must earn a minimum of 6 college credits or 120 inservice points or a combination thereof. For each area of specialization to be retained on a certificate, the applicant must earn at least 3 of the required credit hours or equivalent inservice points in the specialization area. Education in “clinical educator” training pursuant to s. 1004.04(5)(b); participation in mentorship and induction activities, including as a mentor, pursuant to s. 1012.56(8)(a); credits or points that provide training in the knowledge and skills required to support students with autism; and credits or points that provide

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training in the area of scientifically researched, knowledge-based reading literacy grounded in the science of reading, including explicit, systematic, and sequential approaches to reading instruction, developing phonemic awareness, and implementing multisensory intervention strategies, and computational skills acquisition, exceptional student education, normal child development, and the disorders of development may be applied toward any specialization area. Credits or points that provide training in the areas of drug abuse, child abuse and neglect, strategies in teaching students having limited proficiency in English, or dropout prevention, or training in areas identified in the educational goals and performance standards adopted pursuant to ss. 1000.03(5) and 1008.345 may be applied toward any specialization area, except specialization areas identified by State Board of Education rule that include reading instruction or intervention for any students in kindergarten through grade 6. Each district school board shall include in its inservice master plan the ability for teachers to receive inservice points for supporting students in extracurricular career and technical education activities, such as career and technical student organization activities outside of regular school hours and training related to supervising students participating in a career and technical student organization. Credits or points earned through approved summer institutes may be applied toward the fulfillment of these requirements. Inservice points may also be earned by participation in professional growth components approved by the State Board of Education and specified pursuant to s. 1012.98 in the district's approved master plan for inservice educational

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610 training; however, such points may not be used to satisfy the
611 specialization requirements of this paragraph.

612 Section 11. This act shall take effect upon becoming a law.