

The Florida Senate

BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Appropriations Committee on Pre-K - 12 Education

BILL: CS/SB 206

INTRODUCER: Education Pre-K - 12 Committee and Senator Harrell

SUBJECT: Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

DATE: January 27, 2026 REVISED: _____

ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1. <u>Brick</u>	<u>Bouck</u>	<u>ED</u>	<u>Fav/CS</u>
2. <u>Gray</u>	<u>Elwell</u>	<u>AED</u>	<u>Pre-meeting</u>
3. _____	_____	<u>AP</u>	_____

Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

I. Summary:

CS/SB 206 revises educator preparation, credentialing, professional learning, and incentives related to autism spectrum disorder and other specified disabilities. The bill:

- Requires the autism microcredential for specified exceptional student education certification and teacher preparation pathways.
- Aligns the uniform core curricula, professional certificate renewal, and district professional learning to evidence-based practices for autism spectrum disorder and other specified disabilities.
- Creates the Autism Educator Loan Forgiveness Program to provide student loan repayment assistance for eligible special education teachers serving as the primary teacher in a public school classroom in which a majority of students have autism spectrum disorder.
- Revises district compensation provisions to include completion of the Autism Spectrum Disorder endorsement in salary supplements and to authorize incentives for certain eligible teachers.

This bill has an indeterminate fiscal impact on state revenues and expenditures. **See Section V., Fiscal Impact Statement.**

The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.

II. Present Situation:

Educator Preparation and Training

Uniform Core Curricula

Beginning August 1, 2027, each state-approved teacher preparation program must provide uniform core curricula courses aligned with the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices, as established by the State Board of Education (SBE) rule.¹ Minimum uniform core curricula standards include training on differentiated instruction to meet student needs, including the needs of students with disabilities.²

Educator Preparation Institutes

An “educator preparation institute” (EPI) is created by a postsecondary institution or a qualified private provider and approved by the Department of Education (DOE).³ Accredited or approved postsecondary institutions may seek DOE approval to create an EPI to provide specified forms of instruction, including instruction for baccalaureate degree holders to become certified teachers and additional professional learning and instructional offerings identified in statute.⁴

Educator preparation institutes may offer competency-based certification programs designed for noneducation major baccalaureate degree holders to meet educator certification requirements.⁵ To approve a certification program, the department must find evidence the EPI can implement a competency-based program that instructs and assesses each candidate in required areas, including the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices and state academic standards, and requires an educational plan, field experiences, and a certification ombudsman.⁶

Each program participant must meet specified requirements, including obtaining a statement of status of eligibility in the certification subject area and satisfying specified prerequisites before participating in field experiences.⁷ A participant who completes an approved certification program receives a credential from the sponsoring institution and is eligible for educator certification through the department upon satisfaction of statutory certification requirements.⁸

The SBE must adopt rules for the continued approval of each EPI program approved under s. 1004.85, F.S., and each institute must submit annual performance evaluations measuring program effectiveness.⁹

¹ Section 1012.551(1), F.S.

² Section 1012.551(2), F.S.

³ Section 1004.85(1), F.S.

⁴ Section 1004.85(2), F.S.

⁵ Section 1004.85(3), F.S.

⁶ Section 1004.85(3)(a), F.S.

⁷ Section 1004.85(3)(b), F.S.

⁸ Sections 1004.85(3)(c) and 1012.56(2), F.S.

⁹ Section 1004.85(4)-(5) and (8), F.S.

CERT Program

The DOE is required to create the Coaching for Educator Readiness and Teaching (CERT) Certification Program as an alternative pathway to professional certification, and specified entities may implement CERT programs that meet statutory requirements. A CERT program must include specified mentorship, assessment, and professional learning components aligned to applicable evaluation and professional learning systems.¹⁰

Autism Microcredential

The University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment (UF-CAN) is required to develop an autism microcredential that provides specialized training in supporting students with autism. The microcredential must be stackable with the autism endorsement and must be competency-based and offered at no cost to eligible participants.¹¹

The microcredential is required to be available to specified categories of personnel, including instructional personnel and specified early learning personnel. Individuals who complete the microcredential are eligible for a one-time stipend, as determined in the General Appropriations Act (GAA).¹²

In Fiscal Year 2025-2026, the GAA appropriated \$10 million from the General Revenue Fund was appropriated in the GAA for the UF-CAN. The appropriation included:

- Up to \$4.5 million for costs associated with the UF-CAN's role as the statewide coordinating body, administrator, and fiscal agent for programs and services, including the microcredential; and
- The remainder to support and implement programs that include the administration of the microcredential and stipend, based on actual participation and demonstrated need.¹³

State Financial Assistance Programs Tied to Employment in a Profession

The SBE is required to annually identify high-demand teacher needs areas based on the supply of graduates of state-approved teacher preparation programs and the number of vacant positions in a teaching discipline or positions filled by out-of-field teachers. The latest report indicates that the certification in highest demand is exceptional student education.¹⁴

Florida offers the Autism Endorsement Tuition Support Program to provide financial assistance to add the appropriate endorsement for ESE teachers who are teaching students identified as having autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in a Florida public school. The program provides up to \$1000 per course for tuition support from federal funds. The applicant must be ESE certified and be teaching students with ASD.¹⁵

¹⁰ Section 1012.552, F.S.

¹¹ Section 1004.551(1)(f), F.S.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Chapter 2025-198, Laws of Fla., s. 2, Specific Appropriation 162A.

¹⁴ Florida Department of Education, *Identification of High Demand Teacher Needs Areas for 2025-26*, available at <https://www.fl DOE.org/core/fileparse.php/20808/ur1/17-2.pdf>, at 1-2 (last visited Jan. 15, 2026).

¹⁵ Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Student Education, *Autism Endorsement Tuition Support Program*, available at https://florida-ese.org/docs/Autism_Application_Revised%2010_8_21.pdf (last visited Jan. 15, 2026).

The DOE administers the ESE training grant program, which provides financial assistance to teachers for special training in exceptional student education to meet professional requirements. Grant amounts are determined based on rates established by the DOE, and the program is administered under SBE rules. Grants are limited to teachers who:

- Hold a full-time contract to teach in a district school system, a state-operated or state-supported program, or an entity under contract with the DOE;
- Hold a valid Florida educator certificate that does not reflect an ESE coverage or endorsement appropriate for the teacher's assignment; and
- Satisfactorily complete eligible courses.¹⁶

A state loan repayment assistance model exists in the Nursing Student Loan Forgiveness Program, which makes repayments toward certain nursing education loans to encourage employment and retention of nurses in designated facilities. Eligibility includes graduation from an accredited or approved nursing program and Florida licensure as a licensed practical nurse, registered nurse, or advanced practice registered nurse. Loans covered under the program are limited to tuition, books, and living expenses, up to \$4,000 for each year of education toward the degree obtained.¹⁷

Autism Endorsements and Certificate Additions

An endorsement is a credential added to an educator certificate to reflect specialized training and qualifications in a particular instructional area.¹⁸ SBE rules establish requirements for endorsements, including the Endorsement in Autism Spectrum Disorders¹⁹ and the Endorsement in Severe or Profound Disabilities.²⁰ Those rules specify eligibility prerequisites and completion requirements, which generally include required coursework and supervised field experience.

A professional educator certificate is issued for a period not to exceed five years to an applicant who meets statutory eligibility criteria. A district may process applications through the DOE system for certain certificate transactions for public school employees, including adding a subject coverage or endorsement to a valid Florida certificate.²¹

For the 2023-2024 school year, district-reported certification data show 2,614 Autism Spectrum Disorders endorsements; endorsements are counted once per teacher per certification area.²²

¹⁶ Section 1009.62(2), F.S.

¹⁷ Section 1009.66, F.S.

¹⁸ Florida Department of Education, Educator Certification, *Certificate Additions*, <https://www.fl DOE.org/teaching/certification/additions/> (last visited Jan. 15, 2026).

¹⁹ Rule 6A-4.01796, F.A.C.

²⁰ Rule 6A-4.01793, F.A.C.

²¹ Sections 1012.56 and 1012.586(1), F.S.

²² Florida Department of Education, *Identification of High Demand Teacher Needs Areas for 2025-26* (report) (explaining that certifications are counted once per teacher per subject area and providing certification subject code totals) (p. 2; Appendix C, pp. 69-70 (subject code 1078, Autism Spectrum Disorders)), available at <https://www.fl DOE.org/core/fileparse.php/20808/urlt/17-2.pdf> (last visited Jan. 15, 2026).

Compensation, Salary Supplements, And Incentives

District school boards adopt salary schedules, including a performance salary schedule. The performance salary schedule provides annual salary adjustments for instructional personnel and school administrators based on performance. In addition to salary adjustments, each district school board provides salary supplements for specified activities.²³ Collective bargaining may not preclude a district school board from providing incentives to effective and highly effective teachers.²⁴

Certificate Renewal Requirements

An educator must renew his or her professional certificate every five years. An applicant for renewal of a professional certificate is required to satisfy continuing education requirements of a minimum of 6 college credits or 120 inservice points or a combination thereof, including at least one college credit or the equivalent inservice points in the area of instruction for teaching students with disabilities.²⁵

District Professional Learning Systems.

The School Community Professional Learning Act

The School Community Professional Learning Act requires each district to maintain a professional learning system meeting statutory requirements and subject to DOE review and approval. District systems include, among other components:

- Maintaining a district professional learning catalog for inservice activities, updated annually.
- Providing inservice activities with follow-up support aligned to district and school improvement goals.²⁶

Regional Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities.

Regional Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) serve individuals with autism in assigned geographic service areas throughout the state. Each center provides technical assistance and consultation services, including intervention and assistance for a client, the client's family, and the school district. Each center also develops, provides, and evaluates professional training programs, including preservice and inservice training in state-of-the-art practices for personnel who work with the populations served by the centers and their families.²⁷

Personnel Evaluation Procedures and Ratings

Each district school superintendent must establish procedures for evaluating the performance of duties and responsibilities of instructional, administrative, and supervisory personnel employed by the school district.

²³ Sections 1012.22(1) and 1012.34, F.S.

²⁴ Section 1012.22(3)(a), F.S.

²⁵ Section 1012.585(3)(e), F.S.

²⁶ Section 1012.98(5)(b), F.S.

²⁷ Section 1004.55(4), F.S.

The DOE must approve each school district's instructional personnel and school administrator evaluation systems and must monitor district implementation for compliance with statutory requirements.²⁸ Evaluation systems must differentiate among four levels of performance:

- Highly effective.
- Effective.
- Needs improvement, or developing for certain instructional personnel in the first three years of employment.
- Unsatisfactory.²⁹

Statewide, districts reported that 157,905 classroom teachers received an evaluation in the 2023-2024 school year, and 114,950 of those teachers (72.8 percent) were rated highly effective.³⁰

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill revises educator preparation, credentialing, professional learning, and incentives related to autism spectrum disorder and other specified disabilities.

Educator Preparation and Training (Sections 1, 4, and 5)

Section 1 amends s. 1004.85, F.S., related to postsecondary educator preparation institutes (EPIs), to require:

- An EPI program participant who is certified in exceptional student education to complete the autism microcredential created by the University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment; and
- By August 1, 2027, as a condition of continued EPI program approval, each EPI to offer instruction and training on evidence-based practices for teaching students with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, other developmental disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disabilities, consistent with the uniform core curricula developed by the Department of Education.

Section 4 amends s. 1012.551, F.S., related to teacher preparation core principles and uniform core curricula, to require:

- The uniform core curricula to include training aligned with evidence-based practices for supporting students with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, other developmental disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disabilities, applicable across all levels of support; and
- Each state-approved teacher preparation program using the uniform core curricula to include the autism microcredential, which must count for at least 1 semester hour toward program completion.

²⁸ Section 1012.34(1), F.S.

²⁹ Section 1012.34(2)(e), F.S.

³⁰ Florida Department of Education, 2023-24 District Educator Evaluation Ratings (Excel spreadsheet) (Classroom Teachers - % by Dist worksheet, Statewide Total row), available at <https://www.fl DOE.org/file/7503/2324DistEduEvalRate.xlsx> (last visited Jan. 15, 2026).

Section 5 amends s. 1012.552, F.S., related to Coaching for Educator Readiness and Teaching (CERT) Program, to require successful completion of the autism microcredential for a candidate seeking certification in exceptional student education through a CERT program.

Autism Educator Loan Forgiveness Program

Section 2 creates s. 1009.636, F.S., to establish the Autism Educator Loan Forgiveness Program within the Department of Education (DOE) to provide student loan repayment assistance for eligible special education teachers who serve as the primary teacher in a public school classroom in which a majority of the students have autism spectrum disorder.

Program Eligibility and Benefits

The bill establishes eligibility pathways based on degree level and endorsements and provides loan repayment assistance up to \$17,500 over 5 years, capped at \$3,500 per year. The bill requires annual payments to be made directly to the participant's lender.

Conditions for Annual Payment

The bill conditions each annual payment on the teacher:

- Completing a full year of service in the qualifying position;
- Receiving an effective or highly effective evaluation rating under s. 1012.34, F.S.; and
- Meeting specified certificate-related eligibility requirements which include a teacher holding an active loan balance who has earned a bachelor's degree with a specified endorsement, or a master's degree in special or exceptional education.

Administration and Rulemaking

The bill requires the State Board of Education to adopt rules to administer the program.

Compensation, Salary Supplements, and Incentives

Section 3 amends s. 1012.22, F.S., related to teacher compensation, salary supplements, and incentives, to:

- Add completion of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Endorsement to the activities that must be included in district salary supplements under the performance salary schedule; and
- Provide that collective bargaining may not preclude a district from providing incentives to exceptional student education teachers who complete the Autism Spectrum Disorder Endorsement, in addition to any stipend funded in the General Appropriations Act for completion of the endorsement, and who serve as the primary teacher in a classroom in which a majority of the students have autism spectrum disorder.

Certificate Renewal Requirements

Section 6 amends s. 1012.585, F.S., related to the process for renewal of professional certificates, to, beginning August 1, 2027:

- Specify that the renewal requirement for instruction for teaching students with disabilities must include autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, other developmental disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disabilities.

- Require an applicant certified in exceptional student education to earn the autism microcredential for renewal, provides that it counts as 3 college credits or the equivalent inservice points, and provides that once earned it is not required again for additional renewal periods.

Stipend Authorization

Section 7 amends s. 1012.586, F.S., to provide that personnel certified in exceptional student education who complete the Autism Spectrum Disorder Endorsement are eligible for a stipend as specified in the General Appropriations Act.

District Professional Learning Systems

Section 8 amends s. 1012.98, F.S., to require each district professional learning system to provide at least one autism-specific professional development opportunity annually for instructional personnel and school-based administrators. The professional development must be developed and delivered in coordination with the district's assigned Center for Autism and Related Disabilities and must include evidence-based practices for supporting students with autism spectrum disorder across all levels of need, including academic instruction, behavioral supports, communication strategies, and inclusive practices.

The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

The bill has an indeterminate fiscal impact to the DOE related to administration and funding of the Autism Educator Loan Forgiveness Program. The stipends referred to in the bill are contingent on amounts provided in the General Appropriations Act. The bill may also have an indeterminate fiscal impact related to implementation of new educator preparation, certificate renewal, and district professional learning requirements.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 1004.85, 1012.22, 1012.551, 1012.552, 1012.585, 1012.586, and 1012.98.

This bill creates section 1009.636 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:**A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

CS by Education Pre-K – 12 on January 13, 2026:

The committee substitute deletes the bill's amendments to s. 1012.582, F.S., related to a teacher holding the Endorsement in Autism Spectrum Disorders in a class in which at least 50 percent of students have autism spectrum disorder.

The committee substitute creates s. 1009.636, F.S., related to the Autism Educator Loan Forgiveness Program. The committee substitute:

- Creates a student loan repayment assistance program for eligible special education teachers who serve as the primary teacher in a public school classroom in which a majority of the students have autism spectrum disorder.

- Provides eligibility pathways based on degree level and endorsements and limits repayment assistance to a total of \$17,500 over 5 years, with annual payments capped at \$3,500 and paid directly to the lender.
- Conditions annual payments on a full year of service, an effective or highly effective evaluation rating, and no certificate-related disciplinary action.
- Requires State Board of Education rulemaking to administer the Autism Educator Loan Forgiveness Program.

The committee substitute adds to the bill provisions amending:

- Section 1004.85, F.S., related to training at Postsecondary Educator Preparation Institutes (EPIs):
 - Requires ESE-certified program participants to complete the autism microcredential created under s. 1004.551(1)(f), F.S.
 - Requires each EPI, by August 1, 2027, as a condition of continued program approval, to offer training on evidence-based practices for teaching students with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, other developmental disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disabilities, consistent with the uniform core curricula developed by the department.
- Section 1012.22, F.S., related to district school board duties related to compensation and bargaining. The committee substitute:
 - Adds completion of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Endorsement to the activities that must be included in salary supplements under the performance salary schedule.
 - Provides that collective bargaining may not preclude incentives to ESE teachers who complete the Autism Spectrum Disorder Endorsement (in addition to any General Appropriations Act stipend for completion) and who serve as the primary teacher in a classroom in which a majority of the students have autism spectrum disorder.
- Section 1012.551, F.S., related to teacher preparation core principles and uniform core curricula. The committee substitute:
 - Requires the uniform core curricula to include training aligned to evidence-based practices for supporting students with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, other developmental disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disabilities, applicable across all levels of support.
 - Requires state-approved teacher preparation programs using the uniform core curricula to include the autism microcredential, which must count for at least 1 semester hour toward program completion.
- Section 1012.552, F.S., related to CERT Program requirements. The committee substitute requires a candidate for certification in exceptional student education through a Coaching for Educator Readiness and Teaching (CERT) program to successfully complete the autism microcredential.
- Section 1012.585, F.S., related to renewal of professional certificates. The committee substitute:
 - Beginning August 1, 2027, specifies that the required disability-training credit must include autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, other developmental disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disabilities.

- Beginning August 1, 2027, requires applicants certified in exceptional student education to earn the autism microcredential for renewal, provides it counts as 3 college credits or the equivalent inservice points, and provides that once earned it is not required again for additional renewal periods.
- Section 1012.586, F.S., related to stipend authorization. The committee substitute authorizes personnel certified in exceptional student education who complete the Autism Spectrum Disorder Endorsement to be eligible for a stipend as specified in the General Appropriations Act.
- Section 1012.98, F.S., related to district professional learning systems. The committee substitute requires:
 - Each district professional learning system to provide at least one autism-specific professional development opportunity annually for instructional personnel and school-based administrators.
 - The training to be developed and delivered in coordination with the district's assigned Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) and to cover evidence-based practices across levels of need.

B. Amendments:

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
