Marlene Deer, EC-ATP director, interacts with students via webcam.

Traditional classrooms have children who are gifted, and teachers adapt the curriculum to challenge them. Historically, though, teachers weren’t required to adapt the same lessons for children with special needs because the children weren’t included in mainstream classes. Marlene Deer, director of the Early Childhood Alternative Teacher Preparation (EC-ATP) Program at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities and adjunct clinical instructor with the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, says that practice defeats the purpose of mainstreaming children with special needs into traditional classrooms. “It has been my feeling for a very long time that teachers would be very well served to have some background in special ed,” Deer said. The question is, how to adapt a curriculum so all children—including gifted and special needs—benefit from it. A special needs child in a regular classroom is exposed to many important things—speech and cognitive development, language and social and self-help skills—just by being in the classroom, Deer said. “The intent of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) is to educate kids in the least restrictive environment,” Deer said. “With accommodations and support, we have to ask—can his educational needs be met in regular classrooms to the maximum extent possible? If their needs are not being met, it’s not the least restrictive environment. “It’s hard to believe that in 2013, we would still have the general public and educators who feel that kids with disabilities should be segregated,” she said. “I can empathize, but I don’t agree.” Disabilities have become more complex, she said, and there has been a massive increase in children diagnosed with autism. Stressors like these can push teachers out of the profession. “I think that scares general ed teachers,” she said. “Larger class sizes, more disabilities and challenging behavior can be the tipping point for young teachers. It causes a very visceral reaction.” Deer said funding plays into the issue—higher pay, smaller class sizes and more training for teachers would be helpful. Training in special ed can help teachers understand what it takes to reach a child with a disability.

About EC-ATP There is a shortage of licensed Early Childhood Special Education teachers in Utah, particularly in rural districts. To address this problem, USU offers the Early Childhood Alternative Teacher Preparation (EC-ATP) program, an off-campus, distance education program which is housed at the Center for Persons with Disabilities at USU. The EC-ATP provides coursework necessary to license educators to work with families and their children, birth to age 5, who have disabilities. Students enrolled in the EC-ATP program are employed by school districts as preschool special education teachers on emergency letters of authorization. The EC-ATP program delivers students online courses each semester until they have completed their two-year program. Deer supervises the students as they complete practica and student/clinical teaching requirements in their own classrooms. Fifty-three students have graduated from the program since it started in 2006. Another 24 students are currently enrolled in the program.