Instead of bringing the trainees to the university, the EC-ATP program brings university coursework to the trainees.

It’s summer, and special education preschool trainees are coming to Utah State University to kick off their instruction. Their director has a message for them: Prepare for your most challenging two years. The trainees are already filling teaching assignments, they’re new to their jobs, most of them are caring for their own families, and now they’re adding coursework to everything else. They are on campus for a week, but the bulk of their training will occur where they live, via the Internet. Providing trained special education preschool teachers to the remote corners of Utah is not an easy thing—not for the students, the schools or the training program. Across the nation, rural schools often struggle to keep special education classrooms staffed, and Utah is a state with a lot of rural areas.

The Early Childhood Alternative Teacher Preparation program helps fill that need by allowing preschool teachers to receive—in their own communities—the special education certification training that is required by law. The trainees take courses via the Internet. They also teach, under a “letter of authorization” that allows them to simultaneously finish their coursework and staff special education programs that might otherwise go without.

Now, thanks to new technology, they are also able to be observed in real time as they teach. New cameras allow EC-ATP director Marlene Deer to observe a teacher, pan over the students to see how they’re doing, even zoom in on an individual child. Deer’s observations are done by appointment, and they’ve been done remotely for years, since it isn’t feasible for her to do it all in person. In the past, trainees videotaped themselves with a still camera and mailed the VHS tape to Deer. The new pan and zoom technology gives her a much better picture of what’s happening in the classroom, and it offers the view in real time. It adds a lot to the lectures she delivers electronically, helping her to see where the trainees struggle and where they shine.

It’s not as good as being there,” Deer said, “But I can’t be there six times over the course of a semester.”

The program makes training possible for the typical special education preschool trainee in a small, rural area—or in a larger area that does not have a preschool special education program. Most often the trainee is female and married. Sometimes she has children of her own who need special education. She would have a hard time dropping her responsibilities long enough to receive training on a university campus. In fact, she often receives her Internet courses over her home computer.

Tech Support Specialist Dave Harris works with trainees to make sure their home computers are fast and healthy enough to handle everything that’s asked of them. He also travels to the far reaches of the state, installing the hardware needed for the program in rural Utah schools.
(He installed many of the new cameras last November. For a quick look at some of the sights he passed along the way, visit his photo album on the CPD’s Facebook Page.)