All eyes are on special education teacher Kathy Morones ’09M as she flows back and forth in front of the dry-erase board of her Bella Vista Elementary School classroom. Her former life as a production manager at a major payroll company and her current life as a mother of three have taught her how to blend authority and empathy. When it comes to her special needs students, the two qualities synchronize perfectly, thanks to her Mount St. Mary’s College education. She knows just what to do and when. Constant engagement keeps attention deficit disorders at bay. Reassuring touches calm autistic nerves.

She runs the kids — “my friends” she calls them — through a drill concerning the week’s California standardized testing. She asks for words that describe how they feel about the state-mandated exams. Answers range from “horrible” to “tricky” to “weird.” She transcribes all this on the board and then asks her friends to write a sentence using these words. An exercise in self-expression turns into a grammar lesson. The kids eat it up.

Out of nowhere, Michelle, a friendly third-grader sitting in the front row blurts out, “I was student of the month in my normal class!”

“That’s great,” replies Morones calmly, “but it’s not what we’re talking about.” Part of Morones’ job is to clue students in to appropriate classroom and social behavior.

It’s not a mean response, but it hits Michelle in a bad place. Her shoulders drop, her lower lip juts out. Her overreaction proves a sharp reminder that this is, indeed, a special education class.

Without skipping a beat, Morones moves close to Michelle and beams, “Next time we meet, I want you to stand up and tell us all about it.” Michelle beams. That’s all it took.

Surging Demand

As general education teachers across the country face layoffs, demand for those like Morones who are trained in special education is on the rise. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, this growing demand means that the number of special education teachers in the workforce is expected to rise 15 percent from 2006 to 2016.

Instances of identified disabilities, including specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, emotional disturbance disorders, and developmental delays, are on the rise. Nationwide, children with specific learning disabilities alone have increased from 1.5 million in 1980-81 to 2.8 million in 2003-04.

There are several theories as to why this is happening, but the prevailing wisdom says the numbers aren’t actually changing. It’s just that more cases are being identified. “We have more informed families than ever before and society is more supportive of diagnosing and treating individuals with
disabilities,” explains Bob Farran, director of Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area (Southwest SELPA), a branch of the organization charged with coordinating special education’s complex machinations for California’s schools. “We’ve also broadened the categories of disabilities at the federal level,” he adds.

Additionally, it’s a matter of acceptance, says Kimmie Tang, director of special education in the Mount’s education department. “It’s no longer a stigma,” she says. “As a result of that, more parents are coming out and saying, ‘Maybe my child is autistic.’”

Then there are more controversial theories regarding the increase. The No Child Left Behind Act and standardized testing have put increased burdens on educators. According to some, this burden is occasionally handed off to the special education teachers. “We get a number of students referred (to special education) that could have been served in a different way,” Farran says, “The category of students with a learning disability is an example. Some of these learners could have improved their skills via a research-based intervention rather than waiting to fail and then receiving special education services.”

Farran isn’t alone in criticizing this “wait to fail” approach. “They’ve not been given support or help, so they’re suddenly identified as special needs students,” says David Seiler, who teaches a special day class at Gabrielino High School in San Gabriel, Calif. — his alma mater — while seeking his preliminary teaching credential at the Mount. “The majority of my classes are these students, but there’s a shift now because they’re being identified a lot earlier along, so as they grow and progress, hopefully we catch them up and we can exit them from the program.”

Farran agrees. “Districts are starting to increase the amount of interventions for struggling learners. In a few years this may actually decrease the number of students in the learning disability category.”

Morones, who earned her master’s degree in education, with an emphasis in special education, from the Mount this spring, works with the “pull-out” model of special education. Her students typically spend one or two hours with her, four days a week. The rest of the time, they are in classrooms with the general education students. This model makes her role largely collaborative, thus giving her a strong understanding of general education teachers’ plight. “The relationship I have with the general education teachers is that of trying to be of service to them,” she says.

“You need to be a collaborator since the process involves lots of other professionals,” Farran points out. He also feels it’s especially important to communicate with parents. “They did not plan on having a child with a disability. It just happens, so you need to see the world through the parent’s eyes to fully understand.”

A New Vision

While isolated classes and non-public schools do exist for high-needs students, the current thinking is that mild or moderate needs students should integrate into the general student population as much as possible. After all, education isn’t just about academics. It’s about learning to be a community member. “In our society, social networking is key,” explains Tang. “If these kids don’t learn that in school, it’s going to be harsh when they grow up.”

In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) set this thinking into law. It was a sweeping set of reforms that opened up special education to millions of students. “It had a huge impact on the education field,” Tang says. “It lessened the whole idea of general educators and special educators saying ‘this is your student’ or ‘this is my student.’ It opened up cooperation and broke down the walls.”

IDEA, which has been expanded and reauthorized many times since its inception, may have done a great amount of good, but it also helped evolve special education into a complex field.

When a student is identified as having special needs, the first step is to determine his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP). The next step is for parents and educators to decide how a school’s general and special education programs can best help the child. Placement depends on the severity of a student’s needs. In any particular school, the possibilities might include:

- **The Consultation Model.** Students remain in the general classes while their general education teachers consult with a special education teacher.
- **The Pull-out Model.** As is the case with Morones’ class, students, usually at the primary school level, are pulled out of class for a few hours each day to work with a special education teacher.
- **The Special Day Class Model.** Typical of high schools,
Mount St. Mary's Special Education Career Paths

Given the diverse range of people looking for a career in special education, the Mount offers a variety of degree and certification options.

Undergraduates can earn a Special Education Mild and Moderate Preliminary Teaching Credential by enrolling in the education department’s “3-in-5” undergraduate program. Over five years, they’ll receive their:
- Bachelor’s degree
- Elementary or Secondary Preliminary General Education Teaching Credential
- Special Education Mild and Moderate Preliminary Teaching Credential

The graduate program offers:
- A Preliminary K–12 Mild and Moderate Special Education Teaching Credential
- A Professional K–12 Mild and Moderate Special Education Teaching Credential
- A master’s degree in education, with an emphasis in special education
- An internship program

The Mount’s special education credential programs are set up so that students simultaneously earn master’s degree units. This means that once they receive their credential, they’re only 6 units short of a master’s degree in special education. The department also offers an Internship Credential program to qualified candidates, which allows them to teach full time as they earn their credential at the Mount on nights and weekends.

The program’s small size allows students to customize their program to suit their needs. Prospective students should contact Kimmie Tang, director of special education, at 213.477.2627 for an advisement appointment to discuss which program is right for them.
students take a combination of special education classes and general education classes. In the case of Seiler’s school, students take three periods of each.
• The Non-Public School Model. These are schools for students with severe disabilities or emotional issues.
• The Residential School Model. The most isolating option. Given IDEA’s preference for inclusion, non-public and residential schools are only used when absolutely necessary.

Part of the reason for this dynamic structure is that even the educators and legislators governing the process are students of the discipline. “We are still learning about disability,” admits Farran. So to prepare for the field, potential educators must receive a solid education themselves. “The curriculum must reflect a willingness to stay current. The more you have the opportunity to visit, observe and work with students as part of your teacher training, the better.”

An example of this would be the Mount’s Internship Credential Program, which allows students to start their teaching career in special education during the day while studying for their degree at night and on weekends. Both Morones and Seiler took advantage of this program. In fact, Morones’ efforts to help her Bella Vista students improve their oral reading skills became the basis for “Timed Repeated Reading,” her master’s degree project.

In 1970, the College began offering an emphasis in special education in the master’s of education program. Since then, the curriculum has continued to evolve and grow, most notably with the August 2008 addition of Tang, who came to the Mount with ten years’ experience in the field and a doctor of education from the University of Southern California. She kicked off her arrival with an autism symposium this March attended by over 200 parents, professors, school psychologists and other guests.

Personalized Attention

Today, the Mount offers small classes, intense instructor-to-student interaction, and flexibility for people seeking an undergraduate or master’s degree in K-12 mild to moderate special education. “Our courses do have small enough groups of students so that we can give very individualized attention, make sure all questions are answered, and work hard to make sure that each candidate is able to successfully complete the program,” explains Shelly Tochluk, chair of the Mount’s education department.

Students come to the Mount for all kinds of reasons. Morones picked the program because she found bigger universities “catered more to the traditional undergraduate students who went to school during the day.” She also says other programs were too independent, a euphemism for not teaching enough.

Seiler chose the Mount because the program only includes 28 to 30 students, so Tang and her adjunct professors can give each candidate plenty of interaction. “I think it’s the collaboration between the professors and the students,” he says.

The decision to enter the field also means job security for Morones and Seiler. Special education teachers in California make somewhere in the neighborhood of $60,000 annually, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But to be successful in this field, the motivation must be focused on helping children.

People come to special education from all walks of life. Some, like Seiler, are already educators. Others, such as Morones, come from another career. What unifies them all is their passion. As Morones puts it, they are “advocates for the children.”

“There is something in a special education teacher that is a bit different in terms of a particular empathy and dedication,” concurs Tochluk. “If it’s not going to fill them with joy to work with special education students, it’s not a good fit.”

On more than one occasion, Tang has actually dissuaded potential students. “I’ve asked, ‘Why are you looking into this field?’” she says. “If they say, ‘Well, you know, I can guarantee myself a job,’ that’s not going to cut it.”

Tang herself got into the field because, as a 9-year-old Cambodian immigrant, her initial lack of English skills caused her to be considered special needs. “I was treated differently and that had a profound effect on me,” explains Tang.

“I see the uniqueness of each individual in special needs and I hate to see that uniqueness being wasted,” she says. “I feel that if you find that strength and use that strength, they can master anything.”

She then pauses and blushes slightly. “That may sound a little bit cheesy, but it’s a personal belief.”