

Evaluating Special Education Policies and Practices

For over 25 years, federal legislation has guaranteed that children with disabilities have access to a public education through the following provisions: a free and appropriate public education, a program designed to meet their unique educational needs in the least restrictive environments, and protection of rights of children and their families through procedural safeguards. Despite clear progress toward achieving these guarantees, more work remains to ensure that students with disabilities succeed in school and later in life. And many policy-makers and citizens believe that the best way to ensure continued improvements is through systematic, long-term evaluation of how states, districts, and schools educate children with disabilities.



THE COMMITMENT FOR MAKING IMPROVEMENTS

In June 1997, Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the successor legislation to the landmark Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Congress has gradually reinforced the legislation through the addition of amendments to expand services to infants and toddlers, to provide more systematic transition planning, and to strengthen the requirement to place children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

The new provisions of 1997 focused in part on participation of children and youth with disabilities in large-scale assessments and the general education curriculum. These recent improvements have shifted the focus of the legislation from merely providing basic services to improving academic and educational outcomes of children with disabilities.

THE STUDY DESIGN AND TIMELINE

The Office of Special Education Programs, under Section 674(b) of Public Law 105-17, will conduct a national assessment to examine how the changes in the 1997 IDEA amendments are affecting states, districts, and schools, as well as infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities and their families. The study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, SLIIDEA,

In June 1997, Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the successor legislation to the landmark Education for All

has been designed to address the issues of interest to Congress and the public:

- *improving performance for students with disabilities;*
- *supporting students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment;*
- *facilitating the use of positive behavioral supports;*
- *increasing positive parent involvement; and*
- *promoting successful transitions for young children to school and young adults to post-school life.*

The SLIIDEA study will collect data from all 50 states, as well as a nationally representative sample of districts and schools that serve children with disabilities, through a combination of surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and document review. The study is also designed to measure change over time by collecting data at several points over a five-year period, beginning in 2000. This longitudinal study will answer the following research questions:

- *How is IDEA being implemented?*
- *What is the status of each of the identified issues?*
- *What are the contextual factors influencing the implementation of the legislation?*
- *What is the relationship between implementation and the results?*
- *What are the intended and unintended outcomes of the legislation?*
- *What are the critical and emerging issues in states, districts, and schools?*





The results of the study will be important to several different audiences. For policymakers charting an improved course for children with disabilities, the study will report on the variations in implementation of the legislation at the state and local level. For local educators, the study will provide information they need to assure improvements in service coordination, accountability, procedural safeguards, behavioral interventions and supports, and access to a challenging curriculum. And for families who want the best for their children, and for the children themselves, this study will ultimately lead to policy improvements in service delivery and outcomes. These include:

- *improved student performance;*
- *increased participation in the general curriculum;*
- *more effective transitions for young children to school and young adults from school to work;*
- *fewer incidences of dropouts;*
- *increased use of positive behavioral strategies; and*
- *reductions in disagreements between parents and the education system.*

Each fall, beginning in 2001, OSEP will report to Congress on the findings from this policy study. Issue briefs and summary reports, including the annual reports, will be broadly disseminated, and made available on the project's Web site: www.abt.sliidea.org.

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SLIDEA:
 One of the national
 assessments of
 special education



The Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act