

Research Evidence Against Dismantling the U.S. Department of Education: **How to Strengthen Support for Students with Disabilities**

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Meet the Team



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Meet Our Guest Panelists



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Fmr. Director of OSEP at
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Our Goal

Provide evidence-based research to inform and strengthen advocacy efforts against the dismantling of the Education Department





Guiding Questions

What role should the federal government play in the delivery of educational opportunity?

How will dismantling the Education Department impact the quality and efficacy of programs that are supported by federal funding?

How effective have federal programs been in delivering on their intended goals to improve equity, expand opportunity, and support students facing particular challenges?

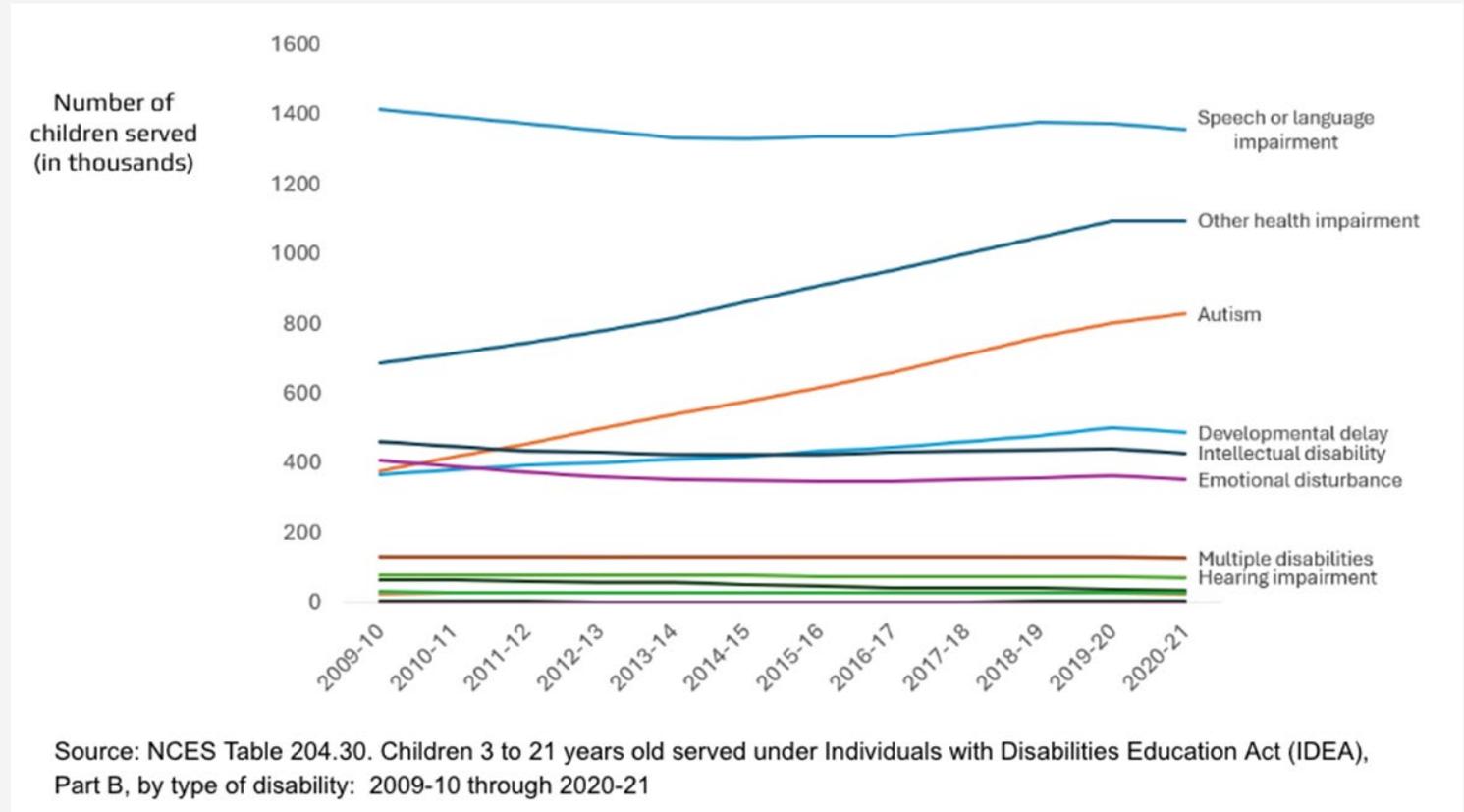


U.S. Education Department and IDEA: **POLICY** CONTEXT



Who is served by IDEA?

More than 90% of IDEA funds flow through IDEA Part B grants





Who Oversees IDEA?

U.S. Department of Education



Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

Responsible for
ensuring states'
compliance with IDEA



Office for Civil Rights (OCR)

Prevent and address
disability discrimination
by enforcing laws that
prohibit discrimination
based on disability.



Institute for Education Sciences (IES)

Evaluates federal
programs and collects
and reports on
education statistics

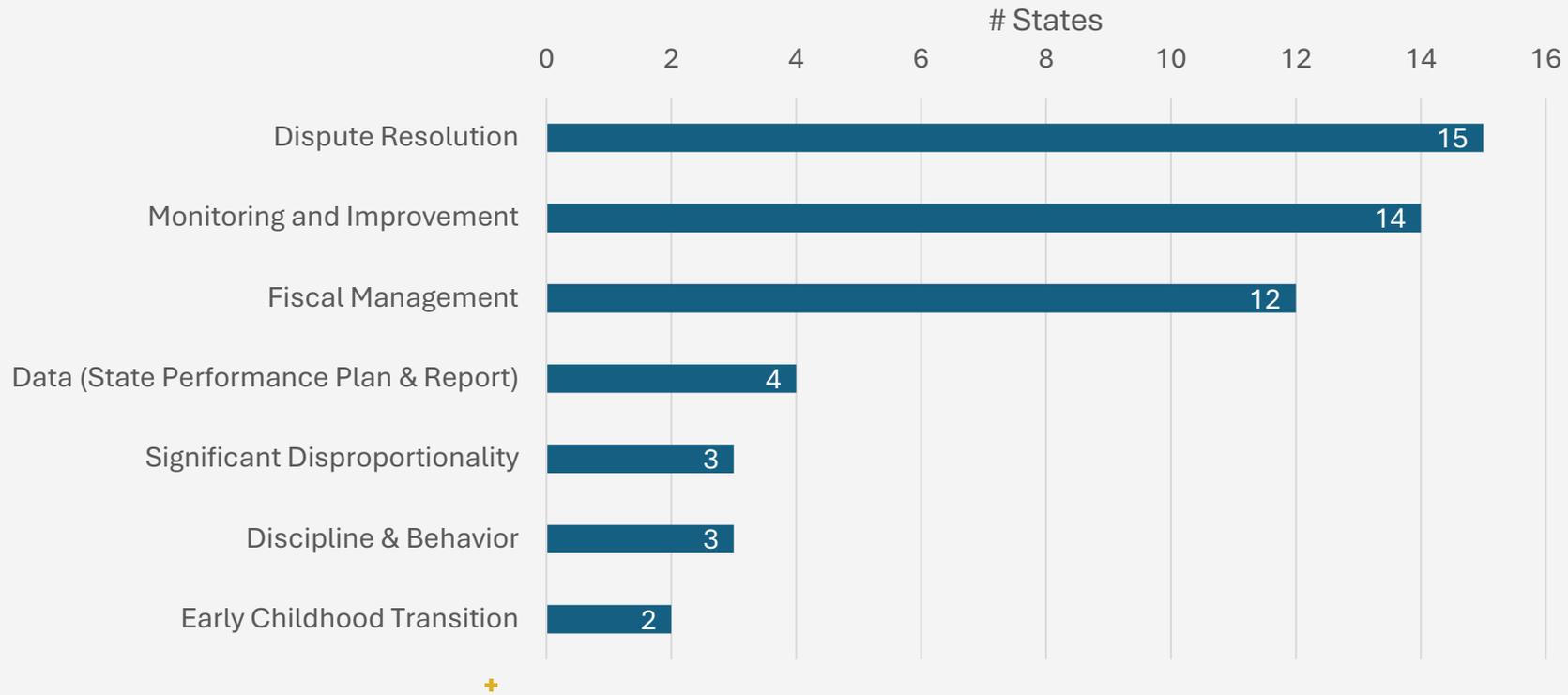
U.S. Government Accountability Office



Works for Congress
and aims to help the
government work
more efficiently



OSEP monitoring revealed state challenges to adhering to IDEA in multiple areas



The Special Education **Staffing Crisis**: Why Loosening Standards Won't Fix the Problem



Special Education Staffing: A System Under Strain

This isn't a minor staffing hiccup — it's a systematic crisis that has persisted for decades.



Special education vacancies are nearly **double** other subject areas

65% of public schools report being understaffed in special education

21% of schools report at least one special education vacancy (2022-23)

72% of schools with vacancies struggle to fill positions with fully certified teachers





Special Education Staffing

Current Law vs. Potential Policy Shifts

States cannot waive requirements on emergency/temporary basis

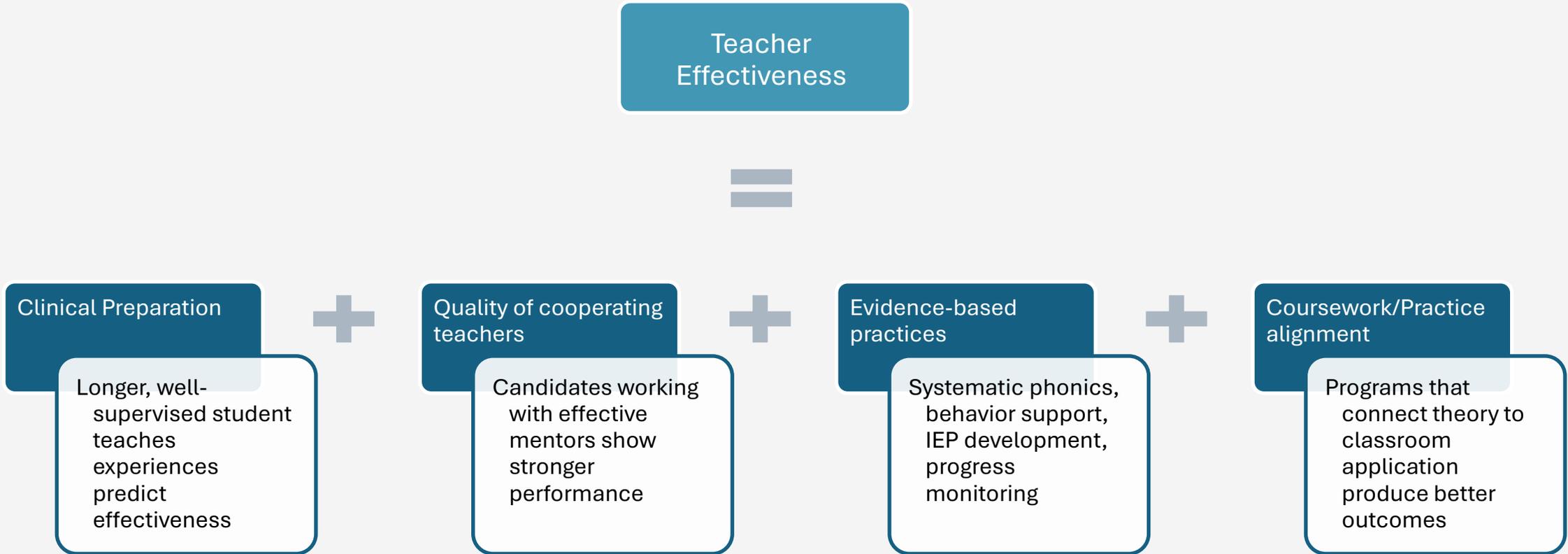
If federal oversight weakens, states may pursue “flexibility” to expand teacher pools

IDEA currently requires: Bachelor’s degree and full special education certification

The Risk: short-term staffing solutions that compromise long-term student outcomes



Core Components of Effective Special Education Preparation





Alternative Routes

Potential and Pitfalls

Preparation: Many alternative routes **compress or omit** key preparation elements identified as effective.

Common Gaps: Limited supervision, insufficient evidence-based practice training, minimal clinical experience.

Teacher Attrition: Alternatively certified special educators are about **25% more likely to leave** the profession.

Evidence Base: Research is **mixed**, alternative routes require sustained investment and careful implementation

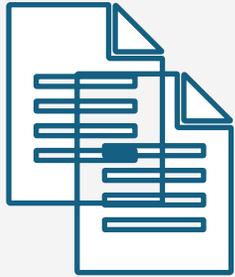




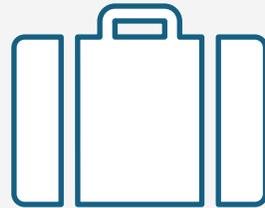
Why Teachers Leave It's Not About Preparation

Working conditions are the strongest predictor of retention — not preparation pathway.

Special educators face:



Excessive
Paperwork



Larger
Caseloads



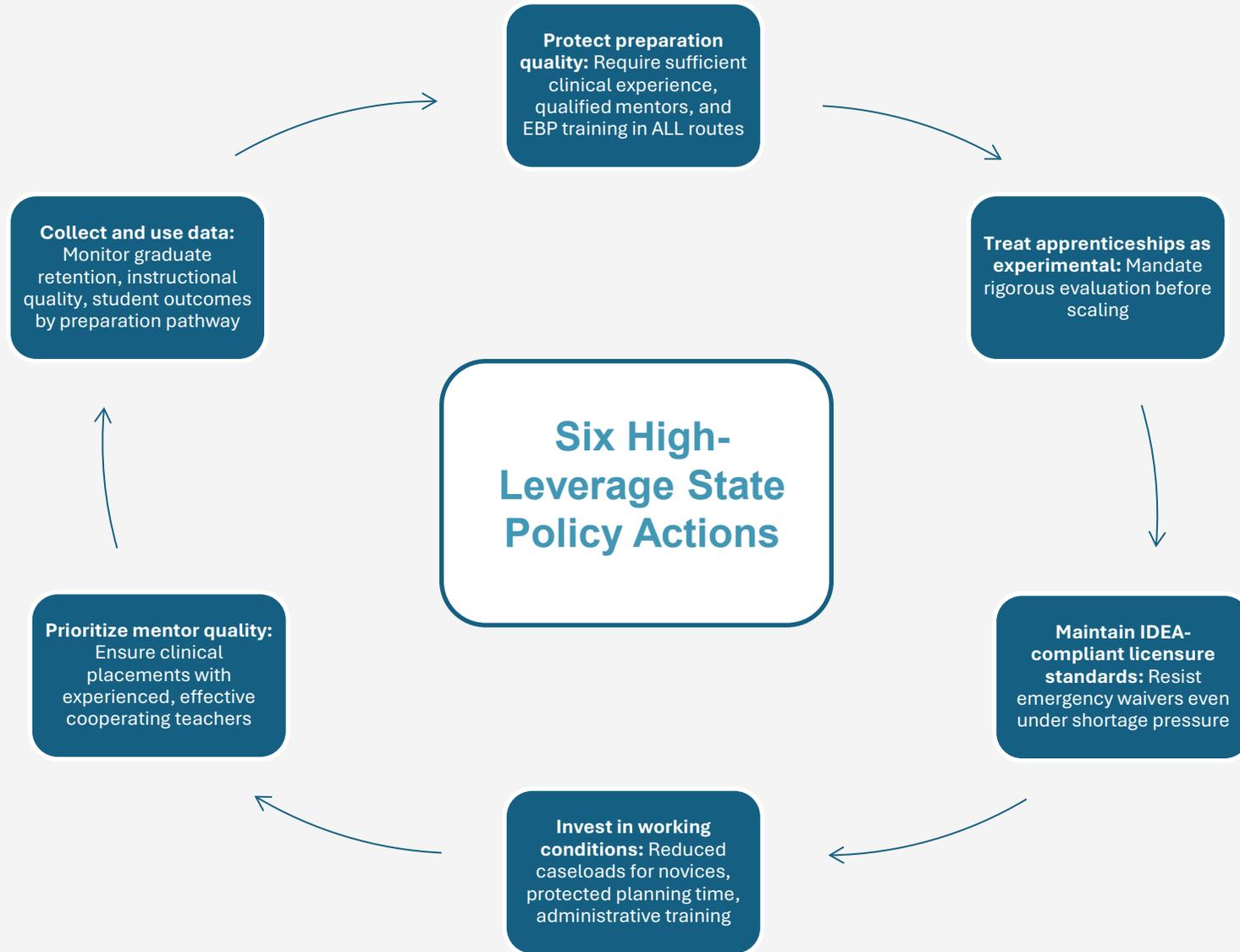
Less Planning
Time



Role
Ambiguity

Evidence implies that faster pipelines accelerate turnover without fixing systemic problems.







The Path Forward

Evidence Over Expedience

Certification flexibility should not be treated as a **simple solution** to complex workforce challenges

The speed of entry does not equal a sustainable **workforce**: lowering standards fills positions temporarily but accelerates turnover

Dual investment in **quality preparation** and **supportive working conditions** is required

The stakes are **students' legal rights** to appropriate services and evidence-based instruction



When Federal Oversight Fades: Protecting **Equity** in Special Education





Why this Matters Now

A Policy Crossroads

- Federal proposal removes required reporting of **racial disproportionality** data (Jan 2026)
- Historical pattern: weak oversight = fewer districts identified, less corrective action
- Recent OSEP reports show critical failures in Indiana, Idaho, South Carolina, Kansas



- Stakes are high: accountability infrastructure vs. persistent inequities going unaddressed

“The concern is not that disproportionality will suddenly increase, but that it will reduce the likelihood that state monitoring systems detect inequities and require action.”



Racial Disproportionality A Persistent, System-Linked Pattern

- Racial disproportionality concentrates in **school-identified** categories, not medical diagnoses
- **Pattern holds** across states, income levels, and decades of research



Black students have **double** the probability of identification in *subjective* categories (emotional disturbance, intellectual disability) vs. White peers

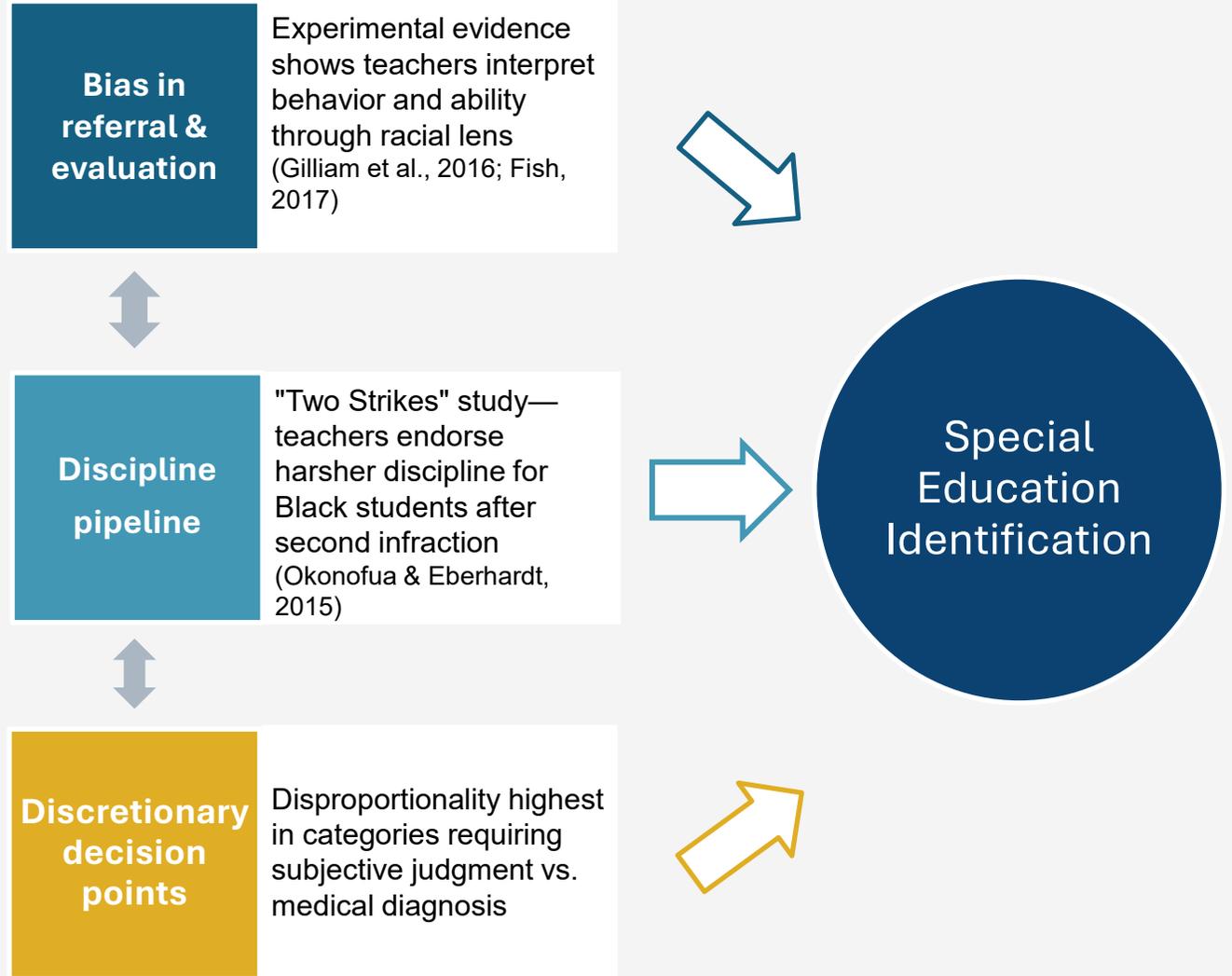
Probability of restrictive placement:

- **16.2%** non-low-income Black students
- **10.3%** non-low-income White students



How Disproportionality Happens

Three Interconnected Pathways





Racial Disproportionality

Interventions that Show Promise

Equity-focused PBIS: RCT showed reduced discipline disparities through reduced exclusion of Black students (McIntosh et al., 2021)

Teacher-student racial matching: Black students matched to Black teachers less likely to be newly identified for special ed (Hart & Lindsay, 2024)

Double Check coaching: Coached teachers had lower office discipline referrals for Black students (Bradshaw et al., 2018)

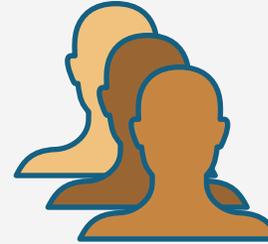
Structured prereferral support: Instructional Consultation Teams reduced relative risk of minority referral/placement (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006)



What States Should Do: Four Strategic Priorities



Maintain conservative monitoring thresholds & transparent reporting despite federal retreat



Treat educator diversity as a special education equity strategy—strengthen recruitment and retention of Black teachers



Strengthen data infrastructure—enable timely, disaggregated reporting with actionable dashboards for districts



Prioritize equity-focused discipline models (PBIS, restorative practices) in state guidance and funding



"States have both the opportunity and the obligation to demonstrate that equity in special education can be advanced through policy choices grounded in research evidence and a sustained commitment to identifying and addressing systemic bias."

KEY TAKEAWAY



Thank you

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