

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

FEDERAL OVERSIGHT OF RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Fact Sheet

Key Takeaway

Federal oversight has been critical in identifying state-level failures in tracking and responding to racial/ethnic inequities in identification, placement, and discipline practices for special education students. Relaxing federal reporting requirements increases the likelihood that disparities will go unidentified and decreases the likelihood that states will take necessary corrective action steps.

The Issue

Racial disproportionality in special education is driven by discretionary decisions at multiple points: referral, evaluation, placement, and discipline. In January 2026, the U.S. Education Department (ED) proposed a change that would eliminate the racial disparities reporting requirement under IDEA. The concern is that this change will reduce the likelihood that state monitoring systems detect inequities and prompt action, allowing inequitable patterns to persist without accountability.

In one [study](#), non-low-income Black students were twice as likely to be identified for more subjective disability classifications (e.g. emotional disturbance, intellectual disability) than non-low-income white students. Students of color were also more likely to be placed in substantially separate classrooms.

The Evidence

Recent Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) monitoring reports underscore how critical federal oversight has been in identifying state-level failures in data collection, methodology design, and compliance with significant disproportionality requirements. Monitoring frameworks create accountability, but corrective action requires evidence-based interventions that address root causes. While causal evidence of what works to reduce racial disproportionality is limited, promising strategies include:

- Interventions that target discipline disparities through equity-focused Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Double Check coaching, and restorative practices;
- Pairing Response to Intervention (RTI) policies that provide support for students with specific learning disabilities with equity monitoring at multiple stages (e.g., referrals, evaluation, eligibility, and placement);
- Increasing teacher workforce diversity and establishing Instructional Consultation Teams to minimize bias and reduce inappropriate referrals/placements.

Evidence-Based Policy Considerations for States

State policy levers

1. **Workforce strategies.** Treat educator diversity as a special education equity strategy, not only a workforce goal; strengthen recruitment, preparation, licensing pathways, and retention supports that expand the pool of Black teachers.
2. **Prioritize evidence-backed equity discipline models in guidance and funding.** Include equity-focused PBIS as a high-priority option in state technical assistance menus.
3. **Require or encourage subgroup discipline monitoring using clear metrics.** Encourage districts to track office discipline referrals and suspensions by subgroup using measures that show inequities clearly (e.g., risk differences), and to review trends regularly.
4. **Strengthen data infrastructure and use.** States can support special education and discipline data systems that allow timely, disaggregated reporting and actionable dashboards.
5. **Promote discipline policies that reduce subjectivity without increasing exclusion.** Subjective decision points can amplify disparities; state guidance can encourage clearer discipline definitions and structured response options.

District practice levers

1. **Embed structured prereferral documentation in special education identification processes** (intervention history, progress-monitoring data, language/cultural context) so identification is less driven by subjective interpretation.
2. **Provide clear and consistent guidance to standardize disciplinary decisions.** Use clearly defined referral categories, require written justification and documentation, and specify escalation/response rules (e.g., what warrants classroom removal versus a restorative response versus additional supports).
3. **Build implementation supports and allocate sufficient resources.** For approaches like Response to Intervention (RTI), PBIS, and restorative practices, budget time for coaching, staff practice, and routines that make the approach real in classrooms—not only in policy.
4. **Audit teacher assignment patterns.** Monitor staffing assignments as part of special education equity work to ensure equitable access to experienced and diverse educators as a strategy to reduce bias.

Read the full research brief [here](#). Visit our [website](#) for more resources on strengthening support for students with disabilities, including a webinar recording, summaries of research evidence, and an FAQ on IDEA.