

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

HOW THE U.S. EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S OVERSIGHT SUPPORTS STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Fact Sheet

Key Takeaway

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the cornerstone federal law that protects the educational rights of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Reducing federal monitoring or restructuring IDEA funding would likely increase variation across states, weaken protections for students with disabilities, and put service quality at risk—particularly for children with the greatest needs.

The Issue

Enacted in 1975, IDEA guarantees that eligible students receive a free appropriate public education, tailored to their individual needs, and provided in the least restrictive environment. Today, IDEA serves millions of children nationwide, from birth through age 21, and is one of the largest and most important federal investments in K–12 education. Through IDEA, states receive funding in exchange for meeting legal requirements related to service delivery, fiscal management, data reporting, and the protection of students' and families' rights.

Federal oversight plays a central role in how IDEA functions in practice. Within the U.S. Department of Education (USED), the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) monitor compliance, enforce civil rights protections, evaluate program effectiveness, and collect critical data.

Since late 2025, OSEP, OCR, and IES have been subject to significant reductions-in-force that implicate their ability to carry out their responsibilities. Though some of these reductions have been reversed, the future of these offices and their status within USED remains uncertain.

The Evidence

Through monitoring, evaluation, and data collection, federal oversight plays a central role in how IDEA functions in practice. This oversight draws attention to areas where states are struggling to meet IDEA requirements and is the key driver that prompts corrective action by states.

Program Monitoring

- Monitoring reports indicate that many states struggle to meet IDEA requirements on their own, particularly in areas such as dispute resolution, monitoring and improvement, fiscal management, data quality, racial disproportionality, discipline practices, and the transition from early intervention to preschool services.
- GAO's oversight of USED's administration of IDEA identified issues with: parental notification policies for students with disabilities participating in state voucher programs, eligibility and identification practices, dispute resolutions, early intervention data needs, and the availability of school- and district-level data to assess available resources for students with disabilities.

Evaluation and Research

- IES has [published](#) approximately 100 reports, data files, fact sheets, infographics, FAQs, blog posts, and events specifically for students with disabilities just since 2020.
- Findings from an IES-funded evaluation of IDEA highlighted improvements, but also acknowledged areas in need of improvement, including interagency coordination in the identification of infants and toddlers with suspected disabilities, linguistically and culturally responsive evaluation methods, and consistency in measures to detect large racial and ethnic disparities in special education identification.
- IES/NCES oversees data collection efforts, including the School Pulse Panel, that shed light on the shortage of special education teachers.

IDEA's effectiveness depends not only on funding levels but also on federal standards, oversight, and enforcement. Our review of policy documents issued by OSEP, IES and the GAO suggest that without strong federal oversight, longstanding issues are unlikely to be addressed consistently across states. The ability of IDEA to meet its goal of protecting the educational rights of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities is dependent on consistent federal standards, oversight, and enforcement. To protect students with disabilities the federal government must not reduce federal monitoring and must maintain a strong commitment to evaluation and research.

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.