

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

Talking Points for Advocates

On February 25, 2026, Education Law Center (ELC) hosted a webinar to discuss the U.S. Department of Education's role in supporting students with disabilities and the potential harms of reduced federal oversight and funding. Expert panelists Denise Marshall, CEO, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA); Valerie C. Williams, former Director, Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Education Department (OSEP); Dr. Alyn Turner, Senior Research Director, Research for Action; and Dr. Cara Jackson, Research Manager, The Center for Outcomes Based Contracting, shared key policy and research insights that can be used by advocates to demand the continued support of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the host of other federal programs that benefit students with disabilities. The webinar was moderated by ELC Research Director Dr. Danielle Farrie. View the recording [here](#). The following key takeaways from the webinar can be used to support advocacy efforts:

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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.

*Dr. Alyn Turner,
Research for Action*

Policy Context

- **IDEA is the cornerstone federal law that protects the educational rights of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.** Its goal is to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.
- **OSEP monitoring revealed that many states struggle to adhere to IDEA on their own and fail to meet IDEA requirements** in areas such as dispute resolution, monitoring and improvement, and fiscal management.
- **Federal monitoring has been a key driver of identifying problems and prompting corrective actions by the states.** Without federal oversight, longstanding issues such as delays in services, uneven enforcement of parental rights, shortages of qualified staff, and racial disparities in identification and discipline are unlikely to be addressed consistently across the states.

Research Findings

Rapid research reviews focused on two areas of federal policy that are governed by IDEA and susceptible to weakened federal oversight of state and local implementation. The reviews focused on evidence of: 1) how relaxing federal oversight for special education teacher licensure/certification might impact the quality of special education teachers, and 2) how reduced oversight of racial and ethnic disproportionality in special education identification, placement, and disciplinary actions may compromise states' attention to meaningful corrective action to address existing disparities.

Teacher Licensure/Certification

- **The country is facing a longstanding shortage of special education teachers, but IDEA holds states accountable by requiring minimum certification standards.** If federal oversight weakens, states may give in to pressure to weaken teacher certification pathways in favor of "flexibility," placing short term staffing solutions over long-term student outcomes.
- **Many alternative routes compress or omit the preparation elements that research has identified as effective.** Clinical preparation, high-quality cooperating teachers, exposure to evidence-based practices, and programs that connect theory to the classroom enable effective instruction among new teachers.
- **Faster pipelines and poor working conditions accelerate teacher turnover.** Teachers prepared through alternative routes are approximately 25% more likely to leave the profession than traditionally prepared peers. Working conditions are the strongest predictor of special educator teacher retention. It is the excessive paperwork, larger caseloads, limited planning time, and role ambiguity that most strongly predicts high educator turnover, which harms student achievement.

Racial disproportionality

- **Racial disproportionality concentrates in school-identified categories, not medical diagnoses.** Disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation of students from specific racial and ethnic groups in special education identification, placement, and disciplinary actions. Black students have double the probability of identification in subjective categories (emotional disturbance, intellectual disability) compared to White peers and are more likely to be placed in a restrictive classroom setting.
- **Three interconnected pathways influence disproportionality.** Research indicates that disproportionality is driven by bias in referral and evaluation, discipline pipelines that impose harsher consequences for Black students, and discretionary decision points that rely on subjective judgement.
- **Numerous promising interventions, such as equity-focused Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and diversifying the teacher workforce, can reduce racial disproportionality.** These strategies work best when paired with systematic equity monitoring at multiple decision points, not implemented as stand-alone solutions.

Advocacy Messages

- **IDEA's effectiveness depends not only on funding levels, but also on federal standards, oversight, and enforcement.** Reducing federal monitoring or restructuring IDEA funding could weaken protections for students with disabilities and put service quality at risk, especially for the children with the greatest needs.

- **States must resist pressure to address teacher shortages by lowering certification standards as federal oversight weakens.** This would be a costly mistake—not just for students with disabilities, but for the sustainability of the special education workforce itself.
- **Students’ legal rights to appropriate services and instruction are at stake: policy decisions must be based on evidence over expedience.** States must take decisive action to protect teacher preparation quality, invest in working conditions, and collect and use data to monitor progress.
- **States should consider four strategic priorities to address racial disproportionality in the special education population:** maintain conservative monitoring thresholds and transparent reporting; treat educator diversity as a special education equity strategy; strengthen data infrastructure with timely, disaggregated reporting and actionable dashboards for districts; and prioritize equity-focused discipline models.
- **When federal oversight weakens, it becomes more important to use legal and political pressure to influence states.** Advocates must anchor their arguments in the state-level obligations that remain in place and must be enforced.