

# Appraising the Progress of IDEA in Educating Children with Disabilities



The U.S. Congress enacted the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, Public Law (P.L.) 94-142, in 1975. This landmark law—together with subsequent amendments as currently reflected in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*; P.L. 108-446—supports states and localities in protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving results for infants, toddlers, children, and youths with disabilities and their families.

As we celebrate the 35th anniversary of P.L. 94-142 this year, significant national progress has been made in ensuring the civil rights and providing equal access to education for all children with disabilities. During the 2007–08 school year, *IDEA*-mandated programs and services were provided to more than 6 million children and youths with disabilities and more than 320,000 infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. These programs and services are provided in each of the 50 states, eight territories, District of Columbia, and in schools supported by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

During these last 35 years, *IDEA* also has developed a national infrastructure of supports that are improving results for millions of children with disabilities, as well as their nondisabled friends and classmates. Notably, many of the educational approaches, techniques, and practices employed by our nation's best teachers are the direct result of *IDEA* investments in rigorous education research, training, and technical assistance. Teachers can employ these approaches, techniques, and practices with confidence that they are likely to be effective.

## What Makes Special Education Special?

Special education features instruction and interventions designed to meet the individual needs of each child with a disability. Through special education, the United States has developed instructional curricula and programs for teaching core competencies to children with disabilities. Key examples are early reading (e.g., progress monitoring), behavior (e.g., multitiered, schoolwide interventions), assessment (e.g., accommodations, including students with disabilities in accountability systems), early childhood education (e.g., Individualized Family Service Plans), and universally designed instruction (e.g., captioning). Additionally, special education has developed a variety of rigorous evaluation methods (e.g., single-subject designs and qualitative ethnographic techniques) that can be used to carefully examine the impact of instruction on individual children with disabilities as well as all students in the school. Finally, *IDEA* has invested in a *research to practice* model that has helped the country support improvements in special and general education. This infrastructure, in turn, has contributed to improved results for children with disabilities and their families over the last quarter of the 20th century and through the first decade of the 21st century.

## National Impact of *IDEA* to Date

Today, due largely to the provision of *IDEA*-supported programs and services together with *IDEA* support for research, training, and dissemination, children with disabilities are achieving at levels that would not have been imagined in previous decades. Consider the following examples of our country's accomplishments over the past 35 years:

**More young children with disabilities receive high-quality early interventions that prevent or reduce the future need for services.**

*IDEA*-reported data indicate that rates of identification for young children with disabilities have been steadily increasing over the past 10 years. For infants and toddlers ages birth through 2, the number receiving services under Part C of *IDEA* has nearly doubled, from 177,281 in 1995 to 321,894 in 2007. For children ages 3–5, the number receiving services under Part B of *IDEA* has increased by nearly 23 percent, from 548,588 in 1995 to 710,371 in 2007. These increases represent not only improved efforts to identify children at earlier ages, but also an improved capacity to serve these young children and help ensure that they enter school ready to learn. Also, the Department-funded Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study, which assessed almost 3,000 preschoolers who received special education services in school year 2003–04, found that approximately 16 percent stopped receiving those services each year over a two-year period because they no longer required special education services.

**More children with disabilities are not only attending neighborhood schools but also are receiving access to the general education curriculum and learning a wide variety of academic skills.**

In 2008, *IDEA*-reported data indicate that 5,660,491 students with disabilities were educated in general education classrooms for at least part of the day, depending on their individual needs. Thus, 95 percent of all students with disabilities were educated in their local neighborhood schools. In addition, data from the Department's National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate increased proficiency over time in reading among fourth-grade students with disabilities. While achievement in

reading for students without disabilities has improved only slightly since 2000, averaged scaled scores for students with disabilities increased by more than 20 points between 2000 and 2009. In addition, the percentage of students with disabilities who achieved at or above basic level of proficiency rose from 22 percent in 2000 to 35 percent in 2009. Furthermore, these increases have contributed to a reduction of the achievement gap in reading between students with and without disabilities. The gap has decreased from 50 points in 2000 to 34 points in 2009.

**More youths with disabilities graduate from high school.**

In school year 2007–08, *IDEA*-reported data indicated that 217,905 students with disabilities, ages 14–21, graduated high school with a regular diploma. There has been a 16-point increase in the percentage of students with disabilities graduating from high school since school year 1996–97. Further, *IDEA*-reported data from 2007–08 indicate that only 90,766 students with disabilities, ages 14–21, dropped out of high school without graduating. There has been a 21-point decrease in the percentage of students with disabilities dropping out since school year 1996–97.

**More youths with disabilities are enrolled in post-secondary programs.**

The rate at which youths with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education rose from 14.6 percent in 1987 to 31.9 percent in 2005. Enrollment rates increased for both two- and four-year colleges, while enrollment rates decreased for post-secondary vocational, technical, and business schools.

### **More young adults with disabilities are employed.**

Trends in the postsecondary employment of youths with disabilities are positive, with an increase of about 15 points in the percentage of out-of-school youths with disabilities who have worked for pay since leaving high school. At the same time, however, the percentage of youths with disabilities who worked 35 hours per week or more decreased.

### **Conditions Before and After *IDEA***

The current promising future of children with disabilities and their families stands in sharp contrast to conditions before *IDEA*. These last 35 years have witnessed significant changes as the nation has moved from paying little attention to the special needs of individuals with disabilities to merely accommodating these individuals' basic needs and then eventually to providing programs and services for all children with disabilities and their families.

#### **Conditions Before *IDEA***

Before the enactment of P.L. 94-142, the fate of many individuals with disabilities was likely to be dim. Too many individuals lived in state institutions for persons with mental retardation or mental illness. In 1967, for example, state institutions were homes to almost 200,000 persons with significant disabilities. Many of these restrictive settings provided only minimal food, clothing, and shelter. Too often, persons with disabilities received care for basic needs rather than education and rehabilitation.

## Sue's STORY

Sue grew up with her stay-at-home mother and truck driver father in a rural community in Louisiana. Sue was born in the 1950s with no sight, significant cognitive disabilities, and severe behavior disorders. When Public Law 94-142 was passed in 1975, Sue was 20 and attended school for the first time.

Sue's teacher worked closely with her mother to increase Sue's independence. Sue learned socially appropriate language to communicate with others. Sue also learned to eat with utensils and walk independently with a cane in school and at home.

After a year of public school, Sue gained the quiet confidence of a young woman who was prepared to enter a new phase of life as an independent young adult.

Unfortunately, these stories were repeated in the life experiences of tens of thousands of individuals with disabilities who lacked support from *IDEA*. For example, in 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students from school, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded.

## Allan's STORY

Allan was born nearly 10 weeks premature in 1949 in the same Louisiana community as Sue. After determining that Allan was significantly deaf, his family's obstetrician contacted the regional early intervention provider. A services coordinator and team of providers evaluated Allan while he was still in the hospital. The team verified Allan's hearing limitations and also identified that he had severe cognitive disabilities.

The team immediately developed an Individualized Family Service Plan that outlined services to be provided by physicians and early intervention experts. The plan also outlined ways in which Allan's mother, a convenience store clerk, and father, a fisherman, could support his early development.

As Allan grew, so did his supports. Special education teachers and service providers helped him participate in classes and school activities, learn to groom himself, and explore an interest in drawing.

In eighth grade, Allan and his family met with a transition team to identify postsecondary and career goals. After high school graduation, Allan enrolled in a certificate program at a state university. During the program, he lived on his own in a dormitory, took courses, and participated in an internship at a local art gallery. Allan joined the gallery after completing his certificate, helping prepare and disseminate materials to promote upcoming exhibits.

Before *IDEA*, too many children were denied access to education and opportunities to learn. Providing appropriate education to youngsters from diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds was especially challenging. Further, most families were not afforded the opportunity to be involved in planning or placement decisions regarding their children, and resources were not available to enable children with significant disabilities to live at home and receive an education at neighborhood schools in their community.

### Initial Federal Response

In the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government, with the strong support and advocacy of family associations, such as The ARC, began to develop and validate practices for children with disabilities and their families. These practices, in turn, laid the foundation for implementing effective programs and services for early intervention and special education in states and localities across the country.

There are numerous illustrations of key initial federal legislation that supported improved programs and services. Notable examples include the *Training of Professional Personnel Act* of 1959 (P.L. 86-158), which helped train program administrators and teachers of children with mental retardation; *Captioned Films Acts* of 1958 (P.L. 85-905), which supported the production and distribution of accessible films; and *Teachers of the Deaf Act* of 1961 (P.L. 87-276), which trained instructional personnel for children who were deaf or hard of hearing. In addition, in 1965, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* (P.L. 89-10) and the *State Schools Act* (P.L. 89-313) provided states with direct grant assistance to help educate children with disabilities. These and other critical federal laws began to open doors of

opportunity for children with disabilities and their families. (See sidebar: *Key Milestones of Early Federal Support for Educating Children with Disabilities*.)

Landmark court decisions further advanced increased educational opportunities for children with disabilities. For example, the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) established the responsibility of states and localities to educate children with disabilities. These court decisions, which affirmed the right of every child with a disability to be educated, are grounded in the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

## Public Law 94-142

When it was passed in 1975, P.L. 94-142 guaranteed a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability. This law had a dramatic, positive impact on millions of children with disabilities in every state and each local community across the country.

The four purposes of the law articulated a compelling national mission to improve access to education for children with disabilities. (See sidebar: *Four Purposes of P.L. 94-142*.) Changes implicit in the law included efforts to (a) improve how children with disabilities were identified and educated, (b) evaluate the success of these efforts, and (c) provide due process protections for children and families. In addition, the law authorized financial incentives to enable states and localities to comply with P.L. 94-142.

P.L. 94-142 was a response to congressional concern for two groups of children. The law supported more than 1 million children with disabilities who had been

### Key Milestones of Early Federal Support for Educating Children With Disabilities

By 1968, the federal government had supported:

- Training for more than 30,000 special education teachers and related specialists.
- Captioned films viewed by more than 3 million persons who were deaf.
- Education for children with disabilities in pre-schools and in elementary, secondary, and state-operated schools across the country.

Source: 22nd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of *IDEA*

### Four Purposes of P.L. 94-142

- “to assure that all children with disabilities have available to them ... a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs
- to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents ... are protected
- to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities
- to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities”

Source: *Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975*

excluded entirely from the education system. The law also supported children with disabilities who had had only limited access to the education system and were therefore denied an appropriate education. This latter group comprised more than half of all children with disabilities who were living in the United States in the early 1970s. These issues of improved access became guiding principles for further advances in educating children with disabilities over the last quarter of the 20th century.

### First 25 Years of *IDEA* Progress (1975–2000)

To achieve national goals for access to education for all children with disabilities, a number of special issues and special populations have required federal attention. These national concerns are reflected in a number of key amendments to the *Education for the Handicapped Act* (*EHA*; P.L. 99-457) and *IDEA* between 1975 and 2000.

The 1980s saw an increasing national concern for young children with disabilities and their families. Whereas P.L. 94-142 mandated programs and services for children ages 3 to 21 that were consistent with state law, the 1986 amendments to *EHA* (P.L. 99-457) mandated that states provide programs and services to children with disabilities from birth.

Through such sustained federal leadership, the United States today is the world leader in early intervention and preschool programs for infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities. These programs prepare young children with disabilities to meet the academic and social challenges that lie ahead of them, both while in school and in later life. (See sidebar: *Examples of Early Childhood Accomplishments Due to IDEA*.)

At the other end of the childhood-age continuum, *IDEA* has supported the preparation of students for competitive employment through new and improved transition programs. The 1983 amendments to *EHA* (P.L. 98-199), the 1990 amendments to *EHA* (P.L. 101-476), which changed the name to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, and the 1997 amendments to *IDEA* (P.L. 105-17) supported initiatives for transition services from high school to adult living. Because of these mandates, each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) must include transition plans or procedures for identifying appropriate employment and other post-school adult living objectives for the student; referring the

#### Examples of Early Childhood Accomplishments Due to *IDEA*

*IDEA* has supported the development, validation, and widespread use of:

- State-of-the-art models of appropriate programs and services for young children with disabilities (birth–5 years) and their families.
- Individualized Family Service Plans to identify and meet the unique needs of each infant and toddler with a disability and his or her family.
- Effective assessment and teaching practices and related instructional materials for young children and their families.
- National network of professionals dedicated to improving early intervention and preschool education at the state and local levels.
- Collaboration among federal, state, and local agencies to avoid duplication of efforts in providing early intervention and preschool education.

student to appropriate community agencies; and linking the student to available community resources, including job placement and other follow-up services. The IEP must specifically designate the person responsible for each transition activity, and transition planning should begin at age 14.

The nation also has been concerned, since the passage of P.L. 94-142, with expanding the opportunities for educating children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. In the early 1980s, *IDEA* supported research institutes and model demonstration projects that developed and validated effective approaches for integrating children with significant disabilities with their nondisabled family members at home and their nondisabled classmates at school. For example, the Badger School Program in Madison, Wis., demonstrated an effective system to teach such children the skills they needed to lead independent and productive lives. Through such efforts, today, millions of children with significant disabilities are attending their neighborhood schools and learning the life skills they will need for full, active participation in integrated activities with their family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

*IDEA* has supported the provision of culturally relevant instruction for diverse learners in inclusive environments. Throughout the 1980s, *IDEA*-supported research

institutes and projects documented that culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities make, at best, limited progress in school programs that employ “watered-down” instruction in segregated environments. Building on and extending this work, *IDEA* has supported the development and validation of culturally relevant assessment and intervention practices. (See sidebar: *Culturally Relevant Instructional Principles*.) For example, the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project at the University of Kansas has demonstrated instructional practices, such as classwide peer tutoring and cooperative learning, that help African-American students, English language learners, and other diverse students become more actively involved in their academic assignments. Increased academic engagement leads, in turn, to improved learning and higher achievement.

#### **Culturally Relevant Instructional Principles**

- Link assessments of student progress directly to the instructional curricula rather than to abstract norms for standardized tests.
- Examine not only the individual child, but also his or her instructional environment, using direct observational data.
- Create classroom environments that reflect different cultural heritages and accommodate different styles of communication and learning.
- Develop and implement family-friendly practices to establish collaborative partnerships with parents and other caregivers, including those who do not speak English.

Source: 19th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of *IDEA*

## Katie's STORY

Katie, a fifth-grade student in Mrs. Blake's class, was identified as having a learning disability, primarily in reading, at the end of the 2003–04 school year. Though Katie had average intelligence, she struggled with words and her reading ability was far below that of her peers.

From the beginning of the school year, Mrs. Blake met weekly with the special education teacher to learn about appropriate instructional practices, developed and validated through *IDEA* investments, to help Katie meet the state standards. As she implemented these various strategies, Mrs. Blake was pleased to see not only that Katie's reading ability improved but also that many of the other students were benefiting from the techniques.

As the time for the annual assessment approached, Katie's Individualized Education Program team met to discuss appropriate test accommodations for both reading and mathematics. They decided that Katie would be given additional test time for the reading test to ensure that she had time to use the reading strategies, and that the mathematics test would be read aloud to Katie because it tested computation ability.

Katie's test scores helped the school, district, and state evaluate their progress in ensuring that all students, including students with disabilities, were achieving at school and meeting high standards for their learning. They also validated Katie's learning and helped her teachers understand where to focus their instruction moving forward.

From the beginning of federal legislation for special education and early intervention, families of children with disabilities have been considered important partners in educating and meeting the individual needs of children with disabilities. *IDEA* includes key principles to guide families and professionals to work together to enhance the educational opportunities for their children. *IDEA* also requires active parent participation throughout the educational process, including the development of the child's IEP. In addition, *IDEA* mandates that schools report progress to parents of children with disabilities as frequently as they report to parents of nondisabled children. The overall goal of these mandates is to maintain an equal and respectful partnership between schools and families.

Finally, since 1975, *EHA* and *IDEA* have supported states and localities in meeting their identified challenges for personnel preparation. For example, throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, *IDEA* supported local communities that were developing and implementing early childhood programs; schools serving students with low-incidence disabilities, such as children who are blind or deaf or children with autism or traumatic brain injury; and schools in rural or large urban areas, where financial and other resources are often scarce.

*IDEA* systems change grants continued to support state and local capacity-building throughout the 1990s. For example, *IDEA* supported the California Department of Education in developing a statewide network of model schools that demonstrate how to provide effective programs and services to children with significant disabilities and their families. These demonstration sites, in turn, serve as centers for training and technical assistance to personnel across the state. Similarly, Vermont's

personnel preparation program helps prepare teachers to meet the needs of students with low-incidence disabilities in rural public schools and other community settings. These and other *IDEA*-supported projects around the country are innovative models that other states and localities should consider replicating as part of their own programs of personnel preparation.

### Continued Progress Over the Past 10 Years (2000–10)

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a continued national commitment for access to a free appropriate public education intertwined with a renewed national concern for accountability and assessments that help improve results for each child with a disability.

The 2004 amendments to *IDEA* (P.L. 108-446) sharpened federal mandates to increase state and local accountability for educating children with disabilities and expanded methods to identify students with specific learning disabilities. This law also continued federal commitment and support to ensure that special education and early intervention personnel are highly qualified.

*IDEA* mandates for strong accountability are closely aligned with the *ESEA*, as amended in 2001 (P.L. 107-110), which holds schools and districts responsible for the performance of students, including students with disabilities. The accountability provisions in the 2004 reauthorization of *IDEA* called for states to establish targets for the participation rate and proficiency rate for students with disabilities in assessments. These laws have established high standards and strengthened the importance of rigorous research that drives investments in knowledge production. These laws are strengthening knowledge utilization through mandates for local

## Anthony's STORY

Anthony lived in a large urban area on the east coast. Anthony, who lost his sight in 2003 at the age of 10, enjoyed leisure activities with his peers, such as riding a bike and playing basketball. He was a popular, outgoing student who enjoyed challenging academic courses.

Though his state had rigorous graduation standards, Anthony's teachers reported that he was a good student who would easily pass his high school exit exam. His course work included advanced courses in English literature, mathematics, history, and science.

Anthony's excellent academic performance was supported by assistive technologies, developed and validated, in part, by *IDEA* research. He read school textbooks and worksheets that were translated into Braille with an optical character recognition program. A special talking software program on his laptop read aloud his written schoolwork and crucial content from the Web. He also used a tactile scientific calculator, which enabled him to better understand advanced math concepts, including fractions, decimals, and graphical representations of data. These tools gave Anthony an opportunity to excel in his courses.

Anthony participated in a summer internship as a legal aid for a local attorney. According to his supervisor, Anthony was one of the best interns the program had ever produced. With continued access to a challenging curriculum and the support of assistive tools, Anthony believes he can accomplish whatever goals he sets for himself. Anthony is now enrolled in college and considering a career as a lawyer.

decision making to increase sustained practice improvement and to increase access to and progress in the general education curriculum. Strong mandates and high standards also are helping to ensure that both the producers and users of scientifically based practices are held accountable, with shared responsibility for improving learning and achievement for all students.

Today, *IDEA*-funded centers and projects support educators in learning how to include students with disabilities in statewide assessments, including issues specifically related to appropriate accommodations, and how to administer and score alternate assessments. They prepare personnel; demonstrate relevant technologies; provide technical assistance to states, districts, and schools; and educate parents. Notable examples of these investments include the University of Minnesota's National Center on Educational Outcomes, which provides national leadership in designing and building education assessments and other school reform initiatives that contribute to improved educational outcomes for all students; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Early Childhood Outcomes Center and the University of Oregon's Post-School Outcomes Center, which are developing rigorous systems for assessing and measuring outcomes for, respectively, young children and youths with disabilities; and the University of Kentucky's National Alternate Assessment Center, which gathers and disseminates information on high-quality, technically sound alternate assessments.

The 2004 amendments to *IDEA* also allow states and localities to employ a response to intervention (RTI) framework and consider a student's response to scientific, research-based interventions when identifying students with specific learning disabilities. The *IDEA*-supported

National Center on RTI at the American Institutes for Research defines RTI as an instructional framework that integrates assessment and intervention within a multilevel prevention system to maximize student achievement and reduce behavior problems. (See sidebar: *Four Essential Components of Response to Intervention*). With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities. RTI can be used to positively impact the achievement of all students, especially struggling learners.

Finally, the 2004 amendments to *IDEA* have continued the long-standing federal commitment to provide an

#### **Four Essential Components of Response to Intervention**

- A schoolwide, multilevel instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure;
- Universal screening to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes or challenging behavior who may benefit from more intensive instruction;
- Progress monitoring to determine when a student has or has not responded to instruction at any level of a prevention system; and
- Data-based decision making for instruction, movement within the multilevel system, and disability identification, in accordance with state law.

Source: National Center on RTI, 2010

adequate supply of qualified teachers. Thousands of professionals specializing in early childhood and special education have been trained with *IDEA* support. These professionals include early intervention staff, classroom teachers, therapists, counselors, psychologists, program administrators, and other professionals who will work with future generations of children with disabilities and their families.

*IDEA* currently supports centers and projects that demonstrate how states and localities can successfully meet challenges to staff recruitment and retention. For example, the University of North Carolina's National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center has helped build national commitment and capacity for hiring qualified early intervention staff and providing family-centered, community-based, coordinated interagency services for young children with disabilities and their families across the country. Vanderbilt University's *IDEA* and Research for Inclusive Settings (IRIS) Center for Training Enhancement creates free course enhancement materials for college faculty who are preparing the next generation of general education teachers, school leadership personnel, school counselors, and school nurses. IRIS course enhancement materials are designed to equip these school personnel with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach children and youths with disabilities in inclusive school settings.

Additionally, *IDEA* is providing support for State Personnel Development Grants that are helping individual states develop effective strategies for improving practice and making progress toward measurable and rigorous targets for student performance. These federal investments are complementing and extending similar state and local investments in school reform and

improvement. Thus, federal, state, and local agencies are partnering together to support the widespread use of scientifically based practices in individual schools and classrooms across the country.

Access to education is the civil rights issue of our time, and so it is appropriate that we celebrate the anniversary of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* this year. In adopting this landmark legislation, Congress opened public school doors for millions of children with disabilities and laid the foundation of the country's commitment to ensuring that children with disabilities have opportunities to develop their talents, share their gifts, and contribute to their communities.

In the past 35 years, classrooms have become more inclusive and the futures of children with disabilities brighter. Significant progress has been made toward protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving educational results for infants, toddlers, children, and youths with disabilities.

Since 1975, policies and practices that meaningfully include students with disabilities in general education classrooms and accountability systems have proliferated. Today, 57 percent of students with disabilities are in general education classrooms for 80 percent or more of their school day. Early intervention services are now provided to nearly 350,000 infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families, and more than 6.6 million children and youths receive special education and related services designed to meet their individual needs. While tremendous progress has been made over the years, we must continue the hard work and address the challenges that still exist.

In light of these accomplishments, it is necessary to broaden the commitment and responsibility for providing appropriate educational opportunities for all children. Children with disabilities must be regarded as general education students first. *IDEA* legislation should complement, support, and expand on the *ESEA* provisions that address the education of all children and not be viewed in isolation or as the sole legislative provision supporting children with disabilities.

## Charting the Next 15 Years of *IDEA* Progress

P.L. 94-142 will mark its 50th anniversary in 2025. The first 35 years since the passage of this landmark law have witnessed unparalleled national progress in ensuring access to a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. However, continuing *IDEA* progress for the next 15 years will require accepting the challenge of the 1997 and 2004 amendments to *IDEA* to not only ensure access to education but also improve results for infants, toddlers, children, and youths with disabilities and their families in each state and every locality across the country.

To meet this challenge, *IDEA* must build on its previous support for equality of access and continue to expand and strengthen its support for quality programs and services. Improving educational results for children with disabilities requires a continued focus on the full implementation of *IDEA* to ensure that each student's

educational placement and services are determined on an individual basis, according to the unique needs of each child, and are provided in the least restrictive environment. The focus must be on teaching and learning that use individualized approaches to access the general education curriculum and support learning and high achievement for all students.

It is known, after 35 years, that there is no easy or quick fix to the challenges of educating children with disabilities. However, it is also known that *IDEA* has been a primary catalyst for the progress witnessed. Because of federal leadership, the people of the United States better appreciate the fact that each citizen, including individuals with disabilities, has a right to participate and contribute meaningfully to society. With continued federal–state–local partnerships, the nation will similarly demonstrate that improving educational results for children with disabilities and their families is critical to empowering all citizens to maximize their employment, self-sufficiency, and independence.

Our nation's ability to compete successfully in the global community depends on the meaningful inclusion of all citizens in our educational system, including students with disabilities. We cannot afford to leave anyone out of our efforts. Every child is a precious resource whose full potential must be tapped.



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