

Education for Students with Disabilities



Prevalence

Statewide about 12.5 percent of students are identified with a disability that qualifies the student for an Individualized Education Program (IEP). There are 13 disability classifications in schools. Every student with one of these disabilities has the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education provided in the Least Restrictive Environment according to an IEP.

Inclusion = Access

The legal requirement for students with disabilities to be in the Least Restrictive Environment is based on the expectation students with disabilities need and should have full access to academic curriculum and instruction as well as their typical peers. Society and every citizen benefit from having inclusive schools. Since school attendance is mandatory it is critical schools have the resources, supports and incentives needed to serve every student in inclusive settings. Inclusion of students with disabilities results in better outcomes – for everyone.

Access to Standards Through Individualized Programming

IEP teams are the mechanism of balance to provide every student access to the same standards while offering individualization in modifications and accommodations to the instruction and assessment needed for each student with an IEP.

Outcomes & Student Level Decisions

IEP teams in Louisiana, like in most states, can determine performance requirements for grade promotion and graduation for certain students with disabilities. Individualized decisions on how to use student performance on academic content standards and standardized assessments create the final balance of equal access to standards and individualized programming.

Accountability Issues

Each state is required to identify schools in need of improvement. Louisiana identifies, and issues a 'grade' of A-F to schools based on a School Performance Score (SPS). Unfortunately, a school's SPS is a good measure of which students a school enrolls, but is a rather poor measure of how well each school serves any student, particularly students with disabilities. Instead of measuring how well a school offers appropriate instruction for each student, up to eighty percent (80%) of a school score is attributable to student and school characteristics, like rates of poverty and disability, student mobility, and school size. Therefore, Louisiana's current SPS creates an incentive for some schools to avoid or remove certain students, like students with disabilities.

Monitoring

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) is supposed to monitor schools for compliance of special education services. For three years, from 2012-2013, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, the LDOE did not conduct any on-site monitoring of schools for special education as required by law. Parents have expressed concerns over the lack of parental involvement in identifying indicators to select school systems to be monitored and in the process of monitoring.

Funding

School funding is still not balanced across school systems. Different formula are used for determining how much funding a traditional school should receive than how much is available for many school choice programs, like charter schools and vouchers. While Act 328 of 2015 caused a correction to some of these inequities, schools need to receive the funding necessary to educate the students enrolled in their schools. Funding formula inequities create another incentive for some schools to select, or avoid, certain students.

Discipline

Students with disabilities are removed from school for disciplinary reasons at a rate 1.5 times higher than for students without disabilities. Although state law passed in 2011 to establish rules governing the use of restraint and seclusion for students with disabilities, only recently has there been statewide attention to this issue. Limited attention to discipline and declining resources to support schools or implement a statewide plan seem to have left school systems without adequate resources to address the demands of dealing with challenging behaviors.

Emerging Issues

Federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, recently made changes allowing states more flexibility with defining success and failure of schools. The new law allows Louisiana to expand the indicators for determining a quality school, such as student engagement, and school climate and safety.