Services for Students with Disabilities: An Overview

Access to a public education designed to develop the abilities and potential of young people is both valued and taken for granted. Although this may be a value and expectation, it has not always been true for students who differ in their learning or their behavior. These students historically were labeled according to their differences or deviation, and either excluded from typical schooling or, in some cases, provided alternative kinds of educational opportunities.

Concerned professionals, in the early 1900s, developed educational programs for students who were seen as exceptional or different. These programs usually were housed in separate, often institutional, settings for students with cognitive delays or sensory deficits. Public schools were not required to serve these students, although some school districts did educate students with mild to moderate learning or physical disabilities in segregated programs within neighborhood schools or in separate special schools within the district.

Educational programs for students with disabilities expanded during the 1950s through the 1970s. Three major forces impacted services for students with disabilities during this time. First, parents of students with disabilities who were inspired by civil rights cases such as Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas organized into advocacy groups to pressure legislative and policy making bodies for equal access to educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Second, research conducted by professionals in both the medical and educational fields resulted in improved services for individuals with disabilities. Finally, as a result of several court decisions such as PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, schools were ordered to provide free public education for all school age children with disabilities through Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This legislation required that any facility or agency receiving federal funds, including public schools, could not deny access to an individual because of a disability.

These combined efforts on behalf of students with disabilities came into focus in one comprehensive piece...
of legislation, the Education of the Handicapped Act (Public Law 94-142) passed by Congress in 1975. This law and its regulations required that all eligible students with disabilities, regardless of the severity of the disability, receive educational services designed specifically to meet their individual needs. This legislation was updated and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, and later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in November of 2004. The 1990 change in the name of the law was significant because it reflected a focus on individuals rather than on the handicap or disability.

The IDEIA ensures services to more than 6.8 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities throughout the nation. Students served under this law include those with the following specific disabling conditions: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment. Individual states may also choose to adopt the term development delay. In addition to specialized instruction, students with disabilities may also receive related services including transportation and such developmental, corrective and other support services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from his or her educational experience.

Part B of the IDEIA outlines four essential conditions that must be met in order for a student to become eligible for special education services: 1) the student must be between ages three and 21 years old; 2) the student must meet the eligibility criteria for one or more of the categories specified above; 3) the student’s disability must adversely affect educational performance to the extent that special education is needed; and 4) educational difficulties may not be a function of lack of appropriate instruction in reading. In the next section these four eligibility requirements of the IDEIA are further explained.

Serving Students with Disabilities: Eligibility under IDEIA

The first condition that must be met in order for a student to receive special education services under Part B of IDEIA is that he or she needs to be between the ages of three and 21. Children under the age of three may be eligible for early intervention, family-based services under Part C of the legislation. The IDEIA includes a component called child find, which requires each state to have in effect policies and procedures to ensure that all children with disabilities are identified, located and evaluated. However, parents or a school professional may also ask for a referral or request for evaluation. Parental consent is mandatory before the child may be evaluated, and the evaluation should be completed within 60 days after consent is obtained.

Next, the student must meet the eligibility criteria for one or more of the 13 categories of disability specified under the IDEIA. Each of these specific disability categories listed above in the previous section has its own definition in IDEIA, as well as its own operational explanation at the state level. Thus, each state may establish its own criteria for a student to be classified in each of the disability areas. The classification the student receives is ultimately a matter of how the federal definition intersects with the policies and definitions of the state in which the student resides.

The third essential condition of IDEIA is that the student’s disability must adversely affect educational performance to the extent that special education, or specialized instruction, is needed. A proper evaluation should assess the student in all areas related to his or her suspected disability. The results will then be used to determine whether or not the student needs special education and related services as a result of one or more disabilities, and to make decisions about an appropriate educational program. It should be noted that a child may be identified as having a disability as defined in the statute, but not receive special education services if his or her educational performance, or progress in the general education curriculum, is not significantly impeded. In this case the student may not meet the state and federal requirements for special education services under the IDEIA, but may receive educational supports through Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Finally, one of the new conditions that Congress created regarding eligibility determination when it enacted IDEIA in 2004 is that a student cannot be determined to be a child with a disability if the determinant factor is a lack of appropriate instruction in reading. This rule specifically relates the IDEIA to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA). The NCLBA outlines five critical components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. The purpose of adding lack of appropriate instruction
in reading to the list of exclusionary factors for eligibility, which already included limited English proficiency and lack of instruction in mathematics, is that historically many students have been determined eligible for special education services due to a lack of reading ability that could be remedied with the use of an appropriate, research-based instructional program.

Serving Students with Disabilities:

Requirements of IDEIA

There are six basic principles of IDEIA that every student is afforded: 1) zero reject; 2) free and appropriate public education; 3) non-discriminatory, non-biased identification and evaluation; 4) placement in the least restrictive environment; 5) parent and student participation in decision making; and 6) due process safeguards.

Zero reject means that all children with disabilities, so matter how severe, can benefit from educational services and are entitled to receive them. No child is considered to be ineducable, and it is the goal of the individual education plan (IEP) team members to determine the most appropriate educational program for each student. The IDEIA requires that an IEP be developed for each student who qualifies for services under the requirements of the law. This plan, developed collaboratively by the IEP team of teachers, related service personnel, administrators, and the child's parent or legal guardian, serves as a blueprint to determine the actual services and programs that will be provided to the student. The IEP document contains information about the student's present level of functioning, annual goals, short-term instructional objectives, related services, percentage of time spent in general education, beginning and ending dates of services, and a provision for an annual evaluation of the student's progress. The document is signed by the parents and educational personnel involved in providing services for that student.

Free and appropriate public education (FAPE) is also defined by the child's IEP. According to the IDEIA, FAPE means that special education and related services are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge. Children who are parentally placed in private schools may also benefit from the IDEIA, although not to the same extent as children who attend public schools. Private schools are eligible to receive a proportionate amount of IDEIA funds for students who meet the eligibility requirements, and private school funds are administered through the public school district where the private school is located. The services a student receives, whether in a public or private setting, must meet the requirements of the state education agency, and must include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary education. FAPE guarantees an appropriate education for each child with a disability, meaning that FAPE will be different for every child. It is up to the members of the IEP team to determine what is considered an appropriate education for each student. However, a special education student's IEP must include goals that will lead towards reasonable progress in mastering the state curriculum standards.

The IDEIA requires that school districts develop nondiscriminatory and multidisciplinary identification and assessment procedures. Assessment measures used to determine a student's eligibility for services need to be given in the child's primary language, and factors related to a student's cultural background must be considered during the assessment process. A comprehensive examination of the student's intellectual capability, school achievement, and social and adaptive behavior is often completed as part of this process. No single instrument may be used to determine eligibility for service; therefore, a multidisciplinary team of professionals is required to complete the assessment. Individuals involved may include the school psychologist, speech and language specialist, special education and general education teachers, hearing and vision specialists, and the student's parents or legal guardians. The decision regarding the student's disability and educational needs comes from the multiple perspectives of this team.

Placement in the least restrictive environment requires that students with disabilities be educated with their non-disabled peers whenever appropriate, rather than receive services in separate or segregated settings. School districts must provide a range of services for students with disabilities to meet this provision. The range of options must include consultative services provided in the general education classroom through more restrictive services that may be provided in the student's home or a hospital setting. A variety of specially trained personnel may be involved to provide services depending on each student's individual needs. Decisions about where to provide services for students with disabilities are based on individual student needs and the requirement to provide services in settings with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible.

The student and the student's parents are members of the multidisciplinary team, and each play a critical role in identifying and developing educational ser-
vices. Students should be encouraged to participate in the evaluation, placement and IEP processes to the greatest extent possible. Important parental rights are guaranteed by the IDEIA, including 1) providing consent in writing for testing and for placement in special education; 2) participating as members of the multidisciplinary team throughout the decision making process; 3) having access to all information and records regarding their child’s program; and 4) requesting a hearing if they cannot agree with the school district regarding the services provided for their child. These safeguards protect families and students with disabilities from possible inappropriate or harmful educational decisions.

Under the IDEIA, due process safeguards are put in place to protect the school, while ensuring that students with disabilities are receiving all appropriate services. Due process hearings are the primary method for resolving disputes between families of students with disabilities and school districts. The IDEIA allows parents or public agencies the opportunity to present a complaint concerning any matter relating to identification, evaluation, placement or provision of services.

Implementing the IDEIA in Rural Schools and Communities: Pressing Problems and Promising Solutions

When PL 94-142 was enacted in 1975, local conditions and issues had a direct impact on how rural school districts implemented the requirements of the Education for the Handicapped Act. Several authors (Berkeley and Bull, 1995; Berkeley and Ludlow, 1991; Helge, 1984) identified common issues and problems faced by rural school districts during the first two decades of implementation. They described the diversity and unique subcultures of rural school districts as major factors that both enhanced and challenged the provision of services for students with disabilities. These factors included characteristics such as varied topography (e.g., deserts, islands, mountain ranges, plains), economic diversity ranging from extreme poverty to wealthy resort communities, and variations in population density ranging from isolated ranches to small towns and clustered communities. Rural school districts experienced, and continue to experience, major problems in qualified staff recruitment and retention, resistance to change, the need for high-quality staff development, long distances between schools and services, cultural differences, geographic barriers, transportation and funding inadequacies, and difficulty serving students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., hearing and vision loss and multiple disabilities).

With the advent of the NCLBA and the IDEIA, these challenges have been amplified. Kossar et al. (2005) summarized the challenging impact of the NCLBA on the delivery of special education services in rural areas, and these challenges have been echoed by other educational leaders (for example, Darling-Hammond, 2007). In particular, two NCLBA mandates—the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) mandate and the requirement that schools demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as measured by student performance on statewide assessments of mastery of the core curriculum standards—appear to present the biggest challenges for special education programs in rural schools. The HQT mandate requires that all teachers, including special education teachers, are fully licensed in research-based pedagogy as well as any and all content areas they teach. However, highly qualified graduates of special education teacher preparation programs are often hesitant to move to rural and remote regions because of lower salaries and limited school and community resources. In addition, rural teachers, including special education teachers, have traditionally taught multiple subjects, thus increasing the complexity of becoming highly qualified.

The NCLBA also mandates states to develop rigorous content standards in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies, and school districts must document that all students, including students with disabilities, achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward meeting those standards. If a school repeatedly fails to meet the state-approved benchmark for adequate yearly progress, parents must be notified and offered an opportunity to send their child to a high-performing school. The lack of proximity to other schools in many rural and remote areas of the country makes this a challenging option. In addition, the NCLBA requires that schools disaggregate the assessment data for subgroups with diverse needs such as special education students. The small size of many rural schools (2,500 students or less) has made this disaggregated data difficult to interpret and has provided fuel for the argument for rural school consolidation.

While these challenges can be daunting, rural school districts continue to employ innovative strategies to address them. With respect to teacher recruitment and retention, many rural school districts advertise the benefits of working and living in rural communities in their recruitment materials. The benefits of
teaching in rural schools include factors such as smaller class size, fewer discipline problems, opportunities to individualize instruction and engage in innovative teaching, and personal involvements with students and their families. In rural communities, involving parents in the development of programs for students with disabilities is sometimes easier for teachers since schools are often the center of rural communities.

An increasing number of special education teacher preparation programs are working with rural school districts via distance education programs to "grow their own" highly qualified special education teachers (Glomb et al., 2004; Grisham-Brown and Collins, 2002; Pemberton et al., 2004). Rural school districts work cooperatively with colleges and universities to bring teacher preparation programs directly to local communities and provide training to individuals in the community who are likely to stay put. Using many of the new interactive technologies (e.g., two-way video and audio systems, computer conferencing via e-mail, satellite broadcasts), teacher preparation programs can be delivered directly to very remote regions of the country. These technologies are also used to update the knowledge and skills of educators already teaching in rural school districts, especially when access to institutions of higher education is difficult. Acquiring new skills and having opportunities to interact and share with other rural educators is an effective use of these new technologies, particularly with respect to training associated with becoming licensed as a highly qualified teacher.

Another challenge that many rural schools have successfully addressed is the provision of comprehensive services to students with low incidence or very severe disabilities (Collins, 2007; Sebastian and McDonnell, 1995). Since there are usually very few of these students, a rural school district may attempt to serve only two or three students with multiple or severe disabilities. These students often require special adaptive equipment and medical care. Additionally, finding and funding specialized related service personnel are often a serious hardship for rural school districts. Districts that successfully serve these students often approach the problem from a systemwide perspective. Using both fiscal and personnel resources creatively helps to address the issues identified above, and itinerant teachers and specialists that are shared by several rural communities is one way rural schools address this challenge. When these students attend school in their own neighborhoods and are not transported for miles, local schools can combine strategies to assist these students with their special programs. Using community volunteers, peer support groups, itinerant support staff, and educators trained to work with a wide range of student abilities, rural schools can address these dilemmas.

While there are no easy solutions to the challenges of serving students with disabilities in rural schools, rural school districts are unique in their ability to creatively and resourcefully solve difficult problems. Rural special educators can also impact local, state and national policy by becoming advocates for the unique needs of rural special education programs (Collins et al., 2005). When students with disabilities are served in their local communities by caring individuals who are able to focus on each student's specific instructional needs, the goal of providing equal access and quality education programs can be achieved.

—Lee Mason, Nancy Glomb, and Joan P. Sebastian

See also
Adolescents; Camps; Education, Youth; Educational Facilities; Policy; Rural Family; Social Work

References


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**Education, Youth**

The academic preparation of rural students in kindergarten through grade 12; elementary- and secondary-level instruction. This entry provides key information about the education of students in rural America: the number and location of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, their academic performance, and their post-high school careers.

**Locating Rural Students**

Rural students, even in this era of rampant urbanization, constitute a sizable portion of America’s student body. In the early 1990s, there were an estimated 6.9 million students in rural areas, accounting for 16.7 percent of regular public school students. The 22,400 schools they attended comprised 28 percent of America’s public elementary and secondary schools (Elder, 1994).

These students are found throughout the U.S. in a range of settings from isolated farms to villages and settlements on the fringe of urban concentrations of various sizes. Distinguishing between urban and non-urban locales is done in two ways by the Census Bureau. One approach defines urban and rural along a continuum by population size in a place, whereas the other makes population density distinctions by county type—metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan. The definitions are not equivalent. Rural pockets or places may be found within metropolitan counties, whereas a considerable number of urban centers exists in otherwise sparsely settled nonmetropolitan counties.

This interrelationship between these two ways of distinguishing between urban and rural is reflected in school designations as well. For example, 12 percent of schools in metropolitan counties are located in rural places. In the nonmetropolitan counties, just over half of the schools are actually in rural settings; the remainder are in the urban population concentrations located within these lightly populated counties. An awareness of these finer distinctions is critical when developing state and federal policies intended to impact rural schools and the students they serve. The following discussion is limited to the intersection of the two primary ways the federal government defines rural. Among the several states and within numerous federal, state and private programs affecting rural issues, still other definitions may be found.

Although rural students are found in every state, the extent of their numbers and their proportion to the whole student population vary considerably. For example, Texas has the largest number of rural students (443,000), representing 12.9 percent of its student population. But although their enrollments are lower, 40 other states have higher proportions of students in rural settings. Overall, proportions of students located in rural areas range from 3.5 percent in Connecticut to 47.1 percent in South Dakota.

**Student Performance**

Student population services in rural settings were commonly viewed as deficient a few decades ago. Improvement is the product of several converging forces. For over 100 years, extensive consolidation efforts drastically reduced the number both of rural schools and rural school districts. At the same time, states and districts continued to bring many of the latest innovations to remote and resource-strapped schools. Rural school personnel, for their part, traditionally approached their challenges creatively; the multi-grade classroom is just one of many strategies devised to accommodate low enrollments.

Recent data from federal studies provide a new appreciation of what rural education can achieve. Earlier National Assessment of Educational Progress