

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS FOR THE IDEA PART D NATIONAL PROGRAM

Standards-based Reform and Students with Disabilities

“The comprehensive planning process has given stakeholders an important role in informing OSEP on how IDEA Part D national activities can help improve results for children with disabilities.”
Lou Danielson, Ph.D. Director of OSEP’s Division of Research to Practice

Experts Inform Part D National Program Plan

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) launched a long-range, comprehensive planning process for Part D of the reauthorized 1997 ***Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*** (IDEA)*. OSEP's goal for its Part D national program is to link best practices to states, school systems, and families to improve results for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. Part D of IDEA '97 authorizes national program activities and federal funding (see figure, this page [Research and innovation, Personnel preparation, Technical assistance and dissemination, Parent training and information, Technology, Media services, and Studies and evaluation]).

OSEP undertook a significant initiative in implementing the Part D national program comprehensive planning process. Among the activities undertaken were:

- Solicit opinions about the Part D national program through mass distribution of an opinion survey.
- Convene experts to identify issues in key program areas and make recommendations for how the Part D national program may address them.

- Use recommendations from the opinion survey, panels, and other national and state sources to develop a five-year Part D national program plan.

This brief focuses on the opinions of national authorities regarding standards-based reform and students with disabilities.

Findings

To ensure that children with disabilities are included in reform efforts and are able to demonstrate performance in the general education curriculum, IDEA provides that the performance results of children with disabilities shall be reported to the public just as performance results are reported for all children, so long as the reporting method will not result in identifying the performance of individual children. IDEA places significant emphasis on ensuring that children with disabilities participate in general state and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations if necessary as determined by the IEP team. IDEA also provides that alternate assessments be developed and provided for students for whom the regular assessment is deemed inappropriate.

The authorities identified the following three issues as being most influential in affecting students' participation in standards-based reform. They also suggested how Part D national program activities might address these issues in part through research and knowledge building, public awareness and support, and capacity building.

Issue 1: Resolve issues related to accountability and assessment.

Technical and equity issues complicate the ease with which students with disabilities may participate in large-scale assessment and accountability systems, resulting in large numbers of these students

continuing to be exempted. For the most part, when students do participate, data is not usable, accessible, or timely.

Confusion also exists regarding accommodations and modifications in the administration of large-scale assessments. Moreover, there continues to exist an unclear relationship between the use of assessment accommodations on large-scale tests and their use in daily instruction.

Unclear policies undermine the impact that students with disabilities may realize when part of accountability systems. To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might support research and knowledge production that addresses issues relating to:

- Standards and their use with students with disabilities.
- Assessments and accountability (e.g., lack of empirical base regarding participation of students with disabilities in state and district-wide assessments with accommodations as needed).
- The relationship between assessment and instruction.

Issue 2: The general education and special education communities, as well as the general public, do not understand the relevance of including students with disabilities in standards-based reform.

In general, the public does not understand standards—what they are, their purpose, and how to gauge progress against them. Nor are they convinced that students with disabilities should be included in large-scale assessments of achievement. Within the education profession, some opposition to including students with disabilities in reform efforts is based on a belief that doing so would, in fact, be harmful to students.

A mindset of universal access to standards-based reform is necessary if students with disabilities are to be equally included in

accountability systems. To this end, authorities suggested that the Part D national program might support research and knowledge production that showcases effective strategies, as well as provide public awareness and support to address public mistrust of accountability systems as they relate to all students, including those with disabilities.

Issue 3: Current policies do support participation of students with disabilities in standards-based reform initiatives.

Standards-based reform for all children is just one of many policy decisions facing educational decision makers. Tension exists between the traditional special education focus on individual student achievement and the corresponding general education focus on group achievement—with neither side in full agreement as to the whos, whats, and wherefores of standard-based reform. Many students continue to be excluded from accountability systems; in fact, some state policies encourage exclusions and exemptions.

Including students with disabilities in standards-based reform initiatives requires that policies are coordinated and coherent. Academic and non-academic results are clear for all students, individual student results are honored, and systems are held accountable for student progress. To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might support research and knowledge production relating to implementing standards-based reform for all students.

Next Steps

OSEP staff members are currently discussing the implications of expert opinions. Their results, along with those of the consumer survey and other relevant planning information—such as the findings of Parts B and C monitoring and oversight efforts and State Improvement Grant Program proposals, as required under Part D,

Subpart 2 of IDEA—are being integrated by agency-wide staff workgroups into a comprehensive Part D national program plan. The public will be invited to comment on the Part D national program plan before it is presented to Congress for approval.

**The comprehensive planning process is authorized by IDEA [sec.661(1)].*

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