



NEA MEMBERS ASK:

Why Is The Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Important to Me?

IDEA BRIEFS

1. I'm a general education classroom teacher, but I have one student with disabilities placed in my classroom for part of the day. What's expected of me in providing instruction to this student?

One of the key components of special education is the notion of *inclusion*, that is supporting students with disabilities in chronologically age-appropriate general education classes in their home schools. Since the first federal special education law was passed in 1975, schools have increasingly integrated students with disabilities into general education classrooms. Today, 96% of students with disabilities are taught in general education settings and 96% of general education teachers have taught students with disabilities in their classrooms. Seventy-five percent of all students with disabilities spend 40% or more of their day in general education classroom settings.

Each student who receives special education and related services under IDEA (the federal special education law) must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). As the teacher of a special education student, you'll likely participate as a member of the team that develops the IEP. The student(s) you teach will be expected to participate with your other students and progress toward standards established in your state and by your district, but your general curriculum will not change in significant ways. You'll work with the special education teacher to develop accommodations and modifications that will help your special education students to learn material from the general education curriculum.

2. Are things likely to change if the Congress enacts a new special education law?

Congress is posed to reauthorize the law governing special education very soon. Our best guess is that the law will be revised by the winter of 2004. Inclusion is likely to continue as a prominent feature of *any* new law, given the fact that a review of the research on inclusion for both elementary and secondary schools shows that the academic performance of general education students was found to be equal to or better in inclusive settings - even students considered to be high achievers (Salend & Duhaney, 1999).

3. My school has a lot of new requirements to meet under ESEA (No Child Left Behind). Many of these requirements involve testing and holding schools and kids accountable for meeting standards. How will ESEA affect the students with disabilities in my class?

Under the new federal law, ESEA (also known as No Child Left Behind), students with disabilities are expected (with very few exceptions) to meet the same challenging academic standards as students without disabilities. Certain accommodations may be used to aid the performance of special education students on tests (for example, extra time, more frequent breaks, etc.). More than ever before, schools must show that special education students are achieving to high standards...and schools are held accountable for that result. Schools that fail to show that their students with disabilities are progressing will be subject to sanctions (as they would if any group of students was failing to achieve). This makes it especially important for all teachers to reach out and help students with disabilities perform well.

4. It seems as if teaching special education students in my classroom places an additional burden on me at a time when I'm already under pressure to produce results. Are there any benefits to teaching students with disabilities in my general education classroom?

Many general education teachers with special education students in their classrooms have the advantage of having additional adults working in the classroom alongside them – very often a special education teacher, and/or a specialist, such as a speech-language pathologist, and/or teaching assistants or paraeducators. One benefit from this arrangement is that those additional staff members are available to work with other students with special needs not just with the special education student(s). General education teachers can then offer individualized help to other students in need of a little extra attention.

General education teachers are also able to receive specialized professional development to learn strategies and techniques that work well with both special education and general education students. This professional development can be provided as part of a student's IEP under "personnel supports."

Often, classroom teachers feel they develop important skills, such as adapting instruction, managing behavior and collaborating with special education personnel, that enhance their teaching practice and can be used with other students.

In a recent survey, general educators reported they received adequate support to teach the students with disabilities in their classrooms. In fact, eighty-seven percent (87%) stated that they felt successful in teaching most students with disabilities.

Finally, we know that all children in classes that include special education students exhibit greater empathy, increased social skills, greater communication skills, better problem solving skills and enhanced learning. These effects occur for students *with* or *without* disabilities (City University of New York, National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995).

5. Why should I be concerned about the reauthorization of IDEA?

Since most students with disabilities spend part of their day with general education teachers, these students are ultimately the responsibility of all who work with them. Changes in the law may affect what or how general education teachers teach; they may impose new requirements on general education teachers; or they may provide additional support, resources or assistance. No matter how the law is shaped, chances are that all teachers will feel its effects. We need to ensure the final law is one we can live with...and one that benefits all children.

To find out more about IDEA reauthorization:

- NEA website <http://www.nea.org/lac> where members can find out the latest information.
- Sign up to receive NEA IDEA Activist updates by contacting Patti Ralabate at pralabate@nea.org.

References

City University of New York, National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (1995). *National Study of Inclusive Education*. New York: Author.

Salend, S.J. & Duhaney, L.G. (1999) The impact of inclusion on students with and without disabilities and their educators. *Remedial & Special Education*, 20 (2), 114 – 127.

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