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SLIIDEA: Placing and Serving Children with Disabilities in the LRE

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When Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, it authorized an evaluation to track progress at the state and local levels on the legislative goals of IDEA. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) commissioned a national longitudinal study, the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIIDEA), toward that end. SLIIDEA was tasked with investigating the following nine topics of congressional interest:

- improving the performance of children with disabilities in general scholastic activities and assessments;
- providing for the participation of children with disabilities in the general curriculum;
- helping children with disabilities make effective transitions from preschool to school and from school to work;
- increasing the placement of children with disabilities, including minority children, in the least restrictive environment;
- decreasing the numbers of children with disabilities who drop out of school;
- increasing the use of effective strategies for addressing behavioral problems of children with disabilities;
- improving coordination of the services provided under the reauthorization with other pupil services and with health and social services;
- reducing the number of disagreements between educational personnel and parents; and
- increasing the participation of parents in the education of their children with disabilities.

This document synthesizes information from SLIIDEA pertaining to the placing and serving of children with disabilities, including minority children, in the LRE as reflected in data from the 2002-03 school year. This synthesis brief was completed by Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) as part of its cooperative agreement with OSEP.¹

¹ Project Forum extends its thanks to Abt Associates staff, including Julie Fritts and Ellen Schiller, Senior Associate of SLIIDEA, for reviewing a previous draft of this document.

Methodology of SLIIDEA Study

In the 2002-03 school year, surveys were sent to key personnel responsible for, or familiar with, special education issues in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and a nationally representative sample of 959 districts and 4,448 schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Project Forum's document synthesizes the SLIIDEA chapter "Placing and Serving Children with Disabilities, Including Minority Children, in the Least Restrictive Environment" (Schiller, Bobronnikov, O'Reilly, Price & St. Pierre, 2005).

Background

Since the 1975 enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) children with disabilities have been guaranteed the right to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This federal requirement was meant to counter laws that existed at the time in some states that excluded children with certain disabilities from attending public schools. This landmark federal law mandated that students with disabilities must be educated in the same settings as their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.

Reflecting the individualized nature of special education, it has long been accepted that the number of students placed in specific educational environments will vary somewhat by disability category. Students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., visually impaired or deaf), for example, are less likely to spend most of their school day in a regular classroom. Students with speech language impairments or learning disabilities more typically spend the majority of their school day in the regular education environment. Of more concern, however, are trends that suggest differences in placement by race/ethnicity. Black and Hispanic students, for example, are about twice as likely to spend a majority of their school day outside the regular classroom as are white students (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

In addition to how they spend their school day, the overrepresentation of minority students in special education has been a topic of much debate and documentation over the past three decades. Both social and special education process factors have been identified as contributing to this complex issue. Social factors include poverty, health risks and interpretation of cultural and language differences as disability. Process factors believed to contribute include misidentification of students during the referral process, limited participation of minority parents in the special education identification and planning process and lack of culturally appropriate interpretations of assessment results. The misidentification and misclassification of minority students for special education can lead to inappropriate placements, increasing the time these students spend in separate or segregated settings.

In recognition of these persistent issues, the 1997 amendments to IDEA included new requirements for states to collect and examine data to determine if significant disproportionality based on race or ethnicity is occurring, both in the identification of children with disabilities and in the placement in particular educational settings of these children.² The regulations further

² IDEA 2004 includes similar data collection requirements to determine disproportionality in section 618(a)(1)(D).

specify that when disproportionality is identified, states must develop a plan to address the problem. Thus, in addition to studying state, district and school policies, practices and resources supporting the placement of students with disabilities in the LRE, SLIIDEA studied the placement of minority children in the LRE. Findings on both topics are presented below.

State/District Support for LRE

In the 2002-03 SLIIDEA survey, states, districts and schools were asked to self-report on their use of policies, practices and resources to support the placement of students with IEPs in the LRE. The following subsections describe the extent to which states, districts and schools addressed this issue.

Progress in Placement

More progress was reported by states, districts and schools in placing all students with IEPs in the LRE than in placing minority students with IEPs in the LRE. Independently, schools reported the most progress in these areas and states reported the least progress.

Participation in Professional Development

Special education teachers were more likely than general education teachers and other staff to have participated in professional development on placing students with IEPs in the LRE. Furthermore, more than twice as many schools reported that staff participated in professional development on LRE than on minority LRE.

Preparation to Support Placement

In addition to professional development activities, schools used a variety of resources to support the placement of students with disabilities in the LRE, including technical assistance and district and state funds.

Schools reported that their special education teachers were much better prepared than their general education teachers in the area of developing strategies to support the placement of students with IEPs in the LRE. Both groups of teachers were less prepared to support the placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE than to support placement of all students with disabilities.

Data-Based Decision Making in Placement of Students with IEPs in the LRE

The availability of data is another type of resource for districts and schools that helps in making placement decisions. The majority of schools had access to data on the placement of students with IEPs in the LRE by disability categories. Many of these had access to this data by race/ethnicity. Of the schools that collected data, most used it to evaluate programs and some to plan professional development. Of those that collected data specifically on minority placement, most used it to evaluate programs and few used it to plan professional development.

State and District Guidance

The federal legislation and regulations pertaining to placing students with IEPs in the LRE is not specific with regard to how the requirements should be met. Thus, state and district guidance in this area can be critical in clarifying how schools might meet their obligations. Proportionately more districts than states provided written guidelines on the placement of students with IEPs in the LRE. Nearly all districts without written guidelines were located in states that provided written guidelines. However, both states and districts were much less likely to provide written guidelines on placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE.

Resources Provided by States and Districts

Proportionately more states than districts used resources as a major policy intervention. Resources included state-wide training, competitive grants and state-supported personnel. These personnel were made available to districts and schools targeted for supporting placement of students with IEPs and minority students with IEPs in the LRE. State and district resources were not likely to be specifically targeted on the placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE.

States were most likely to provide personnel and least likely to provide financial resources to districts. However, states were less likely to provide personnel and financial resources specifically to support the placement of minority students in the LRE. Districts were most likely to provide technical assistance and least likely to provide financial resources to schools for technical assistance to support placement in the LRE. These resources were less likely to be provided specifically for district support of minority placement in the LRE

Districts were more likely to have and use data on LRE by disability type than data on LRE by race/ethnicity for evaluation and planning professional development. More districts used the data collected by disability type for program evaluation than planning for professional development. More districts that collected race/ethnicity data used this data for evaluation than for planning professional development. These findings are somewhat surprising, given the limited attention districts seem to be paying to the area of least restrictive environment for minority students.

Demographic Profiles of Districts and Schools

District size and urbanicity were associated with the provision of resources on the placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE and whether there was access to data on the LRE. Large and urban districts were more likely than suburban or rural districts to provide resources. For example, most large and urban districts as compared to small districts provided resources to schools based on the number of students with IEPs placed in the LRE and also on the number of minority students with IEPs placed in the LRE.

Staff participation in professional development regarding the LRE was associated with school size, urbanicity and the percentage of minority students. Large schools, urban schools, schools with high enrollment of students receiving free and reduced price lunch and schools with a high

enrollment of minority students were more likely to have staff participating in professional development on strategies to support the placement of students, including minority students, with IEPs in the LRE.

A number of school demographics were associated with the percentage of students with IEPs who spent 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms. For instance, these students were more likely to be in smaller schools or in schools with low enrollments of minority students, low enrollment of students with IEPs and low enrollments of students receiving free and reduced price lunch.

Relationships between Actions and Outcomes

Three school outcomes are often used as indicators to determine whether students with IEPs can effectively access the general education curriculum:

- the percentage of students with IEPs who spent 80% or more of the school day in the general education classroom;
- whether special education teachers in the schools were well prepared; and
- whether general education teachers in the schools were well prepared.

Since demographic variables do not easily lend themselves to policy interventions, they have been used as control variables. SLIIDEA reports on the actions related to outcomes that policy makers may choose to use as an intervention.

Many practitioners perceive that increased placement in the regular classroom will lead to increased access to the general curriculum.

- No state and very few district actions or policies were found to be related to the percentage of students with IEPs who spent 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms.
- Schools were more likely to report a higher percentage of students with IEPs who spend 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms when they were in districts that do not have guidelines in this area. Not providing these guidelines was associated with an increased percentage of students with IEPs in these settings.³
- The provision of eight or more hours of professional development on collaboration and teaming between general and special education teachers was the only district-level action that was significantly associated with an increase in the percentage of students with IEPs who were placed in the general classroom 80% or more of the school day.
- Schools where general education teachers participated in more professional development about accessing the general curriculum tended to have more students placed in the general classroom at least 80% of the school day.

³ It is important to note that this association does not indicate a causal relationship. There may be other explanations (e.g., districts for which provision of the LRE has been an ongoing problem are more likely to develop such guidelines).

State, District and School Actions that can Prepare Teachers to Provide LRE

Participation in professional development was related to special education teachers being well-prepared in supporting the placement of students with IEPs in the LRE. When districts provided additional personnel to address placement, schools reported their staffs as being better prepared. Also, when professional development was provided, schools reported their staffs were well prepared.

A number of actions were related to the percentage of schools reporting that their special education teachers were well prepared to support the placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE. Examples of these actions include having school staff with a specific responsibility for increasing the access of students with IEPs to the general education curriculum and participation of special education teachers in related professional development.

District and school actions were also related to the percentage of general education teachers who were well prepared to support the placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE. For instance, schools in districts that provided written guidelines and professional development on the placement of minority students with IEPs in the LRE were somewhat more likely to report that their general education teachers were well prepared compared to schools without such written guidelines. Basically, the more support general education teachers were given on how to support student access to the general curriculum, the more prepared they were.

Summary

No state-level and only one district-level action was significantly associated with an increase in the percentage of students with IEPs who were placed in the general classroom 80% or more of the school day: the provision of professional development on collaboration between general and special education teachers. When a variety of strategies were used – including technical assistance, data and funds – placement of all students with IEPs, including minority students, in the LRE was more likely. However, more progress was reported by states, districts and schools in placing all students with IEPs in the LRE than in placing minority students with IEPs in the LRE, suggesting that improvement is still needed in this area.

Primary Reference

Schiller, E., Bobronnikov, E., O'Reilly, F., Price, C., & St. Pierre, R. (2005, March). Placing and serving children with disabilities in the LRE. In *The Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Final 2nd Interim Report (2002-2003 School Year)*. Bethesda, MD: ABT Associates.

Secondary References

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