

**Study of State and Local
Implementation and
Impact of the Individuals
with Disabilities
Education Act**

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**Policy Brief I: Using
Implementation Data to Study
State, District, and School
Impacts**

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Policy Brief I: Using Implementation Data to Study State, District, and School Impacts

Introduction

In 1997, Congress made significant changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the landmark law that ensured educational equity and human dignity for children with disabilities. With access to public schools already assured for 6.1 million children with disabilities, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA set educators' and policymakers' sights on improving achievement for these students, as well as assuring positive transitions to work or post-secondary education after graduation.

As part of the IDEA '97 reauthorization, Congress asked the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to conduct a national assessment "to examine how well schools, local education agencies, states and other recipients of assistance" were making progress toward:

- 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 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 IDEA '97 services with other pupil services and with health and social services;
- Reducing the number of disagreements between education personnel and parents, and;
- Increasing the participation of parents in the education of their children with disabilities.

OSEP responded to these issues by designing two families of studies: child-outcome longitudinal studies and topic-specific studies. The former includes studies of infants and toddlers, preschools, elementary children, and youth transitioning from school to adult life. The latter covers three issues: the cost of special education; an investigation into the personnel needs in special education; and a longitudinal policy study of how states, districts and schools are implementing IDEA '97. Abt Associates and its subcontractors, Westat and SRI, were charged with conducting the third study, also known as the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIIDEA).

To guide SLIIDEA, OSEP has developed a set of implementation and impact questions to address the Congressional issues annually, as well as over time. They are the following:

- How do states, districts, and schools use policies, practices and resources to serve children and youth with disabilities? What factors influence the use of these policies, practices and resources? (In this question, policies refer to legislation, rules and procedures; practice refers to the activities carried out to implement the policy; and resources include the staff and money set aside or identified to implement the policy and practice.)
- To what extent are states, districts, and schools making progress toward achieving the outcomes?
- What is the relationship between state policy and practice and district and school policy and practice? Do state policies affect district and school practices, policies, and resources or the process of local change, and if so, how?
- What are the critical and emerging issues in states, districts and schools?

This chapter describes the conceptual foundation of SLIIDEA, and in so doing, answers two important questions: What are implementation and impact research and why are they so important? It also sets forth preliminary hypotheses about state and local implementation of IDEA. And finally, the chapter presents preliminary data from the first year survey on the policy instruments that states use to potentially influence districts and schools.

Implementation and Impact Research Defined

As its name implies, implementation research most often looks at how programs or policy innovations are being implemented. Implementation studies primarily focus on “what is happening” in the design and implementation of a program. But well-designed implementation studies do more than just describe what and how a program works or doesn’t work. They also respond to the questions “What is expected or desired?” and “Why is it happening?” In sum, they are expected to evaluate and explain program phenomena.

In addition, implementation research helps to identify the degree or extent to which a program has been implemented, identifying different stages of implementation beginning from early planning all the way to full implementation. Evaluators also use implementation research to determine how faithful program planners were in implementing a program as designed. If a program model is implemented differently than the original design, this could have an impact on the studied outcomes. Similarly, implementation research can help measure how well a program model has been adapted to local conditions, and whether the conditions have affected implementation to such an extent that outcomes might be skewed.

Implementation research is distinct from impact research, which most often answers questions about the outcomes of a program. In other words, implementation studies are designed to describe the features of how organizations or programs work, and impact studies are designed to examine how well an innovation worked, or what effects the policy innovation or program had on the intended beneficiaries. Both types of questions are important, because in the case of public policy they help determine how similar programs can benefit from their experiences, and how the legislation should be expanded or modified – stretching Federal dollars to go as far as possible. Recent impact studies, for

example, have focused our attention on the widening gap between children living in and out of poverty, and the international differences in teaching math and science in 4th, 8th and 12th grades across industrialized nations as measured by student test scores.

Because implementation studies can address almost any set of characteristics relating to how states and localities address implementation of policy innovations, data in implementation studies may encompass a wide set of issues. In describing the implementation of IDEA since 1997, the data include how states collect, use and report assessment data; how states use dropout data; and how often states evaluate parent and guardian satisfaction with special education services.

Examples of Coordinated Uses of Implementation and Impact Studies

Over the past few decades, implementation research has become a major vehicle for policy analysis. In the first generation of implementation studies, researchers focused primarily on whether the results of a given policy were consistent with expectations. In the second generation, they focused on variations in the response of individuals and institutions. The latest generation of implementation research has focused on what instruments can be used during implementation to achieve the desired effects. For example, researchers have begun to explore the different effects of such policy levers as mandates and inducements, and why policy makers use them (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Odden, 1991).

Implementation research has become especially important in the context of impact evaluation. This became apparent to researchers and policymakers in the 1970s when many large-scale studies of the impact of Federal educational programs were first undertaken. One notable example is the national evaluation of Follow Through which reported findings about such educational approaches as open classroom models or models that emphasized the acquisition of basic skills or thinking skills (Stebbins, St.Pierre, Proper, Anderson, & Cerva, 1977). The Follow Through evaluation could not explain very much about how or why the results occurred. Researchers later realized that the study could not provide such explanations because each model was implemented in up to 20 different sites and no information had been gathered on whether the programs had been implemented uniformly, or if the model as implemented matched the program design. This made it impossible for evaluators to determine how or why the results occurred.

As a result of these and similar research experiences, proponents of randomized impact studies began to recognize the need for understanding how programs were implemented. This realization led, in the 1980s and 1990s, to more common coordination between implementation and impact studies.

At least half a dozen examples can be offered on possible uses of implementation data in evaluations of program impact. They include instances in which evaluators are interested in: 1) describing programs; 2) changing programs through mandates; 3) expanding programs because of successful pilots; 4) explaining observed outcomes; 5) helping to identify plausible rival hypotheses for observed program impacts; and 6) testing hypotheses about which program features work.

Describing Programs. Data on how programs are implemented are valuable for providing straightforward descriptive information. Such data help policy analysts understand how a program is

operating and the variations in how it is implemented in different settings. For example, in a national evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program in 1995 and 1998, descriptions of provided services, the characteristics of participating families and the services the families received helped program officials understand how the program operated at the local level (St. Pierre, Swartz, Gamse, Murray, & Deck, 1995; Tao, Gamse, & Tarr, 1998). Ultimately this information allowed officials to understand program deficiencies and to make modifications in the design and in the legislation to make the program operate more efficiently.

Changing Programs Through Mandates. When legislative mandates require new program responsibilities in existing programs, implementation and impact data can help evaluators sort out the effects of the mandates. Evaluators might be interested, for example, in knowing whether the new legislative mandates stretched the capacity of an existing program by adding responsibilities that outstrip resources. The implementation study can reveal important descriptive information, while the impact study can determine if the innovations worked. For example, the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 made a number of changes to the original law, including a greater focus on higher expectations and improved achievement for children with disabilities. Thus the original goals of IDEA – to achieve equity and dignity for children with disabilities – were expanded to achieve academic excellence (Kaufman & Lewis, 1999).

Expanding Programs Because of Successful Pilots. Researchers are sometimes interested in the relationship between the extent of implementation and outcomes. For example, when a model program has successful results, planners are often interested in expanding the program to other sites. Researchers can create surveys to measure important indicators of the model program, and then use the surveys to determine if the indicators are present in the replicated programs. Such information was very useful when researchers studied replication of James Comer’s School Development Program. Millsap, Chase, Obeidallah, Perez-Smith, Brigham, Johnston, Cook, & Hunt (2000) found that better program level implementation was associated with greater student level outcomes. Fidelity to a program’s original design can also be used to predict program outcomes.

Explaining Observed Outcomes. Implementation data can be useful in explaining observed outcomes. *How* a program is implemented can explain *why* the outcomes were positive or not. Researchers (Goodson, Layzer, St. Pierre, Bernstein, & Lopez, 2000) who evaluated the Comprehensive Child Development Program, authorized by Congress in 1988 and administered initially by Health and Human Services, determined that the program was ineffective at meeting any of its goals of enhancing children’s school readiness and parents’ economic self-sufficiency. Was the problem the program’s implementation or the underlying theory of the program? The study revealed that it was implemented as planned, but that the underlying logic of the program was flawed.

Helping to Identify Plausible Rival Hypotheses for Observed Program Impacts. Implementation data can be used to identify or discount plausible rival hypotheses for observed impacts. Researchers need to be able to say if a program actually caused the observed effects, or if some other unaccounted for intervention caused the results. Even in an experimental design, possible problems can lead to improper conclusions, including poor implementation or minimal participation of the experimental group. Implementation data on the program being studied and on the evaluation being conducted can help sort out these issues.

Testing Hypotheses About Which Program Features Work. Implementation data can help policymakers construct hypotheses about which features lead to positive outcomes. Beyond knowing

if something works, researchers want to learn how well it works, who it works best for, the circumstances under which it works best and the program components that are most helpful. These answers are often forthcoming when implementation studies are combined with impact studies. For example, the Even Start evaluation used implementation data to determine the extent to which outcomes are related to the intensity of services provided (St.Pierre, Swartz, Gamse, Murray & Deck, 1995).

Implications for SLIIDEA

SLIIDEA follows the model of an implementation study in the context of an impact evaluation; its charge is to understand both the implementation and impact of policy changes made in the 1997 Amendments of IDEA at state, district, and school levels. Therefore the study is gathering data that are descriptive, evaluative and interpretive (i.e. implementation data) and is using the data to draw conclusions about expected variations in how states and localities have implemented policies and practices to achieve their legislative goals.

It is expected that the study will show evidence that states and localities have to various degrees addressed issues such as service coordination, accountability systems and procedural safeguards needed to achieve the goals of the law. Because of the existence of these indicators, it is also expected that the study will reveal evidence of short-term outcomes, or impact, over the next five years. Examples of impact might include (at state, district and school levels): increased use of accountability systems; better transition services and results; fewer dropouts; greater family involvement; and increased use of positive behavioral supports in schools. It is also possible that the collective impact of these short-term outcomes will lead to longer-term outcomes: better academic performance and increased access to post-secondary opportunities.

Generating Hypotheses

To answer these questions, the study undertook two tasks during this past school year: reviewing existing research literature on school reform and gathering data from the states and districts. These activities have helped construct hypotheses about state and local implementation as well as the impact of IDEA. Two hypotheses are currently being studied.

The first hypothesis is that there is variation in implementation across sites and across time (McLaughlin, 1987; Moore, Goertz, & Hartle, 1983; Stearns, Greene, & David, 1980). Congress set goals in IDEA '97 but did not prescribe how they would be accomplished. One goal of the legislation, for example, was that children and youth with disabilities would participate in statewide assessments, but Congress did not specify what accommodations these students should receive, leaving local decisions to states and districts.

While the lack of specificity may trouble some, others might argue that the tension between Federal mandates and local implementation leads to innovation. In other words, the study may show variations in implementation that themselves demonstrate the strength of the law. If the spirit of the law is to give children with disabilities the best opportunities in life, let states and localities determine how best to provide such opportunities because different contextual situations exist from one state to

the next, demanding flexibility. These might include differences in demographics, readiness for reform and history of serving children with disabilities.

The second hypothesis is that federal or state policy can direct and shape the contours of a program or initiative through legislative mandates and provisions, but that forces at the local level determine how a program or initiative is implemented (Knapp, Stearns, Turnbull, David, & Peterson, 1983; Lipsky, 1971; Miles, 1997). At the federal level, Congress passes laws, agencies write regulations to codify and guide implementation of the laws and agencies collect data to monitor compliance.

But federal programs are typically administered by state agencies with their own priorities and mandates. In special education, the leadership in, history of and priorities for educating children with disabilities have proven to be important factors in how laws are implemented (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1997; Stearns, Greene, & David, 1980; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). At the next level – the district and school level – federal and state priorities are translated again, with variations that depend on resources, capacity and demographics (Singer, Butler, Palfrey, & Walker, 1986).

In general education, this dynamic plays out, for example, in accountability. Nearly every state has implemented standards-based systems that now hold schools accountable to external standards and scrutiny. The movement is national, but implementation varies from state to state and district to district. And within each district, implementation varies from one school to the next according to the culture, skills, knowledge and expertise of the school (Elmore, 2001). Understanding school response to accountability standards must take into account the initial position of the school relative to the policy; the internal conditions already present – including organizational structures, internal accountability systems and collective expectations; and the strategic choices and actions of those within it (Siskin, 2001).

Similarly, state action on school governance issues can have a profound impact, both intended and unintended, on the district. In Illinois, for example, state mandates on the creation, composition and powers of school improvement councils have had a huge influence on how Chicago public schools operate. In particular, the councils were empowered to hire or fire principals. These powers, in combination with new regulations on tenure and school performance mandates, led to massive turnover of principals in the mid- to late 1990s. To recoup and adjust to the new environment, the Chicago principals union initiated some of the most progressive professional development programs in the country for its membership. This is a clear example of how state policy can influence local implementation and practice in ways that nobody could have predicted (Cohen & Thompson, 2001).

In special education, evidence of state policy influencing local implementation and promising practices is more fragmented or unavailable. This study is helping to capture such information as described below. The first step in this process was the administration of a survey to all 50 states and the District of Columbia (n = 51), a nationally representative sample of districts and a nationally representative sample of schools within the sampled districts.

State Policy Instruments

Policy makers have a range of instruments available to them to accomplish their goals. Analysts have identified them as fitting into the following classification scheme: mandates, inducements, capacity-building and system-changing (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). The SLIIDEA data are identifying

certain policy instruments that states may use to influence special education activities at the local level. They include mandates such as legislation, written requirements or guidance; and inducements such as incentives, rewards, sanctions, technical assistance, financial assistance and accountability through public reporting.

The information gathered thus far from the survey shows the following patterns in the states:

Student Assessments

- Forty-three states provide some combination of technical and financial assistance to districts and schools where students do poorly on achievement tests. Twenty-six of these states offer some combination of technical and financial assistance focusing on students with disabilities. None of the states provide financial assistance only.
- Forty-three states issue reports on student assessment performance in schools. Nine of these states separately break out data on the performance of students with disabilities.
- Thirty-one states reward or sanction schools or districts on the basis of students' academic performance on achievement tests. Six of these states do not consider the results of students using accommodations when determining eligibility for rewards or sanctions, and one other state considers separately the test results of students who take tests with accommodations.

Dropout Rates

- Thirty-five states issue reports on dropout rates. Nine of them report separately on the rates of students with disabilities.
- Twelve states reward or sanction schools on the basis of graduation or dropout rates. Only one does not consider the rates of students with disabilities when determining these rewards or sanctions.
- Thirty-three states provide some combination of technical and financial assistance to districts or schools with high dropout rates or low graduation rates. Twenty-eight of these states focus some combination of financial and technical assistance on schools serving students with disabilities. None of the states provide financial assistance only.

Parental Supports

- Twenty-seven states regularly evaluate parent/guardian satisfaction with special education services. Fourteen of the states report these results by district.
- Fifty states offer workshops for district personnel on IDEA regulations as they pertain to parent involvement.
- Forty-seven states offer workshops for district personnel on ways to involve parents/guardians in the IEP process.
- Sixteen states provide districts with funds for such services as transportation and babysitting to encourage parental participation in IEP meetings.

In addition to describing the policy instruments that states are using, the study is examining whether the use of these instruments affects policies and practices at the district and school levels. An examination of the data also could lead to the generation of another hypothesis that might show, for example, that during early implementation, states use technical/financial assistance as the strategy of choice for supporting district policies that benefit children and youth with disabilities, while states might decrease or withdraw such assistance once implementation has been underway for three or four years. Consequently, the study is examining states' use of policy instruments at different points in time.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, implementation research has become a major vehicle in evaluating the effectiveness of public policy, especially in the context of impact evaluation. Among other things, implementation research, when combined with impact evaluation has helped policy analysts clarify program effects, explain observed outcomes, test hypotheses and identify plausible rival hypotheses.

The SLIIDEA study includes both implementation and impact components; its charge is to describe the implementation in order to understand the impact of IDEA '97. It is gathering data that is descriptive, evaluative and interpretive and is using such data to draw conclusions about hypothesized variations in how states and localities have implemented the law to achieve its goals.

The research is guided by the questions Congress generated about how students are being served, and by research questions drafted for the study. The inquiry is expected to show indicators of implementation at state, district, and school levels. These indicators are likely to be associated with the outcomes, as defined by the Congressional questions.

Collection of data already has begun. In the first year, all 51 states were surveyed, as well as representative numbers of districts and schools within the districts to ensure generalizability to the nation's districts and schools. Several hypotheses are being generated. The first is that there is variation in implementation across sites and across time. The second is that federal and state policy can direct and shape a program or initiative through mandates and provisions, but that forces at the local level determine how the program is implemented. After reviewing the policy instruments that states have put in place to accomplish their goals, a third hypothesis might emerge showing, for example, that during early implementation states use technical and financial assistance as the strategy of choice for supporting district policies that benefit children with disabilities.

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