

Paperwork and Administrative Duties in Special Education: A View From the Field¹

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BACKGROUND

In 1997, Congress made significant changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the landmark law that ensures educational equity for children with disabilities. With access to public schools already guaranteed for the 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 supporting postsecondary transitions.

To sustain the educational opportunities for students with disabilities afforded by IDEA, the 1997 reauthorization maintained existing procedures and processes while adding some new requirements to address tensions identified during the IDEA Congressional hearings. Some of these requirements focused on how children were evaluated and identified for special education services, development of a child's individualized education program, and rules for responding to students with IEPs who have on-going behavioral issues.

The new requirements placed a number of demands on existing special education systems, which many studies have noted were already perceived as burdensome to school and district practitioners. In *Twenty-Five Years of Educating Children with Disabilities: The Good News*

and the Work Ahead, the American Youth Policy Forum and the Center on Education Policy observed that it is time to rethink the procedural requirements of IDEA because while they "have been instrumental in ensuring access for students with disabilities ...[they] place considerable paperwork and time demands on teachers and administrators" (2001, p.4).

A sub-study of the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) completed by Westat also found that paperwork was placing considerable demands on teachers, concluding that special education teachers spent an average of five hours per week completing forms and doing administrative paperwork outside of class time. This was in addition to weekly averages of five hours preparing lessons, two hours grading papers, one hour each for sharing expertise with colleagues and attending IEP meetings, and 0.5 hours communicating with parents. Of significant policy concern, the paperwork burden appeared to be a factor in teachers' plans to leave the profession.²

Similarly, Project FORUM of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), in their study of state use of mandated or recommended forms in special education, said that "excessive paperwork is cited by many as a problem in special education."³ The report

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² *SPeNSE Fact Sheet: Paper in Special Education*. (January 7, 2002). Available at <http://www.spense.org/Paperwork.pdf>.

³ Project FORUM. (2002). *State Special Education Forms*. National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Alexandria, VA.

also indicated that a major issue to be addressed in special education is the time spent on documenting compliance with the procedural requirements of the law.

As part of the study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of IDEA (SLIIDEA), the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) supported a study of the factors associated with the burden of special education paperwork and administrative duties for school staff. The goal of the study was to learn what factors affect how much time school personnel spend on special education paperwork and administrative duties and to identify strategies that have the potential to decrease time. Findings from this study complement the prior studies through extensive qualitative data collection and the use of time logs to collect actual time spent on special education tasks during and outside the regular school day.⁴

STUDY DESIGN

We studied five specific special education tasks: (1) conducting evaluations and determinations of eligibility; (2) preparing individualized education programs; (3) responding to disciplinary or behavioral issues; (4) protecting due process and procedural safeguards; and (5) protecting the confidentiality of information and children's rights. Data were collected through telephone interviews with state directors of special education in five states and field visits to seven school districts (sites) in these states. In each site, we interviewed the director of special education and principals, and conducted focus groups with general education teachers, special education teachers and related services staff, and parents of students receiving special education and related services. Across the seven sites, we talked with nearly 250 state, district and school staff, and parents of students with disabilities. We also conducted reviews of federal and state legislation and regulations

governing each of the five special education tasks. During the site visits, each respondent was asked to rank the five special education tasks in terms of how much time each required. Higher rankings were associated with the more time-consuming tasks. In addition, teachers and related services staff completed a daily time log for the two-week period immediately following the site visit in order to capture actual time spent on each of the tasks identified for the study. Thus, we have collected data on both perceived burden and actual burden for general and special education teachers and related services staff.

Prior to data collection, we worked with our Technical Work Group (TWG) and with OSEP staff to establish working definitions for critical study concepts, including "paperwork," "administrative duties," and "burden," as follows:

Paperwork refers to all documents, reports, brochures and the like that are filled out, distributed, or submitted by school personnel or parents to meet procedural requirements of federal, state, or local special education law or regulations.

Administrative Duties⁵ includes all the tasks needed to support the act of filling out and distributing all documents and brochures needed to meet the procedural requirements of special education law.

Burden was initially defined as the amount of time spent on a special education task or subtask, regardless of when that time is spent or the perceived value of the task or subtask. During data collection, however, respondents had difficulty focusing only on the time required to complete a task. Thus, we expanded the definition of burden to include elements of wasted time and stress, as well as the actual time required to complete a task.

⁴ This study was completed during winter 2003, prior to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA which did include several changes to address perceived special education paperwork burden.

⁵ This study treats paperwork and administrative duties separately. Most often, the two terms are used together to jointly reference the actions or time required to perform administrative duties or to prepare paperwork associated with special education.

MAJOR FINDINGS⁶

District and school staff had diverse perspectives on the meaning and extent of burden. Administrators, teachers and related services staff reported that “burden” of special education tasks and administrative duties had multiple meanings for them. Most frequently, staff defined burden the same way we did—in terms of the amount of time required to complete specific paperwork and administrative tasks. However, they also considered tasks to be burdensome if they perceived them to be **wasteful, repetitive, or redundant** or if there was “stress,” “added pressure,” or “frustration” associated with a task. Moreover, tasks that took a lot of time but were perceived to be useful or beneficial, such as completing evaluations, were not necessarily considered to be burdensome. For example, in defining burden, typical responses included:

[Burden is] redundancy—doing the same stuff over and over or entering the same numbers again and again. (Focus group with special education teachers and related service personnel)

Unless I see some benefit to me, it seems like a burden. (Focus group with general education teachers)

Lots of things due at the same time, competing pressures. (Focus group with general education teachers)

It’s time that teachers are taken away from students, either during the school day or at home, when they could be doing other tasks associated with supporting student learning. (Middle school principal)

I can see the needs on this, but...there is a lot of paperwork involved. (Middle school principal)

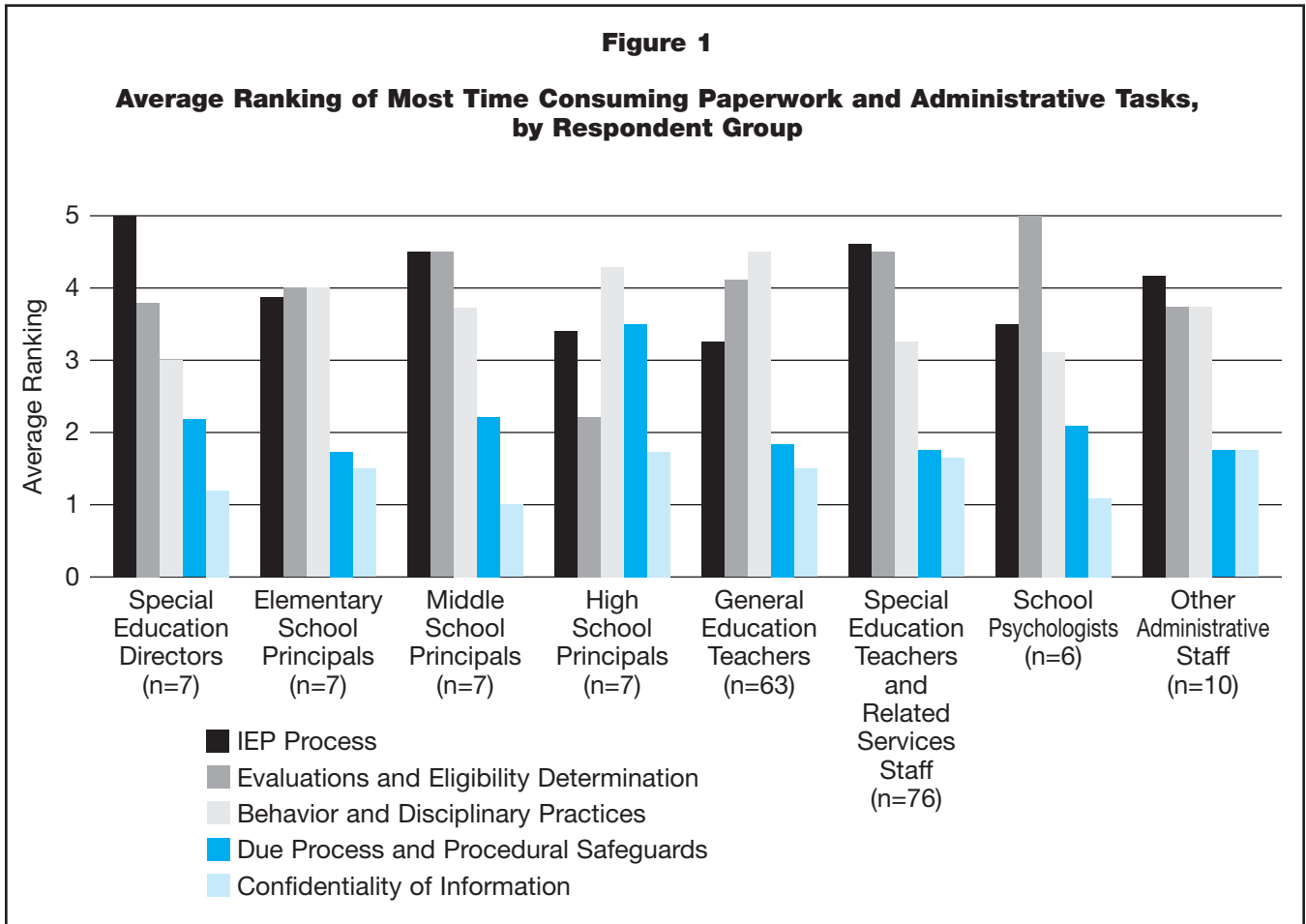
The evaluation, and especially the initial evaluation, is burdensome, but it’s quite necessary to the nature of testing. We tell people the testing is complex, that it is time consuming...but it’s more thorough, and really what you want is a thorough evaluation.
(District director of special education)

The extent to which respondents perceived paperwork tasks and administrative duties to be time consuming varied according to their roles and responsibilities. District and school personnel varied in which paperwork tasks and administrative duties they ranked as most time consuming, and this variation was often based on their special education roles and responsibilities, as shown in Figure 1. The IEP process was ranked as most time consuming among the five tasks studied for directors of special education, special education teachers and related services staff, and other administrative staff. School psychologists ranked evaluation and eligibility determinations as most time consuming, while for general education teachers and high school principals, behavior and disciplinary practices were perceived to be their most time-consuming task.

The paperwork and administrative duties associated with procedural safeguards and confidentiality of information generally took little time. All types of respondents tended to report that due process and procedural safeguards as well as confidentiality of information tasks were the least time consuming of the five special education tasks. Nevertheless, respondents indicated that when they occurred, due process hearings were very time consuming and stressful.

Substantial variation existed across districts in the time spent on each of the five special education tasks. Across the seven districts visited for this study, the actual time spent on each of the five special education tasks varied according to the type of task, but also by staff person (special education teacher,

⁶ These findings are drawn from a larger report: Kirlin, John, Ellen Schiller, Ellen Bobronnikov, Kristine Burnaska, Carolyn MacRae, and Fran O’Reilly. (September 2004). *Final Report on Focus Study III: The Burden of Paperwork and Administrative Duties in Special Education*. Abt Associates Inc., Cambridge, MA, which is available on request.



general education teacher, related services staff) and whether the tasks were performed during or after school hours, as shown in Exhibit 1. Thus, for example, while across all districts special education teachers reported spending the most time on the IEP process, the actual time spent during the day ranged from a low of about 12 minutes to a high of nearly an hour (53 minutes). A similar range existed for time spent outside of school hours.

The availability of technology for completing IEPs did not necessarily reduce time or burden.

Five of the seven districts visited reported some use of electronic IEP forms, but in all of these districts these systems were reported to be problematic. In several districts, only parts of the form were electronic; in other districts the use of the electronic versions was inconsistent in part because

computers and/or printers were not universally available or there were no reliable systemwide networking or web-based applications. In addition, technical assistance and training for using the systems were often not provided. Typical responses to the use of technology as a means of decreasing burden include the following:

We've had a terrible time, too, with that transition, getting the technical help to get [the electronic IEP templates] in the computers. It's just horrible.
(Principal)

If you and I were teachers in the same school and you took my kids, either you'd have to come to my computer and type [the IEP] or you had to retype it.
(District administrator).

SLIIDEA POLICY BRIEF

Exhibit 1
Average Time Spent on Special Education Tasks by Staff Position and District (Minutes per Day)

	Special Ed. Teachers			General Ed. Teachers			Related Services Staff		
	During	Outside	Total	During	Outside	Total	During	Outside	Total
IEP Process									
Ave. Across All Dist: Total Time	33.8	25.1	58.9	4.5	1.0	5.6	35.0	9.0	44.0
District AZ-1	39.0	21.8	60.8	4.4	1.3	5.6	24.0	9.2	33.3
District MA-1	24.2	52.9	77.1	9.1	0.6	9.7	49.2	14.8	64.0
District MI-1	47.4	13.1	60.4	1.5	0.0	1.5	No data available		
District MI-2	11.6	0.0	11.6	0.8	0.4	1.1	48.9	1.1	50.0
District MI-3	38.1	26.6	64.7	2.1	0.2	2.2	No data available		
District NY-1	23.4	48.5	71.9	8.4	3.7	12.1	3.6	18.1	21.7
District OK-1	53.2	12.6	65.8	5.5	1.2	6.6	49.0	2.0	51.0
Evaluation and Eligibility Determination									
Ave. Across All Dist: Total Time	9.2	5.7	14.9	4.8	1.5	6.3	49.8	16.4	66.2
District AZ-1	12.7	6.0	18.7	2.4	0.5	2.9	38.5	4.6	43.1
District MA-1	21.3	15.5	36.8	3.2	0.8	4.0	59.1	53.3	112.4
District MI-1	7.4	3.1	10.5	1.3	0.0	1.3	No data available		
District MI-2	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.7	4.5	69.7	3.9	73.6
District MI-3	2.3	1.6	3.9	13.4	4.7	18.2	No data available		
District NY-1	11.1	8.7	19.8	5.6	0.2	5.8	65.7	20.3	86.0
District OK-1	9.6	4.9	14.5	4.0	3.7	7.7	16.2	0.0	16.2
Behavior and Discipline Practices									
Ave. Across All Dist: Total Time	3.8	1.0	4.8	1.9	0.7	2.6	3.9	0.0	3.9
District AZ-1	8.4	5.3	13.7	1.1	0.2	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
District MA-1	2.5	0.1	2.6	1.4	0.2	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
District MI-1	6.4	0.0	6.4	1.1	0.0	1.1	No data available		
District MI-2	4.3	0.0	4.3	2.9	0.1	3.0	18.9	0.0	18.9
District MI-3	2.4	0.8	3.2	2.3	3.2	5.5	No data available		
District NY-1	1.4	0.4	1.8	1.5	0.7	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
District OK-1	1.3	0.5	1.8	3.3	0.4	3.7	0.6	0.0	0.6
Due Process and Confidentiality									
Ave. Across All Dist: Total Time	0.9	0.7	1.6	0.3	0.1	0.4	1.0	0.2	1.3
District AZ-1	0.7	0.4	1.1	0.3	0.0	0.3	1.2	1.2	2.3
District MA-1	0.5	0.0	0.5	0.7	0.3	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
District MI-1	1.6	0.5	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	No data available		
District MI-2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.2	0.0	3.2
District MI-3	1.0	1.4	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	No data available		
District NY-1	1.8	2.6	4.4	0.7	0.2	0.9	0.5	0.0	0.5
District OK-1	0.9	0.0	0.9	0.5	0.2	0.8	0.4	0.0	0.4

Note: Totals may not equal sum of components due to rounding error.

Source: Daily Time Record Booklet, Focus Study III

We've literally had teachers in the middle of an IEP [when] the program crashes and all the information crumbled. Yeah, you can hear the wailing all the way across the school. (Principal)

Data from the focus groups and individual interviews suggest that some of the variation across districts can be explained by the available resources and strategies used to address the paperwork and administrative requirements. In the following sections we report on the strategies which, when implemented by a district, were reported by school staff to be associated with a decrease in the time or burden, and the factors reported to be associated with increased time and burden for the three most burdensome tasks— (1) conducting evaluations and determinations of eligibility; (2) preparing individualized education programs; and (3) responding to disciplinary or behavioral issues.

What decreases time and burden?

Availability of non-teaching time. Special education teachers in districts that had release time or common planning time available during the school day generally perceived the IEP process to be less burdensome than did teachers in districts without these supports. Many of the teachers reported using this release time to do IEP work or prepare for IEP meetings, consulting with other teachers as needed. A typical response from teachers in districts that provided such time included:

The IEP day is a sanctuary. I need it. I would not have a family if I didn't have these days. I count on them. (Focus group of special education teachers)

Staff in districts without such time were quite likely to comment on this lack, saying:

We have lots of people to interact with, but no time. We interact with teachers before school, at lunch, or after school. (Focus group of special education teachers)

I co-teach and have no common time to meet with other teachers. This is hard. (Focus group of special education teachers)

Assignment of non-teaching staff to coordinate evaluation, eligibility or IEP processes.

While the availability of related services staff or other non-teaching staff to test and/or coordinate the evaluation, eligibility, or IEP processes did not necessarily reduce the overall time required to complete these tasks, it did appear to shift the burden away from teachers. Districts used a variety of names to designate these non-teaching positions, many of which suggested additional roles in the school or district beyond IEP coordination, such as teacher consultant, team leader, social worker, and IEP coordinator.

Training staff on the use of positive behavioral approaches.

School staff in districts with training available on the IDEA requirements related to addressing behavioral incidences of students with IEPs, considered the tasks associated with attending to these issues to be less stressful and time-consuming than did staff in districts without this additional support. Training varied in its emphasis and its source (i.e., state or district). In some sites, the training focused on the due process requirements of IDEA, whereas other districts focused their training on using specific approaches to addressing behavioral incidences, such as how to conduct a functional behavioral assessment or prepare a behavior intervention plan.

What increases time and burden?

Interpretation of how federal, state and district policies need to be implemented.

District and school staff had differential approaches for complying with the IEP process and the evaluation and eligibility requirements. For example, the length and content of the IEP forms and instructions varied across the seven districts, and school staff reported that the forms

and associated instructions were key factors in affecting the burden of the IEP process. According to district and school staff, the IEP forms and instructions for completing them, as well as instructions for conducting the IEP meeting, also have led to lengthier IEP meetings. District and school staff also reported that often there is duplication in completing forms. In many of the districts, school staff are required to complete both state and district forms—often creating redundancy in the information provided. As respondents noted:

We took the state components that need to be part of the multi-disciplinary evaluation team and came up with a form for our district....So, we have our district [form] and then the state eligibility. And it's pretty redundant. (Related services provider)

That's the [form] that everybody has really been opposed to because it's the repeating of data. You know, here's the stack: the medical history, the rights, the consents, his grades, his standardized achievement testing....So, here it is in the packet and why transfer it to these smaller spaces when it's all right here? (Related services provider)

Perception of a need for excessive documentation to demonstrate compliance.

District administrators and school staff perceived a need for excessive documentation of compliance with IEP requirements to protect the district and staff in case of a due process filing or litigation. According to district and school staff, such documentation has increased the burden of special education tasks. Districts involved in recent proceedings were most sensitive to this need. For example, some respondents reported:

I think it's a trickle down effect....The impact of the requirement is somebody figures they'd better have a piece of paper...to document that they did something, even though the requirement itself doesn't require them to have it on paper. (State director of special education)

Everything now has to have a paper trail.
(School psychologist)

If you don't document everything on the IEP, you worry about going to IEP jail. (Focus group of special education teachers)

Unpredictable interruptions requiring an immediate response.

For district and school staff, the unpredictable nature of interruptions, such as inappropriate student behavioral incidents or the immediate need to schedule a manifestation determination, could make the school day very stressful, as it required that planned activities be abandoned or rescheduled. Although responding to the actual incidents may not take much time, administrators and teachers reported that they were demanding and stressful, and therefore they considered such tasks to be quite burdensome. Typical responses were:

The time may not be as great as we think it is. It's [having] to stop everything you are doing....And it's like anytime you are doing this, it becomes the most important thing. (High school principal)

I rated the behavioral issue as [most time consuming], because I'd have to say that the team chair people find that the most demanding. It may not be the top time-taker, but it's the most demanding...the least predictable, the most stressful, and the most demanding. (District administrator)

Sometimes there is a lot that comes up at once, and it's difficult to plan for. You may have a whole day's worth of annual reviews or re-evaluations scheduled, and all of a sudden there is something like this [a behavioral incident that involved several students] that happens, so you've got to move everything around. (District administrator)

SUMMARY

While the sites visited were not selected to be nationally representative, the findings from this study are suggestive in terms of the existing variation across sites and respondents in both the actual and perceived burden of special education paperwork and administrative duties. In sum, burden meant different things to different stakeholders. Administrators, teachers, and related services staff most often defined burden as the amount of time spent on a task, but they also viewed time spent on repetitive or unnecessary activities as burdensome. Moreover, school psychologists viewed evaluations and eligibility determinations as their most time-consuming task, whereas principals tended to report that behavior and disciplinary practices were their most time-consuming

special education task. District administrators and special education teachers ranked the IEP process as their most time-consuming task.

Given this study's finding that educators had difficulty separating time issues from other components of burden when answering questions about time spent on specific tasks, daily recording of time spent, using a technique such as the time-log incorporated into this study, offers a useful data collection method for measuring actual time spent. A larger time log-based study using a representative sample of special educators holds the promise for a more definitive analysis of the extent to which various policies, practices, and resources affect time spent on special education paperwork and administrative duties.