



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



Providing Access to the General Education Curriculum: State, District and School Actions

December 2005

Prepared for

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Special Education Program
550 12th Street SW, 7th floor
Room 7151
Washington, DC 20202-4444

Prepared by

Fran E. O'Reilly
Ellen P. Schiller



Abt Associates, Inc.
4800 Montgomery Lane
Suite 600
Bethesda, MD 20814-5341

Providing Access to the General Education Curriculum: State, District and School Actions¹

Fran E. O'Reilly and Ellen P. Schiller

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 6.1 million U.S. children with disabilities, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA set educators' and policymakers' sights on improving achievement for these students. Along with additional Federal education legislation, such as the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, the Goals 2000: Educating America Act, and the recent enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Federal policy environment has clearly established a focus on improving performance for all students by requiring the development of statewide accountability systems and creating standards that align student learning to assessments. The 1997 amendments to IDEA support these goals by setting expectations for states, districts and schools designed to influence them to offer the same challenging curriculum to students with and without disabilities.

When Congress passed the IDEA amendments in 1997, it also authorized an evaluation to track progress at the state and local level on the expanded goals of the legislation. To complete the requested assessment, OSEP commissioned two types of studies: child-outcome longitudinal studies and topic-specific studies. The topic-specific studies were intended to address three issues:

(1) the cost of special education, (2) the personnel needs in special education, and (3) the implementation of the 1997 Amendments to IDEA by states, districts, and schools. Abt Associates and its subcontractors, Westat and SRI International, have been charged with conducting the third issues study, known as the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIIDEA).

The SLIIDEA study is comprised of two major components. For one component, the study is collecting data over a six-year period through mail questionnaires at the state, district and school levels. The second component of SLIIDEA is a series of qualitative focus studies of the implementation of IDEA in selected school districts on selected topics. This report summarizes the findings from the fourth of these qualitative studies, in which we took an in-depth look at how states, districts and schools ensure access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

Findings reported here for Focus Study IV are based on field visits completed during the 2004-2005 school year to six districts selected from a pool of 18 sites that had participated in one of the three focus studies previously completed for SLIIDEA (O'Reilly, et. al., 2003; Schiller, O'Reilly, & Kirlin, 2004; Schiller et al., 2002). These six districts represent the five study states that have participated in all of the focus studies (AZ, MA, MI, NY, OK). Study sites were selected to provide variation in the

¹ The Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education, as part of Contract ED-00-CO-0026, supports the implementation of this study. However, any points of views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education.

number and percentage of students with disabilities in the three largest disability groups most likely to require accommodation to access the general education curriculum (i.e., students with emotional disturbance [ED], students with specific learning disabilities [SLD], and students with mental retardation [MR]), as well as variation in the types of placements used for these three groups of students (mostly in the regular classroom versus mostly out of the regular classroom). Data are based on information collected during 2002-2003 school year of the SLIIDEA survey, using federally defined disability and placement categories (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Focus Study IV addresses the following specific research questions:

- What major practices are associated with access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities receiving services in different placement options?
- What state and district policies and resources influence the practices being used to assist students with disabilities in different placement options gain access to the general education curriculum?
- What school-level resources and practices influence how students with disabilities in different settings gain access to the general education curriculum?
- What contextual factors are associated with how students with disabilities in different placements gain access to the general education curriculum?

MAJOR FINDINGS

Key findings for the study are discussed in the following sections.

Major Practices Associated with Access to the General Education Curriculum

A wide variety of strategies and practices were reported across the disability groups

and placements in the study sites to provide access to the general education curriculum to students with disabilities.

These practices were used by both general and special educators, in both regular classrooms and in self-contained special education classrooms. We were able to identify several strategies being used for 90 percent or more of the students in each disability group and identified some similarities in the use of these standard practices across the three disability groups included in the study. Learning aids were not used as a standard practice for any of the study students. For accommodations and additional supports, several specific standard practices were common across all three disability groups:

- Regardless of whether students spent most of their instructional day in or out of a regular classroom, monitoring of student progress by the special education teacher was a standard practice across all disability groups.
- Additional time to complete assignments was a standard practice for all disability groups when students spent most of their instructional day in the regular classroom.
- Slower-paced instruction was a standard practice for all disability groups when students spent most of their instructional day outside the regular classroom.

Fewer standard practices were reported for students with mental retardation than for students with specific learning disabilities and students with emotional disturbance.

Although all students with mental retardation in the study sample received at least one type of accommodation to help them access the general education curriculum, the only standard practice for this group of students was slower-paced instruction.

State, District and School Policies and Resources Used to Support Access to the General Education Curriculum

Most resources identified to support access to the general education curriculum were provided at the district level. Respondents across the study sites were able to identify formal state policies regarding access to the general education curriculum, but resources such as professional development or curricular materials primarily were provided at the district level. Formal or informal district policies were not identified beyond state or federal policies and guidelines.

Three key factors differentiated the six study sites into two distinct categories.

These three factors include: (1) the support of district and school leadership for increasing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities, (2) district resources targeted to increasing access, and (3) school-wide practices aimed at increasing access to the general education curriculum. Two of the six districts had strong leadership that provided clear directives to guide implementation of access and supported these directives with district resources and school-wide practices such as the hiring of dually certified teachers. In the four other study sites the district leadership provided limited guidance or support for access and few resources were available at the school or district level. In these four sites, any practices used to support access were due primarily to individual teacher initiative.

Despite differences in district context, we found limited evidence to suggest that the classroom practices being used in the study sites to provide access to the general education curriculum differed across the sites in any systematic way. That is, the practices described by teachers to provide access to the general education curriculum were very similar in each of the study sites, regardless of district policies or resources provided to support access to the general education curriculum. Because we did not have a representative

sample of students and teachers, however, this link should be investigated in a more systematic fashion.

Contextual Factors Associated with Access to the General Education Curriculum

Unlike our findings from previous focus studies, most respondents provided a definition of the term access to the general education curriculum that fell along a continuum. In defining access to the general education curriculum, study respondents provided a range of definitions that included accessing state and district content and performance standards, participation in academic assessments, improving social outcomes, placing students in the least restrictive environment, or exposing them to the same materials provided to regular classroom students. In some instances, respondents did not have a definition of the term. The finding that a majority of respondents had the knowledge to articulate a definition of access and to specifically disentangle the concept of access to the general education curriculum from placement in the least restrictive environment was a vast change from our findings in prior focus studies (O'Reilly, et al., 2003; Schiller et. al, 2004; Schiller et al., 2002).

Understanding of the legislative requirements related to access to the general education curriculum differed by respondent type. We found a wide range in respondents' understanding of the concept, with the least understanding among general education teachers and more among special educators and special education administrators.

Federal legislation, as well as a focus on state and district accountability has played an important role in helping general and special educators move toward a deeper understanding of the need for students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum. We expect the understanding of this term

to continue to evolve as the federal legislation is fully implemented and the performance of students with disabilities improves on statewide assessments. Even when teachers could not articulate a definition of access to the general education curriculum, they were able to discuss many specific strategies they used that demonstrated how they assisted students with disabilities in gaining access to the general education curriculum.

Two commonly reported barriers to providing access to the general education curriculum were large class size and a lack of appropriate curriculum materials for special education students. Some teachers indicated that the size of general education classes sometimes made it difficult for regular education teachers to be able to provide the additional support needed by special education students in order to access the general education curriculum. Special education teachers in particular reported having difficulty getting appropriate instructional materials, such as textbooks or workbooks, that would help students with disabilities access the general education curriculum.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study provide an important detailed look at the practices being used by classroom teachers to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with a variety of disabilities in a variety of settings. They also illuminate the types of resources and supports put in place by states, school districts and schools to ensure that students with disabilities gain access to the general education curriculum and highlight existing limitations across the instructional system. However, the study is based on a limited, non-representative sample of students within a limited sample of school districts in five states. While the study findings provide important insights for policymakers interested in improving both teacher preparation in this area and academic outcomes for students with disabilities, we believe that much more work needs to be done. For example, a larger probability sample of students and

teachers would reveal whether the patterns we identified are representative on a state or national scale. Moreover, future work should examine more directly the link between classroom practices and district contextual factors as well as the impacts of the use of specific instructional supports, accommodations and learning aids on the academic outcomes of students with disabilities.

References

- O'Reilly, F., Bergquist, N., Bobronnikov, E., Burnaska, K., Levin, M., Rooney, R., et al. (2003). *The Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Final Report on Focus Study II*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates Inc.
- Schiller, E., O'Reilly, F., and Kirlin, J. (2004). *Paperwork and administrative duties in special education: A view from the field*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates Inc.
- Schiller, E., Cohen, G., Fiore, T., Müller, E., Robertson, A., & Shearer Lingo, A. (2002). *The Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Report on Focus Study I*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates Inc.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *Twenty-fifth annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.