Duncan Turns Accountability Focus to Special Education

One expert says states also should focus on improving teacher training to

help students with disabilities.

Girl (10-12) with Down syndrome using computer in computer lab, children in

background

The Department of Education will now evaluate states on student performance

measures for compliance with a federal special education law.

By Allie Bidwell <http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/allie-bidwell> June

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The majority of states do not meet federal requirements under new special

education program accountability

<http://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/sppapr.html> measures announced

Tuesday - but advocates for students with disabilities aren't upset about

it.

Until now, the Department of Education determined whether states were

compliant with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) based

on procedural requirements, such as timely student evaluations and due

process hearings, but did not define compliance based on educational

outcomes for students with disabilities.

[READ

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/12/11/budget-deal-could-help-strug

gling-special-education-programs> : Budget Deal Could Help Struggling

Special Education Programs

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/12/11/budget-deal-could-help-strug

gling-special-education-programs> ]

Under the old framework last year

<http://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/2014-chart-3.pdf> , 41 states and

territories met the government's requirements, but when learning outcomes

are taken into account - such as reading and math performance on state and

national tests and proficiency gaps - just 18 states and territories do. The

rest are categorized as either needing "assistance," "intervention" or

"substantial intervention" to become compliant with IDEA.

"Every child, regardless of income, race, background, or disability can

succeed if provided the opportunity to learn," Secretary of Education Arne

Duncan said in a statement. "We know that when students with disabilities

are held to high expectations and have access to the general curriculum in

the regular classroom, they excel. We must be honest about student

performance, so that we can give all students the supports and services they

need to succeed."

<http://www.usnews.com/cmsmedia/d7/0c/7302da1546cca96429195afaa65f/140624-sp

ecialedmaps-graphic.jpg> Under new accountability measures, many states fall

short when it comes to how well they serve students with disabilities.

Under new accountability measures, many states fall short when it comes to

how well they serve students with disabilities.

Kim Hymes, senior director of policy and advocacy services for the Council

for Exceptional Children, says it's "refreshing" to see how students are

faring across the country and that it's important to identify which states,

districts and schools are struggling to get disabled students to positive

outcomes, so agencies know how and where to invest their improvement

efforts.

"We know that states have done a yeoman's job at trying to comply with IDEA,

and that is reflected in the data that was released today," Hymes says.

"This data tells us that educators, families, consumer groups need to have a

better understanding of how students with disabilities learn and then make

sure our educational system is providing them with the tools and the

resources they need to thrive."

The federal role in solving the problem, she says, is to provide technical

and financial support to help schools. Any punitive approach, such as

withholding funding, "would certainly be counterintuitive to what this data

should really be telling us," Hymes says.

Under the accountability framework, if a state falls under the "needs

assistance" category for two years in a row, the Education Department will

require the state to obtain technical assistance, or categorize it as a

"high-risk grant" recipient, according to the department. However, if a

state needs intervention for three years in a row, the department must take

more aggressive actions, which could include requiring the state to draft a

corrective action plan or withholding a portion of the state's funding.

California, Texas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands

and the Bureau of Indian Education are categorized as "needs intervention" -

the second-lowest category. No jurisdictions currently fall in the lowest

category of needing "substantial intervention."

[MORE

<http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2014/04/04/tips-f

or-online-students-with-disabilities> : Students With Disabilities Meet

Challenges in Online Courses

<http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2014/04/04/tips-f

or-online-students-with-disabilities> ]

As a part of the transition to the new accountability model, the

department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services is

funding a new $50 million technical assistance center to help states improve

the educational outcomes of students with disabilities.

As it stands, the national average reading

<http://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/2014-chart-6.pdf> and math

<http://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/2014-chart-7.pdf> proficiency

rates for students with disabilities have remained stagnant or have

decreased during the last several years. Federal data show proficiency rates

for reading inched up from 35.2 percent in 2005 to 36.7 percent in 2010.

Math proficiency was following an upward trend and reached a peak of 38.7

percent in 2009 before dipping to 35.2 the next year.

"Less than 10 percent of our nation's eighth-graders with [Individualized

Education Programs] are scoring proficient in reading, according to the best

available data. We can and must do better," Michael Yudin, acting assistant

secretary for special education and rehabilitative services, said in a

statement.

Lindsay Jones, director of public policy and advocacy for the National

Center for Learning Disabilities, tells U.S. News in a statement that the

center is pleased with the new system.

"In many ways, it also shows that IDEA has worked! Forty years after passing

it - parents and educators know that students with disabilities are capable

of performing at high levels," Jones says. "It is the system that holds them

back in most cases, not the student. As the results of this new analysis

demonstrate, we need to count results. It is about getting better outcomes

for kids - this new analysis will help us do that."

It's also important to unpack the data, Hymes says, and see which schools

and districts specifically need help.

"If you're in a state that is deemed to be meeting the requirements, there

still can be areas of challenge as well," Hymes says. "The emphasis has to

be on . [looking] from a district and even a school perspective, really, how

students with disabilities are faring and what can be done to help them

better achieve academically, socially, developmentally and of course in

their lifelong ambitions."

[ALSO

<http://www.usnews.com/education/articles/2010/12/02/8-steps-for-learning-di

sabled-students-who-want-to-go-to-college> : 8 Steps for Learning Disabled

Students Who Want to Go to College

<http://www.usnews.com/education/articles/2010/12/02/8-steps-for-learning-di

sabled-students-who-want-to-go-to-college> ]

But Hymes says states should also turn their focus to better preparing

teachers - those in both general education and special education - to meet

the needs of students with disabilities.

"Far too often in preparation programs, addressing the needs of students

with disabilities is siloed . even though we know most students with

disabilities spend the majority of their days in the general classroom,"

Hymes says. "A lot of this starts at preparation and it continues once

educators are in the classroom, so making sure general educators and special

educators get high-quality professional development and training in meeting

the needs of students with disabilities is so important."

Board of Education Meeting and Special Needs Students

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