



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20202

DATE: MAY 21, 2014

Dear Chief State School Officer:

As part of the education community, we have a shared responsibility to do everything within our power to ensure all students, including students with disabilities, receive a high-quality education that prepares them for meaningful opportunities in post-secondary life. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) are working together to ensure that States, districts, schools, principals, and teachers have the support necessary to address the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. To provide our stakeholders and partners with coordinated support, we are collaborating across our offices to deliver more effective monitoring, policies, and technical assistance. The requirements that we administer under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended* (ESEA) focus on providing evidence-based instruction and interventions that prepare students for post-secondary opportunities, which make this collaboration essential.

The purpose of this letter is to solicit your support for and engagement in an important initiative that we expect will improve results for all students, including students with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) is implementing a revised accountability system under the IDEA known as Results-Driven Accountability (RDA), which shifts the Department's accountability efforts from a primary emphasis on compliance to a framework that focuses on improved results for students with disabilities, while continuing to assist States in ensuring compliance with the IDEA's requirements. RDA will emphasize child outcomes such as performance on assessments, graduation rates, and early childhood outcomes. In the coming year, each State will be required to develop a State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) as part of the State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report that the State submits annually in accordance with the IDEA. In developing the SSIP, States will use data to identify gaps in student performance, analyze State systems, and then implement targeted, evidence-based reforms to address the gaps. It is critical for a State to develop the SSIP in a manner that is aligned with the State's existing improvement initiatives and reform efforts. We expect this focus on results and alignment with other improvement work to drive innovation in the delivery of services to students.

We are initiating this shift in accountability based on the need for greater emphasis on improving results for students with disabilities. In 2013, math and reading scores for fourth and eighth graders reached a new high on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Dropout rates are down and college attendance is up, especially for African-American and Latino students. This is real and meaningful progress. However, we cannot claim the same progress for students with disabilities for whom the achievement gaps continued to widen. On the NAEP, from 2009 to 2013, proficiency levels decreased for students with disabilities while they increased for non-disabled students, making the gap in proficiency larger between the two groups. This was the case for fourth and eighth graders in math and reading.

The overwhelming majority of students with disabilities who are served under IDEA do not have cognitive impairments that inhibit their ability to learn grade-level content. Rather, we know that when students with disabilities are held to high expectations, have access to the general curriculum alongside their same-age peers, and receive effective instruction and support, they can achieve to high academic standards.

Students with disabilities make up approximately 13 percent of the school age population, and the majority of these students spend a significant amount of their day in the general education classroom. In fact, 60 percent of students with disabilities spend 80 percent or more of their day in general education, and 80 percent of students with disabilities spend 40 percent or more of their day in the general education environment. Given these numbers, it is clear that a comprehensive, integrated strategy which leverages all available resources, strongly supported by your agency is essential if we are to fulfill the ideals of IDEA: equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for students with disabilities.

The Department is committed to supporting States in improving results for all students, including students with disabilities, and we are investing significant resources toward that commitment. Starting in the late spring, staff from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and OESE will be providing technical assistance to support your State as it develops Phase I of its SSIP. This will not be a compliance monitoring review, but rather a dialogue among OSEP, OESE, and State staff designed to assist the State in developing an ambitious, yet achievable, SSIP. **When OSEP and OESE staff conduct the SSIP technical assistance visit or conference calls, please ensure that the key general education offices (e.g., ESEA flexibility (if applicable), Title I, Title III, Professional Development, School Improvement, etc.) in your State actively participate in the process.** We believe that only through a coordinated effort across the education system will we be able to positively affect the school and life trajectory of students with disabilities.

Thank you for your support for better outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

Sincerely,

/s/

Deborah S. Delisle  
Assistant Secretary for Elementary and  
Secondary Education

/s/

Michael Yudin  
Acting Assistant Secretary for Special  
Education and Rehabilitative Services