



GAO Report: Inadequate Federal Oversight, Inconsistent State Policies and Practices Are to Blame for Failure to Identify Children, Infants, and Toddlers with Disabilities

Wide disparities in state practices combined with poor oversight from the Department of Education is allowing thousands of children with disabilities to fall through the cracks

Why did the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct this study?

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), the primary federal special education law, requires states to have policies and procedures in place to ensure that all children with disabilities residing in the state who need special education services are identified, located, and evaluated. These policies and procedures—known as “Child Find”—are generally implemented by local school districts.

Between 2012 and 2016, the percentage of children with disabilities receiving special education services across the country changed by less than a percentage point. However, there are wide disparities in special education enrollment rates across states and this has raised red flags for education experts and special education advocates. For example, in fall 2016, the percentages of the population aged 6 through 21 receiving special education services in individual states ranged from 6.4 percent to 15.1 percent.

How was this study conducted?

The GAO was asked to examine how states implement Child Find and how the Department of Education monitors compliance with Child Find requirements. This report examines (1) factors that may account for differences in the percentage of children receiving special education services across states and (2) how the Department and selected states monitor, and support Child Find efforts.

What were the key findings?

- Child Find practices vary by state, which results in under- and mis-identification of children, infants, and toddlers with disabilities. The differences in states' eligibility criteria and the difficulty of identifying and evaluating some children suspected of having disabilities are likely both contributing to differences in the rate of children receiving special education services across states.
- The Department of Education, which is responsible for ensuring states are properly serving students with disabilities, is not conducting adequate oversight of Child Find practices. Instead of examining the effectiveness of state practices, the Department is only reviewing whether states are completing those practices on time.
- Professional development and technical assistance are not aligned with challenges identified on Child Find activities and are not addressing the issues needed for improvement.

What can be done to resolve this?

The Department of Education must use its oversight authority to correct the wide disparities in special education enrollment rates so that all children with disabilities are receiving adequate support. IDEA's Child Find requirement is clear, and it is the Department of Education's responsibility to ensure federal funds are used to support children with disabilities who need specialized services to receive a free appropriate public education.