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Realizing the Promises of Special Education

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Congressional funding of special education equal to the states' additional costs, requiring the use of available instructional technologies, a stronger emphasis on developing practical job skills and a greater commitment from employers should be the future of special education in America.

In the early 19th century, Horace Mann won popular support for universal public education in Massachusetts. The public school movement eventually spread to all states. From those early days until the latter 20th century, more often than not, disabled children were not routinely admitted to the new public schools. Nearly 150 years after Mann's education revolution started, that discriminatory practice began to change.

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). The new law required participating states to provide a "free and appropriate public education" to all children with disabilities - commonly referred to as "special education and related services." Before 1975, at least one million disabled children were barred from entering the public schools, while millions more were admitted only to face inadequate services - and frequently expulsion at the first sign of difficulty or expense in accommodating their needs. Prior to the law's enactment, school system leaders explained that public schools were simply ill-equipped to educate disabled children, as they lacked the necessary staff, equipment, funding and training to do so. To a significant degree, of course, this was an accurate appraisal in 1975. Unfortunately, although to a lesser degree, that continues to be the case in 2013.

As the 40th anniversary of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act approaches, funding continues to be a central problem in special education. Although, at first, Congress promised to fund entirely the additional cost of educating disabled students, that promise has dwindled to a commitment to funding 40 percent of that additional cost. Congress has failed even to achieve that reduced benchmark. Sadly, Congressional funding of IDEIA, also known as IDEA, has rarely broken the 18 percent mark.

While disagreements between parent/student advocacy groups and school administration groups are common when it comes to special education, on this point they are in complete agreement: the goals of the IDEA are unlikely to be realized without Congress fully funding the law they created. See "IDEA Funding: Time for Congress to Live Up to the Commitment. Mandatory Funding Proposal, March 2006" by the IDEA Funding Coalition, available at **www. principals.org/portals/0/content/53654.pdf**. This first fundamental step is the foundation on which meaningful progress for special needs students will be built.



Few things offer more promise for the improved education of special needs students than the technological innovations of the past decade. The invention of the tablet and the sea of educational apps produced each year have opened avenues to learning that we are only just now beginning to appreciate. With the tablet devices' entertaining interface and the apps' highly intuitive and easy use, this one development - creating learning experiences children greatly enjoy while saving crucial data for teachers to analyze, allowing for differentiated and individually tailored instruction - will undoubtedly lead to better outcomes for special education and regular education students alike. For these better outcomes to happen, current and future educators, as well as teacher preparation institutions, must embrace this technology and state governments must require, not merely encourage, educators to become very proficient with its use.

The desired outcome from additional Congressional funding and the incorporation of technology in special education is simple to describe, but seemingly very difficult to achieve: young men and women who are ready for the workforce or further education. Public educators and parents alike work so very hard to prepare these students. However, in many cases, students are not realizing either of these outcomes. Schools and state departments of education need help from employers; help understanding what jobs are likely to be available for their special needs students; and help in developing a curriculum that emphasizes the skills needed for these jobs. While IDEA does require transition planning for students once they turn 16, the objectives of those plans are very hard to achieve, absent cooperation from employers and agencies that work with disabled persons. If more special education students are going to turn their school successes into productive lives, a more seamless connection between the world of secondary special education and the employment world must be developed by all stakeholders. W



The stated purpose of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 is:

- to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living;
- to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected;
- to assist states, localities, educational service agencies and federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities;
- to assist states in the implementation of a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families;
- to ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities; coordinated research and personnel preparation; coordinated technical assistance, dissemination, and support; and technology development and media services; and
- to assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities.