



Help or Harmful? The Federal Role in Supporting Students with Disabilities in Schools



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

In today's installment, [Edward García Fierros](#) addresses the federal role in supporting students with disabilities. Fierros is Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Villanova University. He is also Associate Professor of Education in the Department of Education and Counseling at Villanova. His expertise includes testing and measurement, diversity and equity in assessment, multiple intelligences theory, and educational policy related to underrepresented students. Fierros has written numerous journal articles and co-authored *Multiple Intelligences: Best Ideas from Research and Practice*.

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

The federal government's involvement in the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) stems from a historical commitment to ensuring equal educational oppor-

tunities for all students, regardless of their disabilities. Prior to IDEA, many children with disabilities were excluded from public education or did not receive the support needed to succeed in school. IDEA, originally enacted in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was a response to parent advocacy about the widespread discrimination and inadequate services for students with disabilities. The federal government stepped in to mandate that all children with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate public education ([FAPE](#)) [in the least restrictive environment](#). This act was part of a broader civil rights movement aimed at eliminating discrimination against marginalized groups.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement been helpful or harmful to preparing students with disabilities to succeed in college, career and life?*

The federal government's involvement in supporting students with special needs has included both helpful and harmful aspects.

Helpful aspects:

- The IDEA has been instrumental in ensuring that students with disabilities receive the support they need to succeed in school. This includes individualized education programs (IEPs), specialized instruction, and necessary accommodations. Of course, "equal is relative." [Equal is more equal for students](#) with strong parent and/or caregiver advocacy.
- Federal involvement in supporting students with disabilities has led to the standardization of services across states, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to similar resources regardless of where they live.
- IDEA provides legal protections for students and their families, giving them rights that can be upheld in the education system. Again, however, parental advocacy is key.

Harmful aspects:

- The IDEA's federal mandates can sometimes lead to bureaucratic challenges, making it difficult for schools, educators, and parents to implement individualized programs effectively.
- The one-size-fits-all model will inevitably miss students who need support because of their specific individual needs, as I discuss further in response to the next question (about how the federal role should shift). Federal involvement may and probably has led to a rigidity that might not address the unique needs of students of different genders and sexual orientations, potentially limiting their preparation for college, career, and life.

Aspects with elements of both help and harm:

- Congress passed the IDEA with the intention of covering 40% of the costs asso-

ciated with educating students with special needs. However, the IDEA's federal funding covers only a portion of the costs of special education, with state and local governments providing most of the funding. [Federal contributions typically cover about 15% of the total cost.](#) Poor school districts pay a greater percentage of their limited funds than wealthier school districts, so the funding shortfall has a differential impact on districts depending on their local tax base.

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

The federal role in the IDEA could shift from strict bureaucratic rules towards more flexible guidelines that allow for localized decision-making, while still maintaining oversight to ensure equal access and rights protection. For example, the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2002 led to an increase in students with special needs' inclusion in regular classroom setting. Yet, for many students, inclusion in the regular classroom setting was detrimental to their schooling experience. Flexibility could allow schools to tailor programs more effectively to the diverse needs of students, particularly regarding race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, federal oversight should remain to prevent discrimination and ensure that all students receive appropriate support.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

- [Project 2025](#): Calls for moving IDEA oversight and implementation to the Department of Health and Human Services (p. 349) and for “most IDEA funding” to “be converted into a no-strings formula block grant targeted at students with disabilities and distributed directly to local education agencies by Health and Human Service’s Administration for Community Living” (p. 326). The overall push is for this federal funding—along with most other federal funding—to be shifted to either block grants to states (with few or no restrictions) or to voucher-like systems (again, with few or no restrictions).
- [RNC National Platform](#): The Republican National Committee (RNC) platform does not directly address supporting the IDEA. The RNC platform emphasizes state and local control over education, advocating for reducing federal involvement. So, any federal oversight and a strong desire to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education would likely shift the IDEA support to the states. This would likely lead to an emphasis on giving states more flexibility in implementation on programming and supports for supporting students with disabilities.
- [DNC National Platform](#): The platform generally supports robust federal involvement in education, including strong support for IDEA. (“We support fully funding IDEA to prioritize students with disabilities and the special educator workforce” (p. 26).) It emphasizes the protection of civil rights and equal access to education for all students, including those with disabilities.

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

- **Project 2025:** Removing IDEA oversight from the Department of Education to the Department of Health and Human Services would be disastrous for [students with special needs and their families](#). The IDEA came about to provide students with a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Project 2025's proposed change in oversight and formula block grant scheme would [undermine or eliminate mandates that local education agencies support students with special needs](#). Without the federal protection of the IDEA, states could use the funds to fund alternative priorities like school vouchers.

Project 2025 seems to be part of a broader trend within conservative policymaking circles to prioritize other education issues over disability rights (e.g., school vouchers, privatizing public schooling). This comes with reduced federal oversight, especially if oversight was shifted to states that could easily choose not to fund funding for students with disabilities. A reduced federal role in supporting students with disabilities could end up harming the standardization and protection currently provided by IDEA.

- **RNC Platform:** The RNC's emphasis on state and local control would likely allow for more tailored approaches to education, which might benefit some students, especially those students who would benefit from programs such as school vouchers. And there is a risk that without strong federal oversight, disparities in access and quality of education for students with disabilities could increase.
- **DNC Platform:** The DNC's support for federal involvement in supporting students with disabilities aligns with the historical intent of IDEA, focusing on protecting civil rights and ensuring equal access. This approach is supported by research showing that federal oversight is crucial for maintaining standards and protecting vulnerable populations.

[Educational research overwhelmingly suggests](#) that federal involvement in education, particularly through IDEA, has been crucial in providing consistent support and protecting the rights of students with disabilities. [Inclusion of students with special needs has become the norm in U.S. public schools and a right for all students](#). However, there is a need for a balanced approach that allows for local flexibility while maintaining federal protections to address the diverse needs of students, including those of different genders and sexual orientations. Shifting towards more localized control to states would need to be carefully managed to avoid exacerbating disparities in educational quality and access.

NEPC Resources on Special Education

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