

Guest Blog: Why the IDEA is Important

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If someone asked me what I remember from my own Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, I would say, "Muffins!" My mother would always bring muffins to these meetings to show appreciation. When I was young, I thought these meetings were long and boring, but looking back now, I realize they helped lay the foundation for my academic success.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the United States and ensures special education and related services to those children. The IDEA mandates the creation and maintenance of an IEP for each student with a disability. The IEP outlines the student's relevant needs and possible accommodations that could enable their success within the school environment.

It is wonderful that the IDEA was put in place, but like any law, it can be hard to understand, implement, and fund. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is a federal agency tasked with enforcing the IDEA and providing guidance and financial support to states and school districts as they implement the IDEA. OSEP is a suboffice in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), which is housed within the U.S. Department of Education. President Donald Trump has expressed a desire to dismantle the Department of Education, and in October 2025, 121 OSERS employees were laid off. These jobs were later reinstated in mid-November, but that deal is set to end on January 30, and the future of OSEP is less than certain.

I recently looked at one of my IEPs and was surprised at how lengthy it was. It listed the services and

accommodations I needed, but it also contained reports from my teachers and classroom aide about how I was doing in the classroom and areas in which I could improve.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2022-23 school year, the number of students ages 3 to 21 who received special education and/or related services under the IDEA was 7.5 million, or 15 percent of all public school students. That is a lot of IEPs. I can understand why educators might feel overwhelmed by all the paperwork and the responsibility to meet each student's needs.

My cerebral palsy has both visible and invisible aspects. I was placed in mainstream classrooms from preschool onward and loved it, but without the academic accommodations listed in my IEP, I could not have succeeded. Some examples are enlarging the font size on assignments, having extended time on tests, circling answers instead of filling in a scantron, and typing assignments.

According to the 2022-23 school year data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the top two categories under which students were served under the IDEA were specific learning disabilities (32%) and speech or language impairments (19%), and autism was number four (13%). In each of these categories, the disability is invisible. The outward visibility of a disability should not dictate whether or not a student receives services.

By providing for the future of Special Education and its oversight, we are preparing for future generations of students to thrive. It is quite possible that without the availability of special education and its regulations, I and many others would not have been able to develop or showcase our strengths.

Special Education training and oversight should be safeguarded. The benefits can go far beyond scholastic performance. I had my physical and occupational therapies listed on my IEP, and to this day, my parents and I still do some of the stretches and exercises we've learned from my therapists over the years. Under therapists' guidance, I walked around the school gym each day with a walker. Today, I am walking around the gym at my local community center as part of maintaining my good health. Simply put, Special Education is important because the benefits (academic and otherwise) can last a lifetime.

Work Cited

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