



Shortchanging Special Needs Students

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Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), last reauthorized in December 2004, states are required to have in place a performance plan (Part B State Performance Plan, or SPP) detailing how they will evaluate their implementation of the law.

For the sixth consecutive year, the District of Columbia has failed to meet IDEA goals, the worst record nationally, according to Education Week. The annual reports review suspension and expulsion rates for special needs students; the proportion of racial and ethnic groups in special education programs; and how promptly students receive special education services evaluations. As Education Week reports:

While 10 other state and territory school systems, including the Federal Bureau of Indian Education Schools, received a “needs intervention” rating from the federal government this year, no other state comes close to having as consistently poor a record as the District of Columbia for its provision of special education services.

But don't blame such poor performance on poor funding. The Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson reports that DC public schools get \$30,000 per pupil—and that's excluding students with disabilities whose special needs often require substantially more funding.

School choice is a better way to get students with special needs the services they need, without all the bureaucracy and overhead. Seven states have special needs voucher special-needs student scholarship programs: Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah. Four states have special-needs student tax-credit scholarship programs, many of which include students from foster care and military dependents who often have special educational needs: Arizona, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Arizona became the first state in 2011 to offer parents educational savings accounts (ESAs). Under the program, parents who opt to take their children out of public schools receive 90 percent of the per-pupil funding their children's public schools would have received to enroll them. With those funds parents can send their children to private schools, hire tutors, purchase special educational services such as online courses, or save for college.

Parents and their children shouldn't have to wait years for public schools and government bureaucracies to act. Voucher and tax-credit scholarships, along with ESAs offer necessary options now.