

Research In Focus: A Consumer's Research Digest from the NIDILRR Community

To Improve IDEA, Parents Draw from Experience.

IEP, LRE, FAPE. These acronyms are part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), landmark federal legislation that ensures children with disabilities in the US have equal opportunity to receive a free and appropriate public education. IDEA gives parents a central role in advocating for their child's access to the services and supports they need from preschool through graduation. While parents are at the heart of the process, in the last reauthorization of IDEA, less than 4 percent of the comments collected from the public came from individual parents. One study shows that parents have specific ideas on how to improve this law

Researchers from the NIDILRR-funded project on [Advanced Training in Translational and Transformational Research to Improve Outcomes for People with Disabilities](#) at the University of Illinois conducted a study with parents of children with intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities to find out their thoughts on how IDEA can be improved. The researchers taught parents about the IDEA reauthorization process and how to advocate for changes and improvements. Parents then recorded simulated testimonies they might give when IDEA is up for reauthorization, specifically what they would say to lawmakers about the barriers and supports they had experienced in the special education process. These parents had some specific suggestions to improve IDEA as listed below.

Parents Said IDEA Should Include More Supports:

- Students and parents should have access to applied behavior analysis services.
- IDEA should require smaller teacher-student ratios.

Parents Said IDEA Should Be More Specific:

- Transition planning should start earlier, as early as 12 to 14 years old.
- Transition planning should require specialists like job coaches with strong assessment tools.
- IDEA should define the ratio of students with and without disabilities in a general education classroom.
- IDEA should clearly define learning disabilities (LD), so children with LD have early access to needed supports.

Parents Said IDEA Should Maintain or Increase Stipulations:

- Currently, federal funding for special education is usually 8-12% leaving states to bear the remaining fiscal costs. Congress should provide full federal funding for IDEA.
- IDEA should continue to require documentation to ensure children with disabilities receive needed services

This study focused on the experiences of parents of children with intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities; therefore, providing a “snapshot” of a specific segment of parent concerns. Because the researchers found that parents of school-age or adult children had different concerns than those of young children, future studies could look at how parents’ concerns change over time. Other areas for research include comparing the experiences of parents from different cultures and backgrounds and gathering input from students themselves. Current and future findings from studies like these could provide valuable perspective as lawmakers look to improve and enhance laws like IDEA.

To Learn More:

[Learn more about how laws like IDEA are written](#) and [how Federal agencies collect comments](#) (PDF). The study authors suggest parents gather their thoughts into a statement with a “hook, line, and sinker.” Introduce themselves, their child, their district, and the challenges their child’s disability presents (the Hook). Describe the main concerns, with a story that illustrates them (the Line). Then tell them what they want changed and how they would change it (the Sinker). To see the videotaped testimonials of the parents in this study, go to: <http://ahs.uic.edu/cl/familyclinics/advocacy/>

Also, every state has a Parent Training and Information Center designed to help families understand their special education rights. To find a Parent Training and Information Center, go to: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>

To read the original article: Burke, Meghan M., and Linda Sandman. (2015). [In the voices of parents: Suggestions for the next IDEA reauthorization](#). Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 40(1), 71-85. The abstract is available free of charge and the full article may be purchased from the publisher. This document may also be ordered from [NARIC’s document delivery service](#) as Article J71799.

Research In Focus is a publication of the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC), a library and information center focusing on disability and rehabilitation research, with a special focus on the research funded by NIDILRR. NARIC provides information, referral, and document delivery on a wide range of disability and rehabilitation topics. To learn more about this study and the work of the greater NIDILRR grantee community, visit NARIC at www.naric.com or call 800/346-2742 to speak to an information specialist.

NARIC operates under a contract from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, contract #GS-06F-0726Z.