

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-25](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

When IDEA was reauthorized in 2004, it included provisions to reduce administrative and paperwork requirements to address concerns about burden. GAO was asked to review federal efforts to reduce burden related to meeting IDEA requirements for educating children with disabilities. Congress provided about \$11.5 billion in grants in fiscal year 2015 under IDEA Part B to help states and local districts defray the costs of special education services for nearly 6.6 million students ages 3 to 21.

This report examines (1) what Education and states have done to implement selected IDEA provisions intended to reduce burden, (2) stakeholder views about IDEA's administrative and paperwork requirements, and (3) steps that Education and others have taken to minimize IDEA-related burden.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations; held nongeneralizable focus groups with state and local administrators and educators from 37 states; visited schools in Clinton, Arkansas and Rochester, New York; and interviewed officials from Education and stakeholder organizations. GAO selected focus group participants, site visit locations, and organizations to highlight a range of demographic and geographic characteristics and obtain perspectives from a variety of stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any recommendations at this time.

View [GAO-16-25](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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SPECIAL EDUCATION

State and Local-Imposed Requirements Complicate Federal Efforts to Reduce Administrative Burden

What GAO Found

In response to the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—the primary federal law governing education of children with disabilities—the Department of Education (Education) attempted to reduce administrative burden by creating pilot programs and publishing model paperwork forms, but states have used these tools sparingly. Specifically, Education created pilot programs allowing states to use multi-year rather than annual individualized education programs (IEP) to describe services to meet each student's needs, and to waive certain federal paperwork requirements. However, no state applied for these pilots, citing a perceived lack of benefit, and inadequate funding to implement and evaluate the pilots. As required by law, Education also published templates, known as model forms, to help states streamline the process of preparing IEPs and comply with parent notice requirements in IDEA. Although some states and school districts adopted at least one of these model forms, they have used others primarily as a starting point to develop their own forms. State and district officials told GAO this allowed them to meet federal as well as state and local requirements, and provided better protection against potential litigation. Stakeholders were mixed in their views about the effects of other provisions intended to reduce administrative burden. For example, several stakeholders viewed a provision allowing states to use more grant funds for paperwork reduction activities as helpful; others said the effect of a provision eliminating benchmarks and short-term objectives for IEPs was largely negligible.

Stakeholders across 9 focus groups—3 each with state administrators, local administrators, and educators—said that state-imposed requirements contribute to the administrative and paperwork burden, but their views on the burdens and benefits of federal IDEA requirements varied somewhat. For example, in focus groups, educators expressed concerns about monitoring and documenting student progress, while local and state administrators expressed concerns, respectively, about IEP implementation and federal reporting requirements. Consistent with prior research, many educators in these focus groups estimated they spend roughly one to two hours daily on administrative tasks, and expressed concern about this taking time away from the classroom. Despite perceived burdens, stakeholders widely acknowledged that IDEA's requirements play an important role in accountability. For example, educators said the requirements provide information about student strengths and limitations that help them assist the student, while state administrators said requirements aid planning and program development.

Education, states, and school districts have reduced administrative burdens by adopting new technology and using certain resource strategies. For example, several state administrators said Education's electronic data submission system has made it easier to complete federally-required state performance plans. During fall 2014, Education launched a new electronic reporting system intended to, among other things, consolidate data collections and ease data entry. Some schools and districts have also adopted resource strategies, such as hiring data clerks to reduce administrative burdens, but these strategies can be costly.