

Why GAO Did This Study

About 13 percent of children aged 3 through 21 enrolled in public schools received special education services in school year 2015-16, and about 3 percent of children from birth through age 2 received special education services. The percentage of the population served under IDEA varies across states. For example, in fall 2016, the percentages of the population aged 6 through 21 served in individual states ranged from 6.4 percent to 15.1 percent. Concerns about the difficulties identifying and evaluating children for special education have been raised by the media, experts, and special education advocates.

GAO was asked to examine how states implement Child Find and how Education monitors it. This report examines (1) factors that may account for differences in the percentage of children receiving special education services across states, and (2) how Education and selected states monitor and support Child Find efforts.

GAO reviewed federal special education data, agency documentation, federal laws and regulations, and selected state laws; and interviewed Education officials, officials from four state agencies and 15 school districts in those states (Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, and New York), and representatives of organizations that advocate for families of individuals with disabilities as well as special education subject matter specialists. GAO selected the four states based on a variety of factors, including the percentage of special education students.

View [GAO-19-348](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

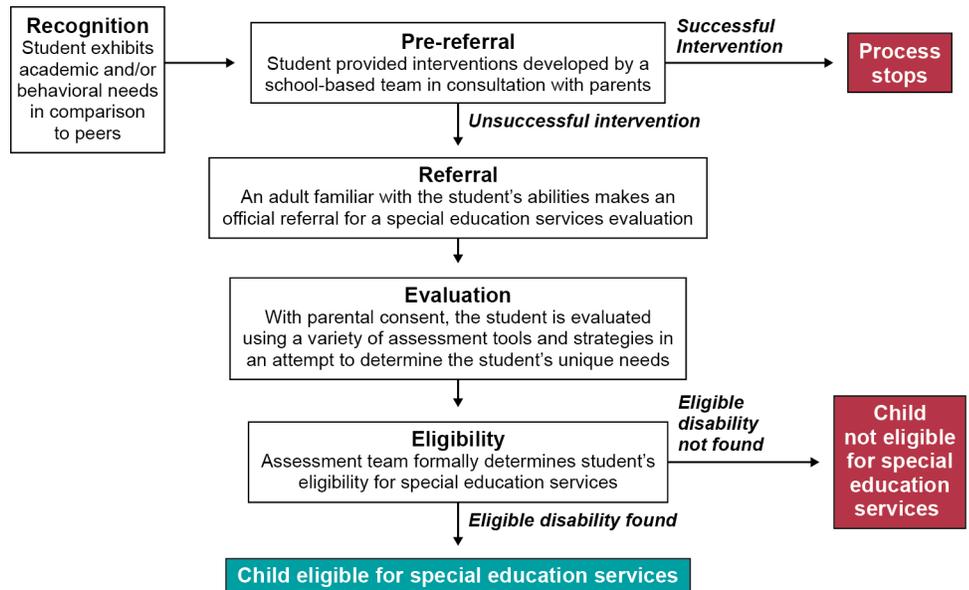
SPECIAL EDUCATION

Varied State Criteria May Contribute to Differences in Percentages of Children Served

What GAO Found

Differences in states' eligibility criteria and the difficulty of identifying and evaluating some children suspected of having disabilities may contribute to differences in the percentages of children receiving special education services across states. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the primary federal special education law, requires states to have policies and procedures in place to ensure that all children with disabilities residing in the state who need special education services are identified, located, and evaluated. These policies and procedures—known as “Child Find”—are generally implemented by local school districts (see fig.). IDEA gives states some latitude in setting eligibility criteria and defining disability categories. In addition, states may determine their own processes for identifying and evaluating children. As a result, a child eligible for services in one state might be ineligible in another. According to advocates, special education subject matter specialists, and state and local officials GAO interviewed, a number of challenges related to correctly identifying and evaluating children suspected of having a disability can affect eligibility decisions. For example, school district officials in all four states GAO visited cited challenges in properly identifying and evaluating English Learner students, as districts do not always have staff who are conversant in a child's first language and skilled in distinguishing language proficiency from disabilities.

Typical Special Education Process for School-Aged Children and Young Adults



Source: GAO analysis of information from selected state agencies and special education advocacy groups. | GAO-19-348

The Department of Education (Education) monitors and supports Child Find efforts primarily by reviewing states' annual performance data and providing professional development and technical assistance. The four states GAO visited reported monitoring and supporting school districts' efforts in a similar manner to Education's.