



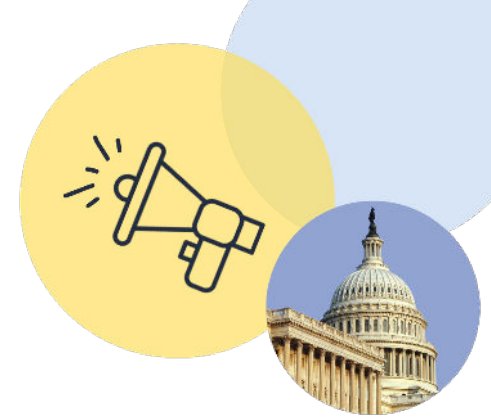
**National Center for Learning
Disabilities' 2025–2026**

Policy Agenda

The National Center for Learning Disabilities partners with educators, students, families, and young adults to advance innovative research and advocate for equitable policies that address systemic barriers in schools, workplaces, and communities.



“For decades, NCLD has been the leader in advocating for policies for individuals with LD that are both sound and practical. The 2025–26 policy agenda continues that tradition; however, given the rapidly changing educational landscape this year’s agenda is also visionary in order to account for many of these changes.”



Donald Deshler, Ph.D., Williamson Family Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Special Education and founder and former Director of the Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas

Overview

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) has spent nearly 50 years focused on education policy, ensuring the rights of students with specific learning disabilities are upheld and barriers within schools are removed. However, systemic barriers and ableism extend beyond educational systems, affecting the transition to and success in employment.

In 2024, we [surveyed](#) approximately 1,300 young adults with learning disabilities and our findings highlighted the importance of sense of belonging: which happens when educational, professional, and social systems are designed from the onset to be inclusive. Forthcoming in 2025 is findings from our survey of educators—both general and special educators—and the implications for policy and practice.

These policy recommendations are rooted in the important role the federal government has in providing access and opportunities for students with disabilities, supporting state and local efforts in education and workforce development and holding them accountable. The U.S. Department of Education is essential for holding states and districts accountable for providing students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education. The federal government has important responsibilities, including providing funding, technical assistance and supporting states and school districts to advance student achievement— especially for historically disadvantaged groups like students with disabilities.

Investing in our education systems and ensuring policymakers understand the specific needs of individuals with learning disabilities is of utmost importance to NCLD. A robust education generates worthwhile economic benefits for individuals, communities, and society.

To understand more about specific issues, including what we know from research and lived experiences, how this shapes our positions, and how we seek to change policy at both federal and state levels, check out our [advocacy center](#) and sign up to receive updates.

K-12 Education for Students with Learning Disabilities

[The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) was enacted in 1975, 50 years ago, which marks an important milestone for a key civil rights law. Our nation's special education law is unique and its principles, including child find and a least restrictive environment, have transformed the ways children with disabilities learn in schools. Today, its influence, coupled with other critical federal laws including the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), must be upheld to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education and schools are held accountable for doing so.

IDEA's Protections

Child Find

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school districts are required to identify, locate and evaluate all children with disabilities, from birth through age 21. The Child Find mandate applies to all children who reside within a State, including children who attend public and private schools.

Least Restrictive Environment

Least restrictive environment (LRE) means students identified as having a disability should be in the same classrooms as their non-disabled peers as much as possible.

Therefore, NCLD will advocate for:

- Ensuring robust funding for federal education programs, especially within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Increases in IDEA-eligible children have created stark funding disparities.

In 1975, Congress pledged a federal funding level of 40% of the average per pupil expenditure (APPE) for students with disabilities. IDEA serves over 7

million children with disabilities, a number that has grown significantly over the past decade. Today, the federal contribution is less than 11% of APPE or approximately \$1,800 per child – a far cry from [fully funding IDEA](#).

- Providing meaningful family involvement in developing and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs), with clearly defined due process rights for parents.
- Implementing early screening and identification of learning disabilities using accurate and evidence-based practices, adhering to NCLD's [joint principles for SLD eligibility](#) with specific attention to significant disproportionality.

What is significant disproportionality?

Years of research point to inequities in education for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities. These inequities are particularly apparent when it comes to rates of discipline and special education enrollment. The term "significant disproportionality" is used to describe the widespread trend of students of certain racial and ethnic groups being identified for special education, placed in more restrictive educational settings, and disciplined at markedly higher rates than their peers.

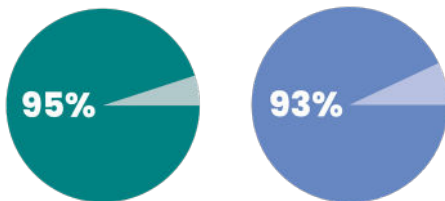
We support maintaining the Equity in IDEA regulations, which are essential for ensuring students of color with disabilities are not disproportionately placed. Previous [litigation](#) required these regulations to go into effect.

- Maintaining federal data collection and reporting to assess resources, evaluate student outcomes, and enable targeted support to states. This includes:
 - ◊ Data and reporting under Section 618 of IDEA, which ensures states are adhering to IDEA but also captures nationwide snapshots and trends, such as increases in eligible children served, placement in the least restrictive environment, and other data.

- ◊ The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) provides crucial information from public schools disaggregated by protected characteristics, including disability status.
- Adopting effective literacy and numeracy initiatives and policies, including ones that are informed by evidence-based practices, coined the Science of Reading and the Science of Math.

What We Know: Literacy and Numeracy

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), most students with a specific learning disability (SLD) are not performing at a proficient level on the [reading](#) and [math](#) assessments.



According to 2022 data, more than **95%** of 4th and 8th grade students with SLD are not proficient in Reading and more than **93%** are not proficient in Math.

- Maintaining strong federal requirements for statewide summative assessments and accountability systems that adhere to NCLD’s [core principles for innovative assessments](#).
- Preparing and retaining high-quality educators, including ensuring general education teachers are equipped to support students with disabilities. This includes addressing chronic educator shortages with resources and focusing on strategies that address the full pipeline of the profession.
- Keeping [public funds in public schools](#) because private schools do not have to abide by federal civil rights laws for students with disabilities such as IDEA.

- ◊ Proposals such as “IDEA portability”, or funds following the child to any educational setting, take much-needed resources out of public schools that provide FAPE.

- Fostering safe and healthy positive school climates by addressing disproportionate rates of restraint and seclusion, corporal punishment, school hardening measures, and youth mental health needs.
- Providing high-quality transition services for students with disabilities, including those defined by IDEA and the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#) (WIOA).
- Enabling college and career pathways with equitable access to opportunities such as dual enrollment, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate coursework, and career and technical education.
- Supporting digital access and inclusion for students with disabilities as educational technologies (including artificial intelligence and assistive technology) rapidly emerge, while also ensuring technologies are procured and employed responsibly so that they do not cause harm.

Voices from Our Community

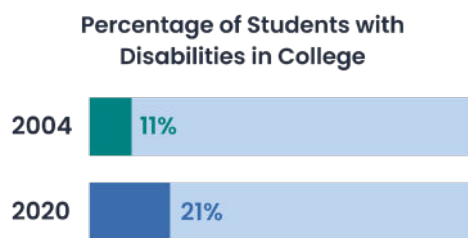
“The IEP process is not just about putting plans in place; it’s about building a bridge of communication and accountability between parents and schools. When parents are empowered to advocate for their children, the process becomes a partnership rather than a struggle. Yet, this is not the end of the road for students who rely on accommodations—it is only the beginning.”

DeAndrea, NCLD Family Leadership Council Member



Postsecondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities are participating in postsecondary education opportunities at higher rates than ever before. A recent [report](#) by the Government Accountability Office estimated 21% of all college students had a disability in 2020 compared to 11% in 2004. Yet, these systems continue to present barriers that result in lower completion and graduation rates compared to non-disabled students.



To improve access and inclusion within these programs and institutions, NCLD will advocate for:

- Providing equitable access to accommodations and postsecondary services, including removing documentation barriers.

Congress should pass the Respond, Innovate, Succeed and Empower (RISE) Act

Congress should require institutions to accept existing documentation as proof of a disability, including an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan.

Currently, students are required to provide costly documentation such as a new psychoeducational evaluation to prove a disability in order to obtain postsecondary accommodations.

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- Bolstering digital access for disabled college students, including ensuring accessible course materials and integration of technologies into the interactive accommodations process.

- ◊ Maintain and enforce ADA Title II regulations which set important web accessibility standards for institutions of higher education, amongst other entities.
- Effectively training and providing resources for faculty and staff on disability rights and accessibility, [Universal Design for Learning](#), and support strategies.
- Ensuring that students with disabilities who receive accommodations for their pace of study are eligible for financial aid grants aligned with their need for a reduced course load.
 - ◊ For example, the Pell Grant Flexibility Act and the Higher Education Grant Flexibility Act propose such changes to make higher education more accessible to learners with disabilities.
- Collecting and tracking comprehensive, longitudinal data on students with disabilities in higher education.
 - ◊ Such data should be used to identify persistence and completion trends and link to best practices and accessibility efforts and can be incorporated in existing legislative data system reform proposals such as the College Transparency Act.

Voices from Our Community

“My learning disability still affects me to this day, I literally have to use text to speech to be able to carry out reading activities, even taking this survey.”

Young Adult, State of LD Survey Participant

“It is difficult for me to access the educational materials I need as well as accommodations because of my learning disability.”

Young Adult, State of LD Survey Participant

Workforce Development and Employment for People with Learning Disabilities

Identifying and removing employment and workforce barriers is essential to create more inclusive workplaces for people with disabilities. Laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are critical for protecting people with disabilities from discrimination in employment, but the ADA is a floor not a ceiling. NCLD will advocate for:

- Sufficient funding and resources to enable access to workforce development services to help people with disabilities find and keep jobs, including the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

Workforce Development for People with Disabilities

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023 marked the highest recorded percentage of individuals with disabilities who were employed since data was first collected in 2008. Despite this progress, the rate of employment for individuals with disabilities is still 33 percent lower than for those without disabilities.

Approximately 745,000 people receive workforce development services from Vocational Rehabilitation, including 115,000 with a learning disability. Other federally funded workforce development programs support people with barriers to employment but more work must be done to make these opportunities fully inclusive for neurodivergent people.

- Promoting disability access and inclusion in employment, including leveraging federal funding for research on workplace equity for people with disabilities and supporting the work and initiatives of the Office of Disability Employment Policy within the U.S. Department of Labor.
- Eliminating subminimum wages for people with disabilities and supporting competitive integrated employment.
 - ◊ For example, the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act would provide grants to states to phase out the use of subminimum wage certificates (14c of the Fair Labor Standards Act).
- Place greater emphasis on inter and intra-agency coordination of workforce development services at all levels (federal, state, and local) to remove silos between Vocational Rehabilitation and other WIOA programs.
- Carefully investigating the role of artificial intelligence for algorithmic bias that may be discriminating against people with disabilities in the workplace, such as [digitized hiring assessments](#).

Voices from Our Community

"I have advocated for accommodations at work but been denied. I have a really great job overall and understand my rights but am afraid to ask for more because of the fear of being fired. I think this is common in the disability community— knowing how to advocate for yourself but being unable to do so because of the potential consequences."

Young Adult, State of LD Survey Participant

With each new Congress, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) develops a federal policy agenda to 1) advance key issues and 2) promote opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities and attention issues. We create the agenda based on research and feedback from our community.



**National
Center for
Learning
Disabilities**



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unlimited opportunity.