



NASP Position Statement on Advocacy for Appropriate Educational Services for All Children

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) achieved major goals in serving children with disabilities, many who previously had been excluded from appropriate education programs. Since its enactment in 1975, all children with disabilities have been guaranteed a free and appropriate public education, the right to due process, and individualization of instruction according to need. The National Association of School Psychologists strongly supports the continuation of legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which has mandated these guarantees.

NASP recognizes that serious problems have been encountered as school districts strive to meet these mandates while assuring a quality education for all students. Some of these problems reflect difficulties within special education; others have their origins in the general education system.

Some significant problems involve reverse sides of the issue of access to appropriate education: (1) On the one hand, access to special education must be assured for all children with disabilities identified under state and federal regulation who need and can benefit from it. (2) Conversely, some children who may not be truly disabled are labeled and placed in special education inappropriately because of: (a) a lack of general education options designed to meet the needs of children with diverse learning styles; (b) at times, a lack of understanding of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; and (c) inappropriate application of measurement technologies that focus on labels for placement rather than on information to improve instruction and learning. It is not a benign action to label children as "having a disability" if they do not, in fact, have a disability, even when this is done in order to provide them with services unavailable in general education. This is an unfortunate result of categorical models that attach funding to classifications/labels.

Other problems with the current classification system include:

- Labels that are often irrelevant to instruction needs.
- Particularly for students with mild disabilities or low achievement, the use of arbitrarily defined categories based on specific deficit labels. These distinctions come to be accepted as "real," often preventing more meaningful assessment and understanding of students' psycho-educational needs.
- Reduced expectations for children who are placed in special education programs.
- Costly assessment processes focused on eligibility determination that often deflect limited resources from the identification of functional instructional

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needs and the development of effective psycho-educational programs within the total school system.

- Limited modifications of the general education curricula and programs to better meet the diverse needs of all children.

The current trend toward statewide standards assessments further complicates the problems associated with categorical special education models. As national standards for excellence are raised, the number of children at risk for school failure increases dramatically. Without provisions to prepare students to meet higher expectations through effective school-wide instructional programs, many of these at-risk children may be identified as having a disability and placed in special education. This climate of “high stakes” testing, where attainment of standards is potentially tied to school funding, creates an urgent need for reexamination and change in the system that provides access to services and instructional modifications.

In view of these problems, and based upon the commitment to see that all children receive effective and appropriate public education irrespective of race, cultural background, linguistic background, socio-economic status, or educational need, NASP believes:

- All children can learn. Schools have a responsibility to teach them, and school personnel and parents should work together to assure every child a free and appropriate public education in a positive school environment.
- Instructional options and support services, based on the individual psycho-educational needs of each child, must be maximized within an integrated education system. The supports of the general education program must be designed to meet most student educational needs (especially for students unable to meet minimum levels of proficiency on high-stakes testing), eliminating the need to classify at-risk children as having a disability in order to receive appropriate instruction. Such a system of instructional supports requires collaboration across general and special education personnel.
- Psycho-educational needs of children should be determined through a multi-dimensional, non-biased assessment process. Such a process must evaluate the match between the learner and his or her educational environment, including the curriculum, rather than relying on the deficit-based model that places the blame for failure within the child. Assessment for all students must always link directly to services designed to meet psycho-educational needs.

NASP supports the continuation of a national initiative to meet the educational needs of all children: We propose the ongoing development and evaluation of alternatives to the current categorical system. This requires reevaluation of funding mechanisms and advocacy for policy and funding waivers needed for the implementation of alternative service delivery models. It also requires the development of increased support systems and ongoing training of all school personnel to enable them to work effectively with a broad range of children with special needs within the general education system. This initiative encourages greater independence for children by enabling them to function within the broadest possible environments,

and independence for school personnel by providing them with the training and support necessary to address the instructional needs of a diverse population of students.

The types and extent of change that we propose require considerable caution. Targeted funds intended for children with identified disabilities must be protected. Similarly, resources for children who do not have disabilities, but who experience learning and/or behavioral difficulties, must be expanded, in order to insure that these children are effectively served within general education. We must also assure that the transition to an alternative system places no child at risk of losing needed services or due process safeguards.

Our task is to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and increase opportunities within the total school system, without taking away the protections offered by IDEA. Noncategorical programs must meet the requirements of accountability, due process, and protection of students' and parents' rights, and provide funding for students in need of services. In addition, while these recommended modifications already have a significant empirical foundation in reducing of misclassification due to cultural or linguistic differences, we caution that these issues, as well as student outcomes, must continue to be monitored, evaluated, and discussed

Because of the complexity of these issues, the implementation of effective solutions will require expanding the nationwide efforts of interested persons and organizations, and collaborating to strengthen our base of knowledge, research, and experience. Through such a coordinated effort, we can establish new frameworks and conceptualizations on which to base decisions, design feasible service delivery options, advocate for policy and funding changes needed to implement these alternatives, and share information for positive change. The National Association of School Psychologists invites you to join us.

Resource

Reschly, D., Tilly, W., & Grimes, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Special Education in Transition*. Sopris West.

- *Original statement adopted by NASP Delegate Assembly in 1985.*
- *Revision of this statement adopted by NASP Delegate Assembly, July 14, 2002.*