

## Comprehensive national study finds substantial progress in improving special education

Abt Associates has completed a six-year study of unprecedented scope for the U.S. Department of Education that identifies the progress made by states, districts, and schools in the implementation of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997. Investigators found that most states have responded vigorously to the federal mandates intended to improve the educational landscape for children with disabilities. Ellen Schiller, Ph.D., project director and senior associate in Abt Associates' Social and Economic Policy Division, presented a summary of the study's major findings a meeting of the American Education Research Association and the Institute for Educational Leadership. The luncheon meeting, held at the Library of Congress, drew senior policymakers from Capitol Hill as well as top education policy researchers.

"It has been 30 years since the courts and Congress first determined that states and local school districts must provide children who have disabilities with free, appropriate, and least-restrictive educational opportunities," Dr. Schiller observed. "We now have a comprehensive analysis of the progress made toward those goals and a clearer picture of the challenges that remain. It is heartening to note that while 30 years ago children with disabilities could be excluded from mainstream public education, today more than 6 million students with disabilities are receiving individualized education services in our public schools."

The complex multi-method study involved four mail surveys to all 50 states and the District of Columbia, a national sample of districts and schools administered in three of the study years, and four qualitative studies of districts nested in five states.

The key findings of the study report, *Marking the Progress of IDEA Implementation*, make clear that states have paid careful attention to special education mandates, making substantial progress on aligning special education policy with standards-based reform and in strengthening the involvement of parents of children with disabilities, Dr. Schiller noted. Less progress has been made toward decreasing dropout rates among students with disabilities and the placement of minority students with disabilities in the least-restrictive environment.

The report indicates the need for policymakers to target school-level resources for providing general education teachers with training and strategic professional development that will help prepare them for improving the educational experiences of children with disabilities.

The report was co-authored by Fran O'Reilly, Ed.D., of Abt Associates and Tom Fiore, Ph.D., of Westat and is complemented by a three-volume sourcebook developed primarily by Julie Fritts, Ellen Bobronnikov, Amanda Parsad, Melanie Brown-Lyons, and Cris Price of Abt Associates.

The report is now available at [www.abt.sliidea.org](http://www.abt.sliidea.org) following its release by the Department of Education

Abt Associates applies rigorous research and consulting techniques and technical assistance expertise to a wide range of issues in social, economic and health policy, international development, business research, and clinical trials and registries. Clients include U.S. federal, state, and local governments; universities and foundations; international organizations; nonprofit associations and institutions; and business and industry. Founded in 1965, Abt Associates has worked in more than 100 countries and currently has over 35 project offices in 30 countries around the world.



**Cambridge**

55 Wheeler Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138-1168  
617.492.7100

**Durham**

4620 Creekstone Drive  
Maplewood Building, Suite 190  
Durham, NC 27703-8062  
919.294.7700

**Bethesda One**

4800 Montgomery Lane  
Suite 600  
Bethesda, MD 20814-3460  
301.913.0500

**Hadley**

Mass Venture Center  
100 Venture Way, Suite 100  
Hadley, MA 01035-9462  
413.586.8635

**Bethesda Two**

4550 Montgomery Avenue  
Suite 800 North  
Bethesda, MD 20814-3343  
301.634.1700

**Lexington**

181 Spring Street  
Lexington, MA 02421-8030  
781.372.6500

**Chicago**

640 North LaSalle Street  
Suite 640  
Chicago, IL 60610-3781  
312.867.4000

**New York**

SRBI  
275 Seventh Avenue, Suite 2700  
New York, NY 10001  
212-779-7700