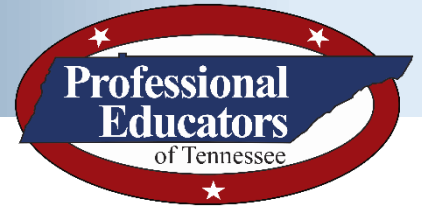


EDITORIAL

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Least Restrictive Environment: A Right That Requires Resources

One of the most difficult challenges educators face is managing chronic behavioral issues while meeting the needs of every student in the classroom. For students with disabilities, this requires more than traditional disciplinary methods and processes.

Educators must understand what may be driving the student's behavior, provide appropriate support, protect the student's rights, and maintain a safe environment where everyone can learn. That balance did not develop overnight.

In 1970, *The Way We Go to School: Children Excluded in Boston* documented that 10,000 or more children were excluded from Boston public schools or placed in inferior or custodial settings. Children with disabilities were among those denied meaningful access to education.

The report helped spur Massachusetts to enact Chapter 766 in 1972, a landmark special-education law that emphasizes appropriate services and integration into regular schools whenever appropriate. Congress followed in 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These reforms corrected a profound injustice. A disability could no longer justify denying a child access to public education.

However, today's debate sometimes overlooks an important distinction. IDEA does not require every student with a disability to remain in a general-education classroom all day, regardless of individual needs or circumstances.

Federal law requires that students with disabilities be educated alongside nondisabled students to the maximum extent appropriate. Removal from the regular educational environment occurs only when education in that environment cannot be achieved satisfactorily with appropriate supplementary aids and services.

IDEA also requires schools to maintain a continuum of placements, including regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions. Least restrictive does not mean a single setting for every child. It means the appropriate setting for the individual child.

That distinction matters in today's classrooms. Students may need support for learning disabilities, autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, emotional disabilities, physical disabilities, medical conditions, or significant behavioral needs. In 2022, the CDC identified autism in approximately 1 in 31 eight-year-olds across 16 participating communities. This illustrates the scope of specialized needs that schools increasingly address.

SUMMARY

"Students may need support for learning disabilities, autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, emotional disabilities, physical disabilities, medical conditions, or significant behavioral needs. When a student's behavior interferes with the student's learning or others' learning, schools should consider positive behavioral interventions and supports. Functional behavioral assessments can help educators identify patterns, triggers, and strategies to change behavior."

Students who qualify under IDEA receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Others may receive accommodations under Section 504. These protections are important. They are intended to provide students with meaningful access to education, not to lower expectations.

Behavioral support may also be necessary. When a student's behavior interferes with the student's learning or others' learning, schools should consider positive behavioral interventions and supports. Functional behavioral assessments can help educators identify patterns, triggers, and strategies to change behavior.

Understanding behavior, however, does not mean ignoring it. A student may repeatedly shout, throw objects, leave an assigned area, destroy property, threaten others, or become physically aggressive. A disability may help explain behavior, but explanation alone does not eliminate its consequences. Differentiated discipline is difficult to explain to other students and challenging for all educators.

When one student's behavior repeatedly prevents 20 or 25 other students from learning, schools have an obligation to address both sides of that equation. Teachers should not have to choose between supporting one child and ensuring safety for everyone else in the classroom.

Schools can take appropriate disciplinary and safety measures involving students with disabilities, even though IDEA establishes procedures governing removals and continued educational services. The goal should not be simply removing a student. It should be identifying and providing the supports that the student and the classroom need to succeed. That is what supported inclusion should mean.

Inclusion cannot be defined by placement alone. It must include staffing, expertise, behavioral interventions, planning, and services needed to make that placement successful. Otherwise, we risk confusing physical presence with educational progress.

A classroom teacher cannot simultaneously teach a lesson, de-escalate a serious behavioral crisis, protect other students, document interventions, communicate with families, implement accommodations, and provide individualized attention without support. It takes special-education teachers, paraprofessionals, school psychologists, counselors, administrators, nurses, behavioral specialists, families, and general-education teachers working together. It also takes time.

Public schools also carry responsibilities that differ substantially from those of private schools. Under IDEA, children with disabilities enrolled in public schools are entitled to a free appropriate public education. Students voluntarily placed by their parents in private schools do not have an individual IDEA entitlement to the same special-education services they would receive in public schools. However, federal law provides equitable services. That distinction matters when policymakers discuss school choice, special education, staffing, and funding. The least restrictive environment remains an essential civil rights protection.

The question is not whether students with disabilities deserve an education or belong in public schools. They do. The question is whether we are providing educators with the staffing, training, planning time, facilities, behavioral supports, and specialized services needed to serve them successfully and safely. Professional Educators of Tennessee makes clear that protecting students' rights and supporting educators are not competing goals. Neither should come at the expense of the other.

Inclusion must be supported. It cannot simply mean placing a child in a classroom and declaring success. Genuine inclusion means providing the people, resources, services, and appropriate educational setting that

child needs to make meaningful progress, while preserving a safe and productive learning environment for everyone. We also know special education teachers are hard to find.

The standard should be straightforward: Every student deserves the opportunity to learn. Every educator deserves the ability to teach. And every child deserves an educational environment where meaningful progress is possible.

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