FPG Snapshot

#65 | February 2012

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act:
State Achievements, Challenges, and Implications

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004

The goal of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is no longer simply to make services available to young children with disabilities and their families, but also to ensure that those services lead to enhanced outcomes for participating children and families. To that end, IDEA 2004 requires states to submit State Performance Plans (SPPs) and Annual Performance Reports (APRs) to document progress on performance and compliance indicators, improvement activities, and monitoring strategies.

Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education Indicators

The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC) and the Early Childhood Outcomes (ECO) Center, both FPG projects funded by U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, are responsible for reviewing 10 indicators pertaining to early intervention (EI) and early childhood special education (ECSE) on the states' SPPs/APRs. These 10 indicators address the following categories:

1. Early identification (2 indicators)
2. Timely provision of services in natural environments (3 indicators)
3. Transition from EI to preschool special education (2 indicators, including 3 subindicators)
4. Early childhood outcomes (3 indicators, including 9 subindicators)

Trends

Early Identification

From FFY 2005-2008, the mean percentage of children birth to age 1 receiving EI services remained stable at 1.15%; the percentage of children birth to age 3 receiving EI services increased from 2.4% to 2.66%, despite the narrowing of eligibility criteria in some states. Eighteen states met their target for serving birth to 1 year olds in FFY 2008 and 31 states met their target for serving birth to 3-year-olds.

Timely Services in Natural Environments

From FFY 2005-2008, most states showed stable or improved performance on all three indicators: having initial Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meetings within 45 days of referral (mean improvement from 86% to 94%); receiving EI services on IFSPs in a timely manner (82% to 92%); and primarily receiving EI services in home or community-based settings (90% to 93%).

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Early Childhood Transition

Most states also showed progress on the early childhood transition indicators. The mean performance increased from 88% to 96% for IFSPs containing transition steps and services, from 83% to 92% for convening timely transition conferences, and from 94% to 97% for notifying local education agencies of potentially eligible children. The mean performance for developing and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for children referred before their third birthday increased from 79% to 92%.

Early Childhood Outcomes

States worked hard to develop systems for measuring child outcomes for the first time from FFY 2005-2008. These systems were not fully implemented until FFY 2008, so FFY 2008 child outcomes data are considered baseline. Family outcomes from FFY 2005-2008 showed a greater percentage of families who understood their rights (from 80% to 84%), could effectively communicate their children's needs (from 80% to 85%), and could help their children develop and learn (from 86% to 90%).

Challenges

Common challenges reported by the states across these four categories included: reduced fiscal resources; personnel shortages; difficulties with referrals and sharing information between departments and agencies; inefficient service delivery models; inadequate data collection and monitoring systems; and the need for personnel development to increase providers' understanding of evidence-based practices and to enhance their capacity to collect, interpret and use data for program improvement.

Improvement Activities

States used a variety of improvement activities to address these challenges, including: supporting training and TA activities to increase qualified personnel and the use of evidence-based practices; promoting regular communication and collaboration across programs and agencies; developing, revising and clarifying policies and procedures; updating data systems and addressing data quality issues; and improving monitoring practices for continuous / ongoing correction of noncompliance.

Implications for the Future

1. States need to strengthen their capacity to collect, report, interpret and use data for both accountability and program improvement purposes.
2. Improvement activities should be data-based, comprehensive, and long-term.
3. A systematic approach to professional development and TA is needed to address pervasive personnel shortages and ensure high-quality, evidence-based practices.
4. A focus on compliance and performance does not assure quality of services. States need to develop measures of quality as well. ■

To Learn More

Kasprzak, C., Hurth, J., Rooney, R., Goode, S. E., Danaher, J. C., Whaley, K. T., Ringwalt, S. S., & Cate, D. (2011). States' accountability and progress in serving young children with disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0271121411408119