

Protect Our Students' Rights to Education:

How do we ensure that every student has the right to an inclusive education?



February 18, 2024

50 years ago, Congress passed the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*—now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. This landmark law fundamentally changed the lives of children with disabilities and their families by establishing, for the first time, a federal right to a free and appropriate public education.

Before IDEA was enacted in 1975, millions of children with disabilities were denied access to public school altogether. Families were left without support or options, and many were forced—out of desperation—to institutionalize their children.

Washington State: A National Leader

Washington was ahead of the nation. In 1971, our state passed the *Education for All Act*, guaranteeing access to public education for children with disabilities four years before federal protections existed. Washington was among the early leader states that helped set the stage for national special education rights and inclusive education.

A Moment to Reflect—and Act

As we approach IDEA's 50th anniversary in 2025, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to build on this legacy. Access to school alone is not enough. Every child deserves:

- Access to the **general education curriculum**
- The opportunity to be **meaningfully educated alongside peers without disabilities**
- Instruction and supports that recognize their strengths, not just their needs

Decades of research show that inclusive education leads to better academic, social, and life outcomes for students with and without disabilities. Inclusive classrooms help all students learn collaboration, empathy, and problem-solving—skills that set the foundation for a flourishing and meaningful life.

What Is Needed—Especially in This Budget Climate

In this challenging legislative session, it is critical that students with disabilities are protected from harmful budget cuts that would weaken inclusion, reduce services, or shift costs to families and local school districts.

To fulfill the promise of IDEA and Washington’s leadership, we must:

- Protect existing special education and inclusion funding from cuts that undermine students’ civil rights
- Invest in evidence-based inclusive supports so students of all abilities can reach their full potential
- Ensure robust early intervention and inclusive services for infants and toddlers, when support has the greatest impact
- End harmful and exclusionary practices that isolate students rather than support them
- Coordinate services across education, health, and community systems so families are supported—not left to navigate complex systems alone

Call to Action

In this difficult budget year, protecting students with disabilities must remain a priority. Lawmakers should reject harmful cuts, safeguard core special education investments, and advance policies that strengthen inclusive education statewide.

Inclusive education is a civil right—not a line item. Washington has led before, and with your leadership, we can continue to lead.

What to Watch for this Session:

HB 1795	Addressing restraint or isolation of students in public schools and educational programs.
SB 6268	Maintaining an online record of special education complaint decisions.
HB 2557	Providing parental access to special education evaluation reports
HB 2688	Providing adjustments to the early support for infants and toddlers program.
SB 5969	Fulfilling high school and beyond plan requirements with individualized education program transition plans.
HB 2440	Addressing records maintained by the office of the education ombuds