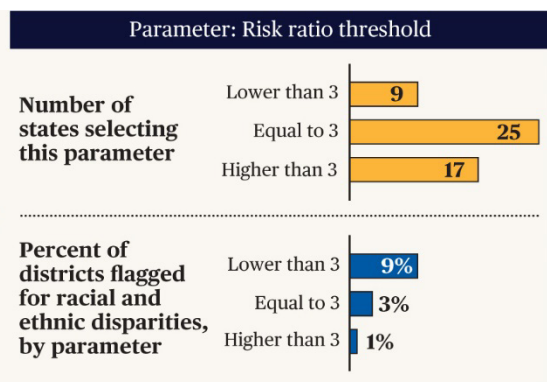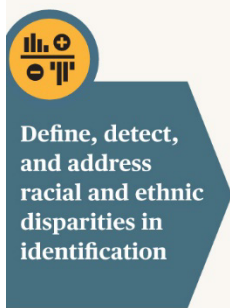# Appropriate Identification of Children with Disabilities for IDEA Services: A Report from Recent National Estimates

A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation at IES

Appropriately identifying children with disabilities—in ways that are timely, comprehensive, and accurate—is critical for ensuring that learners receive the supports they need to meet early milestones and succeed in school. In turn, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) charges states and school districts with: (1) finding all children, birth through age 21, suspected of having a disability; (2) evaluating them to determine if they are eligible for IDEA services; and (3) measuring and addressing racial or ethnic disparities in who is identified. Since IDEA's reauthorization in 2004, there is greater access to data and more sophisticated approaches to screen for and detect certain disabilities, an increasingly diverse child population, and new regulations on how to measure disparities in identification. This report examines how state and district practices during the 2019-2020 school year aligned with IDEA's goals of appropriate identification.

Key Findings

- *Most states and districts reported conducting broad efforts to find children with suspected disabilities, but for younger children, use of intensive approaches was less common.* Finding children who may have disabilities in a timely way can be challenging. Particularly for infants and toddlers, a key obstacle is that they are served through a large network of providers, elevating the importance of coordination and wide outreach. To find infants and toddlers, most states reported coordinating with multiple service agencies through occasional or regular conversations. However, fewer states used more intensive efforts such as coordination through data sharing or outreach through workshops. For school-age children with suspected disabilities, many districts cast a wide net as expected, by using data from tiered intervention systems.

- *State and district reports suggest evaluation policies and practices were trying to be sensitive to each child's needs and therefore more accurate in identification, but challenges with linguistically and culturally responsive evaluation remain.* District-reported approaches for evaluating whether a child has a specific learning disability have increasingly included the use of data on children's progress in response to research-based interventions, consistent with IDEA policy. Most districts also reported supporting the use of special assessments when evaluating for autism and, to a lesser extent, dyslexia, which are areas of increased policy attention. While most states and districts took steps to address potential sources of linguistic or cultural bias in the evaluation process, they also reported challenges such as having insufficient staff or struggling to assess children due to language barriers.

- *Despite federal efforts to encourage more consistent detection of large racial and ethnic disparities in special education identification, state differences in how disparities were defined may have limited detection in some cases.* Consistent with federal regulations issued in 2016, states reported using a more standardized approach to detect disparities in their districts but also exercised some flexibility. For example, all states used the risk ratio as a key measure of disparities in identification; a ratio of 3 indicates that a district is identifying students from a particular race/ethnicity at three times the rate of students from other races/ethnicities. But states differed in what risk ratio is considered too high, and these choices correspond to differences in the percentage of their districts that are flagged (see exhibit). Perhaps as a result, some states continued to flag few, if any, districts as needing to review identification policies and procedures to address disparities.

Define, detect, and address racial and ethnic disparities in identification

Parameter: Risk ratio threshold

Number of states selecting this parameter:
- Lower than 3: 9
- Equal to 3: 25
- Higher than 3: 17

Percent of districts flagged for racial and ethnic disparities, by parameter:
- Lower than 3: 9%
- Equal to 3: 3%
- Higher than 3: 1%

These findings suggest states and districts have taken steps to improve the identification process in ways that are consistent with the goals of IDEA, but there is room for more to be done.

For the full report with technical details, see https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/.