

30th Anniversary of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*

November 29, 2005

Lee is a young man with autism whose achievements belie his disability. An African-American graduate of a public high school, Lee was valedictorian of his class, went on to college, earned a degree and entered the world of work. Lee is one of many young people who have benefited from the landmark law we now know as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*.

Congress enacted what was then the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142) on Nov. 29, 1975. The law was intended to support states and localities in protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving the results for infants, toddlers, children and youths with disabilities and their families.

Before *IDEA*, many children like Lee were denied access to education and opportunities to learn. For example, in 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded, from its schools.

Today, thanks to *IDEA*, early intervention programs and services are provided to more than 200,000 eligible infants and toddlers and their families, while about 6.5 million children and youths receive special education and related services to meet their individual needs.

More students with disabilities are attending schools in their own neighborhoods—schools that may not have been open to them previously. And fewer students with disabilities are in separate buildings or separate classrooms on school campuses, and are instead learning in classes with their peers.

When President Bush and Congress set out to reauthorize the *IDEA* legislation in 2004, they made sure it called for states to establish goals for the performance of children with disabilities that are aligned with each state's definition of "adequate yearly progress" under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*. Together, *NCLB* and *IDEA* hold schools accountable for making sure students with disabilities achieve high standards. In the words of Secretary Spellings, "The days when we looked past the underachievement of these students are over. *No Child Left Behind* and the *IDEA 2004* have not only removed the final barrier separating special education from general education, they also have put the needs of students with disabilities front and center. Special education is no longer a peripheral issue. It's central to the success of any school."

IDEA is now aligned with the important principles of *NCLB* in promoting accountability for results, enhancing the role of parents and improving student achievement through instructional approaches that are based on scientific research. While *IDEA* focuses on the needs of individual students and *NCLB* focuses on school accountability, both laws share

the goal of improving academic achievement through high expectations and high-quality education programs.

Through these efforts we are reaching beyond physical access to the education system toward achieving full access to high-quality curricula and instruction to improve education outcomes for children and youths with disabilities.

Evidence that this approach is working can be found in the increase in the number of students with disabilities graduating from high school instead of dropping out.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), which documents the experiences of a national sample of students with disabilities over several years as they moved from secondary school into adult roles, shows that the incidence of students with disabilities completing high school rather than dropping out increased by 17 percentage points between 1987 and 2003.

During the same period, their postsecondary education participation more than doubled to 32 percent. In 2003, 70 percent of students with disabilities who had been out of school for up to two years had paying jobs, compared to only 55 percent in 1987.

Employment and independence are important pieces of the American Dream. In today's world, getting there depends on having the foundation of a good education. Through *IDEA* and *NCLB*, students with disabilities have the support that they need to be the best they can be.

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