



Equity Committee

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Disability Education in Schools

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Disability Education in Schools

Position:

It is the position of the Iowa Youth Congress, the voice of the Iowa's youth, to support providing educators with additional training assisting students with mental disabilities as well as being able to identify symptoms of said disabilities to provide proper accommodations in collaboration with the individual student as well as to improve curriculum.

Current Situation:

Many Iowa students who have been diagnosed with learning or cognitive disabilities are not properly accommodated. Many teachers do not know how to recognize when a student needs accommodations or how to properly accommodate a student when they need it. Students that have learning disabilities need an accessible learning environment in their classrooms in order to thrive academically. Unfortunately, there are many teachers who do not know how to do this for their students. A study from 2019 found that only 17% of general education teachers felt prepared to teach children with learning disabilities, despite the fact that around two thirds of students with learning disabilities take class with these general education teachers.

The issue of lack of learning and cognitive disability accommodations in education is one that affects a significant number of students. In 2019–20, the number of students aged 3–21 who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.3 million, or 14 percent of all public school students in the United States [2]. In 2019, there were 26,587 people under the age of 18 who had a disability in Iowa alone. [7].

Many students with disabilities perform below their grade level and this can be reflected in students with IEPs – their four year graduation rate was only 76.4% as of 2020[8]. A vast amount of the problems from this issue revolve around the fact that there are not many laws regarding the topic of providing educators with training on mental disabilities. IDEA mandates that states must allow access to free and public education to students with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (or ADA) further prevents discrimination in schools and protects the civil rights of those with disabilities. This issue is also touched on in the Civil Rights Act of 1973; Section 504 states that nobody should be discriminated against solely because of their disabilities. However, only one in 50 public school students receive accommodations through this act despite the significantly larger number of students with disabilities [4].

While these laws are important for preventing discrimination and providing equal opportunities, more action needs to be taken to ensure these students are actually learning in the classroom through these laws. Besides these federal laws, there have not been any other specific laws in Iowa giving equitable education opportunities to these students.

Rationale:

Further action is crucial for students struggling with intellectual disabilities. According to expert Beth Sweeden, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, decades after the passage of legislation opening up schools, students with intellectual disabilities “remain on the fringes of school and community life” and continue to “experience lower levels of involvement in activities, organizations and life experiences compared with their peers”. Sweden goes on to state that “developing high family, school and community expectations” throughout their school careers are essential to “creating both the opportunities necessary for students with intellectual disabilities to develop goals and achieve their dreams”. Further, this issue disproportionately affects Black and Latino students. In a 2015 study, Black and Latino students in 8th grade were 55% less likely to be classified with a learning disability. Similarly, they are less likely to be recognized for special education services [6]. Often, instead of these students being given the help they need, a student will be labeled as “disruptive” due to their behavior. A study through the University of California, Irvine, found that among students with the same income, school characteristics, and academic achievement, black students were 45 percent less likely to be recognized to receive special education services [6].

Recommended Action:

If officially supported by the Iowa legislature we recommend the creation of a bill that will promote the teaching of intellectual disabilities in schools and the creation of a system to provide better training for teachers to recognize and deal with any intellectual disabilities that their students may have. The bill would require an immediate review of the curriculum concerning intellectual disabilities of each school district by the specific school district. A committee specific to each school district would be created for the purpose of such a review. The committee would be composed of parents, student representatives from each high school, teachers, community members, and relevant experts that would advise the committee. Upon the completion of the review, the committee would create an Action Plan to be sent to the school board for approval and subsequent implementation. Any action created by the committee would have to adhere to the standards set forth by the State of Iowa in Iowa Code 256.11, subsection 5 (j). The bill would require the training of teachers in dealing with intellectual disabilities in their classrooms through professional development workshops given by specialists. Such workshops would include subjects such as: recognizing signs and symptoms of common learning disabilities, accommodations for students with intellectual disabilities, promoting a welcoming classroom environment, forming positive relationships with students, and understanding the causes of intellectual disability and their impact on students. These workshops would occur on a semi-monthly basis and would be required for all teachers in the district to attend. The workshops would occur in each school in each school district in the State of Iowa. Funding for this bill would originate from the State of Iowa General Fund, specifically, the education appropriations found there. The implementation of this bill would occur before the start of the 2022-2023 school year.

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