

NEA 'IDEA Brief' #5

NEA members ask:

Why Is Paperwork Such a Burden under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?

Every year we are required to do more special education paperwork. Are all these forms really necessary?

One of the major workload issues facing all educators is the amount of documentation required under federal laws, such as IDEA. Exacerbating the problem, states and local districts often add excessive -- and unnecessary -- forms that document compliance with the law rather than address student needs or student progress.

I know that everyone has a lot of paperwork. But special education teachers and related service providers seem to have far more. Is this true?

Researchers report that the typical special education teacher spends 2½ times as much time on paperwork as general educators (an average of 5 hours per week). Special educators feel particularly burdened by requirements to complete unnecessary or redundant administrative forms -- repeatedly supplying the same data or information. General educators are also frustrated, viewing paperwork requirements as infringing upon valuable instruction time with their students.²

If I had less paperwork, I could spend more time with my students. Do other special educators feel the same way?

When asked about their workloads, a majority of special education teachers (53%) say that IDEA-related paperwork interferes in their ability to do their jobs. Special education teachers report that they work an average of 53 hours per week and roughly half of that time is spent in direct instruction of students. Eighty-three percent (83%) of special education teachers report spending at least 4 hours planning for Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and from ½ to 1½ days each week in IEP-related meetings.

I love working with my students but I don't know how much longer I can do all of this. Does workload affect whether individuals stay?

While there are a number of factors that affect whether individuals choose to stay in public education, special educators most often cite paperwork burdens and unmanageable caseloads and/or workloads as the two prime reasons why they decide to leave the public schools.

How do caseloads and paperwork burdens contribute to unmanageable workloads?

Bulging class sizes and caseloads for special educators and related service providers, usually the result of poor funding or misplaced priorities, cause special education personnel to have unmanageable workloads. They find themselves trying to teach students with significant individual needs in unreasonably large classes. Each student added to the special educator's class or caseload brings extra paperwork. In addition, the threat of litigation under IDEA has caused local districts to require increasing documentation.

Some of my fellow teachers don't seem to view their workloads as unmanageable. Is it different for some people?

Workload manageability varies by job position and geographic region. More educators (30%) in the Western region of the country reported problems with workload than those in the Northeast (19%). And, considerable differences are seen between types of job positions. More speech-language pathologists (26.7%) and special education teachers (24%) find their workloads to be unmanageable than general education teachers do (14.6%).⁵

What can states do to reduce the IDEA-related burden?

NEA recommends establishing: (1) a state standard for IDEA-related paperwork that emphasizes efficiency and non-duplication (e.g., a state model IEP form) and (2) a reasonable statewide workload standard for special education class sizes and related service provider caseloads.

What can local school districts do?

Electronic tools, such as computerized or web-based IEPs and case management products, now exist to help streamline the development of IEPs. Many districts have successfully implemented software applications that significantly decrease the paperwork burden. In addition, added clerical support is an important step to relieve educators of routine, compliance-oriented paperwork -- allowing them to focus their time on student instruction.

What can I do?

Share your concerns about excessive IDEA-related paperwork and workload with your members of Congress. (Our [Legislative Action Center](#) makes it easy to contact your representatives in Congress.) Call on them to require all states to design and implement paperwork reduction plans. Also, call on them to support funding for school districts to purchase special education electronic tools and additional clerical support. Ask them to support provisions in IDEA that will establish reasonable class size and caseloads and reduce the burdens of paperwork without jeopardizing the civil rights of students and their families.

To find out more about IDEA's reauthorization:

- Visit the [IDEA section of our Legislative Action Center](#) for the latest information on the pending reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

- Sign up to receive "NEA IDEA Activist" updates by sending your request via email to NEA's [Patti Ralabate](#), Senior Professional Associate for Special Needs.
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References:

1. Ahearn, E. (September 2002). *State Special Education Forms*. Project Forum. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.
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5. [Council for Exceptional Children](#). (February/March 2003). [Bright Futures for Exceptional Learners](#). Arlington, VA: author.