

Advocacy in 2018: What You Need to Know

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By Meghan Casey Whittaker, Policy and Advocacy Manager, National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)

To kick off the New Year, let's take a look at four of the big issues impacting students with learning and attention issues and what we can expect as we move from 2017 to 2018:

1. U.S. Department of Education regulatory action

Recap from 2017: Early in 2017, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) eliminated regulations put in place by the Obama administration that govern accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Then, in response to an executive order issued by President Trump, the Department of Education began its months-long (and continuing) review of every regulation and policy document ever issued. The community provided feedback in September urging the USED to leave all regulations and policies intact, as they are important tools for educators and advocates. Nonetheless, the USED rescinded 72 special education guidance documents and hundreds more related to other education topics.

Looking ahead to 2018: The department will continue its regulatory review process and begin evaluating whether it should get rid of any current regulations. Specifically, we will be on the lookout for the U.S. Department of Education's decision on whether to delay the special education disproportionality regulations. The disproportionality regulations were issued in 2016 in an effort to curb overrepresentation and disparate treatment of students of color in special education. Even though the regulations were intended to go into effect in 2018, the USED has signaled that these are on the chopping block and might be delayed for another two years. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) and others in the disability community have reminded the U.S. Department of Education why these regulations are important to our students and are urging their enforcement.

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2. Legislative changes in higher education

Recap from 2017: In June, the NCLD and many other organizations worked with Congress to introduce the Respond, Innovate, Support, and Empower Act (RISE Act) in the House and Senate. The RISE Act would support students with disabilities in their transition to college and ensure that they receive the accommodations that they need. In December, the Education & Workforce Committee of the House of Representatives passed the Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Act (PROSPER Act) to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. However, the PROSPER Act fails to include some of the most important provisions of the RISE Act that are related to accommodations in college.

Looking ahead to 2018: Next, the Senate will begin its own process to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. This process will offer the community a chance to work with champions in the Senate to ensure that RISE is incorporated and that the bill provides strong support for students with disabilities in college.

3. Implementation of ESSA

Recap from 2017: Throughout the year, every state submitted its own implementation plan for ESSA. As we watched the USED approve most of the plans, experts across the field, including the NCLD's Lindsay Jones, evaluated and determined that many of those plans would not serve the most vulnerable students well. The NCLD worked with parents in five states to ensure that their voices were heard and reflected in their own states' plans. The NCLD was one of many organizations that developed resources to help our advocates have a say in their states' planning.

Looking ahead to 2018: The focus in 2018 will be on local school districts. Now that the states have developed their ESSA plans, it's time for local districts to develop plans for how they will identify schools that are not meeting the goals or benchmarks—for the general population of their students or for subgroups of students, such as those with disabilities. As schools and districts carry out the work of strengthening schools and helping all students succeed, it will be critically important for advocates to be involved in those discussions. Advocates must have a say in how schools are being identified as needing improvement and which strategies should be used to improve student performance.

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The NCLD will soon release a toolkit with several important purposes:

- To help advocates urge districts to ensure that schools are developing strengths-based IEPs
- To provide strong professional development to educators—in the areas of MTSS, UDL, and personalized learning—so they can fully support all students with disabilities.

4. Federal funding

Recap from 2017: President Trump began 2017 by sharing his vision for educational funding—a \$9B cut that would devastate our public schools by reducing IDEA and career and technical education programs and cutting literacy grants and before- and after-school programs, to name a few. From there, Congress pushed along multiple continuing resolutions to keep the government funded throughout the year. Funding for all the programs that support our students and schools has been relatively stagnant in recent years, and 2017 was no different.

Looking ahead to 2018: As always, advocating for robust federal investment in education is top on the list! In the wake of tax reform, we will see a federal deficit that will likely result in cuts to several important federal programs that serve low-income students and families. The NCLD will continue to advocate for the programs that matter most, including funding for special education services, strong teacher preparation programs, professional development to effectively serve students, and programs that improve accessibility for learners.

Budget cuts loom, important regulations face scrutiny, and new legislation can either help or harm our students—and this is only the short list of what we anticipate seeing in 2018! Now, more than ever, advocates must be informed, engaged, and ready to take action. You can join NCLD's email list or visit our Policy Updates & Resources blog to stay up to date on these issues and speak out.

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Editors' Note: As always, we thank the NCLD for their vital work in advocacy and policy. We also thank Meghan Casey Whittaker for helping to keep the IDA community abreast of important advocacy-policy developments.

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