

Commentary: Sadly, the Promise of Special Education Still Hasn't Been Realized

By Zena Naiditch, Equip for Equality | September 8, 2026

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the federal special education law's enactment, giving children with disabilities the right to a free appropriate education that meets their individual needs. Significant barriers continue to prevent students with disabilities from reaching the law's ultimate goal of preparing them for the transition to adulthood, including living independently and obtaining employment.

At Equip for Equality, the federally mandated Protection & Advocacy System for Illinois, we see the impact of these shortfalls firsthand. The more than 2,000 annual calls to our Parent Helpline on Special Education Rights illustrate common problems.

Starting with our youngest learners, infants and toddlers ages 0-3 are entitled to free and low-cost therapies through Illinois' Early Intervention program. Too many students never get these critical services. Once students are in the system, shortages of specialized programs continue to create barriers. Nearly 300 CPS students with autism and intellectual disabilities missed out on schooling while awaiting placement in specialized programs at the beginning of the last school year.

Schools are also unnecessarily segregating children with disabilities despite legal requirements to place them in the least restrictive environment that meets their needs. Inclusive classrooms benefit all students and should be the starting point.

Other students are excluded through suspensions, expulsions, shortened school days, restraint, and seclusion rather than being given the supports they need. Without access to appropriate interventions, students face increased risks of unemployment and involvement with the criminal legal system.

Finally, the importance of preparing students with disabilities for life after graduation cannot be overstated. Too many students leave school without the tools necessary for employment, independent living, or postsecondary education.

Funding and system reforms are required. Equally essential is empowering parents to be informed and effective advocates for their children. While Equip for Equality continues to support parents and advocate for students' rights, the sad fact remains that half a century later, the promises of special education law have not been fully realized.

Source: Crain's Chicago Business commentary by Zena Naiditch. Reformatted for document sharing.