

What is the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and Why is It Important?

- OSEP is the federal “engine room” for special education in the U.S., ensuring that IDEA is more than just a law on paper and is actively implemented in states, districts, and schools.
- OSEP acts as both a funding agency and compliance overseer; it is central to turning IDEA’s promises into reality.
- **OSEP was built by advocates, families, and persons with disabilities to ensure that no child is excluded and that all children can learn and thrive.**
- More than 95% of staff — all but a few managers — have been terminated, notified of termination, resigned, or retired this year.
- Inclusive education, which relies heavily on accountability and support, becomes much harder to sustain without a functioning, robust federal partner.
- **As a result of the recent irresponsible actions, children with disabilities will be disenfranchised, IDEA protections will erode, and there will likely be an increase in litigation, inequality, and education failure for many.**
- **There is still time to act! Take action to reverse these potentially devastating consequences.**

What Is Happening Now?

- On October 10, 2025, the Trump administration ***fired all but 2-5 OSEP staff***¹, down from approximately 80-90 staff in January of this year.
- This dramatic change in staffing levels effectively shuts the agency. The Trump administration will say it’s still open, but the cuts are too drastic. ***OSERS cannot operate and fulfill its statutory function with fewer than five members.*** Congress established and mandated OSEP’s existence, so it is a violation of the Constitution to shut it down in this manner; only Congress has the authority to do so, and Congress did not authorize these firings.

Understanding the Terms

¹ The exact number has not been confirmed

- **The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)** is part of the U.S. Department of Education and ensures that all children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. OSEP also supports states in providing quality early intervention services for infants, toddlers, and their families.
- **The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS)** is the larger office in the U.S. Department of Education, which includes both OSEP and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA).
- Together, OSEP, RSA, and OSERS are an integral part of the U.S. education system, **ensuring access and opportunity** for people with disabilities and their families.

What Happens If OSEP Staff Are Removed / Functions Are Disrupted?

Here is how the loss of OSPE staff can negatively impact children with disabilities in the United States:

Function	What Could Fail or Be Weakened	Consequences
Grant management & oversight	Without staff to review grant applications, monitor spending, and ensure compliance, funds may be delayed, misallocated, or misused	States and local districts may lose critical funding; corrupt or ineffective use of funds could increase
Monitoring and enforcement	States might not be monitored rigorously; noncompliance may go undetected or uncorrected	Children might be denied their rights under IDEA without recourse
Technical assistance & capacity-building	National centers, training programs, and resources may lose support or guidance	States, districts, and schools will struggle to implement evidence-based practices
Data collection, reporting, and transparency	The flow of timely, valid data to Congress, the public, and stakeholders stops	No visible metrics by which to judge how well children with disabilities are served; accountability is lost

Function	What Could Fail or Be Weakened	Consequences
Specialized oversight (e.g., for vision/hearing, media accessibility)	Institutes like the Described Captioned Media Program and the American Printing House for the Blind may lose federal oversight and coordination	Programs for people with sensory disabilities could suffer, lose support, or degrade in quality
Legal and regulatory guidance	Families, states, and schools will lack up-to-date clarifications, memos, or “Dear Colleague” letters interpreting new problems or nuances in IDEA	Increased confusion, litigation, and inconsistent practices across states
Equity and civil rights safeguards	Disproportionality oversight may lapse; systemic discrimination may go unchecked	Historically marginalized groups may suffer greater harm

Why This Matters to Families and the Community

- **Students lose protections and supports**

Without robust OSEP, the promise of a “*free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment*” can become more tenuous, depending on the willingness or capacity of individual states or districts to honor it.

Many children with disabilities rely on special services (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy, accommodations, assistive technology) that could be cut or not enforced.

- **Financial and economic impact**

Billions in federal special education and early intervention funding to states and localities are at risk. When those dollars shrink or become harder to access, state and local budgets often make up the difference (or cuts happen) — which may reduce staff and services.

In the long run, children who are not well-educated face diminished employment prospects, increased reliance on public support, and less contribution to the economy.

- **Loss of equity and civil rights**

Disability rights and inclusive education are foundational to a just society. Weakening the mechanisms that enforce these rights undermines not only individual children but the broader ideal that public education should serve *all* children.

- **Erosion of trust and stability**

Families, advocates, and education professionals depend on reliable federal support and oversight. Sudden disruption introduces uncertainty, legal battles, and inconsistency from district to district.

- **Universal stakes**

Disabilities are not rare. In any given classroom, a non-trivial share of students —approximately 15% —receive some form of special education. A rollback of protections impacts many communities — urban and rural, wealthy and underserved, as well as tightly resourced and weaker districts alike.

How Inclusive Education Is At Risk

Inclusive education — educating students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers, to the maximum extent appropriate — depends on strong legal, policy, and resource supports. Those supports increasingly rest on federal oversight, funding, and technical assistance. Without them:

- States or districts may retreat to **segregation models** (special schools or isolated classrooms) because the resources or pressure to include diminish.
 - Schools may lack training, coaching, and capacity to support inclusion (co-teaching, differentiated instruction, accommodations, and universal design).
 - Families may face more resistance or denial in requesting inclusive placements, accommodations, or needed services.
 - The progress toward early identification, higher outcomes, social integration, and post-school success for students with disabilities could stall or reverse.
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What Could or Should Be Done Immediately

1. **Restore OSEP staffing and capacity**

The administration should reverse the mass firings, rehire professionals with expertise, and ensure continuity of operations. The law mandates OSEP's functions; abandoning them is not merely an administrative issue — it's a legal and policy problem.

2. **Secure the funding flows**

Congress should act (through appropriations, oversight hearings, and legislative fixes) to ensure that IDEA grant funds continue to flow and that states are protected from disruption.

3. **Mobilize stakeholders and public pressure**

Parents, advocacy groups, disability rights organizations, educators, professional

associations, and the public must raise awareness, contact their congressional representatives, and demand that IDEA protections be defended.

4. **Legal and legislative oversight**

Congress should exercise its oversight authority, hold hearings, require reporting on the status of OSEP operations, and, if needed, pass emergency measures to safeguard children's rights.

5. **State and local preparedness**

Districts, state education agencies, parent centers, and nonprofits should document the current supports they receive from OSEP and national centers, plan for continuity, and coordinate to protect critical services that cannot be easily replaced.

6. **Ensure transparency and public reporting**

Push for mandated reporting — both to Congress and to the public — on how the cuts are affecting services, data collection, and student outcomes.

What Can Concerned Individuals Do to Help Make a Difference?

- **Your Voice Matters.** Reach out to your Senator and Congressperson immediately to say that these cuts must be immediately reversed before children with disabilities and their families suffer and decades of progress are reversed. The firings are slated to be finalized by early December, so ask them to pressure the Trump administration to restore them all before Thanksgiving.
- **Tell Your Story.** Are you a person with a disability? A family member of a child with a disability? Do you have a neighbor or a loved one with a disability? A teacher? Administrator? Specialist? Or just someone who cares? Tell your story and how these devastating cuts will directly impact you and others.

What Does the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Do to Support Children with Disabilities?

- OSEP is a key part of the U.S. Department of Education. Until almost all employees were fired on Friday, October 10, 2025, it was staffed by professionals, most of whom have dedicated their lives to making sure children with disabilities throughout the country had access to a free and appropriate public education, just like other children. These OSEP staff members were responsible for administering federal programs that supported infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, as well as their families. They also ensured

states complied fully with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA is a long-standing law tracing back to 1975 that was needed because, before then, many states failed to educate students with disabilities. The loss of so many staff members at OSEP effectively guts the IDEA, putting into jeopardy the future of education for countless children with disabilities. That means Friday's firings will have a dramatic impact on our nation's future, as children with disabilities who do not receive early intervention services and free and/or appropriate public education will be less likely to grow into productive, self-sustaining members of the public who will help drive the economy forward.

- A lot of money that has traditionally flowed to the states is now in jeopardy as a result of these staffing cuts. The U.S. Department of Education has awarded billions of dollars to states annually to support early-intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families, preschoolers, and special education for children and youth with disabilities. These grants were administered by OSEP's professional staff, almost all of whom have now been fired. With no one left to administer the grants, it's challenging to see how that money, which many states across the political spectrum rely on, will continue to flow. If it stops, it will mean the loss of a lot of state and local jobs, and much worse educational outcomes for students with disabilities. If it continues to flow, it's more likely to be plagued by waste, fraud, and abuse, as OSEP's professionals will not be present to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent appropriately. Some of the federally funded programs located in each state in the U.S., now in jeopardy, include:
 - Almost 100 Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers across the United States, which work with families of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, from birth to 26.
 - A network of State Deafblind Projects focused on the unique needs of children with deafblindness, as well as their families and the teams of professionals that support them.
- OSEP has also overseen a network of national centers, which are funded through a competitive grant-making process. These critical centers developed tools, assisted states and districts, and identified best practices to improve educational outcomes for all children with disabilities. All of these are now in jeopardy because of the staffing cuts. Just two examples include:²
 - The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center supported state early intervention and preschool programs to improve services and supports for young children with disabilities and their families.

² These are just two illustrative examples but there are dozens of successful programs. See the following website for more examples of programs <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-technical-assistance-centers/>

- The Described and Captioned Media Program supported children with disabilities and their families and teachers by making media accessible and available with captions, descriptions, and sign language.
- OSEP coordinated and supported hundreds of personnel preparation grants for universities and states to help prepare and sustain the special education workforce and improve inclusive education. Annually, these grants funded the training, preparation, certification, and/or licensure of thousands of teachers, school leaders, service providers, parents, and volunteers across the United States.
- Through OSEP, the Department also collected information and prepared annual reports for Congress on the number of children with disabilities receiving special education and early intervention services, as well as the type of support they received. Without OSEP staff, this information gathering and sharing will stop; Congress - and the public - will be in the dark about whether hard-earned taxpayer money is being spent wisely to help those who need it, while being protected against waste, fraud, and abuse.

Additionally, staff in OSEP and the Rehabilitative Services Administration (RSA) oversaw the work of four long-standing special institutions, each established in separate statutes, to promote evidence-based education and accessible resources for children and adults with vision and hearing disabilities:

- American Printing House for the Blind
- Gallaudet University
- Helen Keller National Center
- National Technical Institute for the Deaf

Now that OSEP staff members have been fired, the Department has lost all staff members with expertise in sensory disabilities and no longer has the capacity to oversee the implementation of the policies on which the institutions are based.