

Guest Editorial

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40 years of serving all students

A guest editorial by State Superintendent Tony Evers

Wisconsin and the nation celebrate an important anniversary this month. It has been 40 years since President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, on Nov. 29, 1975. The law is better known today by its 1990 reauthorization name, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and it has changed the future for millions of students with disabilities.

Prior to 1975, children with disabilities were excluded from many public schools and were thus separated from their nondisabled peers. States could, but were not required to, provide educational services to children with disabilities and many did for children who were blind or hearing impaired. Wisconsin opened its school in Janesville for educating the blind in 1849, just one year after statehood. The school for children who are deaf or hearing impaired followed in 1852. While these schools provided important services, parents of students with other disabling conditions wanted an education for their children as well.

Wisconsin was ahead of the nation by a couple of years in policy and practice. The state adopted laws regarding services to children with disabilities in 1973. Today's state and national laws require that educational programs be made available to all children with exceptional needs. Rather than isolated at home or in institutions as they were in the past, most students with disabilities are educated alongside nondisabled students in regular classrooms. Parents and guardians are partners in developing the Individual Education Programs (IEPs) that specify the services and accommodations schools must provide to help children progress toward their IEP goals.

The requirement of free appropriate public education doesn't just mean access to schools for children and youth with disabilities. New guidance issued from the U.S. Department of Education to mark the anniversary of IDEA makes it clear that IEPs must be aligned with each state's general education standards. In Wisconsin, we are working to ensure that students with disabilities receive high-quality instruction at each grade level that helps them progress at a similar rate as their nondisabled peers. We want and need every child, and we mean every child

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including those with disabilities, to graduate from Wisconsin's public schools ready for the next steps in life: employment, further education, and independent living.

Let's celebrate our progress in educating children and youth with disabilities and commit ourselves to ensuring that every student graduates ready for college and careers.

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