

Beyond Labels: Helping Educators Address Each Child's Unique Needs

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Elementary and secondary school teachers typically spend most of their time on whole-class instruction. Effective teachers run their classrooms in ways that stimulate individual minds. Very effective teachers perceive differences in child needs and can customize teaching, communication, and referrals to address some of those needs. Modern evaluations and supports in the United States are *inconsistently* set up to bolster educators' ability to meet individual needs. School evaluations report aggregate outcomes and focus on labeling some schools as "lowest performing." Professional evaluations of teachers are based on a mix of administrator ratings, student performance, and classroom observations; the best observation rubrics include appropriate measures of whether teachers can create a positive learning environment and engage all types of students through questions and discussion, but these snapshots rarely capture whether teachers have perceived important differences across students and taken appropriate actions. In terms of supports, three widespread programs address students' diverse needs: IDEA (special education with Individualized Education Programs), Title III (for English language learners), and subsidized school meals programs. Those programs are at least partly federally funded, and another—504 plans for accommodations for students with disabilities who do not necessarily have Individualized Education Programs—is federally mandated. These educational policies are binary in nature: schools are either failing or not, teachers are either tenured or not (perhaps also highly-rated or not), children are either disabled or not, etc. These binary classifications simplify resource allocation. But they are very restrictive. Throughout the country, educators work to address child needs that go beyond these dichotomies—with varying perceptiveness, actions, and resources even within the same counties, school districts, and school buildings. While health problems and other developmental challenges may be caused by factors outside of the educational experience, school employees are often in a prime position to recognize them. This brings up several questions: How perceptive are teachers of differences in child need? Can educational programs improve this perceptiveness? What types of resources can assist teachers in more easily addressing variation in child need? What types of resources should be available on-site at schools to address child needs? Should services be provided by school district employees or others, and what role should parents play? What types of services should educators be able to refer children and their parents to outside of school?