**Feds Pledge to Focus More on Quality of Special Education**

By Nirvi Shah on March 2, 2012

Every year, the U.S. Department of Education spends lots of time and money visiting states to see how well they are complying with the requirements of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Those reviews haven't taken into account what or how much students with disabilities are actually learning. But they will soon, Education Department officials said today.

The department said it is revamping the way it rates states to better address the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers.

"For too long we've been a compliance-driven bureaucracy when it comes to educating students with disabilities," U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in a statement. "We have to expect the very best from our students—and tell the truth about student performance — so that we can give all students the supports and services they need. The best way to do that is by focusing on results."

Education Department officials said they will suspend annual visits to 16 states for the 2012-13 school year for annual compliance reviews (They'll still do the reviews; just by phone and so forth) and instead spend the year working out a new review system that takes a results-driven approach to assessing how states are educating students with disabilities.

Already, the expansion of the department's focus has begun, officials said. States visited last year had to choose an education outcome on which to focus. For example, Mississippi chose to focus on improving performance rates for students with disabilities in 3rd grade reading. Nebraska concentrated on developing a reentry program for students with disabilities who have dropped out of school.

Some special education advocacy groups complimented the department's move.

"This is a much-needed step I think," said Laura Kaloi, public policy director for the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Right now, states can meet federal special education compliance standards, even if "student proficiency is nowhere near where it should be for reading."

The Council for Exception Children said they too look forward to the department's revamped monitoring process.

[http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/speced/2012/03/feds_pledge_to_focus_more_on_q.html?qs=feds+pledge](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/speced/2012/03/feds_pledge_to_focus_more_on_q.html?qs=feds+pledge)
"While there aren't many details about how they will proceed, we applaud the department's focus on outcomes for students with disabilities and its willingness to work with all stakeholders," said Lindsay Jones, senior director of policy and advocacy services for the CEC. "We need to find more innovative ways for the department to work with states and local districts to ensure that we increase student achievement at every level."

The department's action comes at the same time the federal agency has given some states leeway on how they meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law, disappointing advocacy groups.

They worry that the waivers granted by the agency could make it easier for states to ignore lagging student performance for some groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, English-language learners, and students with disabilities.