

Checking the Box, Missing the Child

A data investigation into how America's schools perform — and fail — the legal duty to find every struggling learner

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A Diagnosis at Nine

Kelly was nine years old the first time anyone said the words dyslexia, dyscalculia, and auditory processing delay out loud. Nine. That means kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and most of third grade had already happened — four years in which a bright child sat in a classroom watching letters refuse to hold still on the page, listening to instructions dissolve before she could act on them, and absorbing the quiet verdict no teacher ever had to say aloud: something is wrong with you. Nothing was wrong with her. What was broken was the system that federal law says must go looking for kids like her, early and on purpose, before they fall that far behind.

Kelly is now the founder and Creative Director of Neuro Navigation, Inc., a Wisconsin-based company built together with Dr. Carrie VanZant, its Executive Director, to provide resources, tools, and services for neurodivergent learners and the families raising them. Their work centers on the population Kelly herself grew up inside of: the 15 to 20 percent of students nationwide identified through decades of research, family advocacy, and (too often) academic failure as living with a learning difference such as dyslexia or ADHD.

This report is the product of a year spent asking a simple question: if federal law has required schools to find children like Kelly for 51 years, why does the population of struggling, undiagnosed, under-supported learners in America look statistically unchanged generation after generation? The answer, drawn from federal enforcement data, national assessment results, and independent investigative reporting, is that Child Find has become, in practice, a paperwork exercise — one that reliably produces completed forms and far less reliably produces found, helped, or improved children.

What Child Find Actually Requires

Child Find is not a slogan; it is a specific, binding provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in force since the law's original passage in 1975. It requires every state, and by extension every public school district within it, to have policies and practices in place to “identify, locate, and evaluate” all children with disabilities residing in the state, from birth through age 21, who need special education and related services — including children attending private and religious schools, children who are homeless, children who are migrant, and children who are wards of the state.

Three features of the duty matter for what follows. First, it is proactive: schools are not permitted to wait for a parent to request an evaluation before acting on a reasonable suspicion of disability. Second, it is unconditional on academic performance: a child earning passing grades can still qualify for evaluation and services if a disability is suspected and is affecting them, a point families are frequently, and incorrectly, told is disqualifying. Third, it is free: evaluations conducted under Child Find cannot be billed to the family. On paper, this is one of the more protective duties in American education law. In practice, the data below show a system optimized to document that the duty was performed, not to verify that it worked.

The Gap, By the Numbers

Two sets of federal figures, read side by side, expose the core problem.

Figure	What it means
15–20%	Share of the U.S. population estimated to have a learning or attention difference such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or ADHD — roughly one in five people (National Center for Learning Disabilities).
~50.1M	Total U.S. public school enrollment, fall 2025.
7.5M–10M	Children implied by that 15–20% prevalence estimate applied to current enrollment.
15% / 7.3M	Share and number of public-school students formally identified with any disability under IDEA, 2021–22 (NCES).
~4.5–5%	Share of all public-school students formally identified with a specific learning disability — the category that covers dyslexia — today (NCES/APM Reports).
5M–8M	Neuro Navigation's calculated gap between estimated prevalence and formal identification, using this year's own enrollment figures.
11.3%–20.5%	Range of state-by-state disability identification rates, Hawaii to New York, 2021–22 (NCES).
6.4%–15.1%	Range of state-by-state special-education enrollment found by GAO in an earlier national review — more than double, state to state.
2.4%	Share of U.S. school districts (356 of roughly 15,000) flagged by their states for significant racial/ethnic disproportionality in identification, per GAO; 21 states flagged zero districts.
47–56%	Decline in early-intervention funding for flagged districts between 2009–10 and 2010–11, per GAO — even as identified need should have driven funding up.

72% / 66%	Share of 4th- and 8th-graders with disabilities scoring “below basic” in reading on the 2024 NAEP — the assessment's lowest tier.
18.1% vs 6.5%	Dropout rate for students with specific learning disabilities versus the national average — nearly three times higher (NCLD).

Read plainly: the population of children research says need to be found has stayed remarkably stable at roughly one in five for decades. The share the system actually finds and formally labels has not closed that gap in any period for which comparable data exist. And the outcomes for the children who are found — dropout, graduation, and reading and math proficiency — have not meaningfully improved either. Three separate measures point the same direction: the machine is running, and the children it was built to catch are still falling through.

A Postcode Lottery: Why Identification Depends on Where You Live

If Child Find functioned as the statute describes, disability identification rates should look roughly similar from state to state, because the underlying prevalence of learning disabilities and other conditions does not vary meaningfully by geography. It doesn't work that way in practice. The most recent NCES data put identification rates at 11.3 percent of students in Hawaii versus 20.5 percent in New York — nearly a twofold difference. An earlier nationwide GAO review found an even starker range, from 6.4 to 15.1 percent of students identified across states.

GAO's explanation is damning in its simplicity: federal oversight of Child Find focuses almost entirely on whether states complete evaluation paperwork within required timelines — not on whether the criteria states use to decide who gets evaluated, and who gets found eligible, actually reflect the children who need help. States are free to set their own thresholds, definitions, and eligibility criteria within broad federal guardrails, and the Department of Education's monitoring apparatus was not built, and has not been rebuilt, to ask whether those state-level choices are producing accurate identification. The result is fifty different Child Find systems wearing one federal label — and a compliance regime that certifies the label, not the accuracy underneath it.

The Disproportionality Blind Spot

Nowhere is the box-checking pattern more visible than in how the federal government polices racial and ethnic disparities in special-education identification — a problem independent researchers have documented for decades, on both ends of the spectrum: some groups of children are over-identified and disproportionately placed in restrictive settings; others, particularly in under-resourced districts, are under-identified and denied services altogether.

IDEA requires states to monitor for “significant disproportionality” and to redirect a portion of federal special-education funding toward early-intervention services in districts where it is

found. GAO's investigation found that states were left to define “significant” however they chose — with disproportionality thresholds across states ranging from a 1.4-times to a 4.0-times overrepresentation trigger, minimum group-size requirements ranging from zero to 40 students, and required persistence periods ranging from a single year to three consecutive years. The predictable result: in the year studied, only 356 of the nation's roughly 15,000 school districts — 2.4 percent — were flagged nationwide, more than half of them concentrated in just five states. Twenty-one states flagged zero districts.

GAO was explicit that this was not evidence the problem had been solved. It was evidence that many states had written definitions loose enough, or thresholds high enough, that almost no district could ever be flagged under them — and that the Department of Education had never once required a state to fix a definition that mathematically guaranteed a clean bill of health. Worse, GAO found that funding earmarked for early-intervention services in the districts that were flagged actually fell by 47 to 56 percent between 2009–10 and 2010–11. The paperwork obligation was met. The dollars moved in the opposite direction from where the government's own data said they were needed.

Found Late, Helped Slowly: The Wait-to-Fail Problem

Even when Child Find does surface a child, timing is its own failure mode. Reading researchers, including Yale's Dr. Sally Shaywitz, have shown that the achievement gap between typical readers and children with dyslexia is measurable as early as first grade. Yet most affected children are not formally identified until third grade or later — the point at which reading shifts from a taught skill to an assumed one, and struggling students begin falling behind across every subject at once. Shaywitz has described it as “not unusual for dyslexics to go unrecognized until adolescence and beyond,” a systemic pattern researchers and advocates commonly call the “wait to fail” model: schools wait for a child's struggle to become severe and visible enough to justify a referral, rather than screening proactively for risk before failure sets in.

The screening infrastructure that would prevent this largely does not exist at scale. Schools routinely and reliably screen young children for hearing loss — a condition far less common than dyslexia — while universal, validated screening for dyslexia risk remains inconsistent and, in many districts, entirely absent, despite a growing number of states passing legislation encouraging or requiring it.

And the workforce meant to act once a child is found is itself under-prepared. National surveys have found that only about half of newly surveyed teachers could correctly answer basic questions about how children learn to read, and as recently measured, fewer than 40 percent of undergraduate teacher-preparation programs taught all five components of evidence-based reading instruction — phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension — though that figure has improved from just 17 percent a decade earlier. A child who is found by a system running on outdated or incomplete teacher training is still, functionally, a child without help.

Fifty-One Years In, the Outcomes Haven't Moved

The clearest evidence that Child Find has become a compliance exercise rather than a results-driven duty is that the results have not materially changed. On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress — the nation's most rigorous, long-running measure of what American students actually know — 72 percent of fourth-graders with disabilities and 66 percent of eighth-graders with disabilities scored “below basic” in reading, the lowest of NAEP's four achievement levels. Math results were worse: 53 percent of fourth-graders and 74 percent of eighth-graders with disabilities scored below basic.

Longer-term outcomes tell the same story. Students with specific learning disabilities drop out of school at 18.1 percent, compared with 6.5 percent for students overall — nearly three times the rate. They graduate with a regular diploma at roughly 70.8 percent, versus about 80 percent nationally. They are suspended at roughly double the rate of their peers, and are 85 percent more likely to repeat a grade. Only about 24 percent of college students with a documented learning disability disclose that disability to their institution, meaning the overwhelming majority quietly lose access to the accommodations that might have made the difference between finishing a degree and not.

These are not the outcomes of a system that is finding children early and intervening effectively. They are the outcomes of a system that is finding a fraction of the children who need it, often years later than the science says is optimal, and handing them off to a workforce that is, by its own national surveys, under-equipped to help — while reporting, accurately, that the paperwork was filed on time.

The Oversight Apparatus Just Got Weaker

This report was completed against an unusually consequential backdrop. On June 16, 2026, the federal government announced the transfer of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) — the Department of Education office responsible for administering IDEA grants and monitoring state compliance with Child Find and every other IDEA obligation — out of the Department of Education and into the Department of Health and Human Services. In the same announcement, the Office for Civil Rights, which enforces federal disability-discrimination protections in K-12 schools, was moved to the Department of Justice. Together, the offices oversee roughly \$15.5 billion in annual special-education funding.

The transfer was carried out through an interagency agreement, a mechanism that allowed the administration to shift day-to-day operations without a vote of Congress, even though federal law specifies that OSERS exist within the Department of Education. A senior Education Department official maintained that “no agreement can alter the rights that students with disabilities are afforded under federal law,” but more than 850 disability and education organizations signed a joint statement opposing the move, warning that scattering special-education oversight across agencies with disability expertise now secondary to their

core missions would weaken enforcement at precisely the moment this report's data show it needs to be strengthened, not diluted.

"IDEA is an education law. There is no logical sense why anyone would move students with disabilities under HHS."

— Chad Rummel, Council for Exceptional Children, and Denise Marshall, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (paraphrased from separate statements)

Disability-policy watchdogs have also pointed to the Project 2025 policy blueprint, which proposes converting IDEA funding into a “no-strings” formula block grant administered by HHS's Administration for Community Living — a structure that would remove even the thin, timeline-focused federal accountability that exists today. Given that GAO's own analysis found the current oversight system already fails to verify accuracy, only timeliness, a shift toward block-grant funding with fewer conditions attached would not fix the box-checking problem this report documents. It would make it structurally permanent.

What “Checking the Box” Actually Costs

None of this is an indictment of the individual teachers, school psychologists, and special-education staff working inside the system today; the data suggest most are operating inside incentives and training gaps not of their own making. But the cumulative effect of a compliance culture built around timelines instead of outcomes, state-by-state identification criteria with no accuracy check, a disproportionality safeguard that catches a fraction of a percent of the districts it should, and an oversight apparatus now being dispersed across agencies with no special-education mandate, is a legal duty that technically exists everywhere and functionally protects far fewer children than the law promises.

Fifteen to twenty percent of American children are not a rounding error, an anomaly, or a marketing statistic. They are a fifth of every classroom in the country — the same fifth, generation after generation, going back to the year Child Find became law. If the system built to find them were actually working, that number, and the outcomes attached to it, would look different by now. They don't.

A Call to Action

Neuro Navigation is calling on Congress, the relevant federal agencies, state education leaders, and school districts nationwide to take five concrete steps:

1. Require outcome reporting, not just timeline reporting. States should be required to publicly report, alongside existing evaluation-timeliness data, how many evaluated children are found eligible, how many receive the specific interventions their evaluation recommended, and whether their reading and math performance measurably improves within 12 months of identification.

2. Set a single, evidence-based national floor for disproportionality. Replace the current patchwork of state-defined thresholds — which allowed 21 states to flag zero districts — with a uniform, research-based standard that cannot be defined into irrelevance.
3. Mandate universal, validated early-literacy and dyslexia-risk screening in kindergarten through second grade nationwide, paired with an automatic, funded pathway into intervention — not merely a data point filed away in a student's record.
4. Close the teacher-preparation gap by requiring all undergraduate and alternative-certification teacher-preparation programs to cover the five components of evidence-based reading instruction, so a child who is found lands in a classroom equipped to help them.
5. Reverse the June 2026 transfer of special-education and disability civil-rights oversight out of the Department of Education, and reject any move toward unconditional block-grant funding that would remove federal accountability rather than strengthen it.

About Neuro Navigation, Inc.

Neuro Navigation, Inc. is a Wisconsin-registered company, founded in January 2025, that provides resources, tools, and services for neurodivergent learners and the families and educators who support them, with a specialization in dyslexia and ADHD. The company was founded by Kelly VanZant, Creative Director, who was diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, and auditory processing delays at age nine and has committed her career to changing outcomes for the neurodivergent community she grew up inside of. She leads the organization together with Dr. Carrie VanZant, Executive Director, a public health researcher and healthcare executive whose work focuses on improving educational, health, and life outcomes for neurodivergent individuals through responsible artificial intelligence, implementation science, and public health research — including a forthcoming publication roadmap addressing a responsible AI framework for supporting students with dyslexia, a systematic review of four decades of dyslexia research, development of an explainable dyslexia probability index, implementation science for AI in education, and digital health equity for neurodivergent populations.

Neuro Navigation serves families nationwide from its base in Wisconsin, working at the intersection of the population this report documents — the estimated 15 to 20 percent of students with a learning or attention difference — and the system that, on the evidence above, is not consistently finding or serving them. Learn more, request a screening, or get involved at neuronavigation.org.

Methodology Note

This report synthesizes publicly available federal data and government watchdog findings, including U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics enrollment and identification data, U.S. Government Accountability Office investigative

reports, National Assessment of Educational Progress results, National Center for Learning Disabilities research, and contemporaneous news reporting on the June 2026 transfer of special-education oversight functions. Where this report presents an original calculation — specifically, the estimated 5–8 million-child gap between prevalence and formal identification — that figure is Neuro Navigation's own analysis, derived by applying the cited 15–20 percent prevalence estimate and the cited approximately 4.5–5 percent specific-learning-disability identification rate to the current national public-school enrollment figure of approximately 50.1 million students; it is presented as an estimate, not a federally reported statistic, and is intended to illustrate the scale of the documented gap rather than to serve as a precise headcount.

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