

IDEA Public Schools Witness Significant Drop in Special Education Referrals

By Kurt Engelmann, President and Christina Cox, Publicity and Marketing Manager
National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI)

With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), schools across the nation were charged with ensuring students of all backgrounds and abilities were provided with an equal opportunity to access a successful educational experience. The importance of providing all students with special needs an appropriate education is universally accepted, but the reality is that the referral process for special services varies greatly from school district to school district, with the reliability of the referrals varying greatly, also. In many districts, much time and effort is spent determining which students should be eligible for special programs, often without a consistent criteria applied from year to year or even case to case. Moreover, the match is often quite low between the number of students who are referred to special programs and the number who are designated as qualifying for special programs.

Most importantly, the proportion of students who are assigned to special programs is extremely high in many states -- exceeding 17% of all students enrolled in Maine, New York and Wyoming. This high special education referral rate is an indication that the core instructional approach isn't working for the full range of students attending the school. When students fail, they are placed into special programs. The school's core instructional approach isn't usually seen as the cause of the students' failure even though its use is generating such a high rate of student failure.

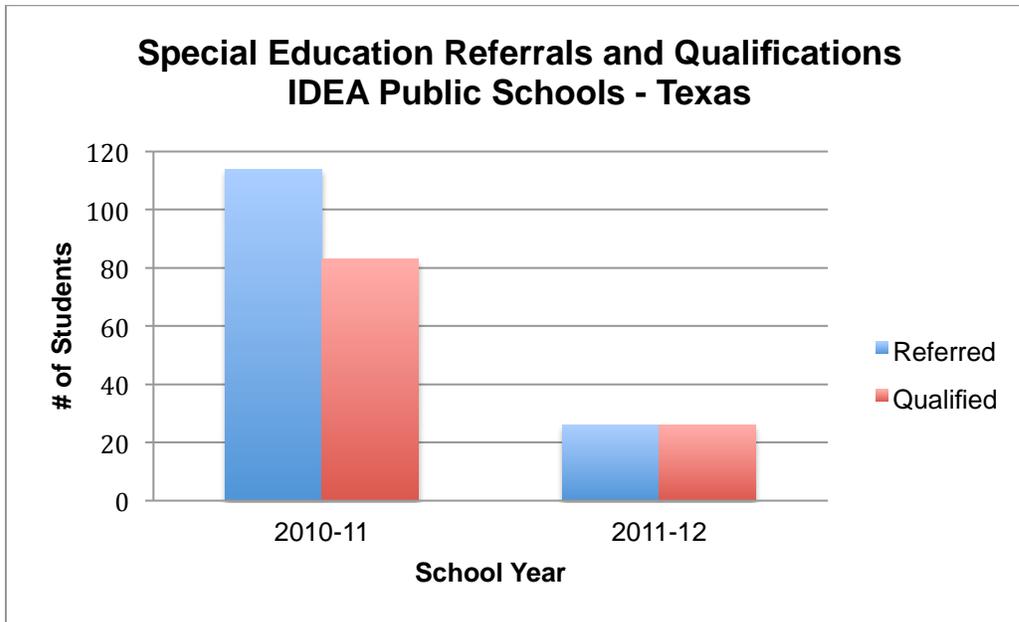
The comprehensive Direct Instruction model can provide a solution to these problems of special education. The full DI model provides three components that can be used to generate consistent criteria for determining whether students require special services: 1) initial assessment of students' skills, 2) ongoing assessment of students' skills and 3) analysis of students' progress through the Direct Instruction programs. All DI programs contain placement tests that are used to determine students' initial starting point in the programs. A very low placement in the program, such as a placement in Decoding A of the Corrective Reading program, can be used as a criterion for referring a student to special services. All DI programs also contain an ongoing assessment system that includes mastery tests given to students usually about every 10 lessons. A consistently low percentage of correct items on several mastery tests indicate that instruction needs to be modified to meet students' needs. If the rate at which students progress through the program is less than a prescribed standard, such

as a lesson a day at mastery, then this low progress rate can also be used as a criterion for referring students to special services.

The implementation of the comprehensive DI model at IDEA Public Schools in Texas demonstrates how DI can lead to accurate special services referrals at the same time that the total number of referrals drops significantly. IDEA Public Schools is a public charter school company. IDEA Public Schools is a growing network of tuition-free K-12 public charter schools serving more than 13,000 students in the Rio Grande Valley and Central Texas. IDEA is committed to “College for All Children” and has sent 100% of its graduates to four-year colleges and universities for six years. Learn more about IDEA at www.ideapublicschools.org.

Beginning in fall of 2011, IDEA Schools implemented the comprehensive DI model schoolwide with support from the National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI). This model of DI involves implementing DI reading, language and math in all grades according to the Developer's Guidelines (available via http://www.nifdi.org/component/docman/doc_download/116-developer-guidelines?Itemid=326). Weekly data analysis of the lesson progress and mastery of each instructional group and each student is an integral part of the model.

During the 2010-11 school year, 114 students at IDEA Public Schools were considered for Special Education services. Of those, only 83 students, or 73%, qualified under the federal regulations for identifying students for services. The following year, 2011-12, IDEA Public Schools began implementing Direct Instruction programs in their schools. What they found was that through in program data they collected each day and analyzed weekly with the help of a consultant from an external support provider, they had a considerably better grasp on students' current skill levels and were able to meet students at their instructional level. With this information, they were able to accurately identify students who may qualify. IDEA reduced the number of students considered for Special Education to 27 -- a 76% decrease in referrals -- and found that they were far more accurate in the students they identified as having a suspected learning disability. *All but one* student the school referred qualified for Special Education, the exception being one child referred to the program by a parent.



The quality of instruction provided to students through the implementation of DI has significantly improved student outcomes and teacher performance. One IDEA principal agrees, saying, “The teachers are all on task and know exactly what to teach”. This improved level of instruction has significantly attributed to increased student performance and decreased number of referrals. “Students are met at their level and their instructional needs are being met, so it has lessened referrals overall,” says Instructional Coach Michele Peckinpaugh, adding that “DI is a specific, structured program that helps guide students and teachers in a very logical sequence for student success.”

“My kindergarten students in the past were never able to accomplish so much. One hundred percent of my kinder students are reading this year because of DI!”

Staff and students see the difference in instruction, too. JoAnn Gama, Chief of Schools and Co-Founder of IDEA, says, “My kindergarten students in the past were never able to accomplish so much. One hundred percent of my kinder students are reading this year because of DI!” IDEA students agree, “We are reading *The Wizard of Oz* and learning so many new words – hard words, too!” says

one third grader. “We have really been practicing those fluency activities...we are getting much more fluent in our reading!” says another student.