

## Special Education Reform Plan Makes Valuable Improvements

By Robert Holland and Don Soifer

Policymakers seeking to improve special education in the United States face a system that is:

- **Vast** – nearly one in eight U.S. schoolchildren is currently considered disabled;
- **Complex** – federal laws and regulations governing special education are among the most complicated and bureaucratic of any in the federal code;
- **Expensive** – one study estimated that over \$77 billion is spent annually to provide education for students with disabilities, and
- **Growing** – by more than one-third over the past decade.

Being the parent of a disabled child is not easy, under this system or any other. Being a child stuck in special education when you are not actually disabled is difficult also, especially under the current system.

House Education Reform Subcommittee Chairman Michael Castle has emphasized that “current methods of identifying children with disabilities lack validity or reliability.” This has resulted in widespread misidentification and mislabeling, especially of minority students. The plan he and his colleagues have produced will improve the current system by making a number of meaningful improvements. These include:

**Emphasizing early intervention** strategies aimed at correcting reading deficiencies before children are identified as disabled. School districts will be granted flexibility to use up to 15 percent of their federal IDEA funds for such pre-referral services.

**Strengthening parents’ control** over decisions regarding their children’s education, by allowing them to bypass process-heavy regulations pertaining to children’s Individualized Education Programs.

**Ending reliance on controversial “IQ discrepancy”** models for identifying children with disabilities.

**Protecting children and their parents from being coerced into administering behavior-altering medication in order to attend school.** These include powerful stimulants like Ritalin, classified under Schedule II of the Controlled Substances Act.

**Reducing heavy paperwork** demands currently placed on special education teachers.

**Easing federal regulations dictating how school officials are permitted to discipline special education students.** The new rules would allow uniform discipline for all children, helping to ensure school safety by allowing school officials to suspend special education students when they feel it is necessary.