

Montana Extends Special Education Services for Students Up to Age 22

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— Categories: Human Rights



HELENA, Mont., Montana has agreed to extend public school services for students with disabilities up to the age of 22, settling a federal lawsuit that challenged the state's previous policies. The move brings Montana in line with federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees a free and appropriate public education for

students with disabilities until they turn 22, provided they have not earned a standard high school diploma.

The lawsuit, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Montana on behalf of families across the state, argued that Montana's previous limit of services until age 19 was insufficient and violated federal protections. The plaintiffs stressed that many students with disabilities require additional time and support to complete their education, develop vocational skills, and transition successfully to independent adult life.

Under the settlement, Montana will not only extend the age limit for special education services but also implement several reforms to strengthen the quality and accessibility of those services. Schools will receive increased training for teachers and support staff to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. The state also plans to enhance programs that assist students transitioning from high school into higher education, vocational training, or the workforce.

Advocates and family members welcomed the settlement as a critical step toward equitable education. "This ensures that all students, regardless of ability, have access to the education and support they need to succeed," said the executive director of the ACLU of Montana. Families affected by the change emphasized the importance of continued guidance and resources for students who require extended support to reach their full potential.

State officials confirmed their commitment to implementing the settlement and monitoring its impact. A spokesperson for the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services stated, "We are dedicated to providing educational opportunities that are accessible,

inclusive, and effective for every student. Extending services to age 22 reflects our commitment to compliance and to the needs of our communities.”

The agreement also establishes oversight mechanisms to ensure that schools comply with the new requirements. An independent monitor will track progress, assess the effectiveness of programs, and report on the state’s adherence to the settlement terms. This oversight aims to hold the state accountable and to ensure that reforms translate into meaningful outcomes for students.

Education advocates highlighted that the settlement could influence how other states address the needs of students with disabilities. By extending services and strengthening transition programs, Montana sets a precedent emphasizing both compliance with federal law and practical support for students as they prepare for adulthood.

As schools begin implementing the changes, attention will focus on expanding resources, improving staff training, and ensuring that all students receive the support necessary to succeed academically and socially. Families, educators, and policymakers now share the responsibility of making sure that students with disabilities benefit fully from the extended services, equipping them with skills and opportunities for life beyond the classroom.

This settlement marks a significant milestone for Montana’s educational system, demonstrating a commitment to inclusive education while highlighting the ongoing need for resources and oversight to support students with disabilities effectively.