

Special Education Official Leads Data-Collection Push

By Christina A. Samuels
Washington

Beginning next month, states will have to report to the federal government more information for their students with disabilities than they were ever required to do under previous incarnations of the federal special education law.

The data-collection effort is not only a challenge for state officials, however. It's also one of the first major activities to be entirely overseen by Alexa E. Posny, who last April took over as the first full-time director of the Department of Education's office of special education programs since March 2005.

Alexa E. Posny, the director of the Department of Education's office of special education programs, will oversee data collection from the states on that subject.

—Christopher Powers/Education Week

Ms. Posny, herself a former state education official in Kansas, has gotten generally good marks from those in the field since she assumed the reins at the federal office, known by its acronym, OSEP. Supporters point to her knowledge base and what they say is her ability to make complicated subjects easier to understand.

The data collection will test her organizational and diplomatic skills as well. States have never been required by the federal government to collect so much information on students with disabilities, and in such detail. Many states have had to retool their computer programs and devote employees specifically to the task. By around June, the Education Department will inform states whether they are moving quickly enough toward the goals they set out for themselves, and what sanctions they may face if they are not.

"The annual performance plans—that is just all-consuming for our state directors of special education," said Bill East, the executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, based in Alexandria, Va. The department, he added, "is going to use the data to rank states, and that's a very high-stakes thing. That's a major challenge that Alexa has, in keeping the states happy."

Ms. Posny is the best person to be in charge of the special education office as it guides the states through the process, Mr. East said, noting that she "has been on both sides of this thing."

"It's a tough job, but if there's anyone who can do it, she can," he said.

Ms. Posny, 54, joined OSEP at a time when federal education officials were well into the process of writing the final regulations for the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

After the regulations were published in August of last year, she was part of the effort to talk about the new rules directly with the state and local educators who would be in charge of carrying them out. At the time, she said the community-based public meetings were a specific effort to reach people outside the orbit of the Education Department. The sessions, along with a department Web site on the regulations, have been popular in the field.

In Kansas, Ms. Posny's last position was as a deputy commissioner for learning services, and she also served for two years as the state director of special education. She was a special education teacher for 4½ years, but much of her career was spent in administrative positions, helping other educators decipher special education law and Title I, the federal program that provides funding to schools with large numbers of poor students.

'New Door'

According to Ms. Posny, those jobs taught her the importance of converting the sometimes impenetrable language of laws and regulations into concepts easier to grasp.

"I learned that having to present to the state board [of education]," Ms. Posny said in a recent interview. "It was made up of lay people. If I couldn't explain things to them so they could understand, then I've lost the game before it even started."

The ability to be clear to people is even more important when it comes to programs or regulations that may be controversial, she said.

"When I do provide explanations, they may not like the answer I have, but I need to help them understand why it came up the way it did," Ms. Posny said.

Those who worked with Ms. Posny in Kansas offer positive comments about her work there.

"She's very down to earth and very concrete in the things she puts together for families," said Connie Zienkewicz, the executive director of Families Together Inc., a federally funded center for parent training and information, based in Wichita.

Former Kansas Commissioner of Education Andy Tompkins, now a professor at the University of Kansas school of education, said in an e-mail message that Ms. Posny "knows the [special education] law and its regulations as well as anyone."

Ms. Posny was on the short list to become the education commissioner in Kansas after Mr. Tompkins retired in July 2005, but was passed over when what was then a conservative majority on the state board selected a conservative policy analyst with no prior experience in education.

Ms. Posny said she barely had time to feel disappointed; soon after the board made its decision, the federal Education Department came calling.

"What [the board decision] did was open up a whole new door for me," she said.

Priority Areas

After Ms. Posny was offered the federal job, she worked a full week in Kansas and started work in Washington the following Monday. Waiting for her guidance were the IDEA regulations, as well as the comments on the proposed regulations that would govern the so-called "2 percent" assessments. The assessments, when in place, would allow 2 percent of all students—about 20 percent of students with disabilities—to take modified tests and still be counted as proficient in calculating adequate yearly progress as mandated under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Ms. Posny said she knows her time in Washington may be limited. Like her boss, John H. Hager, the assistant secretary for special education programs and rehabilitative services, she is a political appointee, and the Bush administration has just two years remaining.

Whatever her tenure at OSEP, Ms. Posny hopes to focus on what she considers four priority areas: early-intervention services, transition for students with disabilities once they leave high school, parent involvement, and a closer tie between special education and general education law.

"I really do look at this as an opportunity," she said of her job. "And, who could ever be bored?"