

Students with Learning Disabilities: A National Review

Nearly 3 million school-age students are currently receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) due to identified specific learning disabilities (SLD). While this number does not represent all students who struggle with learning difficulties, the data available on SLD students served under IDEA offers valuable information. This document presents a review of significant data available on students with learning disabilities as well as other items of importance despite the absence of data specific to students with LD.

I. CHANGES IN NUMBERS OF STUDENTS SERVED

The number of students being served in the IDEA category of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) has increased 34 percent during the past 9 years. In each of the last 4 years the increase in the SLD category has been *less than* the increase in the total number of students served. The chart below shows the growth in the number of children served under IDEA Part B, all disabilities and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), between School Year 1990-91 and 1999-2000.

School Year	All Disabilities Ages 6-21	% Chg.	SLD Ages 6-21	% Chg.	SLD % of total
90-91	4,361,751	-	2,144,017	-	49.2
91-92	4,499,824	3.2	2,247,004	4.8	49.9
92-93	4,625,574	2.8	2,366,487	5.3	51.2
93-94	4,779,359	3.3	2,427,665	2.6	50.8
94-95	4,907,511	2.7	2,510,224	3.4	51.2
95-96	5,078,951	3.5	2,601,904	3.7	51.2
96-97	5,230,772	3.0	2,674,407	2.8	51.1
97-98	5,396,985	3.2	2,754,484	3.0	51.0
98-99	5,539,884	2.6	2,815,664	2.2	50.8
99-00	5,683,707	2.6	2,871,966	2.0	50.5
90-91 to 99-00	+1,321,956	+30.3	+727,949	+34.0	
Growth in Resident population 6-21		+12.2			
Growth in School enrollment pre-kindergarten –12 th grade		+13.7			

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AA12, page II-22

II. PERCENT OF ESTIMATED RESIDENT POPULATION

During the school year 1999-2000, 4.50 percent of the estimated resident population of children ages 6-21 was served under IDEA Part B in the SLD category. State percentages ranged from a low of 2.36 percent in Kentucky to a high of 7.10 percent in Massachusetts.

By comparison, in the school year 1991-92 the percentage of the estimated resident population of children ages 6-21 served in the SLD category was 3.89 percent, indicating an *increase* of .6 percent in the prevalence of SLD in the resident population in 9 years.

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AA9
15th Annual Report to Congress Table AA23

III. PERCENT OF STUDENTS SERVED UNDER IDEA

Students served in the SLD category represented 50.5 percent of all students served ages 6-21 under IDEA Part B during the 1999-2000 school year. This is the largest category of students served.

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AA9

IV. AGE-GROUP DISTRIBUTION

AGES 6-11: For the first time in 10 years the number of students with SLD in the 6-11 age group declined, going from 1,119,501 in 1998-99 to 1,118,152 in 1999-00. Students with SLD represented 39.9 percent of all students with disabilities in the 6-11 age group in 99-00 versus 40.1 percent in 90-91. SLD was the only category to show a decline of the number of children served in this age group. Some of this decline may be attributable to expanded use of the developmental delay (DD) category. The DD category was added in 1997 and is applicable only to children ages 3-9 and its use for students 6-9 is optional for States and local educational agencies (LEAs). 22 States used the DD category in 1999-2000, bringing the total number of students to 19,304, up from 11,907 the previous year.

AGES 12-17: The number of students with SLD in the 12-17 age group increased by 3.7 percent versus an increase of 3.9 percent for all disabilities. Students with SLD represented 61.9 percent of all students with disabilities in the 12-17 age group in 99-00 versus 60.9 percent in 90-91.

AGES 18-21: The number of students with SLD in the 18-21 age group increased by .5 percent versus an increase of 1.0 percent for all disabilities. Students with SLD represented 51.1 percent of all students with disabilities in the 18-21 age group in 99-00 versus 46.1 percent in 90-91.

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AA12

V. RACE/ETHNICITY

The race/ethnic distribution of students served under IDEA appears to differ from that of the resident population of 6-21 year olds. The chart below shows the percentage of students ages 6-21 served during the 99-00 school year in each of the “high incidence” disability categories and developmental delay (DD) versus the race/ethnicity share of the resident population.

Disability	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian/Pacific Islander	Black (non-Hispanic)	Hispanic	White (non-Hispanic)
SLD	1.4	1.6	18.4	16.6	62.1
SLI	1.2	2.4	16.1	12.7	67.6
MR	1.1	1.8	34.2	9.1	53.8
ED	1.1	1.2	27.3	8.9	61.5
DD	0.9	0.8	30.5	4.1	63.7
All Disabilities	1.3	1.8	20.3	13.7	62.9
Resident population	1.0	3.8	14.5	16.2	64.5

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table II-10

The race/ethnicity representation for Preschoolers (ages 3-5) served under Part B for the 1999-2000 School Year does not show the same disproportionality as the 6-21 age group. The following chart shows race/ethnicity for the IDEA Preschool population versus the general population.

	Percentage in Part B Population Ages 3-5	Percentage in General Population Ages 3-5	Differences
White	67.3	61.8	+5.5
Black	15.7	13.7	+2.0
Hispanic	13.7	19.3	-5.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.1	4.3	-2.2
Amer. Indian/Alaska Native	1.2	0.9	+0.3

VI. EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

The percentage of students with learning disabilities who spend more than 80 percent of their instructional time in general education has more than doubled in the past 9 years. The chart below shows the change in the educational environments of students with learning disabilities over the 9-year period from 1989-90 to 1998-99. Only the category of Speech/Language Impairment has a higher percentage of students spending more time in general education than students with SLD.

Students with Specific Learning Disabilities(SLD) Educational Environments				
	Percent of time outside regular class			
School Year	Less than 20%	Between 21-60%	More than 60%	Other*
1989-90	20.68	56.10	21.68	1.53
1998-99	45.11	38.43	15.49	0.96

*Includes placement in public and private separate facilities, public and private residential facilities, and home/hospital environment.

Source: 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AB8

VII. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Graduation from high school with a standard diploma for students with SLD in 1998-99 was 63.3 percent*. This compares to a graduation rate of 57.4 percent for all students with disabilities. The graduation rate for students with SLD is exceeded by students with Speech/Language Impairments (64.8%), Hearing Impairments (69.4%), Other Health Impairments (66.8%), Visual Impairments (75.1%) and Traumatic Brain Injury (70.3%).

While data on graduation rates for students with learning disabilities is not available by racial/ethnic group, it is important to note that overall there is great disparity between groups, ranging from 63.4 percent graduation rate for white students to 43.5 percent for black students. Given the large proportion of students with SLD in the overall population of students with disabilities, this data would suggest that the graduation rates for students with SLD vary significantly by racial/ethnic group.

*This percentage is calculated by dividing the number of students age 14 and older who graduated with a standard diploma by the number of students age 14 and older who are known to have left school (i.e., graduated with a standard diploma, received a certificate of completion, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out.)

Source: 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table I-1

VIII. DROPOUT RATE

The dropout rate for students with SLD was 27.1 percent* in the school year 1998-99. This compares to a drop out rate for all students with disabilities of 28.9 percent, and is exceeded only by the drop out rate for students with ED, which was 50.6 percent.

Dropout rates also vary greatly by racial/ethnic group. Asian/Pacific Islander students had the lowest dropout rate at 18.8 percent, followed by white students at 26.9 percent, Hispanic students at 32.3 percent and black students at 33.7 percent. The highest dropout rate occurred among American Indian/Alaska Native students at 44.0 percent.

**This percentage is calculated by dividing the number of students age 14 and older who dropped out by the number of students age 14 and older who are known to have left school (i.e., graduated with a standard diploma, received a certificate of completion, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out.)*

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AD1

IX. NUMBER OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES SUBJECT TO UNILATERAL REMOVAL

During the 1998-99 School Year, 15,425 students with disabilities were subject to unilateral removal by school personnel for drug or weapon offenses or removal based on a hearing officer determination regarding “likely injury to self or others”. This represents .3 percent of all students age 6-21 served under IDEA Part B during the same school year.

The chart below shows the distribution of these students within the SLD and ED categories, which comprise the majority of students subject to removal.

	Removal by School Personnel for Drug or Weapon Offenses	Removal based on Hearing Officer Determination
All disabilities	13,478	1,921
SLD	8749 (65%)	1224 (64%)
ED	2512 (19%)	330 (17%)

SLD students subject to removal represented .3 percent of all students in the SLD category. ED students subject to removal represented .6 percent of all students in the ED category.

Note: Students with SLD make up 50.5% of all students with disabilities while students with ED make up 8.3%.

Source: 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table AE1

X. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) indicates that parents of students with learning disabilities were *less likely* to attend IEP meetings than parents of students in other disability categories. Parents of students with SLD (88%) and SLI (87.8%) were *least likely* to attend an IEP meeting.

Additionally, only 26.5 percent of parents of students with SLD reported having attended a parent support or informational/training meeting. As with IEP participation, this rate is the lowest (along with parents of SLI students at 18%) of any disability category. Of parents attending a support or training meeting, 36.2 percent reported that the activity was sponsored by the Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC) in their area. Of those who attended a support or training meeting, 96% reported the training/information was “very” or “pretty” helpful.

In 1999-2000, 6,477,776 children received services under the IDEA (205,769 children under Part C, 588,300 preschool children and 5,683,707 students ages 6-21 under Part B). The Parent Training and Information Centers (Part D) are currently funded at \$26 million, providing approximately \$4.00 per year per child to supply training and information to parents.

Source 23rd Annual Report to Congress Table III-4
FY02 Federal ED Budget

Note: SEELS (www.seels.net) is a 6-year longitudinal study of approximately 13,500 students who received special education services and were ages 6 through 12 in the 1999-2000 school year.

XI. DUE PROCESS HEARINGS

In 2000 a total of 3,274 hearings were held in the U.S. 3,020 hearings held at level one (states with a one-tiered hearing system) and 254 hearings held at level two (states with a two-tiered hearing system). This represents one hearing for every 1979 students receiving services under IDEA. It is important to note that Washington, D.C. held 419 hearings (13 percent of the nation’s total) involving its 8788 IDEA eligible students, or *one due process hearing for every 21 students*.

The numbers of hearings held have been decreasing since 1996, while the numbers of hearings requested has continued to increase. From 1996 to 2000, the number of requests increased an average of 10.4 percent each year, but the number of hearings held decreased at the average rate of 4.0 percent per year. While there are many factors that influence the holding of hearings or the cancellation of such requests, one significant factor is the IDEA 97 requirement that every state establish procedures that allow for the settlement of a dispute through mediation at state cost. Assuming that states continue to improve their efforts to make mediation and other dispute resolution strategies available, the decrease in the number of hearings held is likely to continue. (NOTE: All but eight States already had mediation systems in place prior to the IDEA Amendments of 1997.)

Note: While there is no nation wide data available on the party requesting a due process hearing, anecdotal evidence suggests an increase in the occurrence of school districts initiating the requests for due process hearings.

Source: Due Process Hearings: 2001 Update, Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, April 2002.

XII. TEACHER SHORTAGE

In 1998-99, approximately 387,284 teachers were employed to provide special education services to students with disabilities. However, 39,466 of those teachers were not fully certified for their positions and almost 97 percent of districts had at least one special education opening during the 1999-2000 school year. The percentage of teachers not fully certified varies widely from state to state. Many states report less than 2 percent of teachers who are not fully certified, while New York reports a rate of 21 percent.

Note: The Personnel Preparation Program is the most highly funded discretionary program under Part D of IDEA, with \$90 million appropriated for the program in fiscal year 2002.

Source: 23rd Annual Report to Congress

XIII. COST OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Advance Report #1 from the Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP) reported the following findings:

- During the 1999-2000 school year, approximately \$50 billion was spent on special education services by the 50 states and the District of Columbia, amounting to \$8,080 per special education student.
- The total spending to provide a combination of regular and special education services to students with disabilities amounted to \$77.3 billion, or an average of \$12,474 per student. This represents almost 22 percent of the 1999-2000 spending on all elementary and secondary educational services in the U.S.
- The additional expenditure to educate the average student with a disability is estimated to be \$5,918 per student. This is the difference between the total expenditure per student eligible for special education services (\$12,474) and the total expenditure per regular education student (\$6,556). Based on 1999-2000 school year data, the total expenditure to educate the average student with disabilities is an estimated *1.90 times* that expended to educate the typical regular education student with no special needs. (This ratio has actually declined since 1985, when it was estimated by Moore *et al.* (1988) to be 2.28).
- Local education agencies received \$3.7 billion in federal IDEA funding in 1999-2000, accounting for 10.2 percent of the additional total expenditure on special education students (or \$605 per special education student), and about 7.5 percent of total special education spending. If Medicaid funds are included, federal funding covers 12 percent of the total additional expenditure on special education students (i.e., 10.2 percent from IDEA and 1.8 percent from Medicaid).
- Since 1968-69, when the earliest study on special education expenditures was conducted, the total per pupil spending on students with disabilities has risen from \$5,961 to \$12,474 in constant dollars, while total spending per pupil in all public elementary and secondary schools has increased from \$3,106 to \$7,597. In other words, total per pupil spending on the average special education student has increased by 110 percent, while total per pupil spending on *all* elementary and secondary education students has increased by 140 percent.
- While per pupil spending for all students increased at a faster relative rate than per pupil spending on students with disabilities, total spending on students with disabilities as a percentage of total education spending increased from about 16.6 percent in 1977-1978 to 21.4 percent in 1999-2000. Over the same period, the percentage of students aged 3-22 who were receiving special education services increased from about 8.5 percent to almost 13 percent of the school-age population. The implication is that the *growth in the numbers of students served in special education programs accounts for the increase in spending on special education.*

Source: Advance Report #1, Special Education Expenditure Project

Note: SEEP (Special Education Expenditure Project) is a national study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Future reports will focus on how educational spending varies for students by disability and age level.

***Prepared by The Advocacy Institute
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*A not-for-profit organization dedicated to services and projects that work to
improve the lives of children, youth and adults with learning disabilities.*

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