
Improving Results for Students with Disabilities: A Summary of Key Findings from the 1997 National Assessment Studies

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Congress made significant changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the landmark law that ensures educational equity for children with disabilities. With access to public schools already guaranteed for 6.1 million U.S. children with disabilities, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA set educators' and policy-makers' sights on improving achievement for these students, as well as ensuring positive transitions to work or postsecondary education after graduation. As part of the 1997 reauthorization, Congress requested a national assessment "to examine how well schools, local education agencies, states and other recipients of assistance" were making progress toward a number of goals.

This summary is drawn from a synthesis of findings from the seven studies that comprise the national assessment. Four of the studies were designed as longitudinal child

outcomes studies; of these, three were undertaken by SRI International. One SRI study addresses the needs of infants and toddlers (NEILS, the National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study). Another addresses elementary- and middle-school-aged students with disabilities (SEELS, Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study), and the third addresses youth with disabilities (NLTS2, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2). Westat is completing the fourth of the longitudinal child-outcomes studies, addressing pre-school-aged children with disabilities (PEELS, Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study). Although the child outcomes studies are not currently complete, some data are available from all four studies, and substantial data are available from two that are nearly complete, NEILS and SEELS. There also were three topic-specific studies. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) completed a study of the costs of special education (SEEP, Special Education Expenditure Project), Westat completed a study of personnel needs in special education

(SPeNSE), and Abt Associates conducted the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIDEA).

FINDINGS

From Standards to Access to Outcomes

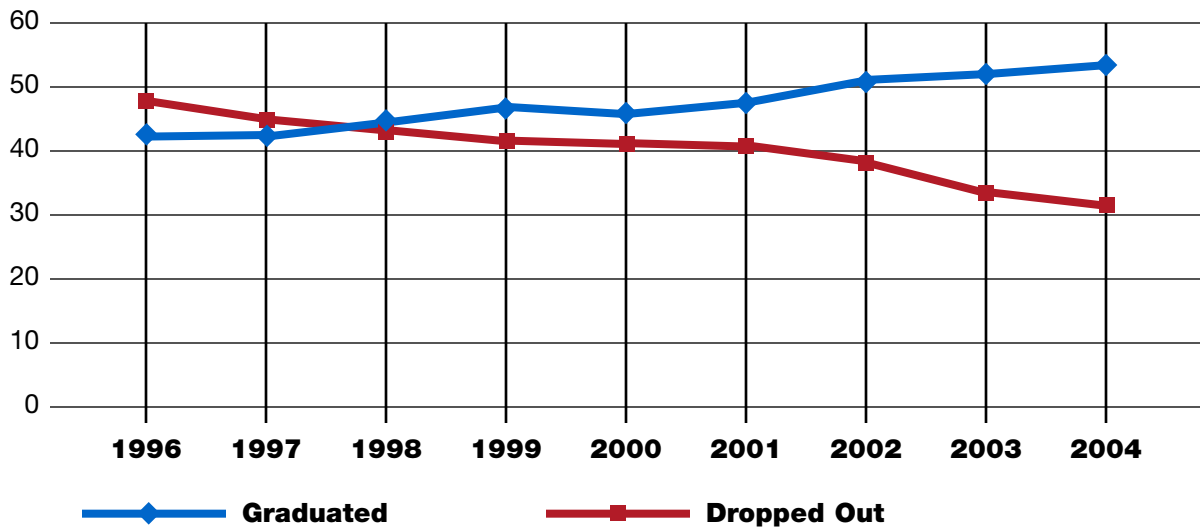
Outcomes: Since the passage of IDEA in 1997, particular outcomes for students with disabilities, such as graduation with a diploma and performance on standardized assessments, have improved. Grades, passage through the grades, and postsecondary enrollment have also improved. However, significant gaps in academic performance between students with disabilities and nondisabled students still remain.

Access to the general education curriculum:

Changes in academic outcomes have occurred against the backdrop of a changing disability distribution, including more students with milder disabilities and continuation of a broad national movement toward education in the regular classroom. Students with disabilities are increasingly taking courses in academic subjects and increasingly taking these subjects in the regular classroom. Teachers reported using a variety of classroom practices to support students with disabilities in their schools, and four out of five special education teachers reported that the practices they used to support inclusion were implemented throughout their school districts.

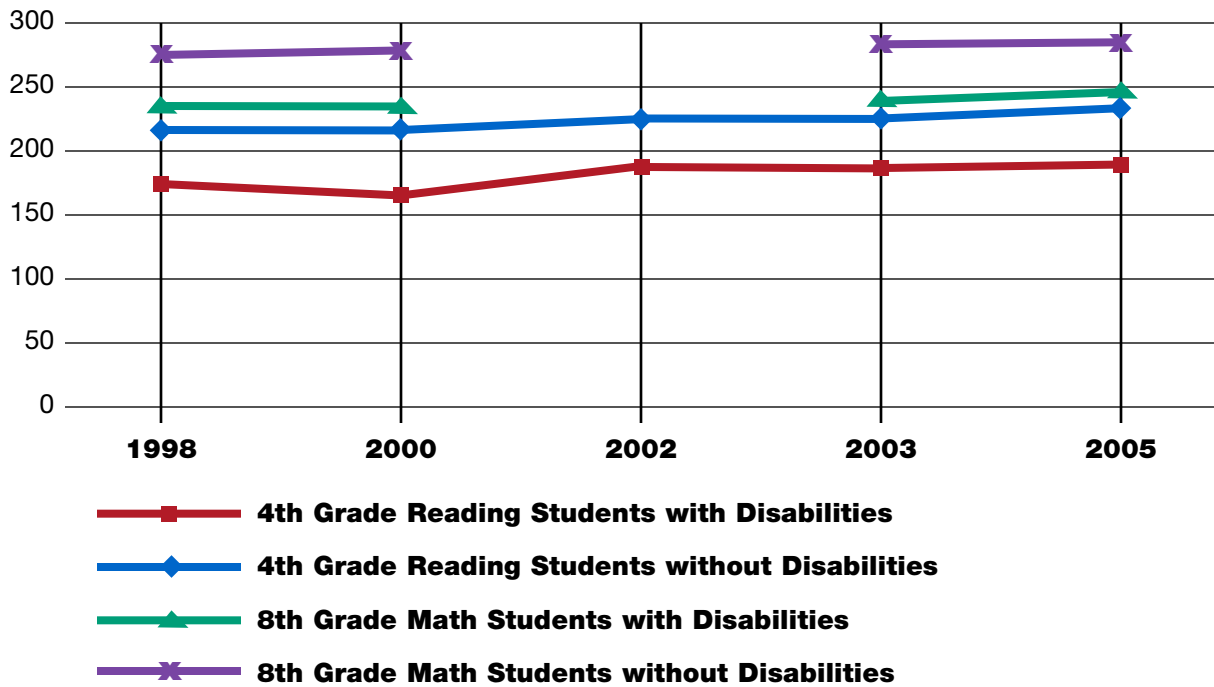
Standards and accountability: Although fewer than three-quarters of all beginning special education teachers were certified for their main assignment, general and special education teachers overall felt prepared to educate students with disabilities. However, special education

Percentage of Students With Disabilities Who Graduated From and Dropped Out of School, 1996 to 2004



Source: State Reported data to OSEP (DANS), retrieved from www.ideadata.org

Average NAEP Scale Scores, Grade 4 Reading and Grade 8 Mathematics, 1998-2005



Source: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nrc/reading>
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nrc/mathematics>

teacher turnover and preparation of general educators remain a concern. Supports for teachers have increased both in number and variety. General and special educators plan together in three-quarters of schools, but they routinely teach together in fewer than half the schools.

Thus, in an education era driven by standards and accountability for results, there has been a sizable shift in the attention given to the academic performance of students with disabilities, the contexts for their instruction, and policy inputs and supports relevant to it. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has contributed to this effort through its support of the National Center for Educational Outcomes and the Center on Access to the General Education Curriculum. In addition, the Office of Elementary and

Secondary Education now includes students with disabilities as a focus of the newly established National Comprehensive Content Centers, which address the topics of high school reform, assessment and accountability, teacher quality, innovation and improvement, and instruction. The focus is on academics, getting access to the general education curriculum, and building the capacity at the school level to implement instructional strategies that will result in more students with disabilities meeting proficiency standards and graduating from high school. Although outcomes are improving, achievement gaps remain. Nonetheless, the experience of the past decade has provided evidence that policymakers and practitioners are laying a foundation that will address these gaps and tackle the remaining need to build the capacity of districts and schools to meet the needs of all students.

As Students Grow, What Happens?

Age at entry: Under IDEA, individuals with disabilities can receive services as early as birth, and up through the age of 21 through a system of programs and services required by the law. Regardless of the age at which disabilities emerge, promptness in appropriately serving students with disabilities can be extremely important in ameliorating their effects on children’s development and functioning. Although improvements over time have been made in lowering both the age at first identification and age at first service, of concern is that gaps remain between these time periods. Even in early intervention, gaps exist in the identification of children with early speech or communication issues.

Age at First Identification of and Service for Disability, 2003

Age	Percentage whose disability or delay first was identified	Percentage who began receiving service for a disability or delay
Birth to 2	19.0	9.1
3 or 4	9.5	7.9
5 or 6	31.3	21.5
7 to 10	29.6	42.8
11 or older	10.6	18.8
Average age	5.9	7.4

Source: Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Newman, L. (2003). *Youth with Disabilities: A Changing Population. A Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

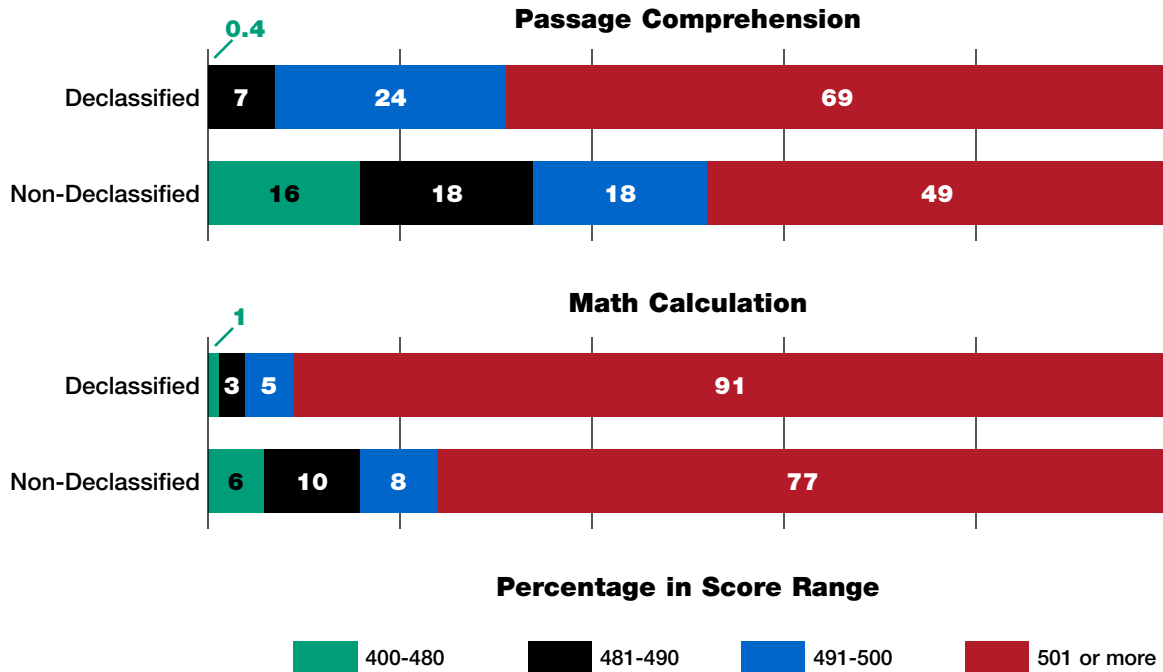
The longitudinal view: As students with disabilities age, the presence and/or type of their disability may change. Older students with disabilities are more likely than younger students to be diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, mental retardation, or emotional disturbances. Older students also are more likely to spend less time in a regular school classroom. And while a gap in academic achievement between students with disabilities and their peers exists at all ages, it is widest for secondary-school-aged youth.

Declassification: About 20 percent of elementary and middle school students with disabilities are declassified from special education. Students with speech and language impairments are the mostly likely to be declassified, exiting the special education system all together. Because declassified students tend to perform better on statewide assessments, their exit from special education may depress scores for students who continue to receive special education services; data from the national assessment studies suggest overall stability in academic performance for such students.

The Importance of Function, Health, and Environment

Health and functioning: Academic outcomes for students with disabilities are associated with a host of student characteristics, aside from the disability category that qualified students to receive special education services. Health status is a primary concern for students with disabilities, particularly because poor health can adversely affect a child’s ability to participate in daily activities at school, at home, and in the community. Compared with the general population, students with disabilities are somewhat less healthy overall. They also are more likely to weigh less at birth—often a precursor to poor health in the future.

Academic Performance* of Declassified and Non-Declassified Students with Disabilities



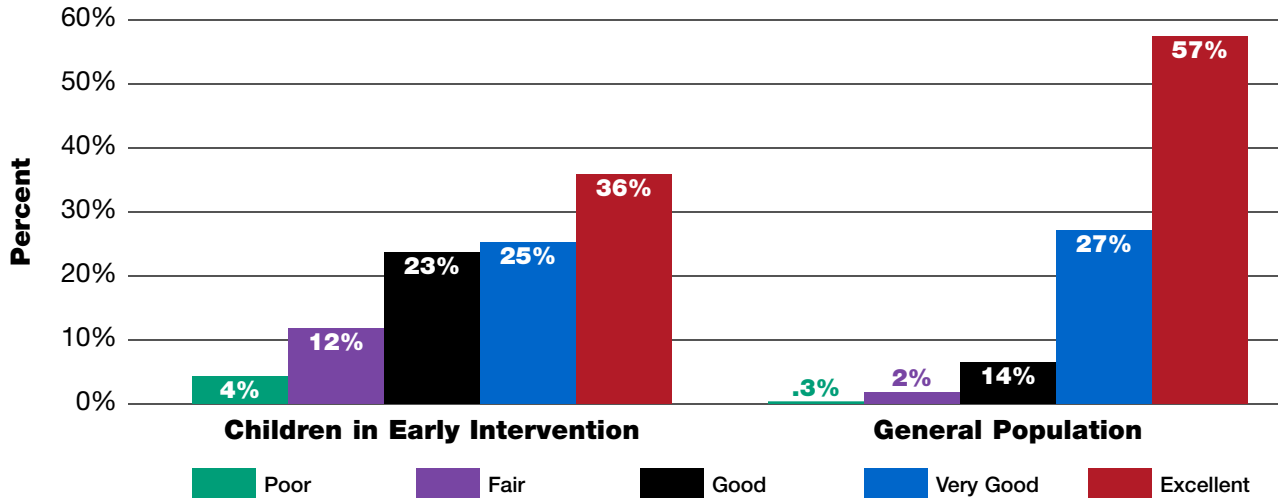
*W score points, Woodcock Johnson III
 Source: Wave 1 SEELS parent interviews and Student's School Program Survey

As children age, their competence to care for their personal needs generally grows, and their independence grows with it. However, some disabilities can delay the typical development of children's competencies and/or independence in different ways, and to varying degrees. Although many students are reported to have no difficulty with self-care skills, these tasks were difficult for some. The functional cognitive skills of students with disabilities, however, tend to be lower than their self-care abilities, and these skills seem to broadly influence various measures of academic performance. Youth with high functional cognitive skill levels, for example, tend to be closer to grade level in reading and mathematics. Levels of functioning also are associated with expenditures for students with disabilities. Disability category explains only 27 percent of the variation in total educational expenditures for

students with disabilities, but the variance in total expenditures explained increases to about 42 percent when students' functional skills are considered.

Poverty and families: Income is an especially important indicator of outcomes for children. For example, students from higher-income households tend to have better academic outcomes. This is a strong concern because children with disabilities are more likely to come from low-income households than nondisabled children. In addition, families' expectations for their children's postsecondary education also seem to play a role in generating positive outcomes. Specifically, students with disabilities whose parents have higher expectations for postsecondary education tend to have better academic outcomes.

General Health Status of Children in Early Intervention, Compared with National Estimates



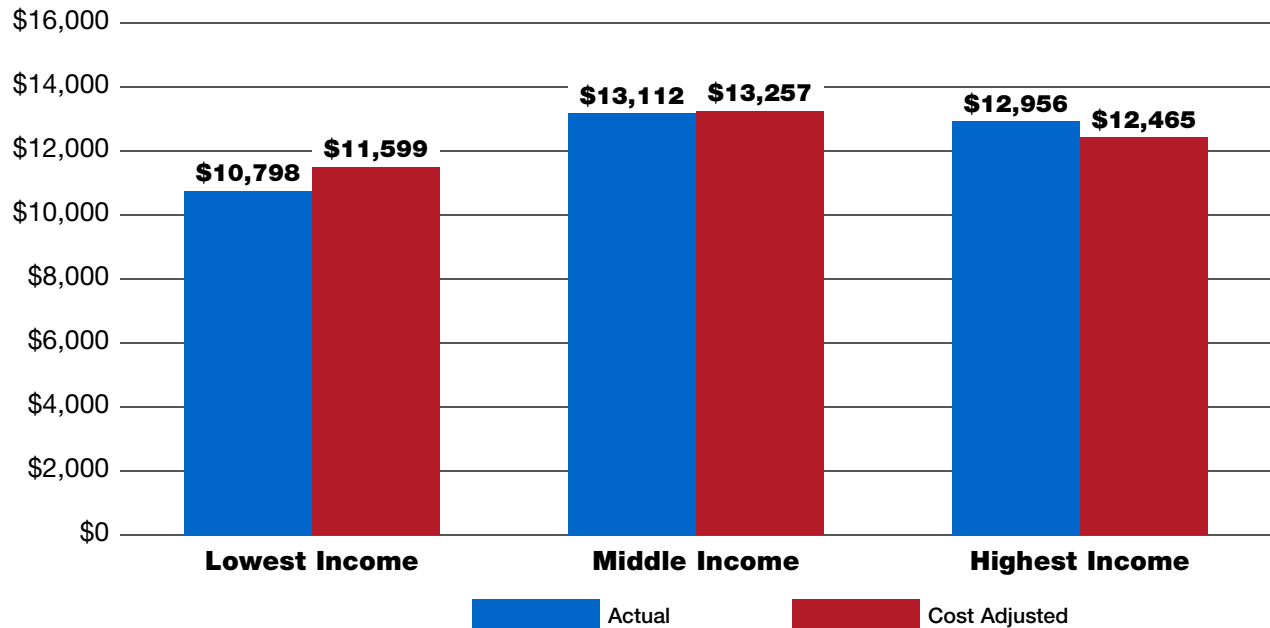
Source: Spiker, et al., (2004). *National Early Intervention Longitudinal Survey: Birth History and Health Status of Children Entering Early Intervention*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

Because economic disadvantages borne by children with disabilities are correlated with worse outcomes, we might expect to see greater resources being designated toward the increased services needed to offset the adverse effects of poverty. In fact, evidence suggests that this is not the case. Average district expenditures to support students with disabilities are lowest in the poorest districts, and significantly lower as compared to middle-income and high-income districts.

Behavior: Students who have disabilities related to their behavior, such as emotional disturbances, autism, and other health impairments (a majority of whom have ADHD), tend to have lower classroom engagement and attendance, are

more often subject to disciplinary action, and have higher dropout rates than other students with disabilities. However, the academic performance of students with emotional disturbances is as good as or better than that of students with learning disabilities. Given existing systems, schools are unlikely to be able to respond to the many needs of students with disabilities that arise from factors outside the school’s control, such as poverty and family involvement. Nevertheless, when implemented appropriately, some emerging practices, such as schoolwide positive behavioral supports, show promising results for improving outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities and those with behavior-related issues.

Total Expenditure to Educate a Student with a Disability Across Districts Classified by Median Family Income, 1999-2000



Source: Chambers et al., (2002). *Special Education Expenditure Project: How Does Spending on Special Education Students Vary Across Districts: An Analysis of Spending by Urbanicity, District Size, Median Family Income, and Student Poverty Levels in 1999-2000*. U.S. Department of Education.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

For many students with disabilities, their life-course patterns are set at an early age, when they are most likely to be identified as eligible for special education. At the same time, policies are changing that affect how the system can respond to the needs of these students. Beginning with the 1997 Amendments to IDEA, for example, there has been an increased emphasis on academic outcomes for students with disabilities. This emphasis was reinforced by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which requires students with disabilities to be included in statewide testing and accountability systems and to meet rigorous achievement expectations. However, students who aged through the education system prior to these policy changes may have experienced lower expectations and received less rigorous academic preparation.

Examining only trends for the broad population of students with disabilities masks variation in their outcomes. Gaps that exist due to poverty, income, health and functioning can be obscured. Nevertheless, the positive trend in the academic outcomes for students with disabilities, as evidenced by increasing graduation rates and improvements on standardized assessments, is real. Programs supported by OSEP, such as the National Center for Educational Outcomes, the Center on Access to the General Education Curriculum, and the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports as well as the newly established National Comprehensive Content Centers supported by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, which now include students with disabilities as a focus in a variety of areas, show promise for assisting in sustaining and extending these trends.

Academic Outcomes, Educational Environment, Cost of Services, and Health for Students with Disabilities, by Disability Category

Disability category	Academic Outcomes		Educational Environment	Cost	Health
	Elementary and middle school ^a	Youth with disabilities ^b	Percent of students with disabilities, ages 6-21, spending <21% of their time outside the regular classroom ^c	Average per pupil expenditures by disability, 1999-2000 (\$) ^d	Percent of youth with disabilities in poor/fair health ^e
All disabilities	38.8	25.3	52.1	12,525	8.0
Learning disability	32.7	26.2	51.6	10,558	6.3
Speech/language impairment	54.6	29.4	88.3	10,958	4.8
Mental retardation	7.6	1.0	13.8	15,040	13.5
Emotional disturbance	38.2	36.2	32.4	14,147	10.2
Hearing impairment	32.4	23.9	47.1	15,992	6.6
Visual impairment	53.6	45.5	56.8	18,811	9.4
Orthopedic impairment	40.6	29.6	48.5	14,993	11.7
Other health impairment	40.7	37.3	53.9	13,229	10.9
Autism	29.2	25.9	29.1	18,790	6.6
Multiple disabilities	20.0	11.5	13.0	20,095	13.3

Sources: ^aSEELS Wave 2 Direct Assessment, Student Assessment Scores, Table 4.

^bNLTS2 Direct Assessment, Academic Knowledge, Table 2.

^cU.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS), "Report of children with disabilities receiving special education under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act," 2004.

^dChambers, J. G., Shkolnik, J. L., & Pérez, M. (2003). *Total Expenditures for Students with Disabilities, 1999-2000: Spending Variation by Disability (Report 5)*.

^eWagner, M., Marder, C., Levine, P., Cameto, R., T. Cadwallader, & Blackorby, J., (2003). *The Individual and Household Characteristics of Youth with Disabilities*.