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Issue Brief: Special Education

There have never been as many students identified with disabilities in U.S. public schools as there are now, and they have never made up as large a percentage of enrollment. Disabilities range widely, from low-level needs such as speech therapy to complex, intense conditions such as severe autism and mental retardation. Public schools today are responsible for educating children who decades ago may have been institutionalized, or may not have even survived. Three decades ago, federal programs supported 3.6 million disabled students ages 3 to 21, or 8 percent of the K-12 population. By 2005-06, that number had risen to 6.7 million, or 14 percent of all public school kids.

States and districts are now scrambling to pay the $77 billion annual cost of special education students—whose costs are almost double the per-pupil pricetag of mainstream students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that school districts provide "free, appropriate public education" for students with disabilities. When parents feel the districts fall short, they instigate state hearings and even lawsuits, pressing for more services. Districts fight back, saying their teachers are effective. And advocacy groups argue minorities are overrepresented in special education. All of this plays out locally, student by student, school by school.

Track Special Education Students by Classroom

Separate special education classrooms are interesting to explore primarily to see how teachers do, or don't, address the wide range of needs among a group of students, and how they manage to keep up with a school's regular curriculum, if they are required to do so.

Not all the special education students in your district are in separate classrooms, however. Some are in work environments, like warehouses or skilled labor facilities, learning life skills. Many—particularly those with less severe disabilities—are "mainstreamed," where additional teachers or aides help them fit into a regular classroom. Debate continues over whether special schools and classrooms are best for these students, or whether mainstreaming, also called "inclusion," is preferable. It's important to see both methods in action.

And some aren't being taught in the district, but instead by private schools specializing in certain disabilities on the taxpayer's dime. So watch enrollment numbers, but take the next step and find out *where* students are learning. Then visit those classes if possible. See what makes them unique or mundane, effective or not.

Individual Student Stories

Usually when a parent complains about a student's district or teacher, the argument will center around the student's Individualized Education Program, or plan, updated at least once a year by the IEP team – which can include teachers, counselors, psychologists and the student's parents. The IEP is a blueprint that guides each student's learning, not just in academics but often in behavior and emotional support. Years of one student's IEPs will give a precise history of how he should have been taught, and how he did in class.

School systems are more private and cautious regarding special education than with perhaps any other issue. In some cases this makes it hard for reporters even to see special education in action. When schools have the permission of parents, this secrecy can loosen a bit. Parents alone can release documents such as IEPs, so they are almost always a key to your reporting. And they usually know well what's going on among other special ed parents. There may be no better organized group of parents and advocates than those with special ed students. Start with local advocacy groups.

Test scores

According to No Child Left Behind, districts and schools must show that their special ed students achieve the same pass-rate targets on state tests that other students do. When schools do not make adequate yearly progress under the law, one of the two subgroups that most often contributes to the shortcoming is special education students. (The other is English language learners.) The most severely disabled, however, can take alternative assessments, such as graded work portfolios. There is some controversy about whether those tests should focus on reading and math, as policy requires, or on the basic skills some of those students spend their time learning in school.

See how schools prepared special education students for the state assessment, get a sense of whether what they are learning for the test matches what they should be learning developmental and track scores by school and district. The U.S. Department of Education publishes an annual report to Congress that will help you put local scores into context.

Due Process Hearings and Court Records

When parents don't agree with a district's IEP for their child, they can appeal to their district, then their state. If they still don't like the results, they can sue. Check court records and state listings regularly. Ask your state where they publish results of the hearings. They'll be redacted, but still useful. Find out how much your district spends contesting and settling these lawsuits.

Sources

Advocates for special education students include the **Council for Exceptional Children** and the **Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund**. On the administrative and business side, look to the **Center for Special Education Finance** and the **National Association of State Directors of Special Education**. You can find the Department of Education's annual report to Congress on IDEA at **www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/index.html.**