

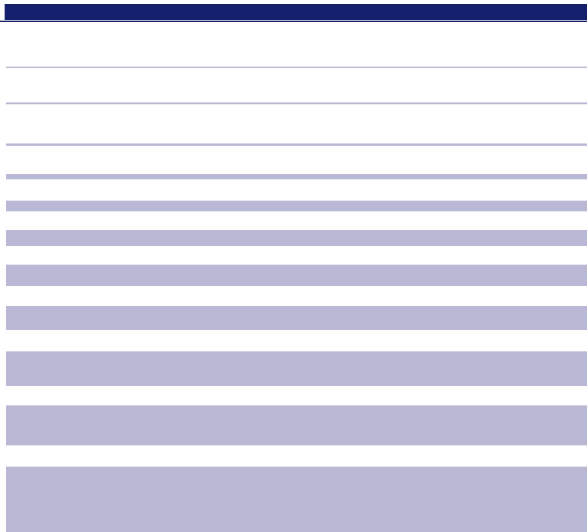
# Executive Summary

CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN • THE DAVID and LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION

# The Future of Children

VOLUME 6 • NUMBER 1 - SPRING 1996

SPECIAL  
EDUCATION  
FOR  
STUDENTS WITH  
DISABILITIES



# Special Education for Students with Disabilities

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- ◆ *One in every 10 students in public schools today receives special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).*
- ◆ *The total cost of special education is an estimated \$32 billion per year.*
- ◆ *Special education students as a group have higher-than-average dropout rates and lower-than-average work force participation and college attendance.*
- ◆ *Before the IDEA, many students with disabilities had severely limited access to education, jobs, and simple participation in society. As recently as 1973, more than one million children were denied enrollment in public schools solely because of their disabilities.*
- ◆ *Today, all students have a constitutional guarantee of a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment, regardless of disability.*
- ◆ *A major question remaining is whether special education as practiced today is the most efficient and effective way to educate students with special needs.*

## RECOMMENDATION 1

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is an important and necessary element of the educational system and should be retained.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

Many students now in special education should instead have their needs met by the regular education system. The implementation of an effective inclusion program requires:

- ◆ Significantly increased resources in regular education (such as special educators working in the classroom) or smaller class sizes;
- ◆ Major changes in typical classroom instruction, supported by intensive training of teachers;
- ◆ Local commitment to making inclusion work; and
- ◆ Retaining separate special education as an option for some students.

## RECOMMENDATION 3

Special education funding systems should enable schools to make decisions about educational placements and services based on student needs, not financial incentives.

## RECOMMENDATION 4

States should investigate ways of holding schools accountable for individual student outcomes rather than only for delivering services.

## RECOMMENDATION 5

Early reading instruction that emphasizes phonological awareness should be used consistently, and schools of education should routinely prepare early elementary school teachers to provide such instruction.

## RECOMMENDATION 6

Vocational education, which is strongly associated with positive employment outcomes for students with mild disabilities, should be reemphasized.

## ARTICLE SUMMARIES

### Legislative and Litigation History of Special Education

In the 1973 case of *Mills v. Board of Education*, a federal district court interpreting the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution ruled that schools could not discriminate against students on the basis of disability, just as the Supreme Court had earlier ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* with regard to race. The impact of *Mills* was to reinforce legislation passed by 45 state legislatures during the mid-1960s and early 1970s, mandating, encouraging, and/or funding special education programs.

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (since retitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), governing (1) eligibility for special educational services, (2) parental rights, (3) individualized education programs (IEPs), (4) the requirement that children be served in the least restrictive environment, and (5) the need to provide related (noneducational) services. Parental rights are fully described in this article. Decisions on instructional matters, such as curricula and the elements of the IEP, remain the province of local and state authorities. While the cost of special services may be an unexpressed criterion in many decisions made by school districts, nowhere does the IDEA explicitly allow cost to be considered. Where a service is necessary for an individual child, cost considerations would not allow a school district to escape its obligations to the child. However, in cases where more than one configuration of services is appropriate to meet a child's needs, the cost of different alternatives may be a consideration.

### Identification and Assessment for Students with Disabilities

Students with suspected disabilities are assessed by schools to determine whether the student is eligible for special education services and, if eligible, what services will be provided. In many states, the results of the evaluation also affect how much funding assistance the school will receive to meet the student's special needs.

There is no official special education classification system that is used uniformly across states and regions. It is entirely possible for students with identical characteristics to be diagnosed as disabled in one state but not in another, or to have the categorical designation changed with a move across state or school district lines. The majority of students with disabilities are initially referred by their classroom teacher (or parents) for evaluation of severe and chronic achievement or behavioral problems.

There is evidence that the high-incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities and speech/language disabilities occur primarily at the "mild" level. The mild disabilities exist on broad continua in which there are no clear demarcations between those who have and those who do not have the disability. Even mild disabilities may constitute formidable barriers to academic progress and significantly limit career opportunities.

This article suggests a revised funding system which weighs four factors to yield a total dollar amount available to support the special education of a particular student. These factors are (1) number of deficits, (2) severity of disability, (3) complexity of intervention, and (4) intensity of intervention.

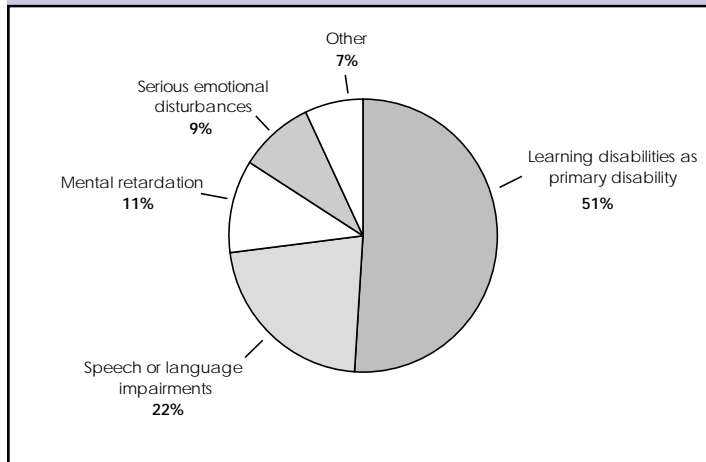
### Learning Disabilities

Approximately 5% of all public school students are identified as having a learning disability (LD). This broad category includes disabilities in reading, language, and mathematics. These separate types of learning disabilities frequently co-occur with one another and with social skill deficits and emotional or behavioral disorders. Most of the information available concerning learning disabilities relates to reading disabilities, and the majority of children with learning disabilities have their primary deficits in basic reading skills.

Recent research indicates that LD in basic reading skills is caused primarily by deficits in phonological awareness. These deficits can be identified in late kindergarten and first grade using inexpensive, straightforward testing protocol. Even mild deficits in reading skills are likely to portend significant difficulties in academic learning, and require early identification and intervention. Children with reading deficits require the expertise of a teacher who is informed about the relationships between language development and reading development. Unfortunately, such teachers are in short supply, primarily due to a lack of professional certification programs providing this training.

The longer children with LD in basic reading skills, at any level of severity, go without identification and intervention, the more difficult the task of remediation and the lower the rate of success.

**Primary Disabilities of IDEA Students**



Students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are classified by their primary disability. This chart represents the number of students served under the IDEA in kindergarten through 12th grade in 1992-93.

Source: Office of Special Education Programs. *Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Sixteenth annual report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1994, page 9, Table 1.4.

### Effectiveness of Special Education: Is Placement the Critical Factor?

Several program models have demonstrated moderately positive academic and social impacts for students with disabilities whether these programs take place in special education or general education. Regardless of location, receiving special assistance is almost always an improvement over (1) being denied access to the schools, as were many students with disabilities before the IDEA, or (2) receiving only the standard education offered to students without disabilities.

However, no intervention eliminates the impact of having a disability. With few exceptions, students with disabilities have not achieved commensurate with their nondisabled peers; even students with learning disabilities as a group have not been able to achieve at the level of low-achieving nondisabled students.

There is no compelling evidence that placement rather than instruction is the critical factor in student academic or social success. Some students, when returned to regular education, have an increased likelihood of failing classes and dropping out before graduation. Further, studies have indicated that typical practice in general education is substantially different from practice in the model programs which showed greatest success for students with disabilities. The interventions that were effective in improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities required a considerable investment of resources, including time and effort, as well as extensive support for teachers.

### Transition from High School to Work or College: How Special Education Students Fare

Results are reported from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students. Dropout rates were high: 30% of students with disabilities dropped out of high school and another 8% dropped out before entering high school.

Employment successes were strongly related to taking a concentration (four courses) in vocational edu-

cation. Youths with learning disabilities or speech impairments were most likely to approach the rate of employment found in the general population. Postsecondary education was low: 37% of high school graduates with disabilities had attended a postsecondary school, compared with 78% of high school graduates generally. Students with hearing or visual impairments were most likely to attend college.

Placement in regular education (rather than special education) was associated with both better and worse postschool outcomes. For many students, more time in regular education was associated with a higher likelihood of course failure, which was a strong predictor of dropping out of school.

### Financing Special Education

In general, special education costs about 2.3 times that of regular education. Approximately 8% of the funding for special education comes from the federal government, 56% from state governments, and the remainder from local school districts. However, the division of fiscal responsibility varies considerably from state to state.

Fiscal pressures on special education have increased markedly in recent years as a result of growing school populations, increasing proportions of students found eligible for special education services, and increasing fiscal pressures on schools. For these reasons, many states are engaged in efforts to reform the fiscal and programmatic structure of special education.

At least three states have recently implemented—and the State Department of Education has recently recommended—special education funding based on census counts of whole-school populations, rather than on the number of students identified for special education services.

Proponents foresee greater efficiency of services, and opponents fear a loss of individualized services. An additional proposal is that census-based funding be modified to increase funding in jurisdictions with higher rates of poverty. Criteria for evaluating state special education funding formulas are proposed. ♦

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The primary purpose of *The Future of Children* is to disseminate timely information on major issues related to children's well-being, with special emphasis on providing objective analysis and evaluation, translating existing knowledge into effective programs and policies, and promoting constructive institutional change. This publication is intended to complement, not duplicate, the kind of technical analysis found in academic journals and in the general coverage of children's issues by the popular press and special interest groups.

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