

Students with Disabilities in U.S. High Schools

Nearly one third of the more than six million students with disabilities* in U.S. public schools are of traditional high school age.¹ Though research indicates that the majority of high school-age students with disabilities and their parents are satisfied with the services they receive,² many still face barriers and challenges to receiving an equitable education. Students with disabilities are more likely than other groups to report discrimination; they are consistently involved in more than half of the complaints investigated by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.³ Also, African American, American Indian, and Alaska Native students are largely overrepresented in special education, while Latino, Asian, and Pacific Islander American students are underrepresented, which suggests that many students in each of these groups may not be receiving an education appropriate to their respective, individual needs.⁴

Dropout Rates, College- and Work-Readiness, and Transition[†]

- The National Center on Learning Disabilities estimates that only about 52 percent of all students with disabilities graduated with a regular diploma in the 2002–03 school year, compared to about 70 percent of students overall.⁵
- In 2003, the most recent year for which data is available, graduation rates for students with disabilities who earned regular diplomas ranged from a high of 68.5 percent for students with visual impairments down to 35.4 percent for students with emotional disturbances.⁶
- Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia did not provide graduation data for students with disabilities in the Class of 2005.⁷
- Only 7 percent of eighth graders with disabilities scored at or above proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, compared to 31 percent of eighth graders without disabilities.⁸
- Students with disabilities are five times less likely to enter postsecondary education than their peers.⁹
- According to the 2006 National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)[‡], just 9 percent of the students in the sample had attended a four-year college for any period of time. Additionally, only 6

* The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) defines “students with disabilities” as those who are evaluated as having “mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance, an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.”

[†] Transition planning is a required component of the Individualized Education Plans (IEP) of all students with disabilities by the time they turn sixteen, designed to help students plan their postsecondary education and/or work goals. Parents, educators, and the students themselves are expected to play a role in the planning.

[‡] The NLTS2 is made up of a representative sample of 11,000 students with disabilities who were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen and in the seventh grade or higher during the 2000-01 school year.

percent of all students in the sample were still attending college at the time of the report, compared to 28 percent of students in the general population.¹⁰

- Youth with disabilities are more likely than those in the general population to report having daily trouble paying attention, completing their homework, and getting along with teachers and classmates.¹¹
- Active student and parent participation is critical for a successful transition. However, one third of fourteen-year-old and one fifth of seventeen- and eighteen-year-old students with disabilities are present but do not participate in their transition planning.¹²
- One third of parents feel as though the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and transition planning processes for their children do not allow them enough opportunities for their involvement in decisionmaking.¹³
- In fall 2007, about 43 percent of public school students receiving services through IDEA were aged twelve through seventeen and almost 5 percent were eighteen through twenty-one.¹⁴

Students of Color and Disabilities

- In 2004, roughly 13 percent of African American and 14 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students ages 6 through 21 were identified as having disabilities, compared to 8 percent of Hispanic and 9 percent of white students.¹⁵
- African American students are twice as likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed and almost three times as likely to be identified as mentally retarded as white students.¹⁶
- African American and American Indian students with disabilities are at an almost three times greater risk of being suspended for ten or more days as white students with disabilities.¹⁷
- According to a 2006 report, black female students are 200 percent and black male students are 300 percent over identified as being mentally retarded.¹⁸
- Though Asian American students as a whole are underrepresented in the special education population, non-English-speaking students, particularly those of Southeast Asian background, are often erroneously placed in special education.¹⁹
- A study of districts in which the overwhelming majority of the ELL population was Latino found that ELLs in grades five through twelve were overrepresented by margins as high as 26.5 percent.²⁰
- Latino students identified as needing special education are about twice as likely as white students to be removed from a general education setting and placed in a restrictive educational environment.²¹

Information on Specific Categories of Students with Disabilities

- A survey of general education teachers found that many of them felt neither confident nor fully prepared to teach students with physical disabilities.²²
- Students with speech/language impediments are the least likely of any category of students with disabilities to feel close to an adult at their school.²³
- Almost three quarters of students identified as having emotional disturbances have been suspended or expelled.²⁴



Endnotes

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