

## State Report Card Round-Up: What Have We Learned about Students with Disabilities?

In 2017–18, the number of students aged 3-21 who received special education services under IDEA reached 7.0 million, or 14 percent of total number of students enrolled in public schools.<sup>1</sup> In other words, **more than one out of every eight students receives services under IDEA**. And while a small percentage of students with disabilities have disabilities that require that they meet different achievement standards,<sup>2</sup> 85 to 90 percent of students with disabilities can meet the graduation standards required for all other students, as long as they receive specially designed instruction and appropriate access, supports and accommodations.

What do we know about the outcomes of high school students with disabilities (SWDs) across states? Historically, not enough. We do know that SWDs in most states are far less likely to graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma than their peers. In 2017-18, the average graduation rate for all students in the U.S. was 84.6 percent. The average graduation rate for SWDs was 66.6 percent.<sup>3</sup> We also know that students with disabilities are less likely to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. If one of the key goals of K-12 education is that all students graduate from high school and that they be prepared for some postsecondary training (2- or 4-year college, workforce, technical training, military, etc.), and one in three SWDs are not even graduating from high school, what does that say about what their futures will hold?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgg.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp)

<sup>2</sup> Thurlow, M. L., & Quenemoen, R. F. (2012). Opportunities for students with disabilities from the common core standards. *The State Education Standard*, 56–62.

<sup>3</sup> Based on *Achieve's* collection of states' reported graduation rates for 2017-18.

This brief presents an opportunity to gauge how well students with disabilities are doing across the states with respect to selected aspects of readiness for postsecondary success, with an emphasis on the gaps in performance between SWDs and all students, in each state. *Achieve* has long worked to promote the importance of college and career readiness for all students, and since a growing number of careers will require not just a high school diploma, but some postsecondary education and training beyond high school, it's important to know how all students are doing. With states' reporting complete for the 2017-18 school year, we also wondered whether states' newly revised report cards and related reporting shed new light on the performance of SWDs. This brief will:

- Provide the most recent information on high school English Language Arts proficiency, mathematics proficiency, and graduation rate gaps within and across states for students with disabilities;
- Analyze postsecondary enrollment rate within and across states for students with disabilities; and
- Offer questions for consideration to improve state reporting of outcomes for students with disabilities.

## English Language Arts and Mathematics Proficiency Rates for Students with Disabilities

We collected the most recent state-level data on the percentage of students who score at the college- and career-ready (CCR) level on high school assessments anchored to CCR standards. These assessments include a performance level/cut score that provides high school students a clear signal regarding their readiness for first-year mathematics and English courses at postsecondary institutions and are used by two- and four-year colleges and universities for placement into first-year, credit-bearing courses. The results are useful in preparing students for successful postsecondary transitions and can assist schools in identifying and addressing student learning gaps before students graduate from high school, reducing the need for costly remediation or workforce training. We found that less than HALF of states reported proficiency rates for SWDs on these assessments, and when data were available, the proficiency rates are shockingly low. Approximately seven percent of SWDs met the mathematics proficiency benchmarks on these states' CCR assessments (compared to 35 percent of all students). On average, 13 percent of SWDs met the ELA proficiency benchmarks (compared to 49 percent of all students). See **APPENDIX A** for state-specific data.

## A Look at Graduation Rates Across States

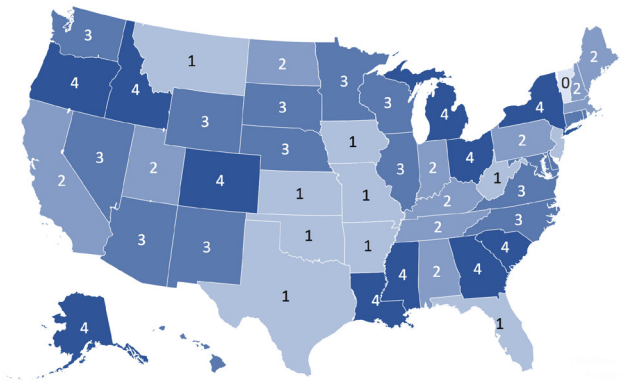
We collected the most recent state-level graduation rates from their most recent report cards, typically reflecting graduates in 2017-18 (see **APPENDIX B**). States' graduation rates for SWDs ranged from 84 percent at the high end to 36 percent at the low end. This 48-percentage point range in graduation rate

is significantly higher than the range of values observed in states' overall graduation rates,<sup>4</sup> where a 33-percentage point range between states' rates is present (68-91 percent).

- In 10 states (category 1 on the map), students with disabilities graduate at rates of 75 percent or more.
- In 11 states (category 2), students with disabilities graduate at rates of 70-74 percent.
- In 17 states (category 3), students with disabilities graduate at rates of 60-69 percent.
- In 12 states (category 4), students with disabilities graduate at rates of less than 60 percent.

### GRADUATION RATES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Category 1: 75%+    Category 2: 70-74%    Category 3: 60-69%    Category 4: <60%



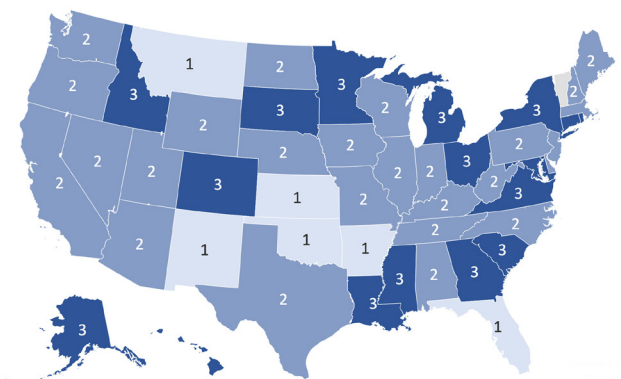
## Graduation Rate Gaps Within States

In every state, students with disabilities graduate from high school at lower rates than all students. But more notable is the variation in gaps in graduation rate between SWDs and all students across states. In some states, SWDs graduate at comparable rates as their peers. But in others, there are big discrepancies in graduation rates. We found that states that reported the highest graduation rates for SWDs typically reported the smallest gaps in graduation rates between SWDs and all students. See **APPENDIX B** for state-by-state specifics.

- In 6 states (category 1), SWDs are nearly as likely to graduate; there is a less than 10 percentage point gap with the graduation rate of all students.
- In 26 states (category 2), SWDs graduate at rates 10-19 percentage points lower than the graduation rate of all students.
- In 18 states (category 3), SWDs are significantly less likely to graduate; they have a 20-47 percentage point lower graduation rate than the graduation rate of all students.

### GRADUATION RATE GAPS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Category 1: <10 pp gap    Category 2: 10-19 pp gap    Category 3: 20-47 pp gap



<sup>4</sup> Overall graduation rates include students with disabilities. A better comparison group – which is not typically reported on school report cards – would be Students without disabilities.

Why are the gaps so pronounced in some states, while less so in others? One key reason may be the different ways states count SWDs in their graduation rates. Some states count SWDs as those who began with the cohort with an IEP, other looks at those who exited the cohort with an IEP, still others count those students with an IEP throughout their high school experience. What's more, it's not clear from states' reporting how they're defining their SWDs, so it's not easy to track the progress of SWDs in states. This lack of clarity impacts the comparability of the ACGR for students with disabilities across states.<sup>5</sup>

Gaps in graduation rates for SWDs across states may also be pronounced because of different state expectations for SWDs. In some states, graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities vary greatly, and a diploma may mean different things for different students.

Additionally, in states where one or more diploma options exists exclusively for SWDs, students earning these alternative diplomas may not be counted in the graduation rate at all. A 2016 Achieve-NCEO report found that 19 states and the District of Columbia had the same course requirements for students with and without disabilities to earn a regular diploma. In 24 states, the course requirements to earn a regular diploma were very different for students with and without disabilities. In many of these states, students simply had to complete the requirements in their IEPs; in others, students were exempted from course requirements. When coursework and other graduation requirement decisions are made by IEP teams, questions emerge about which courses a student took prior to earning a diploma and how the ones specified for students without an IEP to earn the diploma.<sup>6</sup>

### What is a Diploma?

Per ESSA, the term 'regular high school diploma' means the standard high school diploma awarded to the preponderance of students in the State that is fully aligned with State standards, or a higher diploma, except that a regular high school diploma shall not be aligned to the alternate academic achievement standards described in section 1111(b)(1)(E); and does not include a recognized equivalent of a diploma, such as a general equivalency diploma, certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or similar lesser credential.

<https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf>

## Students with Disabilities' Continuation to Postsecondary Institutions

High school graduates should have all opportunities readily available to them, including entering a good career path, the military, or postsecondary education. There is not yet widespread state data available on where all students go after high school, but this is beginning to change.<sup>7</sup> The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) ushered in a number of new reporting requirements for states, including

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.advocacyinstitute.org/blog/?p=837>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve\\_NCEO\\_111616.pdf](https://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve_NCEO_111616.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Post school outcomes of students with disabilities is one of the indicators (#14) in the State Performance Plan each state is required to have and report on annually to USED. The indicator includes not only postsecondary enrollment but also employment; though it is often based on representative samples of students and survey data: <https://osep.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/17333>.

postsecondary enrollment rates “where available.” We wondered how “available” states’ data was, and whether states would report postsecondary enrollment details of not just all students, but by subgroups like race, income, disability status and English proficiency.

Our review of states’ report cards and related materials found that while 46 states report some measure of postsecondary enrollment rate, just 26 states reported data disaggregated by some subgroup, and of these, 20 of these states report state-level data for the percentage of SWDs enrolling in postsecondary education after they graduate from high school (See **TABLE 1** below). These states should be commended

**TABLE 1. POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT RATES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

State	Postsecondary Enrollment Rates Students with Disabilities (%)	Postsecondary Enrollment Rates All students (%)	Postsecondary Enrollment Rates Gap Between All Students and Students with Disabilities (%)	Where Do Students Enroll in College? (2- and 4-year, public and private, in- and out-of-state institutions unless otherwise noted)
Mississippi	50.3	67.1	16.8	Only includes 2- and 4-year, public, in-state institutions
California	49.6	67.8	18.2	
Massachusetts	53.6	72.3	18.7	
New Jersey	56.0	77.9	21.9	
Virginia*	45.0	67.0	22.0	
New Mexico	41.6	64.5	22.9	
Connecticut	45.5	70.9	25.4	
Tennessee	38.3	64.1	25.8	
Hawaii	29.0	55.0	26.0	
Montana	15.0	41.0	26.0	Only includes 2- and 4-year, public, in-state institutions
New Hampshire	31.9	58.0	26.1	
Pennsylvania	34.0	61.8	27.8	
North Carolina	30.6	60.4	29.9	
Louisiana	26.4	57.4	31.0	
Michigan	36.1	67.3	31.2	
Rhode Island	33.0	64.5	31.5	
Washington	30.0	62.0	32.0	
Wisconsin	25.8	59.4	33.6	
Arkansas	15.1	49.1	34.0	Only includes 4-year, public, in-state institutions
Minnesota	37.0	71.0	34.0	

\*Virginia is the only state that reports postsecondary enrollment rates for the 9th grade cohort (rather than high school graduates).

for disaggregating and reporting outcomes for SWDs beyond high school. Without this information, no one can tell how well SWDs and other subgroups are doing, and how well the system is serving these students. States (and their stakeholders) cannot address problems they do not see. Knowing the postsecondary outcomes of SWDs can also help states surface which schools are outperforming their peers and begin to understand how these schools are succeeding, which may be worth replicating across the state.

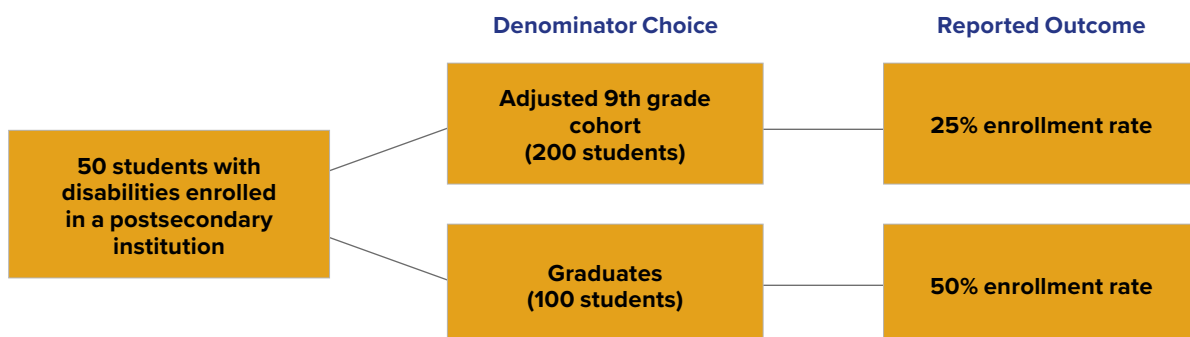
The data are sorted by states with the lowest to highest postsecondary enrollment rate gaps between all students and SWDs. **TABLE 1** also compares rates of postsecondary enrollment for SWDs and the rates of All Students within the state to see if any patterns emerge, which controls for some of the differences across states in terms of denominators and definitions. It shows that like graduation rates, there are significant gaps between the postsecondary enrollment rates of students with disabilities and the percentages of all students enrolling in postsecondary across states. On average, states reported a gap of 26 percentage points across the 20 states that report outcomes for SWDs. Mississippi, California, and Massachusetts had the smallest postsecondary enrollment gaps between SWDs and all students. Wisconsin, Arkansas and Minnesota had the largest gaps.

## A Complicated Picture Emerges

Before interpreting states' postsecondary enrollment rate data, a few questions must be considered:

- **Which institutions are included?** Most states' postsecondary enrollment data includes 2- and 4-year, public and private, and in- and out-of-state institutions, but this is not always the case (see **TABLE 1** above). Due to the nature of their data systems and the sources of the reported data, some states' postsecondary enrollment data excludes out of state institutions, while other states exclude private institutions.

**FIGURE 1. HOW STATES' DENOMINATOR CHOICES CHANGE THE STORYLINE**

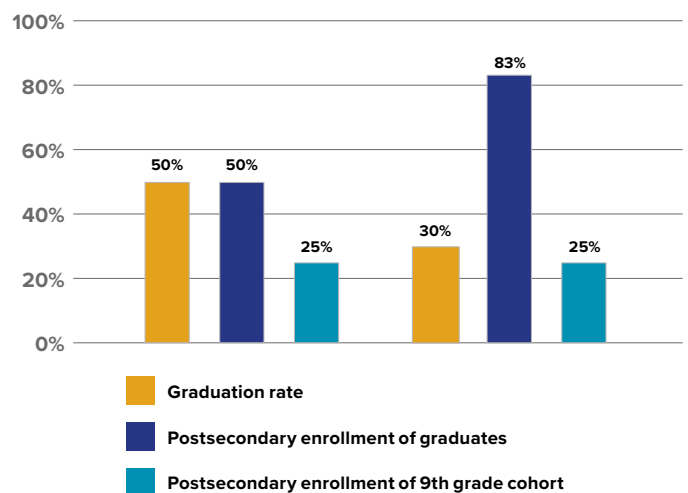


- **Which students are included?** States do not use the same denominator to report postsecondary enrollment rates. Most states report the postsecondary enrollment rates of graduates or completers. Reporting enrollment rates for only those that are still in the system by graduation time (in most states 70-90 percent of students, but much lower rates for SWDs at 36-84 percent) – particularly for subgroups with some of the lowest graduation rates historically – provides an incomplete – and inflated – picture because it fails to account for the students that have been left behind along the way.
  - Including all students who started in 9th grade in the denominator sends the message that schools, districts, and states are responsible for the performance of all students not just those who graduate. Failing to look at the outcomes of the 9th grade cohort is a missed opportunity.
  - This denominator allows for some comparisons to be drawn across schools, districts, and states and to identify bright spots that can serve as models or particular areas in need of intervention and support.<sup>8</sup> **Virginia is the only state that reports postsecondary enrollment rates for SWDs of the 9th grade cohort.**<sup>9</sup> As a result of these different definitions and denominators, postsecondary enrollment rates for students with disabilities cannot be easily compared across states.

**FIGURE 1** illustrates how the reported outcomes differ for one state based on the denominator chosen, even though the number of SWDs enrolling in college (50 students) remains the same. Using denominators with more selective pools of students — such as graduates in the bottom scenario — communicates that a sizable percentage of SWDs enrolled in postsecondary education (50% enrollment rate). But the story is a very different one when the adjusted 9th grade cohort is used (25% enrollment rate); it presents a more comprehensive, honest, and comparable picture of student performance that includes all students who began high school together.

We intended to draw conclusions from states' postsecondary enrollment rates, but because states typically use high school graduates as the denominator, which range from 36 to 84 percent across states, we could not use it as a reliable denominator without excluded large percentages of students. States with lower high school graduation rates tell an even less clear story when

**CHART 1. WHY DENOMINATORS MATTER**



<sup>8</sup> <https://www.achieve.org/publications/count-all-kids-using-9th-grade-cohort-improve-transparency-and-accountability>

<sup>9</sup> The adjusted 9th grade cohort is the number of students who begin school together in 9th grade and who anticipate graduating from high school four years later, adjusting this number for transfers in and out, émigrés, and deceased students.

they report student outcomes using high school graduation rate as the denominator (as most do). A state that graduates less students that uses graduates as a denominator will look better than a state with higher graduation rate, all else equal. See **CHART 1** for an illustration.

Two States, A and B, start with 200 SWDs in their 9th grade cohorts and each have 50 SWDs enroll in college after high school. However, State A graduates 100 students (50 percent) of its SWDs and reports a 50 percent enrollment rate for SWDs. But State B graduates only 60 students (30 percent) of SWDs and reports an 83 percent postsecondary enrollment rate – a much more positive story despite a lower high school graduation rate.

**TABLE 2. WHO GRADUATES FROM HIGH SCHOOL AND GOES ON TO POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS?**

State*	SWD 4-year ACGR Rank (Highest graduation rate = 1)	SWD Postsecondary Enrollment Rank (Highest enrollment rate = 1)	All Students –SWD Postsecondary Enrollment Gap Rank (Smallest gap = 1)
New Jersey	1	1	3
Pennsylvania	2	11	11
Massachusetts	3	2	2
New Hampshire	4	12	9
California	5	3	1
Tennessee	6	7	7
North Carolina	7	13	12
Wisconsin	8	17	16
Connecticut	9	4	6
New Mexico	10	6	5
Hawaii	11	15	8
Rhode Island	12	8	10
Minnesota	13	9	17
Washington	14	14	15
Virginia	15	5	4
Louisiana	16	16	13
Michigan	17	10	14

\*This table includes the states that publicly report postsecondary enrollment data. Arkansas, Mississippi, and Montana are not included, despite reporting SWDs data for their states, because their postsecondary enrollment definitions were less comprehensive than the other states.



## Putting the Pieces Together

Finally, we wanted to see how high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollments rate fit together considering differences in what states expect of students to graduate, widely varying graduation rates within and across states by subgroups, and widely varying postsecondary enrollment rates within and across states. For the 17 states reporting postsecondary enrollment rates for SWDs (Arkansas, Mississippi, and Montana were removed because their postsecondary enrollment definitions were less comprehensive than the other states), we ranked the states from 1-17 based on high school graduation rate, postsecondary enrollment of SWDs, and postsecondary enrollment gaps between SWDs and all students.

**New Jersey, Massachusetts and California emerged as three key states of note, each ranking in the top five states of high school graduation rate among SWDs, highest postsecondary enrollment rates for SWDs, and the smallest gaps between SWDs' and all students' enrollment rates.** Postsecondary enrollment is not for everyone, but it is noteworthy that these states are supporting SWDs to graduate from high school AND pursue their postsecondary goals. Of course, enrollment is but one step in the process. Students must accumulate credits at an appropriate pace and earn a degree or credential. Still, this early data is worth noting – and researching further – especially as more states (hopefully) begin reporting postsecondary enrollment data by subgroup.

## Questions and Recommendations to Improve High School Outcomes

For too long, stakeholders invested in improving the outcomes for SWDs have been unable to access information on how these students are faring, especially in relation to other groups of students. This is still the case in many states, but there are more data than ever before, and some early lessons and information for state and local education leaders and policymakers, advocates and parents to draw from and reflect on as they continue to push for increased transparency, better reporting, and accountability as it relates to serving SWDs.<sup>10</sup>

Stakeholders should consider the following questions regarding data their state is reporting on SWDs (or not), how well districts and schools are serving SWDs, and where gaps in both SWDs achievement and reporting on SWDs might exist:

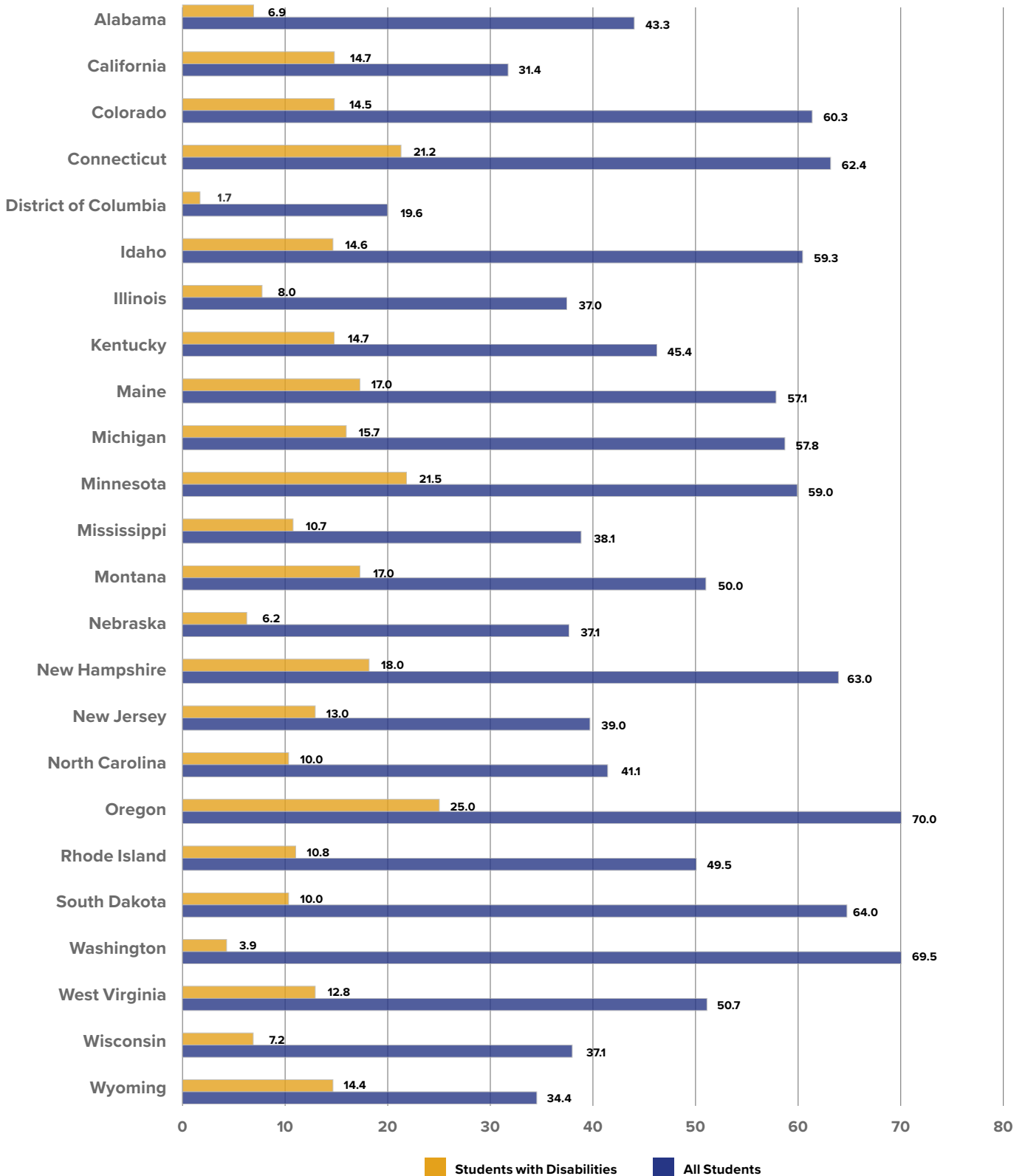
- What does the state expect students to be able to know and do to graduate from high school, and how do these expectations differ for SWDs? How is the state/district/school ensuring SWDs are held to the same expectations as their peers, and that they graduate with a meaningful diploma?
- Is the state clear about which students are included in the SWDs graduation rate? For example, does the rate include all students in the 9th grade cohort with an IEP, or those who exited the cohort with an IEP, or those students with an IEP throughout their high school experience?

<sup>10</sup> Achieve's collection of publicly reported student outcomes data from states' SY 2017-18 reporting is available at <https://highschool.achieve.org/college-and-career-ready-student-outcomes-data-explorer>.

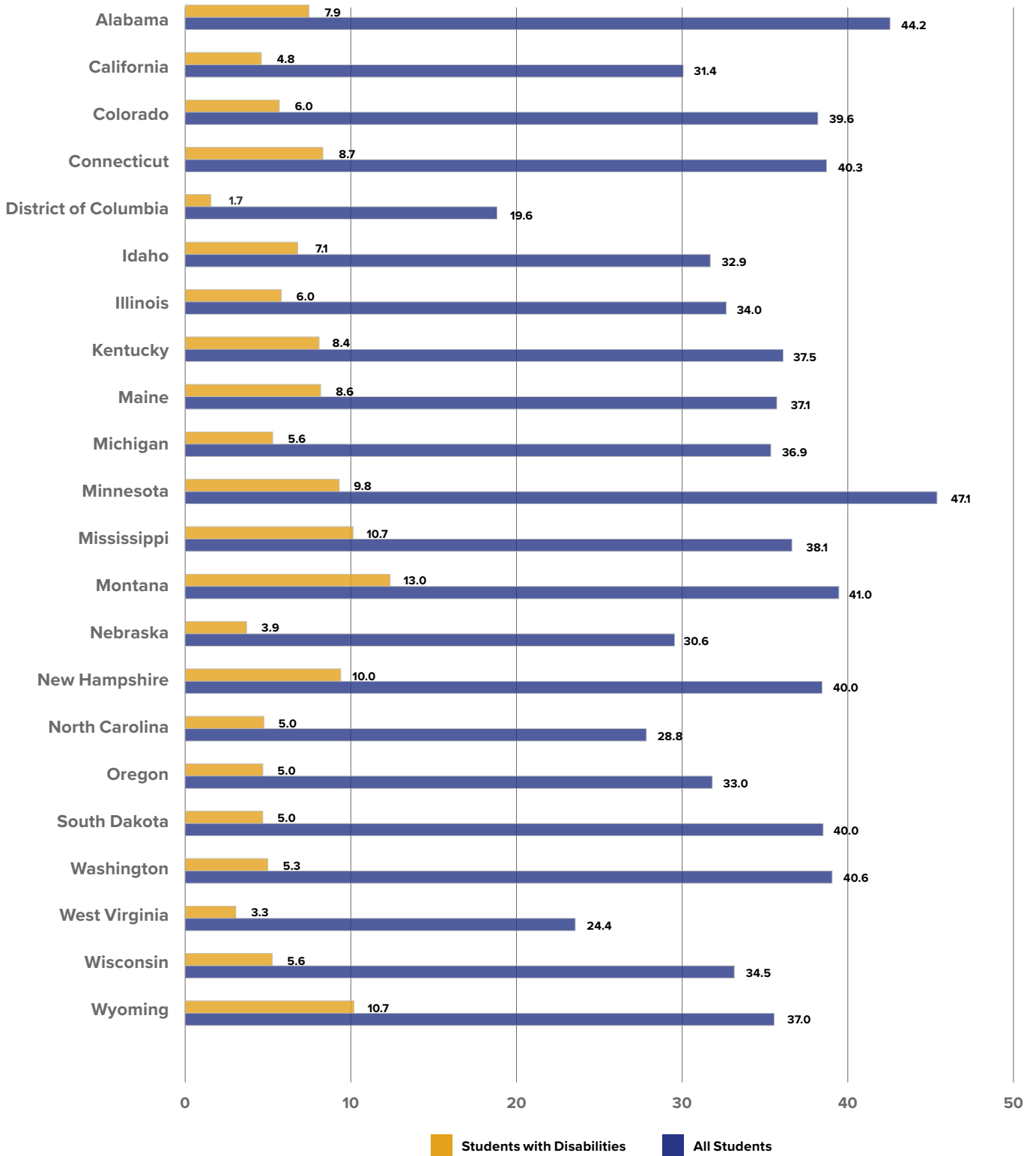
- How is the school implementing IDEA's transition planning requirement and ensuring students and parents understand the graduation options and the implications of each as well as how the final years of high school will prepare their student for a successful transition to post school life?
- Is the state reporting postsecondary enrollment on school, district and state report cards, dashboards, or closely connected to the related high school outcomes reporting? Our review found that less than a third of states reported postsecondary enrollment data as part of their report cards. Many other states' that reported postsecondary enrollment data did so on another website or far removed from the report cards most states have recently revised and are working to increase awareness of.
- Is the state disaggregating postsecondary enrollment data by subgroups? While 46 states report some measure of postsecondary enrollment, just 20 of these states report postsecondary enrollment rates for students with disabilities. States must disaggregate data on postsecondary enrollment not just all students, but by subgroups like race, income, disability status and English proficiency so they can tell how well different groups are doing, and how well the system/high schools are serving students and where additional interventions and supports are necessary to improve students' outcomes. You can't address problems you can't see.
- Is the state reporting postsecondary enrollment of the 9th grade cohort or another (less comprehensive) denominator? Student outcomes should be reported against the adjusted 9th grade cohort, rather than limiting reporting to those students who make it across the high school finish line. This is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the K-12 system, and of high schools. It provides evidence about where improvements are occurring, and where they are needed.

**APPENDIX A. ASSESSMENT PROFICIENCY RATES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND ALL STUDENTS - 2017-18 REPORT CARDS**

**ELA Proficiency Rates on CCR Assessments: Students with Disabilities and All Students**



**Mathematics Proficiency Rates on CCR Assessments: Students with Disabilities and All Students**



**APPENDIX B. GRADUATION RATES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND ALL STUDENTS - 2017-18 REPORT CARDS**

State	Students with Disabilities (%)	All Students (%)	Gap between All Students' Graduation Rate and Students with Disabilities Graduation Rate (percentage point)
Alabama	74.0	89.0	15.0
Alaska	56.9	78.5	21.6
Arizona	66.4	78.0	11.6
Arkansas	84.6	89.2	4.6
California	71.4	83.5	12.1
Colorado	56.8	79.0	22.2
Connecticut	66.7	87.9	21.2
Delaware	67.6	85.8	18.2
District of Columbia	46.9	68.5	21.6
Florida	77.0	86.1	9.1
Georgia	48.8	81.6	32.8
Hawaii	64.0	84.0	20.0
Idaho	58.5	80.6	22.1
Illinois	69.0	85.0	16.0
Indiana	72.8	88.1	15.3
Iowa	76.5	91.4	14.9
Kansas	79.5	87.5	8.0
Kentucky	74.8	90.3	15.5
Louisiana	59.3	81.4	22.1
Maine	73.6	86.7	13.2
Maryland	66.8	87.1	20.3
Massachusetts	72.4	87.9	15.5
Michigan	57.5	80.6	23.1
Minnesota	62.3	83.2	20.9
Mississippi	36.4	83.0	46.6
Missouri	75.8	89.2	13.4
Montana	77.0	86.0	9.0
Nebraska	69.3	88.6	19.3
Nevada	64.7	80.9	16.2
New Hampshire	72.2	88.4	16.2

STATE REPORT CARD ROUND-UP: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?

State	Students with Disabilities (%)	All Students (%)	Gap between All Students' Graduation Rate and Students with Disabilities Graduation Rate (percentage point)
New Jersey	80.1	90.9	10.8
New Mexico	65.6	73.9	8.3
New York	56.0	80.0	24.0
North Carolina	69.1	86.3	17.2
North Dakota	71.7	88.1	16.4
Ohio	51.4	84.1	32.7
Oklahoma	79.0	85.6	6.6
Oregon	58.8	76.7	17.9
Pennsylvania	73.6	86.6	13.0
Rhode Island	63.0	84.1	21.1
South Carolina	52.1	81.0	28.9
South Dakota	63.0	84.1	21.1
Tennessee	71.4	89.1	17.7
Texas	77.4	89.7	12.3
Utah	70.0	87.0	17.0
Vermont	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Virginia	60.0	87	27
Washington	61.7	80.9	19.2
West Virginia	76.9	90.2	13.3
Wisconsin	68.5	86.6	18.1
Wyoming	62.7	81.7	19.0