

Students with Disabilities in the CORE Districts

Characteristics, Outcomes,
and Transitions

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In this brief, we leverage data from eight school districts, known as the CORE districts, to describe students with disabilities (SWD) by their characteristics, outcomes, and transitions into and out of special education. We found that the most common disability type was a specific learning disability. Relative to their representation among students districtwide, males, African Americans, English language learners, and foster youth were more highly represented among SWD. In terms of outcomes, chronic absence was more prevalent among children with multiple disabilities. Entry rates into special education were highest in K–4 while exits were most common in Grades 8–12. These descriptive results shed light on the diversity within the SWD population and highlight who may need targeted supports to address performance challenges.

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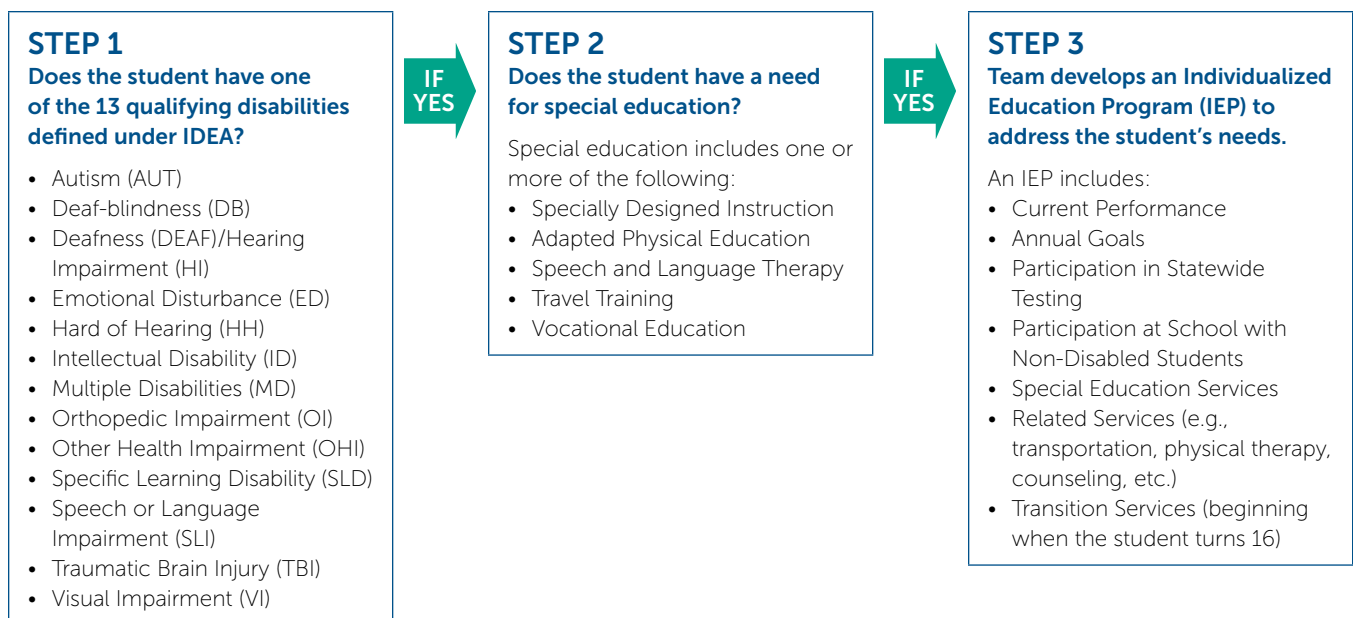
Introduction

Students with disabilities (SWD) are far from a homogenous population; they come from a variety of backgrounds and have diverse experiences and outcomes. In this brief, we take a deeper dive into the characteristics of SWD, examining who they are by key demographics and outcomes as well as by how these students move into and out of special education. Importantly, our descriptive analyses offer a more nuanced portrait of SWD, examining their outcomes and experiences by their disability type. To conduct our analyses, we use annual data (2014–15 to 2017–18) on children in K–12 from eight California school districts, known as the CORE districts, located in Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Santa Ana.

To provide context for who SWD are and their transitions into and out of special education over time, we first describe how students are identified for special education services. Per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),¹ these services are specified under an Individualized Education Program (IEP). When a student is initially identified and every 3 years thereafter, a group of qualified education professionals and the student’s parent(s)/guardian(s)—a student’s IEP team—review special education evaluation results to determine eligibility for special education according to Figure 1.

Some SWD qualify for services under a different mechanism, known as a 504 Plan.² These plans focus on the educational needs of children with disabilities that affect their ability to learn, but those disabilities are more broadly defined.

Figure 1. Eligibility Determination Process for Special Education

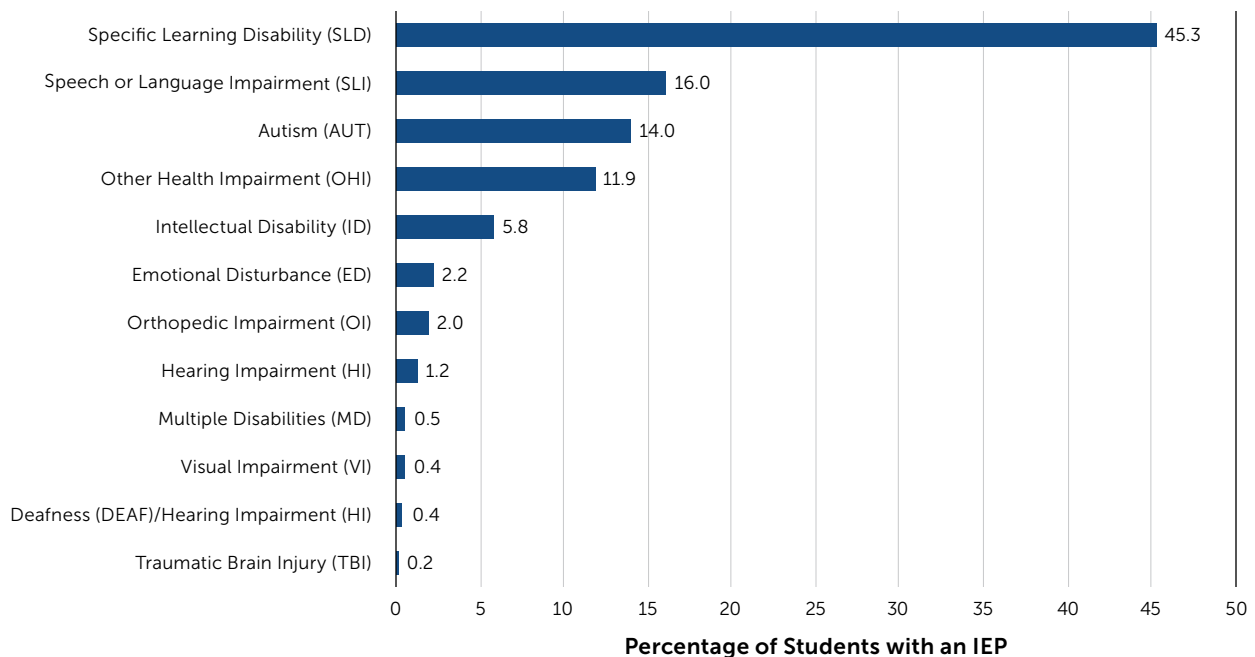


Characteristics and Outcomes of Students with Disabilities

Primary Disability Categories

Figure 2 shows the distribution of students by primary disability category. The majority of children (45.3 percent) were classified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) followed by a speech or language impairment (SLI; 16 percent) and autism (AUT; 14 percent). These results are consistent with statewide classification rates among 0- to 22-year-olds. For example, in 2018, about 39 percent of children enrolled in special education in California were classified as having a learning disability while 21 percent and 15 percent were children with a SLI and AUT respectively.³

Figure 2. Students with an Individualized Education Program by Disability Type



Note. Based on $n = 329,478$; categories and coding based on the CALPADS Primary Disability Codes: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ca/disablecodes.asp>

Race and Ethnicity

Table 1 shows the racial and ethnic breakdown of students with an IEP, 504 Plan, students overall, and among children in the six most frequent disability categories. African American students are more highly represented among those with an IEP—13.2 percent among those with an IEP versus 9.3 percent in the population overall. In contrast, White students make up about a third of students with a 504 Plan, while they only represent 10.2 percent of students districtwide. Finally, about 44 percent of students with a 504 Plan are Latinx while nearly 66 percent of students with an IEP and 67 percent overall are Latinx.

Table 1. Percentage of Students with Disabilities by Race and Ethnicity

	African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Filipino	Latinx	Multi-racial or Multi-ethnic	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	White
Students with an IEP								
	13.2	0.3	6.2	1.1	66.4	2.2	0.5	10.1
Students with a 504 Plan								
	11.9	0.5	6.8	1.1	43.7	4.2	0.6	31.3
CORE Districtwide								
	9.3	0.2	9.0	1.8	66.9	2.1	0.6	10.2
By Six Most Frequent Disability Categories								
SLD	13.2	0.4	3.8	0.5	73.6	1.3	0.4	6.7
SLI	8.7	0.3	10.3	1.0	64.2	3.4	0.5	11.6
AUT	11.2	0.3	10.7	2.7	56.9	2.9	0.4	15.0
OHI	20.3	0.4	3.2	0.7	57.2	2.9	0.4	14.9
ID	14.9	0.3	7.5	1.4	67.2	1.6	0.6	6.6
ED	29.9	0.6	3.3	0.7	46.5	3.6	0.3	15.1

Among children with an emotional disturbance (ED), close to 30 percent were African American—2 times the rate for White children. For children with a SLD, nearly three quarters were Latinx, close to 7 percentage points higher relative to their representation among students with an IEP and districtwide. Finally, slightly over 10 percent of children with a SLI or AUT were Asian American, roughly 4 points higher than their representation among students with an IEP as a whole.

Gender

As Figure 3 shows, males are more highly represented than females among those with an IEP or 504 Plan. Nearly two of every three students with an IEP is male while about three of every five students with a 504 Plan is male. This is compared to a 50/50 gender split districtwide.

Student Subgroups

Table 2 shows the percentage of students with an IEP and 504 Plan who are part of four specific subgroups alongside the percentage of each subgroup districtwide. Notably, each subgroup is more highly represented among students with an IEP relative to students overall. For example, among IEP students, nearly 39 percent are English Language Learners (ELLs), while ELLs represent 23 percent of students districtwide. Comparing students with a 504 Plan relative to students districtwide, there is lower representation of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth (52.5 percent versus 74.2 percent) and ELLs (8.4 percent versus 22.9 percent).

Figure 3. Percentage of Students with Disabilities by Gender

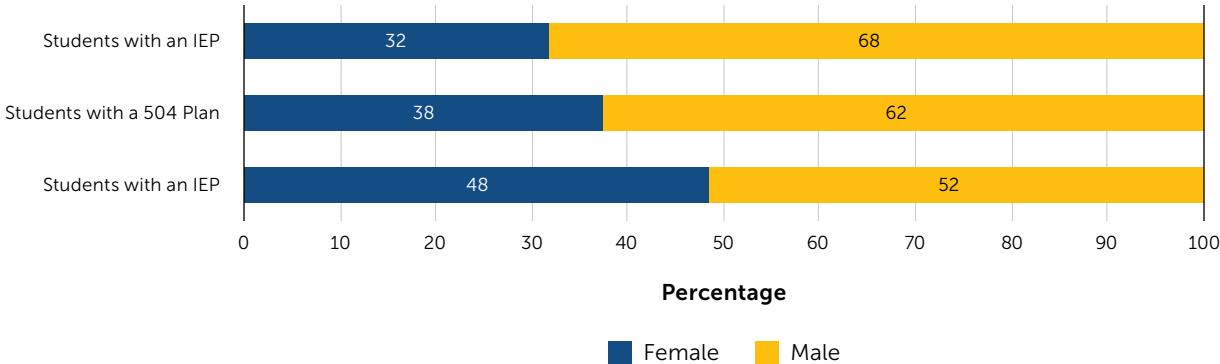


Table 2. Percentage of Students with Disabilities by Student Subgroups

	English Language Learners (ELLs)	Foster Youth	Homeless Youth	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youth
Students with an IEP	38.8	5.1	4.3	77.4
Students with a 504 Plan	8.4	3.0	3.1	52.5
CORE Districtwide	22.9	2.1	3.2	74.2

Note. Socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) or have a parent without a high school diploma.

Outcomes

Chronic absence and suspensions. Table 3 displays chronic absence and suspension rates for students with an IEP or a 504 Plan, disaggregated by disability type and grade levels. Chronic absence rates vary across disability types and grades spans. Among K–5 students, those with multiple disabilities (MD) have the highest rates (58.3 percent) while children with SLI have the lowest (12.1 percent). However, by Grades 9–12, chronic absence rates are highest for students with an ED, with nearly half experiencing chronic absenteeism. Finally, all groups in K–12—with the exception of students with SLI or AUT—have chronic absence rates exceeding the districtwide rate (17.4 percent). Across all grade spans, suspensions rates are the highest for children with an ED, with 30.4 percent of sixth–eighth graders with an ED having had a suspension.

Four-year graduation rates. Figure 4 shows that students with a 504 Plan have the highest four-year graduation rates (78 percent). Among children with an IEP, those with a SLI have the highest rates (75 percent) and children with an ID or who have MD experience the lowest rates at around 10 percent each.

Table 3. Percentage of Chronic Absence and Suspensions by Disability Category

	Chronic Absence				Suspensions			
	K-5	6-8	9-12	K-12	K-5	6-8	9-12	K-12
AUT	18.2	10.9	13.1	16.2	1.0	2.3	1.8	1.5
DEAF/HI	20.5	10.7	20.9	20.8	0.7	1.8	1.9	1.2
ED	32.3	43.3	53.7	47.1	23.7	30.4	16.9	22.1
HH	16.6	13.7	18.9	17.8	0.7	2.3	2.3	1.4
ID	32.9	23.8	27.9	29.8	1.5	3.6	2.9	2.7
MD	58.3	48.0	37.1	49.8	0.5	4.2	1.1	1.1
OI	50.6	42.2	42.6	45.6	0.2	0.1	0.3	9.0
OHI	19.3	20.1	29.5	23.0	5.3	12.3	9.3	0.2
SLD	13.0	14.6	24.9	17.8	2.0	6.4	5.4	4.9
SLI	12.1	9.4	14.3	13.4	1.1	4.1	2.7	1.4
TBI	34.1	25.0	31.3	31.1	1.5	5.5	4.0	3.6
VI	22.3	26.5	26.2	25.3	0.4	1.8	1.9	1.4
504	14.7	16.7	25.0	19.5	4.9	7.7	4.7	6.0
CORE Districtwide	11.0	9.6	17.2	17.4	0.8	3.7	2.5	2.1

Note. Chronic absence includes students who missed 10 percent or more of instructional days for any reason; suspensions include students with a record of any suspension.

Special Education Entries, Exits, and Transitions

Grade-to-Grade Entry Rates into Special Education

To describe special education entry rates between consecutive grade levels, we analyzed a sample of students we observed in any two consecutive school years. For a given grade level, among the students without an IEP, we then determined the percentage who had an IEP in the next adjacent grade. The results are displayed in Figure 5.

Our findings show that the highest entry rates into special education occur between kindergarten and fourth grade, where between 2.1 and 2.5 percent of students enter special education. Less than 1 percent of students enter special education while in high school, where we see the lowest entry rates. While there is an overall downward trend in special education entry rates from 2nd through 12th grades, the percentage of students entering special education slightly increases at key transition points: (a) after the elementary to middle school and middle to high school transitions and (b) in 12th grade, when students are preparing to matriculate into postsecondary opportunities.

Figure 4. Four-Year Graduation Rates for Students with a 504 Plan and by Disability Category

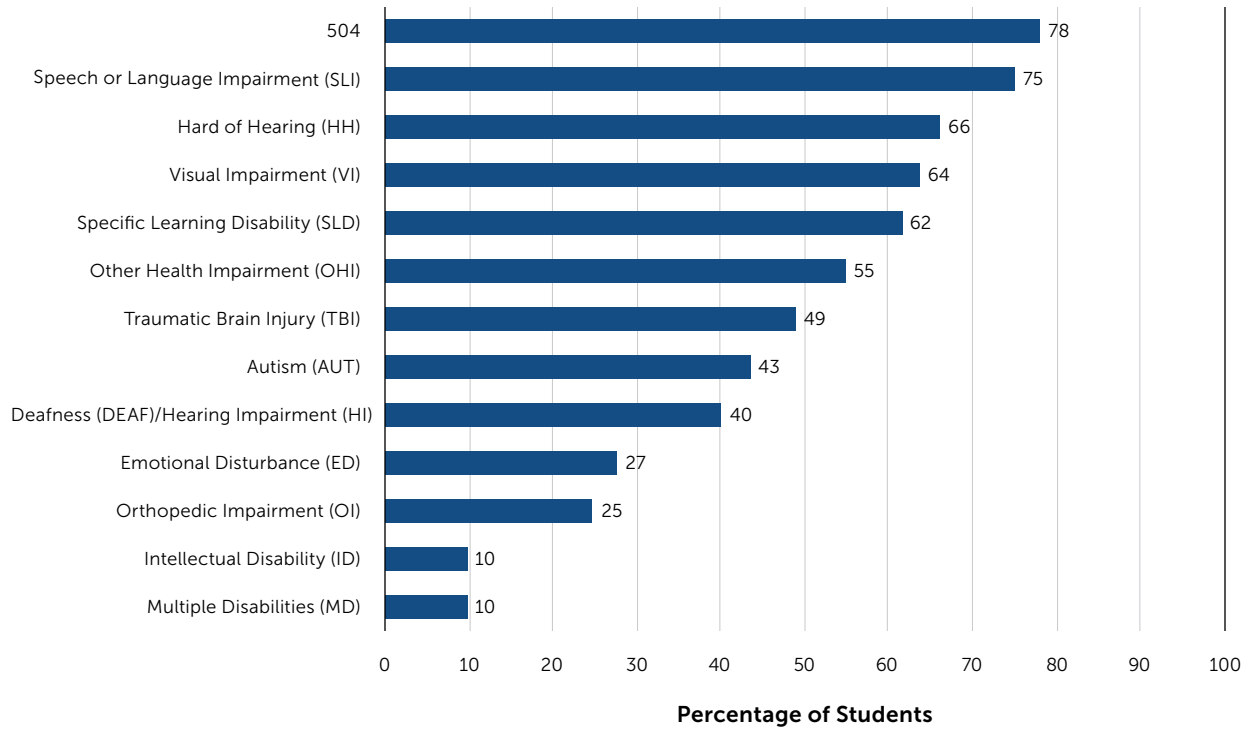
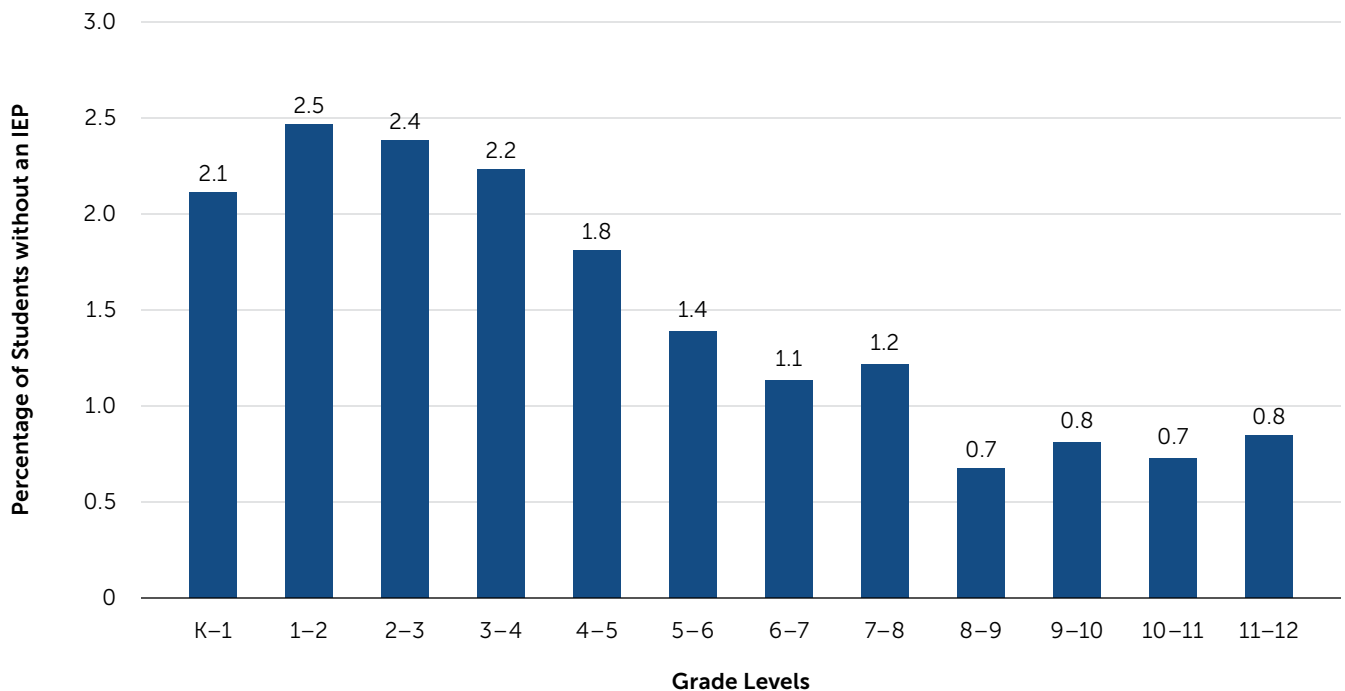


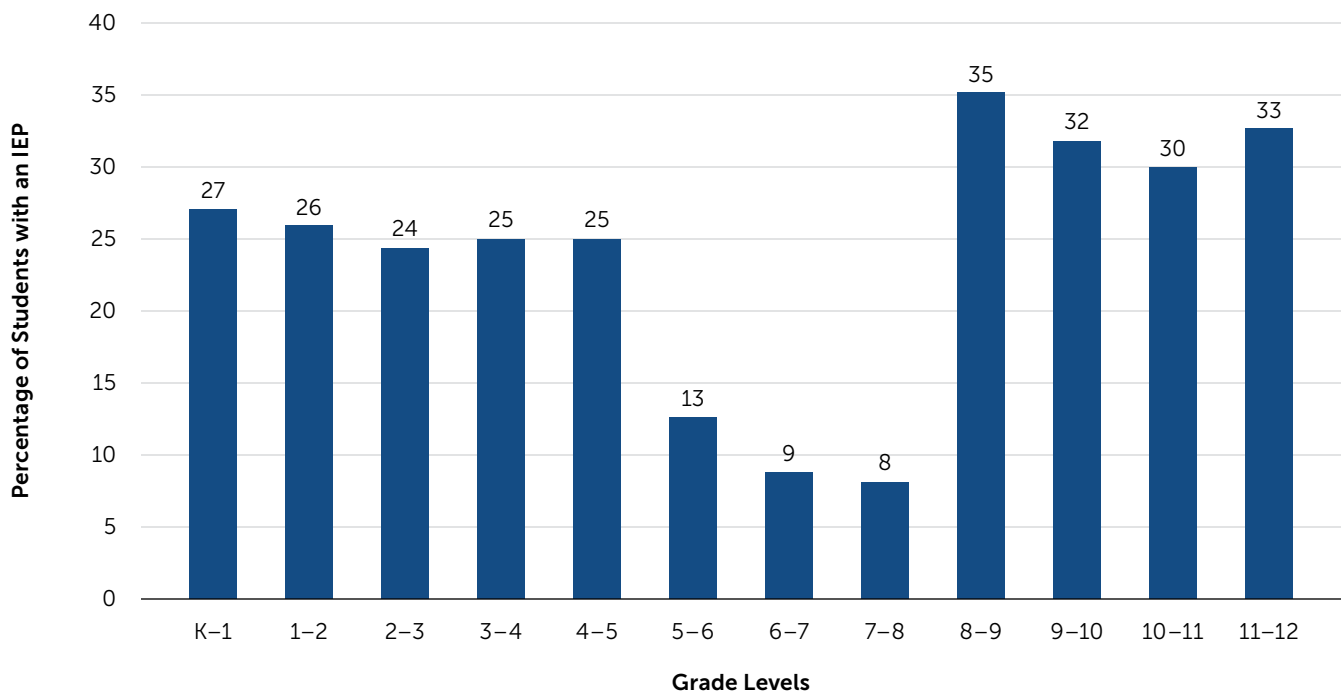
Figure 5. Percentage of Students Entering Special Education in Grades K–12



Grade-to-Grade Special Education Exit Rates

To assess how SWD exit special education, we determined the percentage of students in each grade with an IEP who then exited special education by the next grade. These results are displayed in Figure 6, which shows that exit rates between grades remain relatively constant from kindergarten through fourth grade, where about 25 percent of students who had an IEP in the prior year exited special education. Also, there is a sharp decline in the percentage of students exiting special education between fifth and seventh grades, where the lowest percentage (8 percent) of students are exiting in seventh grade. Finally, the highest exit rates occur in 8th through 12th grades, where about one third of SWD exit special education between each grade level.

Figure 6. Percentage of Students Exiting Special Education in Grades K–12



Movement Between Special Education Primary Disability Categories

To understand how students move between primary special education disability categories, we compared transitions for two primary disability categories—SLI and ED— using a sample of students we observed for three consecutive school years. We focused on these two categories because, relative to the other categories, they tended to experience higher rates of change from one primary disability category to another. We used a 3-year window given that eligibility for special education is determined every 3 years. Specifically, we examined those with either a SLI or ED in a given grade, and then looked at their classification in the 13 disability categories three grade levels higher. Results are displayed in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7. Transitions of Students Who Had a Primary Disability Category of Speech or Language Impairment

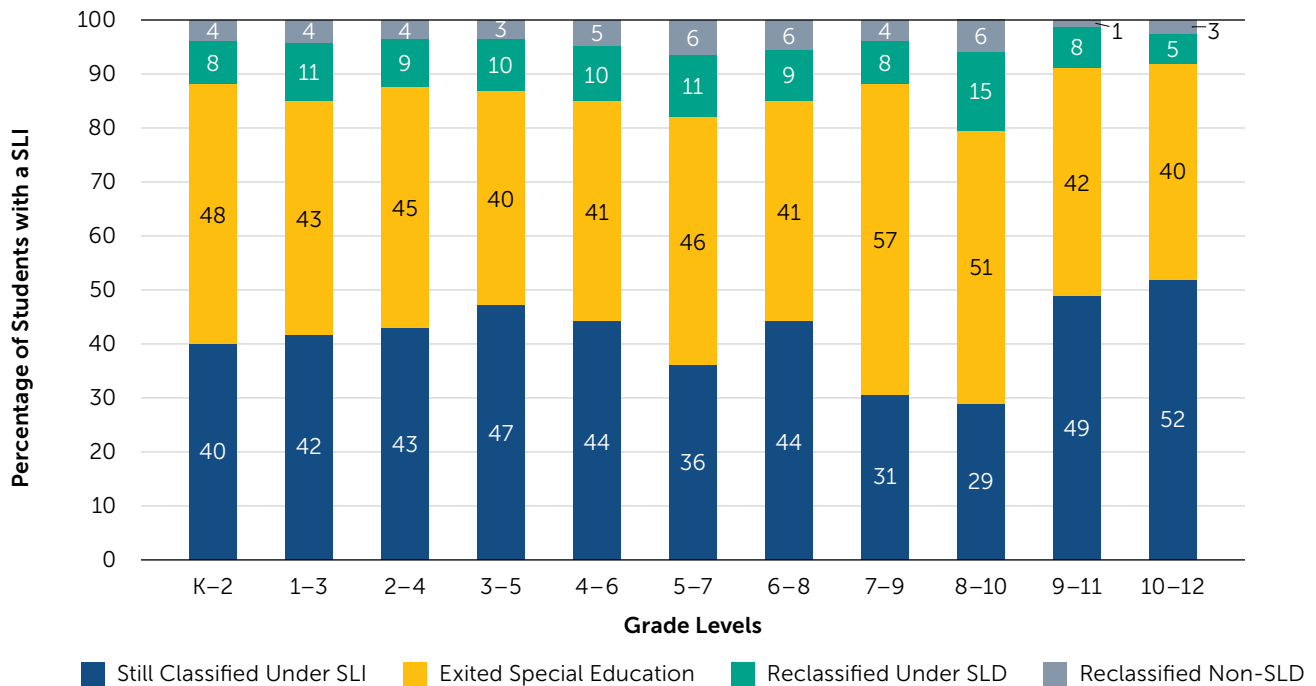
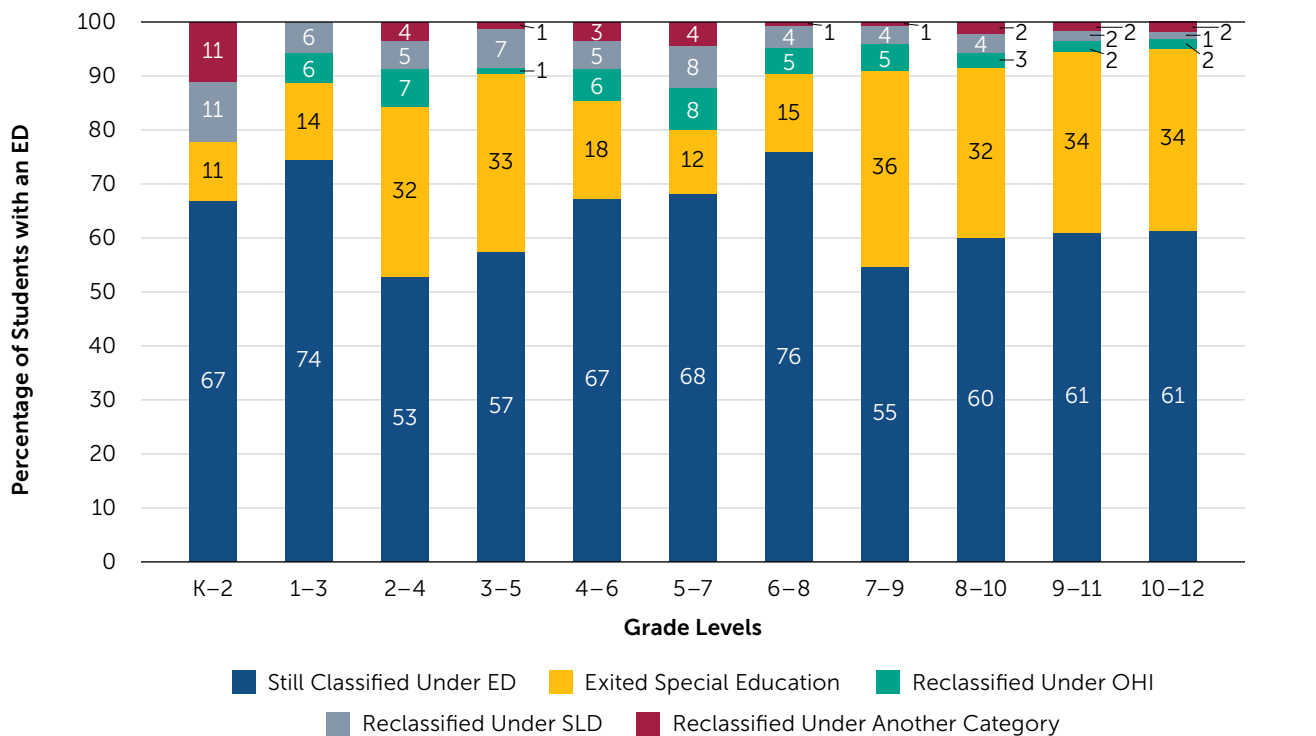


Figure 8. Transitions of Students Who Had a Primary Disability Category of Emotional Disturbance

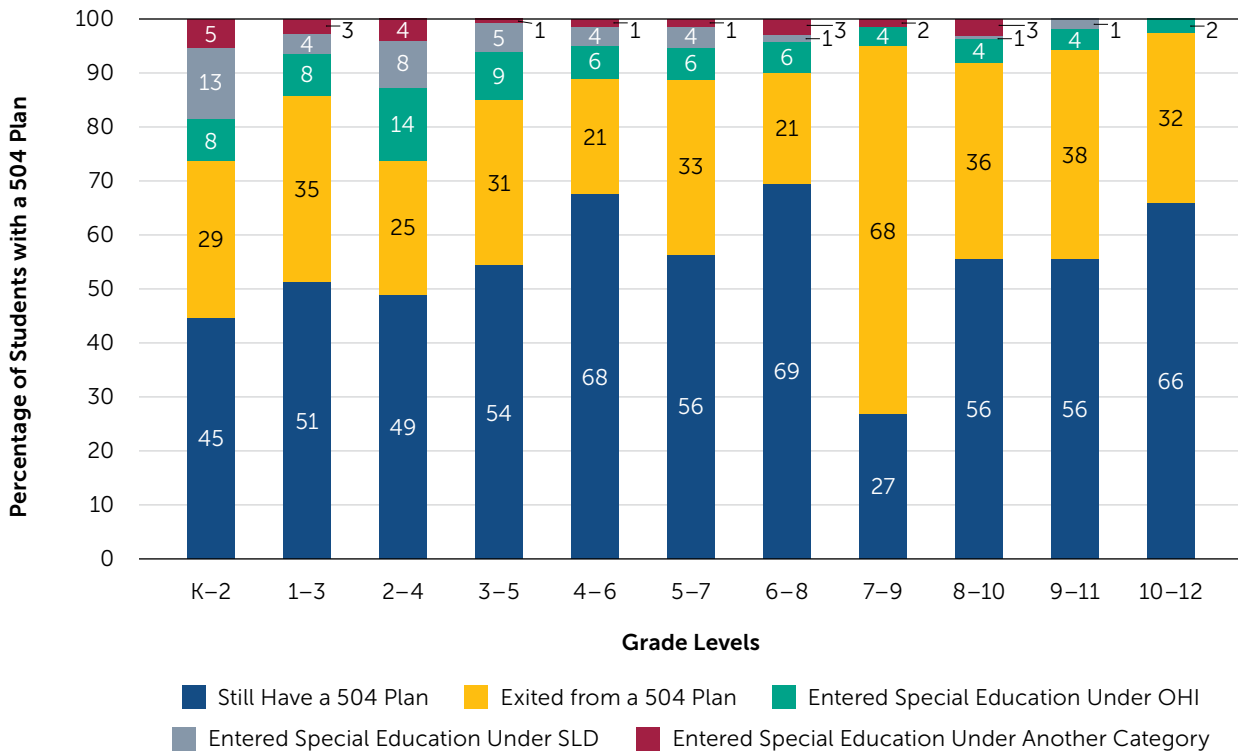


Note. Some figures do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Results show that exit rates for students with a SLI remained relatively constant across the 3-year grade spans with an increase in the percentage of students exiting special education in Grades 7–9. Students reclassified from SLI to another primary disability category were most likely to qualify under SLD 3 years later. The highest exit rates for students with a primary disability category of ED are observed in second and third grades as well as during high school. Students reclassified from ED to another primary disability category were most likely to qualify under Other Health Impairment (OHI) or SLD 3 years later.

Finally, we examined how students who qualified for a 504 Plan exited out of having a 504 Plan as well as how they transitioned into special education. Our results are displayed in Figure 9. We found that there is a sharp increase in the percentage of students who exited from their 504 Plan in middle school, where 69 percent of students with a 504 Plan in seventh grade no longer had one in ninth grade. Also, students who previously had a 504 Plan are most likely to enter special education under the primary disability categories of OHI and SLD respectively.

Figure 9. Transitions of Students Who Had a 504 Plan



Note. Some figures do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Conclusion

While students with disabilities in the CORE districts come from diverse backgrounds, specific groups—males, African Americans, ELLs, and foster youth—are more highly represented relative to their representation among all students served by CORE districtwide. Not only do SWD come from varied backgrounds but also they experience different outcomes by their disability type. Given that outcomes—particularly chronic absence and graduation rates—vary by disability type, boosting the performance of SWD as a whole will require attention to these key differences. In addition, SWD who have an IEP not only experience transitions into or out of special education but also reclassification among disability categories. Though students may no longer qualify for services or may qualify for services under a different designation, transitions can be particularly disruptive. It is thus important to ensure continuity and stability of their educational experiences to promote these students' continued learning, growth, and development.

Endnotes

- ¹ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 300.39.
- ² The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 34 C.F.R. §504 Part 104.
- ³ Kidsdata. (n.d.). Special education enrollment, by disability. Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. kidsdata.org/topic/96/special-needs-education-enrollment-disability/table#fmt=246&loc=2&tf=108&ch=206,207,208,209,210,1415,212,211,213,215,216,214,217,218&sortColumnId=0&sortType=asc

Author Biographies

Kevin Gee, Ed.D, is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. He examines the impact of a broad array of adverse experiences on children's school outcomes, including children who are vulnerable to truancy, bullying, food insecurity, abuse, and neglect. He asks policy-relevant questions critical to understanding: (a) how adversity shapes these students' schooling-related outcomes and (b) how school policies and programs can enhance students' well-being and educational outcomes.

Carolynne Beno, Ed.D., is the Associate Superintendent of the Yolo County Office of Education. She has served Yolo County as a special education teacher, vice principal, director of pupil services, and director of the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).

Joe Witte, M.P.P., is the Quantitative Research Manager at PACE. Before joining the PACE team, he worked as a consultant for the Illinois State Board of Education. His work at both organizations has focused on providing high-quality and actionable data in order to inform and support education policymakers and stakeholders.

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Related Publications

Brighthouse, H., Kurlaender, M., Reardon, S., Doss, C., Reber, S., Kalogrides, D., & Reed, S. **Outcomes and Demographics of California's Schools**. Policy Analysis for California Education. September 2018.

Farkas, G. **Achievement Gaps and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in California**. Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.

Gee, K. **Students with Disabilities and Differentiated Assistance**. Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.

Humphrey, D., & Gamse, B. **Promising Policies to Address the Needs of Students with Disabilities: Lessons from Other States**. February 2020.



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