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Special Education Eligibility Identification Rates in Texas: A Comparative Analysis of Rural and Urban School Districts

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Introduction

Since 2004, federal regulations in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have provided states with guidelines for serving the educational needs of students with disabilities. These guidelines delineate requirements for the identification of eligible professionals in charter schools, county education offices, and local education agencies (herein referred to as school districts) to conduct comprehensive and individualized evaluations to identify students with disabilities, as well as requirements for the implementation of special education services. The IDEA guarantees all students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Thus, school districts must develop, review, and revise an individualized education program (IEP) for each eligible student according to their strengths and academic, developmental, and functional needs. As school districts implement special education services, the IDEA also requires states to provide school districts with assistance and to ensure their compliance with federal regulations. Ultimately, the IDEA's primary goal is to promote educational equity among students with disabilities by providing them with appropriate academic, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional instruction (Bateman & Cline, 2016; Howe, Boelé, & Miramontes, 2018). However, the guidelines developed and established to ensure educational equity for students identified to receive special education services present challenges when considering service delivery at the state education agency and school district levels. This study examined the impact of federal oversight and consequential legislative correction on the identification rates of students receiving special education services in rural and urban school districts in the state of Texas.

Addressing the IDEA Requirements in Texas

In Texas, the State Board of Education (SBOE) and Commissioner have established special education rules and published them within the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2019e) to help school districts understand how to comply with the IDEA's federal regulations. Additionally, any state-based special education laws passed by the Texas legislature are published in the Texas Education Code (TEC). Consequently, school district administrators who oversee special education services throughout school districts in Texas have access to multiple sets of laws, regulations, and rules (see TEA, 2017b for a side-by-side comparison of IDEA, TAC, and TEC). Every year, the TEA (2019b) monitors the performance of school districts with the state's special education program through the Results Driven Accountability (RDA) system, which from 2004-2018 was known as the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS).

Despite the availability of federal and state laws, regulations, and rules, public recognition surrounding special education identification and the correlation between the TEA RDA system surfaced in 2016. Although educators had historically been voicing concerns about special education policy in Texas, this was the first time issues surfaced in a very public manner. As a result, a series of investigative news reports were published that revealed systemic problems concerning Texas's continuous delayed identification and denial of services to students with disabilities (Carroll & Rosenthal, 2016; Rosenthal, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e; Rosenthal & Barned-Smith, 2016). These investigative news reports asserted that the TEA had enacted an illegal cap (i.e., a state limit) in 2004 that set an enrollment target for the number of students that a school district could identify as eligible for special education services. This enrollment target served as a strong disincentive to school districts to not exceed a maximum student enrollment of 8.5% in special education services as exceeding that percentage of identified special education students would precipitate increased oversight from TEA. This enrollment target also violated the IDEA and systematically denied services to a great multitude of students with disabilities (DeMatthews & Knight, 2019; Knight & DeMatthews, 2020; Michals, 2018).

Within one year of the public media coverage, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) launched a comprehensive, 15-month investigation to examine Texas's statewide practices for special education services (Michals, 2018). When the investigation concluded, OSEP determined that Texas was in violation of the IDEA and cited three findings of noncompliance (OSEP, 2018). Specifically, the OSEP cited that the TEA failed to: (1) ensure that all students with disabilities were identified and evaluated; (2) ensure that FAPE was made available to all students with disabilities; and (3) fulfill its monitoring and supervisory responsibilities. Based on these findings, OSEP required Texas to make associated corrective actions. In 2017, the Texas Legislature passed two state laws related to OSEP's findings of noncompliance. Texas Senate Bill 160 (2017) prohibited the use of any type of enrollment incentive that could potentially influence the number or percentage of students that an LEA may provide special education services. Texas Senate Bill 1153 (2017) delineated parental rights and information about intervention strategies used with students to address learning difficulties.

The Texas Commission on Public School Finance, the TEA, special education advocates, and lawmakers collaborated to pass several bills to address special education funding and initiatives for students with special needs in Texas by the 86th legislative session in 2019 (Chevalier, 2019). Among those bills was Texas House Bill 3 (2019), landmark legislation for students receiving special education services in Texas. Texas House Bill 3 increased the weight of funding an LEA receives for placing a student in a general education instructional setting. Ultimately, this legislative revision generated significant funding increases in the allocation of special education services provided in a general education classroom (Chevalier, 2019). Texas House Bill 3 (2019) also established a state-level special education advisory committee to make special education funding recommendations.

In addition to HB 3, the 86th legislative session included two state senate bills relevant to special education funding and special education identification in Texas. Texas Senate Bill 500 (2019) provided a supplemental spending bill to settle maintenance of support costs and future funding penalty failure prevention in response to decreased funding for special education students that occurred during 2012, 2017, 2018 and 2019 (Chevalier, 2019). Texas Senate Bill 139 (2019) specifically addressed the 8.5% student enrollment target (DeMatthews & Knight, 2019; Knight & DeMatthews, 2020; Michals, 2018) by requiring the TEA to develop a notice to LEAs and families of students receiving special educations services.

Special Education in Rural School Districts

DeMatthews and Knight (2019) conducted an analysis of special education enrollment trends in public schools throughout the United States between 2004 and 2016 to examine the impact that the 8.5% enrollment target had on special education practices in Texas. Their findings showed "a significant long-term decline in special education" in Texas from 2004 through 2016 "that was not experienced in other states" (p. 21). Among their results, DeMatthews and Knight reported two significant findings related to rural school districts in Texas: (1) rural school districts had served considerably larger numbers of students with disabilities prior to the enactment of the state's 8.5% enrollment target, and (2) rural school districts experienced larger declines in special education enrollments compared to suburban and urban school districts.

Several researchers have recognized that the geographical location of a school is a factor that affects special education practices and services (Barrio, 2017; Bouck, 2005; Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Kurth & Keegan, 2014; Pennington, Horn, & Berrong, 2009). School districts located in rural areas contend with unique challenges in special education, such as access to service providers, funding, resources, and professional development. Researchers have also found that special educators in rural school districts tend to have lower levels in education beyond the bachelor's degree than their suburban and urban counterparts (Bouck, 2005) and often experience feelings of professional isolation (Berry & Gravelle, 2013).

Texas has more rural school districts than any other state in the United States (NCES, 2013). Out of the total 7,156 rural school districts in the United States, Texas has 631 rural school districts, compared to an average of 133 rural school districts in the other 49 states. During the 2016-2017 school year, Texas and Alabama were cited as the only two states that did not offer IEPs for at least one in 10 of their rural students, with only 9.3% of the rural student population in Texas and 8.3% in Alabama receiving special education services (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019). Showalter et al. (2019) pointed out that this finding suggested, "Some students with disabilities go without the services they need even though such services are required by federal law" (p. 7). Around this same time, Texas's Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, formed the Texas Rural Schools Task Force to identify statewide challenges and best practices for rural school districts (TEA, 2019c). Members of the Texas Rural Schools Task Force worked together to identify priority issues for rural school districts that were subsequently published in a summary report (TEA, 2017a). Although the priority issues identified did not directly address special education services, the concerns cited by the committee reflected the challenges that rural special education programs face in meeting local, state, and federal policy requirements.

Rationale for the Present Study

Previous researchers have highlighted longstanding educational injustices in special education and evaluated the impact of regulations, laws and guidelines on special education services (e.g., Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middelberg, 2012; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Knight & DeMatthews, 2018; Robinson & Norton, 2019; Skiba, Albrecht, & Losen, 2013; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2015; Strassfeld, 2019; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). These researchers have illuminated data that reflect disparities and disproportionate identification and delivery of special education services to students belonging to subgroups of the general education student population, such as students of color and students from low socioeconomic households. Previous researchers have analyzed school campus state performance ratings (Grubbs, 2000), and also studied comparisons between special education

services and academic outcomes among students receiving special education services in Texas based on education agency settings, such as charter schools compared to traditional public schools (Garton, 2019; Kahama, 2015). Against this background, researchers of the present study conducted the first examination of legislative impact for special education services by comparing rural and urban school district special education identification trends within the state of Texas.

The present study sought to add new insights by investigating statewide enrollment trends for special education in rural and urban school districts and by comparing the prevalence of primary disability types among students who received special education services in rural and urban school districts throughout Texas from 2015 to 2019. Specifically, the following two research questions guided the present study:

1. What are trends in the number of students identified for receiving special education services in rural and urban school districts in Texas between the years 2015 to 2019?
2. How does the prevalence of primary disability types among students who received special education services differ by time (i.e., 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years) and school district locale (i.e., rural or urban) in Texas?

By conducting a Texas-only analysis, the researchers of the present study aimed to focus the investigation on statewide special education practices that are guided by federal and state laws, regulations, and rules (i.e., IDEA, TAC, TEC). The *Houston Chronicle* investigative series, the U.S. Department of Education's Special Education Strategic Plan and Corrective Action Response, the 2019 86th legislative session, and the most current publicly accessible data served as the guide for selecting the four years between 2015 and 2019 for investigation. Accordingly, findings from the present study will have contributed relevant and timely empirical insights to inform ongoing corrective actions that improve statewide special education practices.

Methods

Data Collection Procedure

To retrieve data for the present study, researchers followed a systematic data collection procedure. First, the lead researcher (i.e., the first author) created a master spreadsheet that listed all school districts in Texas and their locale classification by consulting publicly available information on the TEA's (2019a) website. The TEA uses NCES's classification system that categorizes school districts as one of twelve possible categories (i.e., city, suburban, town, rural). Each category contains three subtypes. The lead researcher then filtered the master spreadsheet to only include school districts with the basic category type of city (i.e., urban or rural) (see Table 1 for a listing of the six subcategories and corresponding definitions).

Table 1

City and Rural Locale Subcategories and Definitions

Locale	Definition
City: Large	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.

City: Midsize	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
City: Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
Rural: Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
Rural: Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
Rural: Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Note. TEA's school district type data search yielded data sets for school years ranging from 2007-08 up to 2017-18. The most recent district type categorization data set available was from the school year 2017-18. Thus, all school districts categorized as city (i.e., large, midsize, small) and rural (i.e., fringe, distant, remote) listed on the district type dataset for the 2017-18 school year were included for analysis.

Next, the lead researcher consulted publicly accessible information on the TEA's (2019d) Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) website to retrieve data from the RDA system Special Education Reports for the school years under study (i.e., 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019). These data summarized the total number of students who received special education services in each school district by primary disability. After the lead researcher retrieved these reports, the data was consolidated into a single report and matched by the school district to the master spreadsheet. As a result, the master spreadsheet housed data for 828 rural and urban school districts (i.e., a total of 3,312 district-level data) in Texas that included the number of students who received special education services by primary disability for the school years under study. To ensure accuracy and completeness with the master spreadsheet, the secondary researchers (i.e., the second and third authors) each performed careful reviews of the data collection procedure.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the initial analysis was to analyze the statistical and comparative trends of disability types among students who received special education services during the school years under study. The purpose of the secondary analysis was to compare identified trends between rural and urban school districts. The researchers identified the following variables for the present analyses:

- the school years under study (i.e., 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019);
- the school district locale category (i.e., city, rural); and
- the counts of students who received special education services by primary disability code (i.e., OI = orthopedic impairment, OHI = other health impairment, AI = auditory impairment, VI = visual impairment, DB = deaf-blind, ID = intellectual disability, ED = emotional disturbance, LD = learning disability, SI = speech impairment, AU = autism, DD = developmental delay, TBI = traumatic brain injury, NCEC = non-categorical early childhood).

The researchers also generated a data point aggregate for the total counts of students who received special education services in rural and urban school districts during the school years under study.
Initial analysis. For the initial analysis, two-level multilevel analyses were conducted using a *lme*( ) function from the *nlme* R package (Pinheiro, Bates, DebRoy, & Sarkar, 2020). The researchers coded each school year (time) sequentially in order from 1 (2015-2016) through 4 (2018-2019) and coded the school district locale category as either 1 (city) or 0 (rural). The researchers also calculated the primary disability type as a percentage (a ratio that represents the number of students for each primary disability type out of the total number of students who received special education services) in each school district. With the total number of students who received special education services in each school district as a dependent variable, two-level models were used to account for the school year and the primary disability types based on each district (Level 1) nested within school district locale categories (Level 2). Model 1 tested the first research question, examining the fixed effect of time. Model 2 further tested the interaction between time and district type, hypothesizing the total number of students receiving special education services between 2015 and 2019 may differ by district type.

Secondary analysis. For the secondary analysis, the student count prevalence totals were converted to percentages, and data were presented in a 100% stacked column chart by school year for rural and urban school districts. This analysis included a data set of 1,023,470 total data points. Some values in the data set were masked to comply with requirements in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), so the TEA had replaced values greater than 0 but less than 5 with "-999" or "-999999." In order to assign value during data aggregation, the lead researcher calculated any masked values as 2.5, whereas 2.5 is ([1+2+3+4]/4). Model 3 tested interactions between disability type and time or district type, hypothesizing disability type can be a moderator affecting prevalence rate changes over time or between urban versus rural school districts.

Validity checks. After the lead researcher completed initial and secondary data analyses, all three researchers worked together to perform validity checks. Validity checks encompassed regular conversations held among the researchers synchronously through telephone calls and video conference sessions, as well as asynchronously through email exchanges. During these communication exchanges, the researchers discussed data trends over time, application of discrete comparison variables, and implications for study findings as they related to special education practices.

Results

Trends in the Number of Students Receiving Special Education Services in Rural and Urban School Districts in Texas

Based on 3,312 district-level data extracted from the TEA's PEIMS, the researchers of the present study conducted a two-level multilevel model to examine the trends of students receiving special education services in Texas. As shown in Model 1, there was significant growth in the total number of students who received special education services in each school district during the four school years under study ($\beta = 12.24$, $p < .001$); approximately 12 new students every year across districts after controlling for grade mean of student numbers. Furthermore, as shown in Model 2, there was a significant interaction between time and district type ($\beta = 34.59$, $p < .001$), controlling for time, district type, and grand mean of student numbers. The growth of student numbers in special education programs was significantly larger in the urban school districts than the rural school districts between

2015 and 2019; approximately 35 more students in the urban areas than in the rural areas received special education services.

Table 2

Fixed and Random Effects for the Two-Level Growth Model

Parameter	Parameter estimate (*SE*)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Fixed effects			
Intercept	305.07*** (41.37)	94.23*** (9.07)	76.80*** (8.86)
Time	12.24*** (1.25)	4.47*** (1.36)	298.28 (194.41)
District type[a]	—	937.92*** (169.39)	—
District type × Time	—	34.59*** (2.87)	—
OI × Time	—	—	-3.19 (1.95)
OHI × Time	—	—	-2.80 (1.94)
AI × Time	—	—	-3.04 (1.95)
VI × Time	—	—	-3.19 (1.95)
DB × Time	—	—	-3.29 (2.14)
ID × Time	—	—	-2.88 (1.94)
ED × Time	—	—	-2.95 (1.95)
LD × Time	—	—	-2.93 (1.94)
SI × Time	—	—	-2.82 (1.95)
AU × Time	—	—	-2.51 (1.94)
DD × Time	—	—	228.14** (78.56)
TBI × Time	—	—	-3.32 (1.98)
NCEC × Time	—	—	-2.96 (1.95)
OI × District type	—	—	10.62*** (2.52)
OHI × District type	—	—	10.39*** (1.74)
AI × District type	—	—	10.04*** (2.06)
VI × District type	—	—	9.77*** (2.28)
DB × District type	—	—	-32.37 (27.05)
ID × District type	—	—	9.77*** (1.78)
ED × District type	—	—	10.94*** (1.80)
LD × District type	—	—	9.53*** (1.70)
SI × District type	—	—	9.92*** (1.70)
AU × District type	—	—	10.07*** (1.78)
DD × District type	—	—	-861.78*** (234.69)
TBI × District type	—	—	7.10* (3.57)
NCEC × District type	—	—	12.09*** (3.40)
Parameter	Parameter estimate (*SD*)		
Random effects			
Intercept	305922.8 (553.10)	89.80 (9.48)	3.24 (5.69)
District type	—	5251189 (2291.55)	5255553 (2292.50)
Residual	1105892.8 (1051.61)	47934.44 (218.94)	47039.21 (216.89)

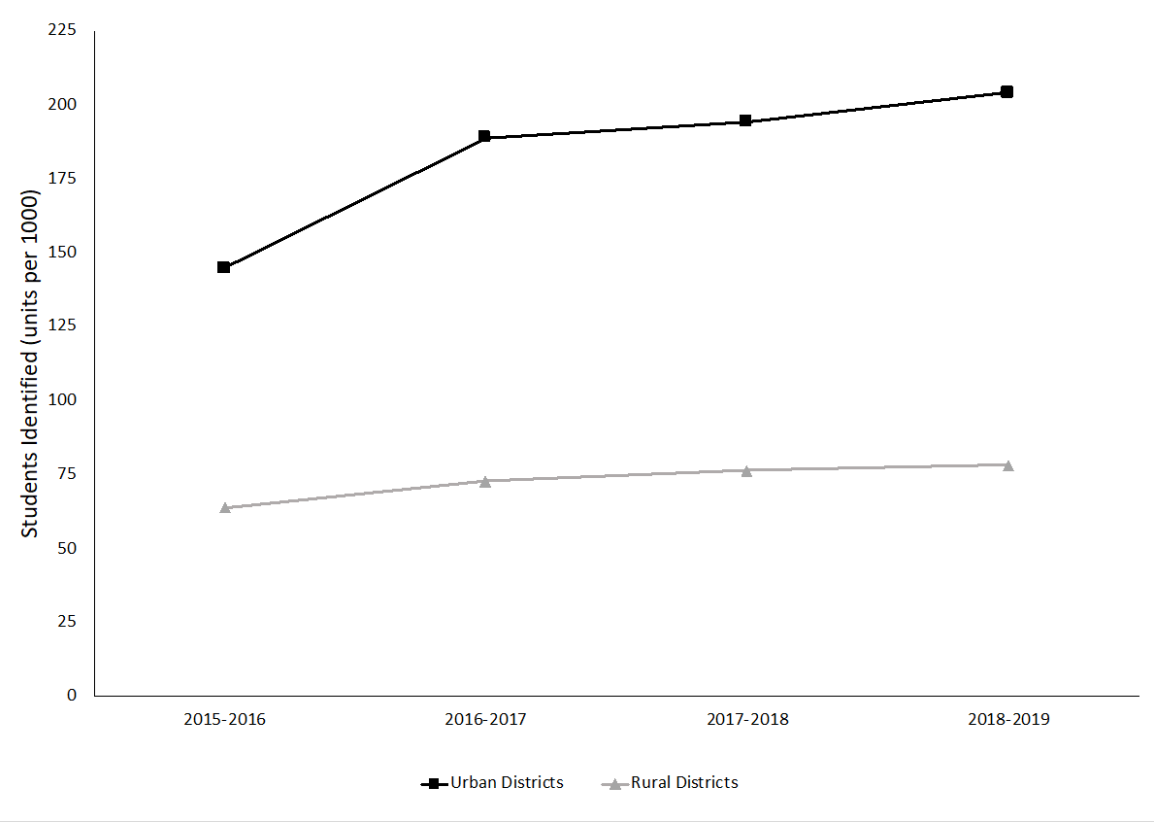
Note. AI = auditory impairment; AU = autism; DB = deaf-blind; DD = developmental delay; ED = emotional disturbance; ID = intellectual disability; LD = learning disability; NA = not applicable;

NCEC = non-categorical early childhood; OHI = other health impairment; OI = orthopedic impairment; SI = speech impairment; TBI = traumatic brain injury; VI = visual impairment.
[a]District type was coded 1 for the urban and 0 for the rural area.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$., *** $p < .001$.

Overall, the total number of students who received special education services in both rural and urban school districts increased over time with a constant change in trend from the first school year (i.e., 2015-2016) to the last school year (i.e., 2018-2019) included in data analyses (see Figure 1). To illustrate, the total number of students who received special education services in urban school districts during the 2015-2016 school year was 144,840 students, while the total number of students during the 2018-2019 school year was 204,169 students. Similarly, the total number of students who received special education services in rural school districts during the 2015-2016 school year was 63,727 students, while the total number of students during the 2018-2019 school year was 78,311 students.

Figure 1

Number of Students Identified for Special Education Services in Urban and Rural Districts



As shown in Figure 1, the average rate of change in the identification of students who received special education services over the four school years under study in urban school districts was 13%, with an immediate increase in the rate of identification to 30% from the 2015-2016 to the 2016-2017 school year. On the other hand, the average rate of change in identification of students who received special education services over the four school years under study in rural school districts was 7%,

with an immediate increase in the rate of identification to 14% from the 2015-16 school year to the 2016-2017 school year. Comparatively, students who received special education services were identified at a higher rate and with a greater increase in percentages over the four school years under study in urban school districts than in rural school districts.

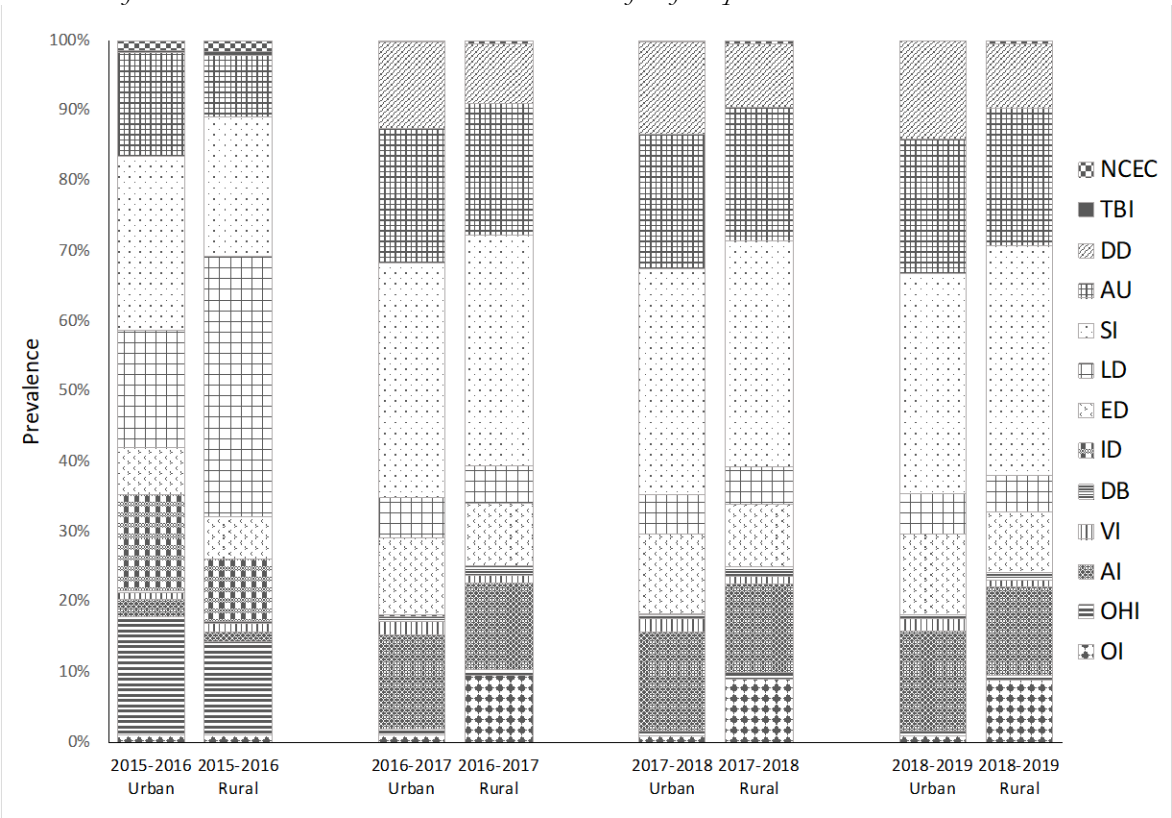
Prevalence of Primary Disability Types among Students Who Received Special Education Services by Time and School District Locale Categories

As shown in Model 3, in general, there was no significant interaction between students' primary disability type and time (β = -3.32 to 2.51, ps > .05). Only the prevalence of DD showed a significant increase over the four school years under study controlling for all other variables (β = 228.14, p < .01); annually, approximately 228 new students were receiving special education services in a disability type of DD. On the contrary, in most primary disability types, there was a significant interaction between prevalence rate and school district locale. Specifically, controlling for all other variables, in the urban school districts, students whose primary disability type was SI (β = 9.92), VI (β = 9.77), ID (β = 9.77), LD (β = 9.53), TBI (β = 7.10), ED (β = 10.94), OI (β = 10.62), OHI (β = 10.39), AU (β = 10.07), AI (β = 10.04), and NCEC (β = 12.09) showed significantly higher prevalence rates than students in the rural school districts (ps < .05). In only one primary disability type, DD, the prevalence rate was significantly lower among students in the urban school districts than that in rural school districts after controlling for all other variables (β = -861.78, p < .001).

The researchers also made discrete comparisons between the four school years under study and students who received special educations services by primary disability type. These comparisons showed that the total prevalence of identification varied by primary disability type with a notable change in trends from one school year to the next. As shown in Figure 2, there was a notable change from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2018-2019 school year for each of the following primary disability types: LD, OHI, SI, AI, AU, and ED. In particular, the number of students whose primary disability type was OHI in urban school districts significantly decreased from 24,380 during the 2015-2016 school year to 1,398 during the 2018-2019 school year. In rural school districts, the number of students whose primary disability type was OHI changed from 8,453 during the 2015-2016 school year to 576 during the 2018-2019 school year. Similarly, the total number of students whose primary disability type was LD during the 2015-2016 school year in urban school districts was 24,381 students and 23,553 students in rural school districts. During the 2018-2019 school year, the number of students whose primary disability type was LD in urban school districts decreased to 11,648 students and 4,148 students in rural school districts.

Figure 2

Prevalence of Students in Urban and Rural Districts Identified for Special Education Services



Note. AI = auditory impairment; AU = autism; DB = deaf-blind; DD = developmental delay; ED = emotional disturbance; ID = intellectual disability; LD = learning disability; NA = not applicable; NCEC = non-categorical early childhood; OHI = other health impairment; OI = orthopedic impairment; SI = speech impairment; TBI = traumatic brain injury; VI = visual impairment.

There was also a prominent increase in the rate of identification among students whose primary disability types were SI, AU, and ED. During the 2015-2016 school year, there were 35,609 students whose primary disability type was SI in urban school districts and 12,729 students in rural school districts. During the 2018-2019 school year, the number of students whose primary disability type was SI more than doubled to 63,975 students in urban school districts and 25,580 students in rural school districts. A similar increase was also noted among students whose primary disability types were AU and ED: the number of students grew from 21,475 students (AU) and 9,738 students (ED) in urban school districts and 5,574 students (AU) and 3,823 students (ED) in rural school districts during the 2015-2016 school year to 39,182 students (AU) and 23,296 students (ED) in urban school districts and 15,296 students (AU) and 6,675 students (ED) in rural school districts during the 2018-2019 school year.

Discussion

The present study was a state-focused endeavor that sought to achieve two goals: (1) to identify trends in the number of students who received special education services in rural and urban school districts, and (2) to determine how the prevalence of primary disability types among students who received special education services differed by time and school district locale. By keeping the focus of the present study on a single state, the researchers were able to investigate statewide special education practices that are guided by federal and state laws, regulations, and rules (i.e., IDEA, TAC, TEC). Furthermore, this approach enabled the researchers to capture changes with statewide special education practices that occurred after the most recent amendment to the IDEA (U.S. DOE, n.d.) and the TEA's corrective actions associated with OSEP's findings of noncompliance with the IDEA (OSEP, 2018).

Regarding the time trend, there was a significant increase in the number of students receiving special education services from 2015 to 2019. In terms of comparisons between the number of students who received special education services in rural and urban school districts in the state of Texas from 2015 to 2019, the rate of identification by primary disability type appeared to follow the same trend as the findings that compared the total number of students who received special education services. Data analysis revealed that students in rural school districts received special education services at a lower average change in percentage when compared to students with the same primary disability type in urban school districts.

Concerning the prevalence of primary disability types among students who received special education services correlated to time (2015 to 2019) and school district locale, results indicated somewhat different results. In most cases, there was no significant interaction between students' primary disability type and time; however, there was a significant increase in the number of students who received special education services identified as having DD only over the last four years.

Conversely, when comparing the total prevalence of identification from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2018-2019 school year, there was a significant decrease in the number of students whose primary disability type was OHI and an increase in the number of students whose primary disability type was SI in both urban and rural school districts. This change in primary disability identification type and rate could be attributed to Texas's 86th legislative session and SB 139 (2019), which required school districts to improve upon the special education evaluation and referral process by better-informing parents of their educational right to a comprehensive full individual initial evaluation or reevaluation.

Overall, analyses from the present study have provided a snapshot of the impact that the issuance of OSEP's (2018) findings of noncompliance has had on statewide practices in Texas for identifying and serving students with disabilities in special education. Furthermore, the multilevel analyses have illustrated a measurable variance that the required corrective actions have had on special education practices in rural and urban school districts.

Rural School Districts Need for Resources

Findings from the present study showed that school district locale was a factor that directly related to changes in identification rates for special education services. The researchers found that following Texas's removal of the 8.5% enrollment target and subsequent disincentive for special education

services and the TEA's implementation of corrective actions, special education enrollment rates were lower in rural school districts than urban school districts. Although there was a measurable increase in the number of students who received special education services in rural school districts, the percentage at which the rate of identification grew was lower in rural school districts when compared to the rate of identification growth in urban school districts. This finding is of great concern because Texas serves such a large number of students in rural school districts and has a relatively low level of per-pupil funding for rural students (Showalter et al., 2019). Moreover, rural school districts grapple with many unique challenges that influence their implementation of special education practices and delivery of high-quality services (Barrio, 2017; Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Bouck, 2005; Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Kurth & Keegan, 2014; Pennington et al., 2009). With this in mind, rural school districts in Texas may benefit from localized assistance that provides guidance with identification processes for special education services, increased funding and resource allocation for special education programs, and access to resources that ensure placements in LREs and appropriate instructional adaptations. In alignment with Texas House Bill 3 (2019) and the state-level implementation of a special education advisory committee, it is strongly encouraged that school districts in rural locales develop and facilitate local special education advisory committees that can oversee and advise the use of funds and resources designated for special education services.

The Role of Education Policy to Meet FAPE Requirements

According to findings in the present study, the number of students who received special education services in Texas increased significantly over the past school years under study (i.e., 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019). As mentioned previously, this time span corresponds with several major events that have been instrumental in restoring educational equity for students with disabilities in Texas. With significant increases in the rate of identification among students with disabilities, the TEA must ensure that they provide school districts with ongoing support to maintain compliance with federal and state laws, regulations, and rules (i.e., IDEA, TAC, TEC). In order to provide a FAPE to all students with disabilities, it is essential that school districts receive adequate funding for special education resources and services. As an initial step toward addressing this funding need, Texas Senate Bill 500 (2019) provided supplemental spending to settle maintenance of support costs and future funding penalty failure prevention. However, the bill did not provide specific guidance to rural school districts. It is suggested that future legislation make allowances and provide allocation guidance directly related to the increased funding needs that exist among school districts in rural areas. Additionally, school districts should be given consistent access to informative and systematic professional development for all special education stakeholders (e.g., superintendents, directors, specialists, principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, school board members).

Conclusion

Identifying and assessing students for their eligibility in special education has been a relevant education issue throughout the United States. As evidenced in the present study, Texas experienced significant growth in the number of students who received special education services from 2015 to 2019. Although there was a decrease in the prevalence of many of the primary disability types, the number of students who received special education services in urban school districts has grown at a greater rate than in rural school districts. Considering the major events that promoted this tremendous growth, several questions come to mind: Are school districts conducting comprehensive and individualized evaluations to identify students with disabilities appropriately? Are school districts implementing special education services to guarantee FAPE in the LRE for all students with disabilities?

Are school districts developing, reviewing, and revising an IEP for each eligible student according to their strengths and academic, developmental, and functional needs? Does the TEA provide school districts with sufficient support to ensure compliance with federal and state laws, regulations, and rules? As Texas continues to move forward in the journey to improve special education services, it is recommended that future researchers conduct periodic evaluations through the use of publicly accessible data that determine program effectiveness. It is of vital importance that all students with disabilities are identified and provided with special education services that best meet their individual needs.

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