



# Debunking Myths about Students with Disabilities

*State policy should confront the pervasive low expectations that the outcomes reveal.*

**Karla Phillips-Krivickas**

When education initiatives set out to help those who have been “historically disadvantaged or historically marginalized,” they perfectly describe students with disabilities. Yet too often, these students have been excluded from conversations about equity in education.

Consider my middle school-aged daughter: Had she been born a few decades earlier, she would not even have the right to attend her school because she has Down Syndrome. This right did not exist until 1972, when a U.S. district court overturned a Pennsylvania law that allowed schools to deny children with intellectual disabilities attendance in a public school.<sup>1</sup>

Just a few short years later, Congress opened public school doors for millions of children with disabilities through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This law, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), not only guarantees the rights of students with disabilities to attend a public school but also promises a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Yet 46 years later, families and advocates are still fighting for its full implementation and enforcement.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students with disabilities comprise 14.1 percent of all public school students. While federal law defines 13 categories of disabilities, most students with disabilities—nearly 70 percent—come from only three categories considered to be generally mild in nature: specific learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), speech-language impairments, and other health impairments (see figure, page 3).

## Setting High Expectations

One of the most pervasive myths about special education is that most students

receiving special education services have an intellectual disability. Not true. Over 90 percent do not.<sup>2</sup> Thus the vast majority of students qualifying for special education services can be expected to reach the same level of academic achievement as their peers without disabilities if they receive the specially designed instruction and support to which they are entitled. Even so, misconceptions regarding the intellectual abilities of special education students easily seep into state policy and conspire to lower expectations for these students.

Consequently, it is important for state boards of education to set audacious goals and to translate them into policy. The call to “raise expectations” might sound like a broken record, but many students can attest to the impact that low expectations have had on them.<sup>3</sup> As former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “No belief is more damaging in education than the misperception that children with disabilities cannot really and shouldn’t be challenged to reach the same high standards as all children.”<sup>4</sup> Students deserve more. As states align state policy and goals to work toward equitable education, they must pursue high expectations, appropriate services, and booming achievement for students with disabilities.

## Benchmarking Achievement

While it has become clear that school shutdowns during the pandemic disproportionately affected students with disabilities, researchers are just beginning to quantify how much. In any case, there were alarming achievement gaps on almost every measure before the pandemic.

A 2018 meta-analysis found that students with disabilities were on average performing more than three years below their nondisabled peers.<sup>5</sup> Scores on the National Assessment of Educational

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Progress reveal a decline in reading and math for students with disabilities over the past 20 years.<sup>6</sup> As always, these rates vary widely by state. One state witnessed a 24-point decline in fourth grade reading for students with disabilities over this period; another saw a 13-point improvement. The fact that these gaps have persisted for so long is concerning, but I worry more that we have grown accustomed to them—or even worse—have begun to assume that because these students have disabilities there will always be a gap.

Graduation rates, however, have been an anomaly. Despite a generally stagnant movement in academic achievement, more students with disabilities are graduating with a regular diploma. In 2019, 68 percent of students with disabilities graduated nationwide.<sup>7</sup> This rate is 17.6 percentage points lower than that of their nondisabled peers, but it shows great improvement, given that in 1996 only 27.2 percent of students with disabilities graduated with a regular high school diploma.<sup>8</sup>

The many changes to graduation requirements and reporting measurements at the federal and state level make it difficult to compare states. However, state boards can examine their own state's data to determine whether their state's rising graduation rates for students with disabilities have been commensurate with other achievement data.<sup>9</sup> High school diplomas open doors to college and careers, but students must be prepared to succeed as well.

## Examining Within-Group Diversity

Too often, the conversation stays focused on the gap between students with disabilities and those without. But thinking about students with disabilities as a monolithic group ignores the diversity within this subgroup.

When Utah looked at school mobility, dropout, and graduation rates across student disability categories in 2014, researchers found that academic achievement varied greatly by category:

As a group, students with disabilities had graduation rates nearly 20 points lower than the 78 percent graduation rate for general education students. A closer look, however, revealed that students with speech or language impairment graduated at rates nearly on par with the general population, whereas students with autism, emotional disturbance, or intellectual disability had graduation rates below 50 percent, and

students with multiple disabilities had the lowest graduation rate of all, at just 16 percent.<sup>10</sup>

With this type of analysis, states can begin productive discussions about the appropriate policies and practices to address the unique needs of their students. When reviewing achievement data, state boards can request that their state education agencies disaggregate data by disability. Some of the categories may have too few students to be reported publicly, but even data kept at the state level will provide new insights and provoke important conversations.

## Endrew Case

In its unanimous 2017 decision of *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, the U.S. Supreme Court clarified the standard for a free and appropriate public education. It declared that students with disabilities must be provided an “appropriately ambitious” education. Chief Justice John G. Roberts wrote, “A student offered an education program providing ‘merely more than de minimis’ progress from year to year can hardly be said to have been offered an education at all.” Before *Endrew*, six circuit courts had used a “merely more than de minimis” standard to determine if students’ plans were adequate to confer educational benefit. The *Endrew* ruling changed the game.<sup>11</sup>

The ruling came amid a much-changed context. In contrast with the early years of special education, 95 percent of students with disabilities in 2018 were educated in regular classrooms for at least some portion of the school day.<sup>12</sup> Even more striking is that the majority (64 percent) were educated inside the regular class for 80 percent or more of the day. As with most national averages, these numbers vary greatly by state, ranging from 44 to 83 percent, and by disability. For example, 88 percent of students with speech and language impairments spent 80 percent or more of their day in general education, whereas only 17 percent of students with an intellectual disability did.

As decades of research have demonstrated, educating students with disabilities in general education, inclusive environments—with the services and support that they need—improves their outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Schools need flexibility to design new strategies that meet the unique needs of their learners. Times have changed,



and schools need the space to innovate and create more inclusive learning environments. States should evaluate the flexibility provided to schools during COVID and determine which waivers can be made permanent.

## Prioritizing Postsecondary

The goals and dreams of students with disabilities are the same as those for all students, and always have been. However, there is a disconnect. Students with disabilities fall behind in planning and taking the steps necessary to achieve their postsecondary goals. A Mathematica study found that “youth in special education are almost half as likely as their peers to report taking college entrance and placement tests (42 versus 70 percent).”<sup>14</sup> This gap is even more concerning given that federal law requires that students’ individualized education plans facilitate attainment of postsecondary goals such as further education and employment. This transition planning must involve the students as much as possible and reflect their preferences, interests, and strengths.

Federal law requires that every state report the results of compliance audits on these plans with a mandatory goal of 100 percent. Furthermore, states must report actual postschool outcomes of students with disabilities.<sup>15</sup> Both indicators are to be reported at the local level as well. Yet postschool outcomes are still poor, underscoring that legal compliance alone is insufficient.

Just as postsecondary education improves employment outcomes for the general population, it improves prospects for students with disabilities. To ensure that K-12 schools are preparing all students for a bright future, state boards should monitor postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. In conversations on college and career readiness, boards should ascertain whether their state has a transition policy or is relying solely on the enforcement of federal law on reporting outcomes.

There is much progress to celebrate over the past 50 years, but the United States and its schools have far to go before equity is a reality for all students. What began as an exercise in civil rights compliance decades ago must transform into a genuine commitment to prepare students of all abilities for college and careers. Deliberate, strategic leadership from state education leaders can ensure that the needs of

students with disabilities are taken into account on every issue and in every policy decision. ■

<sup>1</sup>Public Interest Law Center, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, <https://www.pubintlaw.org/cases-and-projects/pennsylvania-association-for-retarded-citizens-parc-v-commonwealth-of-pennsylvania-case-documents/>.

<sup>2</sup>Martha L. Thurlow, Rachel F. Quenemoen, and Sheryl S. Lazarus, “Meeting the Needs of Special Education Students: Recommendations for the Race to the Top Consortia and States” (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, N.d.), [https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/Martha\\_Thurlow-Meeting\\_the\\_Needs\\_of\\_Special\\_Education\\_Students.pdf](https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/Martha_Thurlow-Meeting_the_Needs_of_Special_Education_Students.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>Sarah Butrymowicz and Jackie Mader, “Low Academic Expectations and Poor Support for Special Education Students Are ‘Hurting Their Future,’” *Hechinger Report*, November 11, 2017.

<sup>4</sup>Kalman R. Hettelman, “A Supreme Disappointment for Students with Disabilities,” op-ed, *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 2017.

<sup>5</sup>Allison Gilmour, Douglas Fuchs, and Joseph H. Wehby, “Are Students with Disabilities Accessing the Curriculum? A Meta-Analysis of the Reading Achievement Gap between Students with and without Disabilities,” *Exceptional Children* 85, no. 3 (April 2019): 329–46.

<sup>6</sup>Matthew Ladner, “The NAEP Sounded Red Alert for Students with Disabilities before COVID-19,” blog, *EducationNext*, June 18, 2021.

<sup>7</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, Public High School Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, table 1, [https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR\\_RE\\_and\\_characteristics\\_2018-19.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2018-19.asp).

<sup>8</sup>Congressional Research Service, “Students with Disabilities Graduating from High School and Entering Postsecondary Education: In Brief,” July 10, 2017, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R44887.html#\\_Toc487452711](https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R44887.html#_Toc487452711)

<sup>9</sup>For an excellent blog post examining possible explanations for the divergence of graduation rates and academic achievement, see “The Special Education Graduation Conundrum” (Little Rock, AR: The Reform Alliance, February 6, 2018), <https://thereformalliance.org/2018/02/06/the-special-education-graduation-conundrum/>.

<sup>10</sup>Vanessa X. Barrat et al., “School Mobility, Dropout, and Graduation Rates across Student Disability Categories in Utah,” REL 2015–055 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>U.S. Department of Education, “Questions and Answers (Q&A) on U.S. Supreme Court Case Decision *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1*,” December 7, 2017, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/qa-andrewcase-12-07-2017.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, *42nd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2020* (Washington, DC, 2021), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/42nd-arc-for-idea.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* for state breakdowns. The SWIFT Center lists key research here: <https://iod.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/InclusiveEd/researchsupport-final.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup>Stephen Lipscomb et al., *Preparing for Life after High School: The Characteristics and Experiences of Youth in Special Education. Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012, Volume 1: Comparisons with Other Youth* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, March 2017).

<sup>15</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, “Disability Rates and Employment Status by Education Attainment,” in *The Condition of Employment 2017*, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_tad.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_tad.pdf).

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