Supporting Students with Disabilities throughout the Year

The data point up a need for services that extend beyond the school year.

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Elizabeth's Story

In the months leading into my first summer break as a special education teacher, my feelings were bittersweet. My excitement for recharging my batteries on vacation was quickly overshadowed by concerns about the reality for my students. Some could qualify for continuing to receive support services during the summer months; others could not. Some would qualify but not be able to attend due to family circumstances.

Most of my students needed services that were unavailable to them during the summer months, such as speech-language pathologists, behavior specialists, or occupational therapists. Despite all the hard work my students put into their studies during the school year, the summer represented eight weeks without support. And while for some students, reading for 20 minutes a day or doing 10 to 15 minutes of math on an app can help mitigate academic loss, I struggled to come up with solutions that supported all my students. To maintain their academic progress, most required the more in-depth, one-on-one teaching or services they received during the school year. I quickly learned that summer could not give me a sense of freedom or relaxation but rather provoked anxiety about my students.

Qualifying for Programs and Services

Nationwide, over 430,000 thousand teachers like Elizabeth serve seven million students with disabilities.[1] The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for eligible students with a disability in one or more of 13 categories,[2] and to the greatest extent possible, for inclusion, so that students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers without disabilities. Under IDEA, schools are required, at no cost to families, to identify and evaluate students with disabilities who may need special education and related services to support their learning. Schools are also required to provide "appropriately ambitious" instruction and show that students are making progress.[3]

To demonstrate students are growing academically, schools assess students periodically during the school year and report their progress. For example, if students are receiving FAPE, test scores should improve between the fall and spring of a school year. In contrast, flat within-year test score trajectories suggest students' educational needs are not being met.

In addition to the school year, summer learning opportunities are critical to students with disabilities. Students who qualify for services under IDEA sometimes are also eligible for extended school year (ESY) programming. Such programs may include academic content as well as services like speech-language or behavioral therapy and are provided when school is out of session. ESY eligibility is determined on an individual basis. Although local education agencies vary in their procedure for determining program eligibility, ESY is often deemed necessary when interruptions in learning during the summer months hinder the progress a student made during the school year.[4] How this is defined depends on state and district policies. In some states and districts, students become eligible for ESY if in the most recent academic year it took them longer than expected to relearn what they lost during the previous summer.[5]

Here's a simple example to illustrate: In fall 2018, Sammy's teacher noticed that Sammy had lost considerable math skills over the summer. While all students can be expected to lose some learning during the long summer break, it is taking

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Sammy much longer than expected (relative to peers) to relearn the math concepts during the fall. Concerned that this loss will impact Sammy's long-term growth and that the upcoming summer might also be a challenging time, the teacher recommends that Sammy receive ESY in summer 2019.

Essentially, the decision for ESY eligibility is based on whether the learning the student gains over the school year is significantly jeopardized if they do not get services over the summer or any extended period without services.[6] Thus measuring summer learning (or summer learning loss) for students with disabilities is important for determining if ESY is offered to them.

Measuring Academic Achievement and Progress

Given the goal of ensuring that all children receive an equitable education and that policy maintains high expectations for them, measurement of learning and progress is an important component of IDEA. However, understanding of achievement and growth for students with disabilities is limited because data are rare. Historically, states have had different policies and practices for assessing students with disabilities and reporting their achievement scores. Many states did not report test scores separately for students with disabilities. There is no state or federal longitudinal database that tracks their academic progress over time.

Research based on student achievement at a given point in time has tended to show troubling discrepancies of one standard deviation or more between the academic outcomes for students with and without disabilities.[7] These studies might seem to suggest that students with disabilities are not making as much academic progress as their peers. But there is an important caveat. These studies share a key limitation: Since the assessment data they used were collected at most once a year, progress could only be tracked across but not within school years.

Take the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example. Test scores for a representative sample of students show that in fourth grade students with disabilities score about one standard deviation lower than students without disabilities in reading and math. This information makes clear that schools across the country need to do a lot more and a lot better to support students with disabilities. What is unclear is when and how to do that—the most important part. Key information that would help these students is missing from the data. Scores on a test given once in fourth grade will not reveal where students were academically when they started school or how much progress they made from fall to spring, from year to year.

Data showing how much students with disabilities grow within each year are critical to education policy and practice but are missing at the local, state, and national levels. Studies have shown that students in general education typically grow in math and reading during months in school, but growth tends to slow down, stop, or turn into loss during summers when school is not in session.[8] We have reason to believe that students with disabilities may be even more susceptible to learning loss during out-of-school time since some services essential to their learning are taken away. But there has previously been no similar within-year growth research focused on students with disabilities.

New Evidence and Implications

We therefore recently looked at this important topic using a unique dataset that followed a cohort of students from kindergarten to grade 4, testing each student in math and reading up to three times a year.[9] In this study, students in special education services scored about 0.5 standard deviations below their peers in the fall of kindergarten, and by the end of grade 4, the disparity expanded to one standard deviation. What is especially interesting, and perhaps surprising, is that this expansion of disparities was mainly shaped by the kindergarten year and by summers between school years (table 1).

During kindergarten, students in special education grew less than their peers, but in each subsequent grade, students in special education grew at least as much as, and sometimes more than, their peers. However, students in special education lost more learning during several summers, which led to widening disparities despite their promising school-year growth.

These findings are important for a few reasons. First and foremost, the growth rates affirmed the academic potential of students with disabilities. Second, we learned that the critical kindergarten year should be better leveraged to help students with disabilities make more progress in reading and math. Earlier assessment

Table 1. Monthly Growth Rates for Students in Special Education Compared with Peers

PERIOD	MATH	READING
Kindergarten	Grew Less	Grew Less
Summer after K	Lost More	Lost More
During Grade 1	Grew More	No Difference
Summer after Grade 1	Lost More	Lost More
During Grade 2	No Difference	No Difference
Summer after Grade 2	No Difference	No Difference
During Grade 3	No Difference	No Difference
Summer after Grade 3	Lost More	Lost More
During Grade 4	No Difference	Grew More

Source: Growth rate estimates from Angela Johnson and Elizabeth Barker, "Understanding Differential Growth during School Years and Summers for Students in Special Education," EdWorkingPaper 21-409 (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute at Brown University, 2021). Differences that were not statistically significant are listed as "No Difference" regardless of their sign or magnitude.

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and identification could also help ensure that students receive the support they need as soon as they enter school. Third, summer learning carries important implications for ESY policies. Based on prior research, ESY services appear to be a proactive way for schools to minimize learning loss and a possible effective way to use public funds.[10] Disaggregated data, like spring-to-fall changes in test scores, could be used to identify student needs and determine eligibility for ESY. All of these implications point to the critical role of data-informed decision making.

The Need for Data and Collaboration

In order to make the important decisions to support students, what policymakers and school leaders need are longitudinal data, which show progress over time (or a lack thereof). Test scores that can be compared from the fall and spring of each school year, from kindergarten to eighth grade, would be one example of a measure useful for this purpose. Fall-to-spring score changes show how much students learn while they are in school; spring-to-fall score changes show how much students learn (or lose) during the summer break.

In addition to math and reading test scores, a variety of social-emotional and behavioral measures could be useful in monitoring student progress. In-class assignments, student behavioral observations, and family input can all provide important information on student progress. Collaboration between teachers and other specialists can be especially important in supporting students with intersections of needs, such as English learners with disabilities (see article, page 26) and students with multiple disabilities.

Partnerships among research, practice, and policy are also key to improving students' outcomes and experiences. Through the sharing of data, experience, and expertise, researchers, educators, and policymakers can work together to generate actionable findings that are relevant to practice and improve programs and services in an iterative process.

Data-based decision making is especially important in the current times. During the pandemic, most students experienced severe disruptions in instruction and services. We anticipate these disruptions to have especially large impacts on students with disabilities since many of the supports and services they need, like one-on-one instruction, are difficult to deliver or less effective when provided remotely. In the upcoming school years, schools have the monumental responsibility of helping students with disabilities recover unfinished learning and continue to make progress toward their goals. To support this effort, we offer the following research-based recommendations.

Recommendations

Policy. State boards and policymakers should advocate for assessment practices that both monitor and affirm the progress that students with disabilities are making. Teachers and

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schools should regularly assess and monitor students with disabilities throughout the school year, formally or informally. Assessment results should be well documented in each student's file, and teachers and staff should be given maximum support to collaboratively design and implement instructional materials and practices to support individual students.

Students in special education need support over the summer months—or any time there is a significant break in learning. The amount of learning lost during summer should signal state and federal legislators to act. In particular, a review of IDEA's ESY policy should be a priority, as it is integral to FAPE. In addition, improving the consistency of definitions across states and districts will help make policies more inclusive. Consistency lets teachers, parents, and students rely on the same definition for eligibility and gives special education teachers the opportunity to learn and implement appropriate measures for all students in their case load. As it stands now, if a student or teacher moves to a new district or state, the inconsistency of the policy can cause confusion and delay crucial services.

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In addition, states should provide resources and guidance to teachers and families of students with disabilities to support their learning and development both in and outside of school. Keeping students at the center of learning without punishment or blame is essential. Teachers must be equipped with the assessment literacy skills and knowledge of intervention practice to support their teaching and student learning.

Teachers also need to understand the consequences of long breaks within and between school years. Policymakers should take this information into consideration in their laws and regulations to better support students and teachers. Providing opportunities to learn data literacy, analysis, and interventions is one way to address this need.

System of supports. Disparities for students in special education when they enter kindergarten reveal the need to identify student needs and offer support services earlier. Collaboration among general education, specialists (e.g., special education, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists), and families creates a powerhouse of knowledge. A framework based on early collaboration will provide the foundation for greater growth and maintaining achievement outcomes. These frameworks may resemble universal design for learning, a multi-tiered system of supports, response to intervention, or a combination of approaches.

Schools. There are many variables for teachers of students with disabilities to balance and consider. School leaders and administration are an important lifeline for them. This support could include mentoring for first- and second-year teachers, setting aside time and budget for teachers to collaborate, and providing opportunities for extended learning on data, assessment, and strategies. Lastly, leaders need to ensure there is space to put students at the center. Each student is unique, important, and has a story. Teachers need school leaders to support them, so they can in turn support students. ■

[1]DataUSA, "Special Education Teachers," web page, https://datausa.io/profile/soc/special-education-teachers; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Percentage of Children Served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by Age Group and State or Jurisdiction: Selected Years, 1990-91 through 2018-19," table 204.70, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_204.70.asp.

[2]Categories under IDEA include autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic, other health impairments, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment including blindness.

[3]U.S. Department of Education, "Questions and Answers (Q&A) on *U. S. Supreme Court Case Decision Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1*," (Washington, DC: Author, December 7, 2017).

[4]Andrew Tagenhorst, John W. Norlin, and Susan Gorn, *What Do I Do When…The Answer Book on Special Education Law*, 6th ed. (Palm Beach Gardens, FL: LRP Publications, 2014).

[5]In determining ESY eligibility, some districts also consider the student's current academic year learning rate, behavioral or physical barriers to learning, the student's ability to interact with peers without disabilities, the ability of the student's family to provide education structure in the home, and the availability of alternative resources.

[6]Tatgenhorst, Norlin, and Gorn, *Answer Book on Special Education Law.*

[7]Allison F. 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 (2019): 329–46.

[8]Paul T. von Hippel and Caitlin Hamrock, "Do Test Score Gaps Grow before, during, or between the School Years? Measurement Artifacts and What We Can Know in Spite of Them," *Sociological Science* 6 (2019): 43–80, doi: 10.15195/v6.a3.

[9]Angela Johnson and Elizabeth Barker, "Understanding Differential Growth during School Years and Summers for Students in Special Education," EdWorkingPaper 21-409 (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute at Brown University, 2021), https://doi.org/10.26300/0d43-qv21.

[10]Lucy Barnard-Brak and Tara Stevens, "Criteria for Determining Eligibility for Extended School Year Services," *The Journal of Special Education* (March 18, 2020), doi:10.1177/0022466920911468.

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