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Educational Environments for Students with Disabilities

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EACH YEAR, THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS (OSEP) COLLECTS DATA from States on the number of students with disabilities served in

different educational environments. These data help OSEP monitor compliance with the least restrictive environment (LRE) clause of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and inform advocates, parents, and researchers of the extent to which students with disabilities are educated with their nondisabled peers. In 1998-99, OSEP began collecting placement data by race/ethnicity. The disproportionate placement of racial and ethnic minorities in more restrictive environments has been documented in the special education literature for over 10 years (Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990). More recently, research has confirmed that minority special education students are more likely to be educated in restrictive environments (Parrish, as cited in "Tracking Urged to Stem Racial Gap," 2001). This module presents further evidence of differences in educational environments between racial and ethnic groups.

In 1998-99, States began using new categories to collect data on the environments in which children aged 3 through 5 with disabilities received services. Concerns were raised over the applicability of the old categories to a younger population. After an analysis of State reporting practices and definitions, eight new preschool environment categories were established: early childhood setting, early childhood special education setting, home, part-time early childhood/part-time early childhood special education settings, residential facility, separate school, itinerant services outside the home (optional), and reverse mainstream setting (optional). In addition, States were required to report the location where children receive special education services, not educational services in general. For example, a child who spent five days a week in a regular education kindergarten and received one hour of special education per week in a separate school would previously have been reported as served outside the regular class for less than 21 percent of the school day. Under the new reporting categories, that child would be reported only as served in a separate school.

This module summarizes the educational environment data submitted by the States for 1998-99. It describes the educational environments in which students with disabilities were served and changes over time in the percentage of students served in various environments. It also explores factors such as age, race, and disability category that are related to the educational environments in which students receive services (Note 1).

Trends in the Data

The percentage of students aged 6 through 21 with disabilities served in both regular schools and in regular education classes within those schools has continually increased. During the 1984-85 school year, only one-quarter of students with disabilities were served outside the regular class less than 21 percent of the school day. By 1998-99, that percentage had increased to almost half (47.4 percent). (See Table 1).

Virtually all students (96 percent) are now served in regular school buildings. During the 1998-99 school year, 2.9 percent of students with disabilities were educated in public and private separate day schools; 0.7 percent were educated in public and private residential facilities; and 0.5 percent were educated in home/hospital environments.

Factors Associated with Educational Environments

Educational environments for students with disabilities vary by age, race, and disability category. This section summarizes data on educational environments, taking into account these various factors.

Note 1. Data on educational environments are presented in Tables AB1 through AB10 of the *Twenty-Third Annual Report to Congress*.

Table 1. Percentage of Students Age 6 Through 21 with Disabilities Educated Outside the Regular Class Less Than 21 Percent of the School Day and the Percentage Served in Regular School Buildings: 1984 to 1998

<u>School Year</u>	<u>Outside the Regular Class <21% of the Day</u>	<u>Regular School Buildings</u>
1984-85	24.6	93.0
1985-86	25.5	93.1
1986-87	26.4	93.9
1987-88	28.9	93.6
1988-89	30.5	93.8
1989-90	31.5	93.9
1990-91	32.8	94.4
1991-92	34.9	94.7
1992-93	39.8	94.9
1993-94	43.4	95.6
1994-95	44.5	95.7
1995-96	45.3	95.6
1996-97	45.8	95.7
1997-98	46.4	95.9
1998-99	47.4	95.9

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS)

In the original report, this was Table III-1.

Age

During the 1998-99 school year, 80.8 percent of students aged 6 through 21, 72.3 percent of students aged 12 through 17, and 58.8 percent of students aged 18 through 21 were served outside the regular classroom for 60 percent or less of the school day. Over the past eight years, progress in serving students in less restrictive settings has continued across all age groups. From 1989-90 to 1998-99, the percentage of students who received special education and related services outside the regular class for less than 21 percent of the school day rose 15.2 percent for students aged 6 through 11 (from 42.0 percent to 57.2 percent), 18.1 percent for students aged 12 through 17 (from 20.3 percent to 38.4 percent), and 14.9 percent for students aged 18 through 21 (from 16.2 percent to 31.1 percent).

Race/Ethnicity

During the 1998-99 school year, States reported data on educational environments by race/ethnicity for the first time. Of the students aged 6 through 21 served outside the regular classroom for less than 21 percent of the school day, 70.1 percent were white; 14.3 percent were black; 12.4 percent were Hispanic; 1.8 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander; and 1.3 percent were American Indian or Alaska Native. These percentages differ somewhat from the racial/ethnic breakdown for the total population of students with disabilities: 63 percent of the total number of students served during the 1998-99 school year were white; 19.5 percent were black; 14.3 percent were Hispanic; 1.8 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander; and 1.3 percent were American Indian or Alaska Native.

The racial/ethnic distribution of students served in correctional facilities represents an even further departure from the total population percentages. Of the students served in correctional facilities, 38.9 percent were white, 40.6 percent were black, 17.1 percent were Hispanic, 1.6 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.7 percent were American Indian or Alaska Native.

The data on educational environments by race/ethnicity can also be examined by looking at the total number of students in each racial/ethnic group served in a given environment. (See Table 2.) Approximately 80.9 percent of white students, 70.3 percent of Hispanic students, 63.0 percent of black students, 73.6 percent of Asian or Pacific Islander students, and 82.6 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native students were served outside the regular class for 60 percent or less of the school day.

Table 2. Percentage of Students Age 6 Through 21 with Disabilities Served in Different Educational Environments, by Race/Ethnicity: 1998-99

	<u>Amer Indian/ Alaska Native</u>	<u>Asian/ Pacific Isl</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>White</u>
Served outside the regular class					
<21% of day	48.2	47.0	34.8	41.2	52.5
21% to 60% of day	34.4	26.6	28.2	29.1	28.4
>60% of day	14.6	22.2	31.5	26.1	15.3

Separate school	1.5	3.1	4.2	2.6	2.7
Residential facility	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.5	0.6
Home/hospital	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS)

In the original report, this was Table III-2.

Disability

Settings continued to vary across disability categories during the 1998-99 school year. Table 3 shows the percentage of students with high-incidence disabilities (those with a child count over 100,000) served in various settings within regular schools.

Table 3. Percentage of Children Age 6 Through 21 with High-Incidence Disabilities Served in Regular School Buildings During the 1998-99 School Year

<u>Disability and Setting</u>	<u>Percent</u>
All disabilities	
<21% of day outside regular class	47.4
21% to 60% of day	28.4
>60% of day	20.1
Specific learning disabilities	
<21% of day outside regular class	45.1
21% to 60% of day	38.4
>60% of day	15.5
Speech or language impairments	
<21% of day outside regular class	88.5
21% to 60% of day	6.6
>60% of day	4.5
Emotional disturbance	
<21% of day outside regular class	25.5
21% to 60% of day	23.0
>60% of day	33.2
Mental retardation	
<21% of day outside regular class	13.8
21% to 60% of day	29.3
>60% of day	51.1

Multiple disabilities	
<21% of day outside regular class	10.5
21% to 60% of day	16.6
>60% of day	44.8

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS)

In the original report, this was Figure III-1.

Students with speech or language impairments and specific learning disabilities continued to be predominantly served in the regular classroom for most of the school day. Students with emotional disturbance, mental retardation, and multiple disabilities were more likely to receive services outside the regular classroom for more than 60 percent of the school day.

Summary

Overall, progress continues to be made in educating students with disabilities in less restrictive environments. However, differences in placement between racial and ethnic groups may need further examination to identify potential explanations for variations in placement.

References

- Tracking urged to stem racial gap in special ed. (2001, March). *Special Education Report*, 27, 2-3.
- Valdes, K. A., Williamson, C. L., & Wagner, M. M. (1990). *The National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students, Statistical almanac. Volume I: Overview*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

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