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Graduation Disparities Loom Large for Students With Special Needs

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The wide graduation-rate gaps in many states between students with disabilities and those in regular education raise the stakes for next year's first-ever federal evaluation of how well states are serving their special education students. [Back to Story](#)

The most recent U.S. Department of Education data, for 2011-12, shows a four-year graduation-rate gap that ranges from a high of 43 percentage points in Mississippi to a low of 3 percentage points in Montana.

By 2015, the Education Department aims to take a closer look at graduation-rate disparities when it evaluates states on their special education performance. And that eventually could affect what states can do with their federal aid for special education.

"We know there are students with disabilities who can be achieving much more," said Melody Musgrove, the director of the federal office of special education programs.

Nationally, the largest proportion of students with disabilities, about 41 percent, is classified as having "specific learning disabilities," which would include dyslexia or auditory processing disorders. The second-largest group, at 18.5 percent, has speech and language impairments. Most students in these categories are expected, with appropriate supports, to achieve at grade-level standards.

The graduation gaps reported for the 2011-12 school year are based on what's known as the "4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate," which is a standard metric the Education Department now requires states to calculate.

The rate divides the number of diploma-earners by the number of students who started 9th grade four years earlier. The cohort is adjusted by adding any students who transfer in over the four-year time span, and subtracting any students who subsequently transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die. The 2011-12 data represent the second year the Education Department has collected this information.

Change in Works

The office of special education programs, which is charged with evaluating states on their adherence to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, plans by next year to take into account graduation rates, dropout rates, and other so-called "performance" indicators as it shifts from a focus on compliance to what it calls **"results-driven accountability."**

States that fall short of meeting federal requirements in this area—a standard still under development—would risk having some of their federal funds reallocated to problem areas, or even withheld. The office of special education programs, or OSEP, is also shifting to providing targeted assistance based on a state's specific needs, Ms. Musgrove said.

Since the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004, states have been required to collect a variety of special education indicators and submit that data to the Education Department. But instead of being measured on indicators related to student results, they were evaluated on factors such as how quickly they scheduled individualized education program meetings, or whether high school-aged students had postsecondary goals written into their IEPs. By next year, states will be asked to create "systemic improvement plans" that comprehensively address how they will improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Looking more closely at the performance of students with disabilities will be a different way of measuring success, Ms. Musgrove said. "What OSEP focuses on is what the states will focus on. That's what gets better," she said.

Though the four-year adjusted cohort rate offers a standard method of calculating who is earning a diploma, the numbers still hide a great deal of variability.

For example, states can determine what academic standards must be met for a regular diploma for a student with a disability, though certificates of completion do not count.



Lagging Behind

In many states, there are large gaps between students with disabilities and those in regular education on the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for the class of 2011-12. By 2015, the U.S. Department of Education will use these statistics, among others, to evaluate how well states are teaching special education students.

Students With Disabilities: 2011-12	Gap (in percentage points)	Enlarge ⊕
32%	43	
24	39	
33	39	

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

It is also at a state's discretion to determine just who is a student with a disability for the purposes of the cohort.

Factors Vary

Candace Cortiella, the author of a May 2013 paper titled "[Diplomas at Risk](#)," found during her research into the same graduation-rate statistics that states can define "student with a disability" as students who were IDEA-eligible at the time of graduation, or students who received special education at any time in their high school career, or some other way. She said she hopes that a new focus on student performance will move the needle on a persistent problem.

"This is what we get when we don't have any accountability for outcomes and when we continue to just focus on if you just get your IEPs done," she said. "I hold out great hope for the shift in emphasis, and we'll see."

State special education directors offered different explanations for what was behind their graduation gaps, whether they were wide or narrow.

Patrice Guilfoyle, the director of communications for the Mississippi Department of Education, said that the state's new accountability system in its No Child Left Behind Act waiver application will help it focus more on graduation rates for students with disabilities.

"That's one of those priority issues for our new state superintendent—making sure we can close those gaps," said Ms. Guilfoyle, referring to Carey M. Wright, who was appointed to the position in September.

Georgia's graduation-rate gap, like that of many states in the South, was on the higher side compared with other states in the nation. The 2011-12 data show that 35 percent of students with disabilities graduated in four years, compared with 70 percent of all students.

Deborah Gay, the director of special education for Georgia, said the state made policy changes last year that may help some students with disabilities earn their diplomas in four years. Students with documented math disabilities, for example, can take an alternate math sequence and earn a standard diploma. That route may not offer the required classes for college entry, so that choice has to be made carefully, she said.

However, that change may open the doors to diplomas for more students, she believes. "The math core sequences are one of the major stumbling blocks for kids," she said.

Georgia is also digging deeper into its achievement gaps to find out which students are struggling the most. The U.S. Department of Education does not require such information to be reported, but Georgia knows that it has particular challenges related to reading and math for students who have mild intellectual disabilities, she said.

"What we're trying to do is get schools to ... really do targeted special assistance," Ms. Gay said.

Fresh Focus

Marva Cleven, the special education director for Nevada, said the federal Education Department's new focus on performance will "give us an opportunity to look at what we're doing with a different lens." The states' graduation rate for all students in 2011-12 was 63 percent; its four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities was 24 percent.

"I definitely think it's going to be positive," she said. "I think we have focused way too much on compliance in the past, and outcomes are really important. Our students have to have our good outcomes in order to be successful."

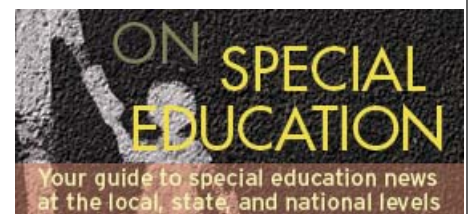
On the other end of the spectrum, Kansas was one of just a few states that had an achievement gap lower than 10 percentage points. Eighty-five percent of all students graduated in 2011-12 with a diploma after four years, compared with 77 percent for students with disabilities.

Colleen Riley, the special education director for Kansas, said one factor was a "robust" co-teaching program in the state that aims to keep students with disabilities in regular classrooms with appropriate supports. Instead of bringing general education and special education teachers together for one-time training, they're offered continuous coaching, she said. The quality of instruction "contributes to keeping kids in school and keeping them on track for graduation."

Alabama had a wide achievement gap—in 2011-12, 75 percent of all students graduated in four years, compared with 54 percent of students with disabilities. But its gap is notable for how quickly it has closed; in 2010-11, the first year this graduation rate was collected, 72 percent of all students graduated with a standard diploma in four years, compared with 30 percent of students with disabilities. The achievement gap shrank from 42 percentage points to 21 percentage points over that two-year period.

Michael Sibley, the director of communications for the Alabama Department of Education, did not point to any one factor that

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explains the drop. "It could be a 'rising tides floats all boats' scenario," he said. The state also has created a cadre of about 350 academic coaches in high schools around the state to reach out to students who are at risk of dropping out.

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