

Caught in the Crisis: Students with Disabilities in U.S. High Schools

Nationally, 6.6 million students, or 13 percent of all public school students, are identified as having disabilities and therefore receive special education services.¹ About one-third of these students are between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one.² Research indicates that the majority of high school-age students with disabilities and their parents are satisfied with the services they receive.³ But data shows that these students are not receiving the kind of equitable education that leads to a regular high school diploma.

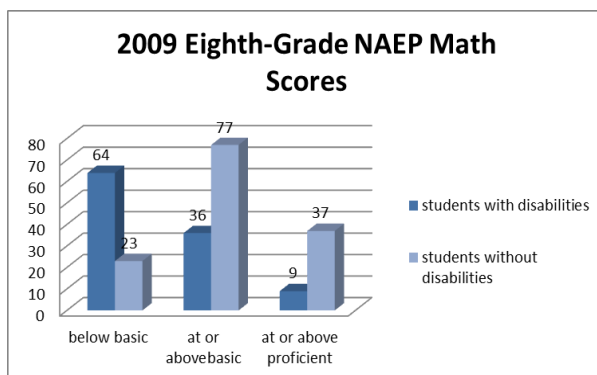
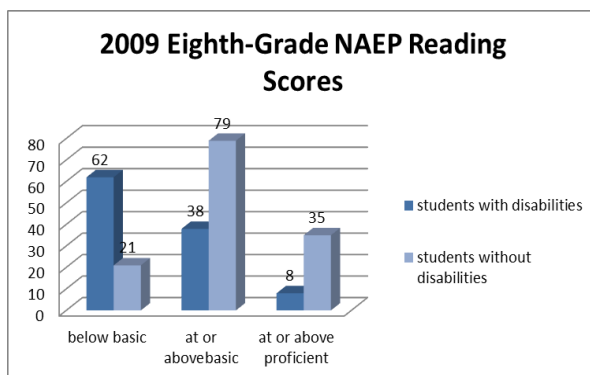
Students with disabilities are more likely than other groups to report discrimination; they are consistently involved in more than half of the complaints investigated by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.⁴ In addition, African American, American Indian, and Alaska Native students are largely overrepresented in special education, while Latino, Asian, and Pacific Islander American students are underrepresented, which suggests that many students in these groups may not be receiving an education appropriate to their individual needs.⁵

Caught in the Crisis

Nationally, millions of students in grades 7–12 are at risk of dropping out of high school because of low literacy skills, poor attendance, and class failure. Unfortunately, many of these students come from groups that are underserved and underrepresented: students of color, high-mobility students (including foster, migrant, and homeless students), English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students.

These students are not at risk of dropping out as a *result* of their racial, ethnic, housing, English proficiency, disability, or economic status; however, these characteristics drive the moral imperative that the nation has a duty to ensure that they receive a high-quality education. The absence of a college- and career-ready education for these students is a civil rights and social justice issue that the federal government cannot ignore. Failing to do so will continue a cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement that the education system itself is intended to disrupt.

Academic Achievements of Students with Disabilities



- In 2009, eighth-grade students with disabilities who took the reading and math National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were two times more likely to score “below basic” in both content areas.⁷ (See charts above.)
- A National Center for Education Statistics study during the 2008–09 academic year estimated that **61 percent of U.S. students with disabilities graduated with a regular diploma, 15 percent exited with a certificate of attendance, and 22 percent dropped out.**⁸ (See table at right.)
- Overall, students with disabilities are less than half as likely as their peers without disabilities to have attended college in the two years after high school, but the college-going rate varies greatly by type of disability.⁹

Category	Graduated with Diploma	Received a Certificate of Attendance	Reached Maximum Age	Dropped Out
Specific Learning Disability	66%	12%	1%	21%
Mental Retardation	39%	36%	5%	20%
Emotional Disturbance	47%	10%	1%	41%
Speech or Language Impairment	68%	12%	0%	19%
Multiple Disabilities	48%	26%	8%	15%
Other Health Impairment	67%	11%	1%	20%
Hearing Impairment	72%	16%	2%	11%
Orthopedic Impairment	61%	19%	4%	14%
Visual Impairment	75%	13%	2%	10%
Autism	64%	24%	5%	6%
Deafness / Blindness	64%	10%	13%	4%
Traumatic Brain Injury	68%	15%	3%	13%
Average	61%	15%	1%	22%

Students of Color with Disabilities

- In 2008, roughly 11 percent of African American and 13 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students aged six through twenty-one were identified as having disabilities, compared to 9 percent of Hispanic, 5 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander, and 8 percent of white students.¹⁰
- African American students are nearly twice as likely as white students to be identified as “mentally retarded.”¹¹
- American Indian and African American students with disabilities are, respectively, two and four times more at risk of being suspended for ten or more days than white students with disabilities.¹²
- As a whole, Asian American students are underrepresented in the special education population, but non-English-speaking students, particularly those of Southeast Asian background, are often erroneously placed in special education.¹³
- Latino and African American students identified as needing special education are twice as likely as white students to be removed from a general education setting and placed in a restrictive educational environment.¹⁴



Education Policy Issues: High School Students with Disabilities

Key policy areas that address the issue of quality education for high school students with disabilities include

- building organizational capacity to develop and implement research-based instruction and intervention systems that can prevent academic failure and reduce the number of students identified as needing special education services;
- using on-track-to-graduation measures for students with disabilities as part of early-warning systems that can assist in identifying when these students are off track to earning a diploma and at risk of dropping out;
- structuring transition plans to include attention to nonacademic behaviors, comprehensive goal setting, and wraparound services that build on the aspirations of students with disabilities; and
- expanding access to the general curriculum and course work that prepares students for postsecondary education options by increasing the rigor of content-area learning and peer interaction.

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Endnotes

¹ S. Aud et al., *The Condition of Education 2010* (NCES 2010-028) (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

² U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, "Part B Child Count 2009," <https://www.ideadata.org/csvdata%5Cbchildcount2009.csv> (accessed April 28, 2011).

³ P. Levine, C. Marder, and M. Wagner, *Services and Supports for Secondary School Students with Disabilities: A Special Topic Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2)* (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2004).

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, *Annual Report to Congress of the Office for Civil Rights: Fiscal Year 2007–08* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009).

⁵ Alliance for Excellent Education analysis of IDEAdata.org, "Table 1-20: Percentage of Population (Ages 6–21) Served, by Race/Ethnicity and State: Fall 2008," http://www.ideadata.org/arc_toc10.asp#partbCC (accessed October 25, 2010).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, "National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009 Mathematics and Reading Assessments," <http://nationsreportcard.gov/> (accessed September 17, 2010).

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics, "Elementary/Secondary Persistence and Progress," <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2008/section3/table.asp?tableID=898> (accessed September 17, 2010).

⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, "After High School: A First Look at the Post School Experiences of Youth with Disabilities," http://www.nlts2.org/reports/2005_04/nlts2_report_2005_04_complete.pdf (accessed October 21, 2010).

¹⁰ Alliance for Excellent Education analysis of IDEAdata.org, "Table 1-20"; IDEAdata.org, "Table C-10: Number and Percentage of Estimated Resident Population Ages 6 Through 21, by the Five Race/Ethnicity Categories and State: 2008," <https://www.ideadata.org/PopulationData.asp#2008> (accessed October 25, 2010).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² IDEAdata.org, "Table 5-18b: Asian or Pacific Islander Children and Students Ages 3 Through 21 with Disabilities Served Under IDEA, Part B, Removed or Suspended/Expelled by Total Number of Days Removed and State: 2007–08," https://www.ideadata.org/arc_toc10.asp#partbDis (accessed October 25, 2010).

¹³ K. Um, *A Dream Denied: Educational Experiences of Southeast Asian American Youth* (Washington, DC: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2003).

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, "29th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2007, Vol. 1," <http://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2007/parts-b-c/29th-vol-1.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2011).

