

Special Education Enrollment Rose in 2015-16

2015-16 numbers boosted by students with autism

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January 24, 2017



The number of students ages 6 to 21 enrolled in special education rose in the most recent year for which the federal government has data, driven by increases in the number of students classified as having autism or "other health impairments." It was the fourth year in a row for such an increase.

In fall 2015, about 5.9 million students enrolled in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Bureau of Indian Education Schools received services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. A year ago, enrollment in that age group was approximately 5.8 million. The peak enrollment for special education was 6 million in fall 2004.

The proportion of special education students in the 6-to-21 age range is also going up. In fall 2015, students with disabilities made up about 8.8 percent of the overall population of U.S. residents those ages as calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau. In fall 2014, that proportion was 8.7 percent.

The proportion of students with disabilities in that age group has been as high as 9.1 percent, in fall 2004.

Impact of Identification

These numbers do not mean that there is an actual increase or decrease of young people with disabilities in the United States. Child-count data are very sensitive to state and local policies that encourage, or discourage, special education identification.

For example, Texas is currently under fire after an investigation by the Houston Chronicle showed that districts were interpreting state policy to mean that special education enrollment in districts could not exceed 8.5 percent of the overall student population. The Texas Education Agency denied the allegations, but sent a letter to districts reiterating their legal responsibility to identify and evaluate students who may have disabilities.

Nationwide policy also appears to be affecting identification rates in certain categories. For example, the widespread adoption of multitiered systems of supports and response to intervention may be related to a decrease in the number of students classified as having a specific learning disability. That is the largest category of students covered under the

IDEA, but for the 10-year span between fall 2006 and fall 2015, the percentage of students in that category dropped about 14 percent, to about 2.3 million children. Multitiered systems of support and response to intervention are intended to help schools identify struggling learners and address their needs before the problems become entrenched and require special education.

Tracking Trendline for Students with Disabilities

For the fourth year in a row, special education enrollment rose among students ages 6 to 21, according to the most recent federal data, for the start of the 2015-16 school year. The growth was driven by increases in the number of students in the categories of autism and "other health impairments." The category of specific learning disabilities remains the largest, but has dropped 14 percent over the past 10 years.



Sources: Fall 2006-2013, U.S. Department of Education Annual Reports to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; Fall 2014-15, U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs IDEA Static Tables

Other categories have also fallen over that 10-year span. Students classified with emotional disturbances decreased by 25 percent, to about 345,000. For intellectual disabilities, the decrease has been about 19 percent, to 412,000 children and youth. And for speech and language impairments, the decrease has been about 11 percent, to approximately 1 million students.

Autism identification, on the other hand, has shown a dramatic increase. Over that 10-year span, the number of children identified with the disorder has risen 144 percent, to about 546,000 students. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also noted an increase in the number of children identified as having autism, from 1 in 150 children in 2007 to 1 in 68 children in the most recent prevalence estimates.

"Other health impairments" is a catchall category that could include a number of disabilities, including epilepsy, diabetes, and mental health disorders. Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may also be placed in this category; the IDEA does not have a separate category for ADHD.

This category has increased by 49 percent over 10 years, to about 887,000 children and youths.

The other disability categories—hearing impairments, visual impairments, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, and traumatic brain injury—are a small proportion of students with disabilities and have remained stable.

Regardless of what is driving the increase, school districts will need support from the federal government to educate these students, said Nancy Reder, the deputy executive director for governmental relations for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

"Decreases in appropriations would not meet the real need here," Reder said. Nor would special education vouchers, she believes, "because private schools have so much leeway in whether they accept students with disabilities."

The nominee for U.S. secretary of education in the Trump administration, Betsy DeVos, is a supporter of vouchers and other forms of educational choice.

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Published in Print: January 25, 2017, as **Spec. Ed. Enrollments Rise**