

Specialization or Segregation? Educational Placement and Programming for Students With Autism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students with autism are more likely to be educated in self-contained special education classrooms than their peers with other disabilities. Often, these separate programs are designed specifically for students with autism, providing specialized personnel, resources, and interventions. However, some critics view such programs as contrary to the preference for inclusion expressed by the least restrictive environment provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In this case study, one school district grapples with the dilemma of determining appropriate educational placements for its students with autism. The district's long-established self-contained autism program is being reviewed in light of an increased commitment to the inclusion of students with disabilities. Administrative data, school staff perspectives, and family perspectives reveal a vast range of pros and cons of the autism program with significant implications for how the district will move forward with placement and service decisions for students with autism.

INTRODUCTION

Since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004), the expectation has been for students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible (34 C.F.R. §§ 300.114). This principle, called the least restrictive environment (LRE), emphasizes inclusion while acknowledging that school districts must offer a range of placement options to accommodate individual students' needs (Yell et al., 2020).

Crucially, a student's access to special education services cannot be determined solely based on their disability category or dictated by mere convenience or existing service arrangements (Yell et al., 2020). For instance, a school district is not allowed to implement a policy that requires all students with intellectual disabilities to be educated in a self-contained classroom, nor can they claim they do not provide services in pull-out resource settings. In summary, the LRE must be determined on a case-by-case basis, with a preference for education in general classrooms accompanied by the necessary support services (Yell et al., 2020).

Approximately 65% of students with disabilities are educated in a 'regular' setting, meaning they spend at least 80% of their school day with their peers in general education classrooms. However, placement trends differ depending on the disability category (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Students with speech or language impairments (87.9%), specific learning disabilities (73.5%), visual impairments (68.8%), and other health impairments (68.2%) are most likely to be placed in general education settings. In contrast, students with autism are less likely to spend most of their school day in general education classrooms, with only about 40% of students with autism placed in such settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

As of 2019, 11% of students receiving special education services were eligible under the category of autism, making it the fourth-largest group of students with disabilities in kindergarten through 12th-grade (K-12) schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Autism is a heterogeneous neurodevelopmental disability with core features in the areas of social communication and restricted and repetitive behaviors (Lord et al., 2018). Only about one-third of children diagnosed with autism also have a co-occurring intellectual disability (Maenner, 2020). Individuals with autism range from non-speaking to highly verbal in their communication and may require relatively low, moderate, or extensive levels of support in different domains throughout their lives (Lord et al., 2018).

Between 2000 and 2014, the number of students with autism in U.S. schools increased by over 500%, and the prevalence has continued to rise (Morningstar et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). When comparing students with disabilities, specifically students with autism are more likely to be educated in either

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