

# Special Education

## GLOSSARY

### **Center programs**

*Classes for special education students that are offered at a site other than a general-education school; such programs were created in the 1950s so that local districts could pool their resources to give special help to children with disabilities.*

### **General education**

*Schooling “mainstream,” or non-special education, students.*

### **Individualized educational planning committee (IEPC)**

*A group of educators, specialists, and parents assigned to every special education student that identifies his/her academic needs and specifies the education setting the group believes best will meet the student's needs.*

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

*Federal law enacted in 1974 that lays out special education requirements with which states must comply.*

### **Intermediate school district (ISD)**

*Public institution that provides education services to school districts and students within a certain geographic area, usually a county; an ISD usually provides some centralized special education services for students within its boundaries.*

## BACKGROUND

Special education in Michigan is subject to federal laws that dictate the minimum standards with which states must comply. The major federal law relating to special education is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1974. The IDEA requires that all children with disabilities receive a “free, appropriate education” that meets their individual needs. To this end, each special education student has an “individualized educational planning committee” (IEPC) consisting of educators, specialists, and parents. It is the IEPC that identifies a special education pupil’s academic needs and specifies the best way in which to educate him/her.

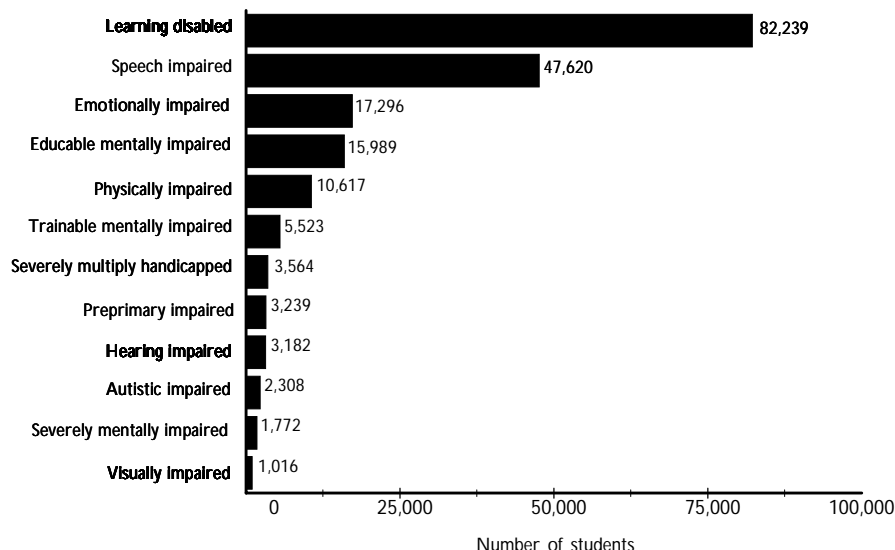
The IDEA requires that special education be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible, to ensure that special education students are not unnecessarily segregated or treated in a way that is not equal to that of general-education pupils. The IDEA also requires that, “. . . removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”

Michigan has its own special education regulations, and they set a higher standard than the federal requirements. For example, certain services (particularly for children who are severely mentally or physically impaired) must be provided for 230 days a year, 50 more than the 180 required by federal law. The state also requires schools to educate students in some disability categories from birth to age 26, compared to birth through age 21 as required by federal law.

Currently, Michigan has about 200,000 special education students, about double the number of a decade ago. The number has grown from 10.9 percent of the student population in FY 1985–86 to 12.0 percent in FY 1995–96. These figures are consistent with the nationwide data: Special education students comprised 10.9 percent of the national student population in FY 1985–86 and 12.4 percent in FY 1995–96.

Disabilities range from severe mental impairment to learning disability; the latter—which in Michigan is by far the largest disability category—refers to several conditions that impair one’s ability to learn, including attention deficit disorder. In 1995, 82,239 (42 percent) of the state’s special education pupils were classified as learning disabled (see the exhibit).

## Michigan Special Education Enrollment, by Disability, 1995



SOURCE: Michigan Department of Education.

### Learning disability

A neurological disorder that interferes with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information; examples are dyslexia (a language-based disability), dyspraxia (difficulty in coordinating body movement), and dysgraphia (a writing disability).

### Least restrictive environment (LRE)

Federal law requires all U.S. schools to educate special education students in the least restrictive environment possible: "To the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities [should be] educated with children who are not disabled."

### Low-incidence disability

A relatively uncommon disability, usually severe.

### Mainstreaming/inclusion

Placing special education students in general-education classrooms for part of all of the school day; the latter generally is referred to as "inclusion."

### Special education

Schooling students with such disabilities as blindness, speech impairment, emotional disability, learning disability, or physical handicap.

Increases in special education enrollment in Michigan and the nation are due in part to a rise in the number of students classified as learning disabled. Nationwide, pupils with learning disability comprised 43.4 percent of all special education students in FY 1985–96 but by FY 1995–96 had grown to 46.3 percent—an increase of more than 700,000 new students in special education classrooms nationwide.

No one is certain why the number of learning disabled students is growing. Some postulate that it reflects societal troubles, such as poor parenting, drug and alcohol use by expectant mothers, inadequate child nutrition, or children watching too much television. Others believe that more students are classified with learning or other disabilities than is warranted; they claim, for example, that some teachers classify students as "learning disabled," when they may simply learn more slowly than others, which demands more of a teacher's time. These critics call for a strict definition of what constitutes a "special education" student or for schools to provide disincentives for teachers to classify students as needing special education.

Although a fraction of Michigan's special education population is schooled at residential placement centers or such setting as hospitals or home, most receive their education in one of the following three settings:

- Special classrooms within regular schools (approximately 67 percent)
- General-education classroom for all or part of the school day (approximately 27 percent); this is referred to as "mainstreaming"
- ISD center programs (5 percent)

In the 1980s, a few years after the IDEA passed, mainstreaming began to emerge as a common practice, but students with the more severe disabilities still were educated in separate classrooms and included in a regular classroom for only a few hours a day. During the last ten years, more parents of special education students are advocating having their children placed full time in general-education classrooms. Even students with severe disabilities more frequently are being educated in regular classrooms for the full school day. Often, teacher's aides are assigned to help the disabled student, or special education teachers work with the student for part of the day in the regular classroom.

### Cost

The United States can boast that its education system is among the most equitable in the world, because it makes a genuine effort to meet all students' needs. The tradeoff for this equity is higher cost per student. Combined with the fact that more children are being classified as needing special education each year, special education costs have been rising and account for a greater percentage of school funding each year. In Michigan (as in most states) there is insufficient good data to measure annual per capita costs, but a rough estimate is \$19,000 for special education pupils compared to \$6,500 for general-education students (FY 1994–95 data; both figures exclude transportation costs).

Special education's higher cost is due to several factors—one is that special education class sizes must be small, to meet state regulations and students' needs. Michigan administrative rules for special education specify, for example, that class size must not exceed 15 pupils for educable mentally impaired students and three for autistic students. Teacher aides are required in many instances as well; the aide-student ratio depends on the pupils' disabilities.

Special education cost was a major factor in the recent *Durant v. State of Michigan* lawsuit. A group of local school districts sued the state, claiming that it had imposed "unfunded mandates" on them for special education and other programs in violation of

the so-called Headlee amendment to the state constitution. Plaintiffs argued that since the state requires special education, these requirements fall under the provisions of that amendment.

The plaintiff districts complained that to meet state requirements they were forced to use their general fund money. After 17 years of litigation, the Michigan Supreme Court agreed with the plaintiffs and ordered the state to pay them \$212 million in retribution. To avoid similar lawsuits from districts that were not parties in *Durant*, the state decided also to pay nonplaintiff districts similar retribution for past special education and other costs. To try to ensure that special education is not underfunded in the future, the state put additional funding for special education into state school aid: \$66.7 million for FY 1997–98 and \$48.2 million in 1998–99.

## DISCUSSION

### Mainstreaming/Inclusion

Opponents to mainstreaming (inclusion) argue that general-education teachers usually have had little if any special education training and, therefore, are unprepared to educate students with such disabilities as Down's syndrome, blindness or near blindness, deafness or near deafness, or severe hearing loss.

Some critics of full-time mainstreaming say that having certain special education pupils in the same classroom as general-education pupils is detrimental to the latter, because teachers must devote too much time to the special needs of the disabled students. They point out that special education children with emotional or other impairment often disrupt the classroom, taking time and attention away from general-student instruction. Finally, inclusion opponents fear that general-education academic standards will be lowered or the learning pace slowed so as to accommodate special-education students' needs.

Inclusion critics maintain that mainstream schooling frequently is not in the best interest of the special education student either. They point out that general classes are a good deal larger than special education classes, and pupils with special needs re-

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ceive less personal attention than in center programs or special education classrooms. They also contend that inclusion means that students with disabilities have less contact with teachers specially suited and trained to teaching them. They point out that some parents who switch their children from center programs to mainstream classrooms end up returning them to the centers because they need the special facilities and services and the specially trained staff.

Mainstreaming advocates believe that inclusion is highly beneficial to special education students. They say that these pupils suffer a stigma when they are segregated in separate classrooms or buildings. They believe that students with disabilities have a need to “fit in” and to socialize with their peer group, and they are deprived of this when they are segregated. Advocates also point to studies that find that special education pupils who are mainstreamed tend to have higher academic achievement, higher self-esteem, more probability of attending college, and even better physical health than those who are not.

Many mainstreaming advocates also believe that inclusion promotes diversity in schools and helps all students to learn to accept others who are different from themselves; they believe that mainstreaming benefits general-education students and society as well as special education students.

To counter the charge that general-education teachers are not adequately trained to educate children with special needs, inclusion advocates point out that teachers sometimes have an aide or special education teacher in the classroom with them. Many dispute the argument that disabled students slow the learning rate for the rest of the class; others say it is irrelevant—inclusion is a civil right.

Despite the controversy over mainstreaming/inclusion, there is little that state policymakers may do to slow, speed, or change the movement toward it. Federal law specifies that schools must follow the IEPC’s decisions, and if an IEPC decides that a child should (or should not) be placed in a general-education classroom, federal law requires that it be done. Several lawsuits have

reinforced federal law, finding that inclusion is a right, not just a privilege, of disabled students.

### Special Education Costs

Although the state is paying its *Durant* settlement and has increased special education funding to avoid future underfunding, the special education cost issue is not yet put to rest. The attorney for the districts that sued the state in the *Durant* case says that the state simply has shifted funds from the state foundation grant into special education. Supporters of another lawsuit say that this results in the schools still having to sacrifice part of their foundation monies to pay for at least some special education costs. At this writing, the districts are deciding whether to bring another lawsuit similar to *Durant*.

Many observers feel that the *Durant* suit and the threat of another will focus attention on special education costs. Some educators, lawmakers, and others say that special education requires an unacceptably high proportion of the state’s school funds, and per student costs should be reduced. They say that laws could be changed to allow larger class sizes for special education students, lower from 26 to 21 years the age to which some special education students must receive schooling, ease some regulations pertaining to training special education teachers, and make certain other changes.

There is some legislative willingness to explore cost-cutting measures, but most observers believe that this is an emotionally charged issue and will not be addressed in an election year. Others say that reducing special education costs also would reduce quality, and lawmakers will be reluctant to take that risk.

See also Early Childhood Development; Headlee Amendment; K–12 Funding.

### FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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National Information Center for Children and Youth  
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