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Friday, January 27, 2012

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## TOP STORY

TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2012

## State special education rates vary widely

By Ben Wieder, Stateline Staff Writer

Rhode Island is the smallest state in the country, but it has every other state beat by one measure: A higher percentage of its students are in special education than anywhere else.

An analysis of U.S. Department of Education data shows that the percentage of students in special education varies widely among states. While Rhode Island tops the country at 18 percent, Texas, at 9 percent, is at the bottom.

The average percentage across all states is 13 percent, and two-thirds of states are above that number, according to the data.

Those differences could have major financial implications for states. Special education funding can account for up to 20 percent of school budgets, according to a [2010 report](#) by the Economic Policy Institute. Overall funding for special education has remained mostly intact during the recession, but looming cuts at the federal level could spell trouble if state and local resources, which already pick up most of the tab for special education, are stretched even further. Already, several states have asked for federal exemptions to allow them to cut special education support.

Schools have fairly high discretion in identifying special education students within the federal guidelines, according to officials at the Department of Education. Changing understandings of the disabilities, themselves, can also have an impact. Autism has been among the fastest growing categories in special education, but [some researchers say](#) that a proposed change to its medical definition would halt that growth.

Incorrectly placing students in special education, particularly minority students, is against the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, first passed in 1975 and reauthorized in 2004. The law also requires that special education students, to the extent possible, be placed in traditional classes with non-special education students. But in practice those requirements can be interpreted differently across the country.

“If you have a struggling reader, there are some schools and or some states that will say immediately, we’re putting that kid in special ed,” says Alice Farrell, director of special education in Vermont. “There are other states, such as ourselves, that say, ‘let’s not do that, let’s diversify our education and handle it in the classroom.’”

In Rhode Island, Elliot Krieger, a spokesman for the state’s department of education, had no explanation for why his state has the highest percentage of students in special education, a distinction it has held several times in the past few years. In Texas, Debbie Ratcliffe, a spokeswoman for the state’s education agency, says that the state’s lowest-in-the nation percentage is in part due to increased efforts to make sure students are accurately identified. “Just because they’re behind in a class, doesn’t mean they necessarily have a disability,” she says.

Stephen Frank, a director at Education Resource Strategies, a private consulting firm, says that putting too many students in special education is among the



Grant Blakenship/Macon Telegraph/MCT via Getty Images  
Colleen Etheridge, right, a special education teacher at Howard Middle School in Macon, Georgia, gives one-on-one attention to one of her students in the midst of a larger mainstream 7th grade social studies class taught by Donna Wells, left.

Special education percentages by state

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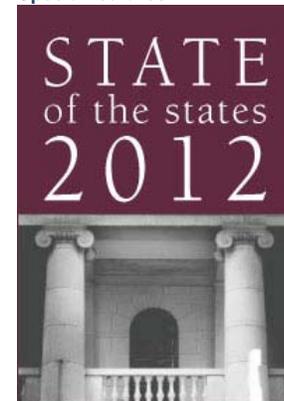
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most inefficient practices in all of education. His company works with school districts to help them make the best use of their resources. He advocates for larger classes, co-taught by both general and special education teachers, or bringing specialists in to traditional classes to help special education students rather than sending those students out of the class for extra help. He also suggests that districts consider encouraging their traditional teachers to get cross-certified in special education, rather than relying only on additional special education teachers.

High identification rates aren't in and of themselves a problem, says Tom Parrish, managing research scientist at the American Institutes for Research. He's studied the education systems in California and Illinois extensively and found that many schools with high identification rates actually have better academic performance among special education students than other schools in the state. He argues that an emphasis on student outcomes needs to be part of the discussion on increased efficiency. "In some places we're getting a much better return than other places," he says.

One strategy many states are using to improve achievement and help prevent over-identification is giving all students baseline assessments at an early age to spot and treat learning disabilities. Students lagging behind are given additional support to get them back on track before they need special education services. For some students, this approach, called "response to intervention," can be faster and more cost-efficient in addressing their difficulties than turning to special education, says Erika Hughes, in California's Special Education Division. "You don't replace your engine before you replace your spark plugs," she says.

#### Funding models

Currently, states get federal special education money based on formulas that consider general population and poverty numbers, rather than the number of special education students. But many states give districts additional money for each special education student or service they provide, which some lawmakers and researchers think encourages over-identification.

The extra weight given to special education students in New Mexico's funding formula, for example, has some lawmakers in the state concerned that some schools might be over-identifying borderline students to bring in additional funding. The [report suggests](#) moving to a system that gives districts funds based on their overall number of students and lets them decide how to spend the money.

That's how California and six other states operate. Elizabeth Dhuey, an assistant professor of economics at the University of Toronto, studied those systems in an [article published last spring](#) in the journal *Education Finance and Policy*. She and co-author Stephen Lipscomb found a 10 percent decline in special education enrollment rates between 1991 and 2003 in states that adopted the census-based system.

A census-based model, however, doesn't automatically mean a small percentage of students in special education. While [four of the seven states](#) using that model have special education percentages below the national average, the other three — Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania — have among the top six rates in the country.

#### Cuts on the horizon

State	Percentage in special education
Rhode Island	18.4%
Massachusetts	18.0%
New York	17.3%
Maine	17.3%
New Jersey	17.1%
Pennsylvania	16.8%
West Virginia	16.2%
Indiana	16.0%
Vermont	15.8%
New Hampshire	15.6%
Nebraska	15.3%
District of Columbia	15.1%
Delaware	15.0%
Kentucky	15.0%
Oklahoma	15.0%
South Dakota	14.9%
Minnesota	14.9%
Ohio	14.7%
Wisconsin	14.6%
Illinois	14.5%
Iowa	14.4%
North Dakota	14.3%
Oregon	14.3%
Kansas	14.2%
Alaska	14.2%
Missouri	14.1%
South Carolina	14.0%
New Mexico	14.0%
Wyoming	13.9%
Florida	13.7%
Michigan	13.7%
Arkansas	13.4%
Virginia	13.2%
Mississippi	13.1%
Maryland	12.7%
Tennessee	12.5%
Washington	12.4%
Connecticut	12.3%
Louisiana	12.3%
Montana	11.9%
North Carolina	11.7%
Utah	11.5%
Hawaii	11.1%
Alabama	11.1%
Arizona	10.9%
California	10.6%
Nevada	10.4%
Georgia	10.3%
Colorado	10.3%
Idaho	9.5%
Texas	8.9%

Source: U.S. Department of Education



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When IDEA passed in 1975, Congress said that it would provide states with an additional 40 percent of the per-pupil cost of education each year to cover the higher cost of special education. It's never hit that mark, and [research suggests](#) that state and local sources pay for as much as 90 percent of the actual cost of special education.

States got increased special education funding in 2009 as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, but despite the extra federal dollars, some states cut spending on special education during the recession. Legally, states can't reduce these funding levels from the previous year, but in the past two years, seven states have [applied for waivers](#) from the Department of Education, and four were approved.

They could soon have more company. If the Budget Control Act of 2011 goes into effect, special education would be among the many federal programs hit with an 8 to 9 percent cut — a reduction of about \$1 billion in special education aid. Taken with [cuts to other federal funds](#), Lindsay Jones, senior director for policy and advocacy at the Council for Exceptional Children, says she doesn't know how states will cope without the special education money. "It is going to be a huge cut," she says. "It will be felt in every school in the nation."

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##### Consultant is wrong

By Brian O'Connor on Jan 26, 2012 12:52:21 PM

This article cites that a consultant is recommending that districts get teachers cross-certified in Special Education as opposed to hiring additional Special Education certified staff. Schools have to be careful when doing this. A teacher either has to be teaching general education or Special Education. They cannot wear two-hats as it were. Funding regulations will not allow it.

Moreover, who in their right mind would do both a general education workload and a Special Education workload at the same time. The teacher would be responsible for not only lesson planning, grading, and all the other tasks involved in running a general ed class, that person would also be responsible for case manager duties like setting up IEP meetings, writing IEPs, sending out invites and prior written notices, completing progress reports for multiple students, creating and implementing specialized instruction for individuals, keeping service logs accurately, and much more. A school would have to pay that person double what they normally would.

Finally, it would be counter productive since the Special Education process mandates that these duties be separated. This is evident in IDEA since it mandates that BOTH a Special Education and General Education teacher be in attendance at all IEP meetings. As the law reads, these two roles cannot be filled by the same person.

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