



# research digest

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## Data reveal varied outcomes for students with disabilities

Nationwide, students with disabilities drop out of school at higher rates and graduate at lower rates than students in the general education population. In 2011/12, the average national graduation rate for special education students was just 61 percent—19 percentage points lower than the graduation rate for the general student population.<sup>1</sup> And research indicates that students who fail to graduate from high school, including students with disabilities, are more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, poverty, health problems, and incarceration than students who earn a diploma.<sup>2</sup>

While these statistics are clearly troubling, they don't tell the entire story. That's because students with disabilities are not a homogenous group—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 identifies 13 disability categories, and student demographics vary within and across those categories. REL West researchers realized that, while there was ample information on the high school outcomes of students with disabilities grouped together as a single population, there was scarce literature available about how outcomes vary across the different subgroups of students in special education.

Accordingly, two REL West research alliances have been working with state and district partners to analyze student data to uncover a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the education situation for students with disabilities.

### *Disaggregating student outcomes by disability category*

To help the Utah State Office of Education gain a better understanding of high school completion outcomes across each of the 13 disability categories, REL West researchers analyzed data on the state's entire grade 6–12 public school population, including all students with disabilities. The resulting report, *School Mobility, Dropout, and Graduation Rates Across Student Disability Categories in Utah* (2014), offers important insights into the outcomes of different subgroups of students in special education.

Many of the findings were in line with the national research—as a group, Utah students with disabilities had lower rates of high school graduation, as well as higher rates of dropout, retention in grade 12, and changing schools during the school year compared to general education students. But, perhaps most importantly, the study found that outcomes varied considerably across the 13 disability

REL West Research Digest keeps educators and others abreast of the research, data analysis, and technical assistance carried out by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), including joint efforts with eight state and regional research alliances of education stakeholders in the West Region states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. In addition to providing abstracts of selected REL West research reports, the twice-yearly digest may include descriptions of upcoming REL West work, services, and events in the West Region, or publications developed by other researchers.

*continued on page 2 >>*

categories, confirming that students with disabilities are a diverse group with unique capabilities and needs (the infographic below shows four-year high school outcomes for several subgroups of students with disabilities).

“Students with disabilities are typically combined together as one large at-risk group,” says BethAnn Berliner, one of the study’s co-authors and the leader of REL West’s Dropout Prevention Alliance for Utah Students with Disabilities.

“That sort of grouping serves a function, but it’s not enough. If you want to find where to target interventions and supports, you need to know which subgroups of students are struggling the most.”

The variation uncovered by the research team included, for example, the finding that students classified with emotional disturbance had a dropout rate of 44 percent—the highest dropout rate across both the general education population and all the special education subgroups. In contrast, some subgroups had dropout rates lower than the general education population’s average dropout rate of 21 percent. For instance, at 11 percent, students with autism had the lowest dropout rate of all the subgroups.

However, students with autism also had only a 48 percent four-year graduation rate—30 percentage points lower than the general student population—and a third of

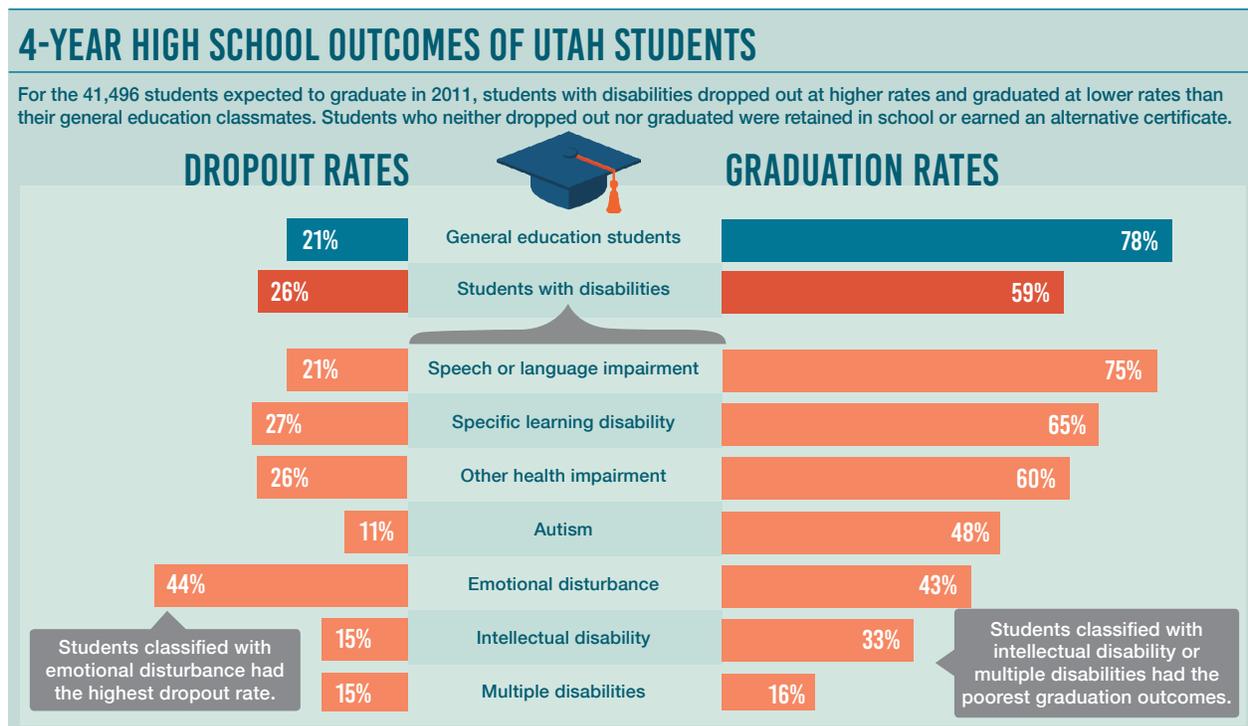
students with autism were still enrolled in school beyond the conventional four-year high school timeframe. Students classified with an intellectual disability, or with multiple disabilities, had the poorest four-year graduation rates, at 33 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

“The findings suggest that to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, there needs to be a heterogeneous response to match the varied results,” says Vanessa Barrat, a senior research associate with REL West and a co-author of the study. “We’re hoping this sort of research will help catalyze a rethinking of how interventions are targeted toward specific groups of students with disabilities.”

### Examining the stability of special education classifications

While the Dropout Prevention Alliance has been helping Utah dive deeper into the nuances of its special education data, another REL West team has been working with officials from Washoe County School District in Nevada to help them better understand and support their students with individualized education programs (IEPs). Washoe was particularly concerned about how to better support this student population because, as of the 2013/14 school year, 13 percent

*continued on page 3 >>*



Note: Only those categories that accounted for more than 1 percent of Utah’s grades 6–12 students with disabilities are included in this graphic. The entire infographic is available at <https://relwest.wested.org/resources/194>

of its students had IEPs and those students had an overall graduation rate far below the general student population.

The research team is focusing on analyzing data related to two particular disability categories—specific learning disability and speech/language impairment—because the majority of Washoe’s special education students fall into one of those two classifications. In particular, the researchers are looking at how many students classified with a specific learning disability or speech/language impairment retained their classification, were declassified, or were reclassified when transitioning from kindergarten to first grade, elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and through four years of high school.

In addition, REL West is helping the district disaggregate these reclassification patterns by race, English language learner designation, and eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, says John Rice, leader of the Nevada Education Research Alliance, which is spearheading this work. The analyses will help Washoe better understand the patterns of classification within the district, says Rice, to identify whether there are any inconsistencies between K–12 levels in how students are being classified and supported through IEPs.

Adds Rice, “Helping Washoe look at its data a little differently can help the district start zeroing in on which subgroups might need additional support to help boost their graduation rates. All of this work is about closely examining the data to get a more thorough understanding of how to best support the unique needs of different students.”

*For further information about the work of the Dropout Prevention Alliance, contact BethAnn Berliner at [bberlin@wested.org](mailto:bberlin@wested.org) or 510.302.4209. The report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2015055>*

*For further information about the work of the Nevada Education Research Alliance, contact John Rice at [jrice@wested.org](mailto:jrice@wested.org) or 562.799.5435.*

### Endnotes

1 Stetser, M., & Stillwell, R. (2014). *Public high school four-year on-time graduation rates and event dropout rates: School years 2010–11 and 2011–12*. First Look (NCES 2014-391). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

2 Legters, N., & Balfanz, R. (2010). Do we have what it takes to put all students on the graduation path? In N. Legters & R. Balfanz (Eds.), *New directions for youth development: Putting all students on the graduation path*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Rumberger, R. (2011). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Resources on students with disabilities

### National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

#### *Decreasing dropout rates for minority male youth with disabilities from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds*

Divided into three chapters—focused on American Indian, African American, and Latino males with disabilities—the report examines obstacles to graduation and strategies for improving the high school outcomes of male students of color with disabilities. (2014)  
<http://www.ndpc-sd.org/documents/EDC-2014-monograph-book.pdf>

### National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI)

#### *NCSI website*

The center helps states transform their systems to improve outcomes for infants and youth with disabilities. Its website houses a range of resources, including data-analysis tools, upcoming and archived webinars, and links to other web resources. Users can also subscribe to NCSI’s quarterly newsletter.  
<http://ncsi.wested.org/>

### REL Mid-Atlantic

#### *Teacher Effectiveness and Students with Disabilities*

This webinar explored research and policies for making curriculum, instruction, and assessment more accessible for students with disabilities, including significant cognitive disabilities. (2014)

The archived webinar and downloadable materials are available at <https://relmidatlantic.org/content/teacher-effectiveness-and-students-disabilities>

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## New report highlights research on identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities

Educators struggle with how to distinguish between English learner students who have difficulty with language acquisition and those who have learning disabilities. As a result, English learner students are both over- and under-represented in special education classes, and their education can suffer when they are not aligned with an appropriate academic program.

A recent REL West report, *Identifying and Supporting English Learner Students with Learning Disabilities: Key Issues in the Literature and State Practice* (2015), presents key findings and best practices from a review of research and state policies. The study team found that, although no diagnostic method works in all contexts, research and state practices indicate common elements of effective processes for determining why English learner students might underperform, whether special education services might be warranted, and what those special education services should be.

**Identification.** The report pinpoints a handful of key questions to answer to help determine whether an English learner student's academic struggles are caused by linguistic difficulties or a learning disability. The research also suggests several actions to more effectively determine the source of the student's academic challenges in order to make appropriate referrals for necessary support:

- » Provide professional development for educators.
- » Use pre-referral strategies, such as the response to intervention approach.
- » Involve parents.
- » Consider multiple forms of data.
- » Develop clear policy guidelines and data-tracking systems.

**Support.** The study team also reviewed states' protocols for supporting English learner students with possible learning disabilities, and identified five guiding principles, including having a clear policy statement indicating that additional considerations will be used in placing English learner students into special education programs and providing test accommodations for English learner students.

*For further information about this study, contact study co-author and leader of the English Learner Alliance Eric Haas at [ehaas@wested.org](mailto:ehaas@wested.org) or 510.302.4288. The report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2015086>*



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