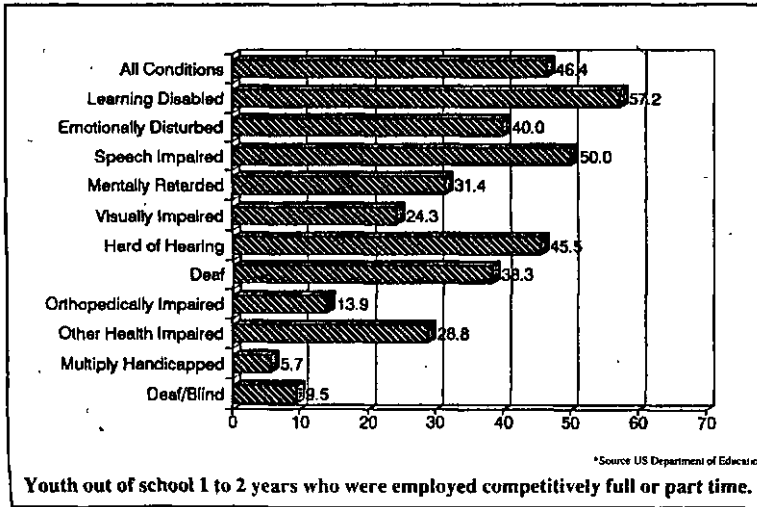




Counterpoint

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Study reveals how disabled fare in years after school

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Senior Editor

In what may be the most important commissioned study released in a decade, the U.S. Department of Education has learned some good, bad, and surprising news about teenage special education students who fail or succeed in their last year of high school and for two years that follow thereafter.

Among factors that affect student performance and outcomes, several reflect back in positive and negative ways to the general and special education administrators and teachers who are responsible for their schooling.

The report provides sufficient information to create a blueprint for change, but as with past data, the data raise hard questions for all educators about the racial, socioeconomic, and other factors that relate to dropping out of school that are now documented in special education.

More than 90 percent of special education

secondary students in the study attended regular schools and 86 percent took at least some of their courses in mainstream classrooms. The average amount of time spent in regular education in this study was 56 percent, with some students spending a high of 77 percent, and more seriously impaired students dipping to a low 19 percent. Overall, 17 percent of students took all of their courses in regular education.

On a positive note, nearly 70 percent of the special education students, and particularly deaf students and those with learning disabilities, rose above counterparts in special education and were as productive in the first and second year after high school as nondisabled peers in the general population. While two-year data is promising, once peers earn college degrees, a gap between groups is expected, cautions SRI International's Mary Wagner, who directed the project and notes that only about 1 percent of LD students go after higher education and better outcomes it offers.

In other good news, more and more students

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with milder impairments had access to general vocational education, the report said. Job counseling and job readiness were offered in schools attended by six of ten students, but often not before senior high. Students with severe impairments and students not assigned to mainstream grade levels, however, were not participating in these programs.

Discouraging words

On the gloomy side, students with severe impairments or serious emotional disturbance (SED) generally fared the worst, both in school and out. Arrest records of SED students at 19.6 percent as high schoolers, for example, soared to 43.8 percent once they were out of school for more than a year. Most of these were former SED students. Males, minorities, and those from single parent homes were likely arrestees. Once school age youngsters are arrested, even more absenteeism, failing grades and dropping out follows, SRI notes.

Both the type of disability and its severity has an important influence on success, according to SRI's mid-point data, part of a five-year look at the transition from special education into work, training, and independence.

The study sample included 8,000 students and their parents in the 1983-86 school year who were ages 13 to 21, and receiving special education in high school. Billed as nationally representative, findings generalize to youth as a whole and to other youth nationwide in the 11 federal special education disability categories, SRI says.

More than half the students in the 1985-86 school year were learning disabled. One in four were mentally retarded. When combined with 10 percent who were seriously emotionally disturbed, these groups accounted for most of the students in special education. Researchers noted that nearly one in five youth also had a second disability that also challenged them educationally.

The percentage of black youth in special education ran about twice the rate for general population. Youth with disabilities were more likely than the general population to be poor and come from single parent homes not located in suburban areas.

Most study participants also were males and they largely had different outcomes from their female counterparts. Some were positive, with better employment rates after high school but antisocial or illegal behaviors were worse. Males outnumbered females in all but the deaf/blind category and by three to one in LD and SED categories.

Who gets regular ed?

Socioeconomic levels had a significant effect on special education students. While the amount of time spent in regular education classes hinged largely on disability, wealthier students and those who were younger, irrespective of disability, spent the most time in regular education.

In addition, students spent significantly more time in regular education, independent of other factors, if they took occupationally specific vocational training or nonacademic classes or if they attended schools with specific policies supporting

mainstreamed students and their regular education teachers, SRI said.

As for related services that support special education, about one half of the students in the study were receiving speech or occupational therapy, personal counseling, help from a tutor, reader or interpreter services, or physical therapy/mobility training. But, students in particular disability categories absorbed most of the need for services.

Separate schools

Of students attending special schools, those who were deaf, visually impaired, and multiply handicapped were served most in separate settings.

These students were usually more severely disabled and economically disadvantaged than students in these categories in regular schools. Those with sensory impairments were more likely to come from low-income households than similar youngsters who attended regular schools. In addition, special schools emphasized vocational and life skills training over academics, and began training earlier than regular schools. Special school students also were more likely than public school counterparts to participate in community-based vocational rather than academic courses and receive related services.

Other report highlights:

School performance

Judging by their records, high school students in special education have a hard time in school. Absenteeism, course failure, and retention were most chronic for SED students. Absenteeism was highest and grade performance worst among ninth graders. Many scored poorly on minimum competency tests.

Study participants graduated at a rate of only 56 percent, and three quarters of those graduates earned regular high school diplomas. At 32 percent, nearly one third of disabled students in the study were drop outs, a significantly higher rate than for the general population. Half the SED students dropped out, as compared with an 8 percent rate for deaf/blind students.

"For many youth, dropping out appears to have been a continuation of a cluster of student behavior that included failing courses, high absenteeism, disciplinary problems, and lack of social affiliation with school or community groups," the report said.

More than one in five female dropouts left school due to marriage or pregnancy and of all female leavers, few were likely to return to school within two years.

What could help prevent disabled student dropouts? Statistically significant data showed occupationally oriented vocational education, tutoring, and personal counseling, SRI noted.

Social status

Only 14 percent of students studied were reported by parents to be socially isolated. They either never saw friends or saw them less than once weekly. Those most isolated were lower functioning, more severely impaired females, students older than their peers, and those taking fewer regular education classes. The longer they were out of school, the more likely they were to see friends less often.

While 40 percent of those who

frequently socialized met with friends six or more days a week, data show that often these were SED students, males, and students with disciplinary problems.

Group membership: 41 percent of secondary students belonged to a school or community group. Those with multiple handicaps, mental retardation, or SED were less likely to socialize in organized groups. Those who were poor, living in urban areas, older, and with known behavior problems were less likely to belong to formal groups. Those who had spent time in regular education were more likely to be group members, even among those with more severe disabilities. Once students left school, however, group participation fell by nearly half, and some groups showed marginal declines after that.

Independence

Household care: Parent reports showed disabled youth were involved with household chores at least some of the time. Those with physical or multiple handicaps rarely helped, however. Female and older youth often took responsibility for chores regardless of their disability. Black youth and those from single parent homes were significantly more likely than others to do chores often.

Finances: Most out of school youth did not use common financial management tools. Fewer than half had a savings account, while less than one in ten had a checking account or credit card in their own name and they were less impaired youth.

Those from affluent homes were more likely to have a saving account as were working youth who also had credit cards.

Residential independence: Parents said that after two years following high school, 12 percent of youth with disabilities were living alone, with a spouse or roommate, at college, or in military housing.

Those with learning disabilities, visual impairments, and deaf or hard of hearing young people were the most independent. Those with physical or multiple disabilities or mentally retardation were least likely to be on their own.

Independent living increased with time. More than one-third of youth in selected disability categories were living independently three to four years after leaving high school.

Some parents held hope for independent living experiences. Exceptions were about half those students with mental retardation, orthopedic, or health impairments and three-fourths of those with multiple handicaps who were expected to need supervised living.

Employment

Parents reported that 15 percent of students in grades seven through eleven had work-study jobs in the preceding year and more than half had paid jobs, a rate similar to youth in the general population. Those with learning disabilities or SED had the highest rates of paid employment.

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Work-study jobs fell out about equal among males and females, most of whom were mentally retarded, deaf, or multiply handicapped. Males (61 percent) were much more likely to be paid than females (46 percent). Employment became more common as youth grew older.

Most of the paid employment was in lower skill jobs, such as laborers, general construction, and babysitters. Earnings were at or below minimum wage. Those from affluent homes, suburban dwellers, males, and younger exiters seemed better at finding employment.

Higher education

Only 14 percent of youth who had been out of high school up to two years had postsecondary training in the preceding year of the study. Deaf and visually impaired youth had the highest rates, and made up about one third of students who furthered their education. Enrollment rates did increase as time passed.

The postsecondary school enrollment rate for disabled youth was far below the 56 percent rate for students in the general population.

Youth with disabilities most often attended postsecondary vocational or trade schools. Only 4 percent attended a 2-year or community college and 1 percent attended a four-year college. Trade two-year colleges and vocational/trade

schools were more accessible to a greater breadth of students, and students who took either occupationally-oriented vocational education or spent a greater percentage of class time in regular education classes in their last in high school were more likely to have continued their education.

Productivity

The National Longitudinal Transition Survey also took a close look in the broadest way at whether or not students with disabilities were engaged in productive activities outside their homes.

They met the criteria if they had participated in the preceding year in a job skills training program, a GED program, a vocational or trade school, a 2-year or 4-year college, or were paid for volunteer work outside the home.

Researchers found that 22 percent of the study participants who had been out of school up to two years had not been engaged in such activities in the preceding year.

Of those who were, 93 percent had worked for pay. Most of these youth were hard of hearing, learning disabled, or deaf. As time went by, levels of productive engagement did not improve markedly.

Copies of the report *Youth With Disabilities: How Are They Doing?* is available for \$40 and must be prepaid, from *SRI International, B-SI28, 333 Ravenswood Ave, Menlo Park CA 94025.*