EDUCATION COMMISSION
OF THE STATES
Your education policy team.

Response to information request

Prepared August 18, 2016
Stephanie Aragon, Policy Researcher
saragon@ecs.org

Your Question:
You had two questions. First, you wanted to know what states are closing the achievement gap of students with specific learning disabilities, and what state policy changes have been made to close the gap. Second, you wanted to know what states are showing the most positive postsecondary reports for students with severe learning disabilities.

Our Response:
This part of our response focuses on closing the achievement gap of students with specific learning disabilities. My colleague, Mary Fulton, presented information on postsecondary students in a separate document. *(Document Available Upon Request.)*

Closing the Achievement Gap of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

Students with disabilities have and continue to score lower than their peers on state (Figure 1) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams (Figure 2). And, despite steady progress in graduation rates amongst these students, nationally only approximately 61 percent of special education students graduate high school. Proficiency and graduation rates vary quite significantly from one state to the next. For example:

- In the analysis (p. 14) of state assessments for elementary students, the gap between students with IEPs and the comparison group varied widely—from 9 percent in one state, to 51 percent in another.
- Graduation gaps between students with disabilities and all students also vary widely—from four percent in Arkansas to 49 percent in Mississippi. (See here for graduation rate comparisons.)

Figure 1: Gaps Between Students with IEPs and Comparison Peer Group on General Assessments

Grade Ranges	Mean Gaps for All States with Data[1]							
	2006-07		2008-09		2010-11		2012-13	
	Gap	Number of states	Gap	Number of states	Gap	Number of states	Gap	Number of States
Elementary Reading	31	47	31	45	34	45	35 (34)	45 (48)
Middle School Reading	40	47	40	46	41	45	41 (41)	45 (48)
High School Reading	40	46	40	44	40	45	39 (38)	46 (49)
Elementary Math	29	47	28	46	30	45	32 (32)	45 (48)
Middle School Math	40	47	38	46	40	42	40 (39)	45 (48)
High School Math	38	44	37	44	40	43	37 (36)	46 (49)

[1] Data in parentheses include the unique states. Data including the unique states were available only for 2012-13. Prior analyses did not include the unique states.

Source: 2012-13 Publicly Reported Assessment Results for Students with Disabilities and ELLs with Disabilities, National Center on Educational Outcomes. See report for additional subject/grade comparisons.

Figure 2: NAEP Proficiency Levels

2015 NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS (NAEP)

	% Below Basic	% at Basic	% at Proficient	% at Adanced
READING - 4TH Grade				
Students with disabilities	67	21	10	2
Students w/o disabilities	26	34	30	10
GAP	41	13	20	8
READING - 8TH Grade				
Students with disabilities	63	29	8	0
Students w/o disabilities	19	43	34	4
GAP	44	14	26	4
MATH - 4TH Grade				
Students with disabilities	45	38	14	2
Students w/o disabilities	14	42	35	8
GAP	31	4	21	6
MATH - 8TH Grade				
Students with disabilities	68	24	7	1
Students w/o disabilities	23	40	27	9
GAP	45	16	21	8

Students with disabilities includes students with both IEPs and 504 Plans.

Source: 2015 NAEP Shows Little Change for Students with Disabilities, Advocacy Institute

Unfortunately, though, some caveats with the data make it difficult to compare one state's proficiency or graduation rate data to another, and therefore to determine which state is having the most success addressing special education achievement gaps. For instance, as explained here and here:

- The state assessment report by the National Center on Educational Outcomes does not have information from every state, and not all states report their scores and gaps in the same manner.
- Efforts to include more special education and English Language Learner students in the NAEP exam sample have contributed to varying assessment participation rates within a state over time and variations amongst states.

And, as explained here and here:

- States vary in how they define a student with a disability for the purposes of calculating graduation rates.
- States have different definitions for what a "regular high school diploma" is for students with disabilities.
- Some states with high graduation rates have graduation requirements vastly different and less rigorous than those for non-disabled students.
- Some states allow students with disabilities to remain in school beyond the age of 21. Students who stay beyond four years, then, will not be captured in four year graduation rate measures.

Data caveats and multiple inputs for student success make it difficult to determine what states are making the greatest strides in this area. What is evident, though, is the presence of significant achievement gaps across the nation, as is represented both in student proficiency scores and graduation rates.

Researchers have provided some recommendations that might be helpful to you:

- [This 2016 white paper](#) highlights strategies needed to ensure the success of all students more generally. They include: data-based decision making, cultural responsiveness, rigorous and standards-aligned instruction, universal screening and progress monitoring, and evidence-based instructional and behavioral interventions). Instructional approaches to addressing the needs of special education students are addressed on p. 7-8.

- [This 2014 report](#) by Hanover Research summarizes some of the research on special education achievement gaps. It highlights [this 2004 study](#) which the researchers emphasized that while "there is no single blueprint for advancing the achievement of students with special needs in socio-economically complex urban areas" successful schools shared the following eleven characteristics in their approach to education students with disabilities:
     1. A pervasive emphasis on curriculum alignment with the state framework.
     2. Systems to support curriculum alignment.
     3. An emphasis on inclusion and access to the general education curriculum.
     4. Culture and practices that support high standards and students achievement.
     5. Well-disciplined academic and social environments.
     6. The use of student assessment data to inform decision making.
     7. Unified practice supported by targeted professional development.
     8. Access to targeted resources to support key initiatives.
     9. Effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment.
     10. Flexible leaders and staff working effectively in a dynamic environment.
     11. The determination that effective leadership is essential to success.

- [This 2012 study](#) highlights and details the following as effective practices that lead to improved student achievement for students in special education: access to the core curriculum, collaboration between special education and general education teachers, continuous assessment and use of Response to Intervention, targeted professional development, and use of Explicit Direct Instruction.

- *(Document Available Upon Request.)* A 2005 report to the Kentucky Board of Education (included as an attachment in our email to you) described five the following five components as "essential and foundational in closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities":
     1. Inclusion of special education students in the rigorous curriculum with effective instruction, appropriate support and ongoing assessment.
     2. Assuring that special education students receive instruction and specially designed services by qualified regular and special education teachers who are certified in their assigned areas, committed to progress of all students, understand effective instructional strategies, routinely collaborate across areas and receive job-embedded professional development specific to the needs of their students.
     3. Implementing a pre-referral process that minimizes inappropriate placements in special education and affords all students access to a variety of interventions and an identification process that utilizes appropriate, research-based evaluation tools.

4. Ensuring commitment to and accountability for closing this gap is constantly monitored and evaluated at the school, district and state level and policies and procedures are specifically constructed for this purpose.
5. Focusing on effective state and local leadership that will examine issues related to organizational structures and culture of schools to ensure they meet the needs of students for a climate of high expectations for all students and staff, data-driven decision making, effective communication with stakeholders, appropriate allocation of resources and celebration of student success and achievement.

These recommendations are divided into considerations for the state board and for local districts and schools.