

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Examination of Contextual Variables Across and Within Different Types of Placement for Elementary Students with Complex Support Needs

A recent study found that students with complex support needs who had educational placements in more restrictive settings did not have adequate access to age- and grade-level general education curricula. Involvement in age- and grade-level general curriculum is widely acknowledged to be the best practice for all students.

The study, part of a larger national study that examined the impact of educational placement on the outcomes for students with complex support needs, looked at a representative sample of 117 students from fifty-nine schools in eleven states and found a significant disparity in the opportunities, instruction, services, and supports available to students in less restrictive placements (40% or more of the school day spent in the general education classroom) vs. more restrictive placements (special education classrooms or schools).

Though research clearly shows that meaningful access to general education content can only be assured when students are educated with their age- and grade-level peers, only the less restrictive placements offered a peer-based environment. Students in general education settings had more access to instructional materials based on age and grade level. In contrast, students in more restrictive environments were often grouped by perceived “ability level” and had curricula and instruction based on what the special education teacher perceived as “meaningful and engaging,” making the content and delivery subjective at best.

Instruction was more likely to be student-centered in general education and teacher-centered in more restrictive settings. Co-teaching was practiced in less restrictive settings but not

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Students with complex support needs in general education settings have more access to age- and grade-level instructional materials than those in more restrictive educational settings.
- Special educators in more restrictive settings are rarely certified to work with students with the most complex needs.
- The federal mandate to promote access to the general education curriculum to all students remains largely unmet for students with complex support needs.

in more restrictive ones. Peer supports were more commonly available in general education settings and were rare or absent in more restrictive settings.

Teachers with a general education background were available only to students in less restrictive settings. Though students in more restrictive settings had more access to special educators, those special educators were rarely certified to work with students with the most complex needs. Across placements, schools provided little or no in-service training related to instruction for students with disabilities.

This study’s findings suggest that as placements became more restrictive, students’ access to peers and age- and grade-level general

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education curriculum and supports were greatly diminished. As students with complex support needs are most frequently placed in more restrictive settings, the federal mandate to promote access to the general education curriculum for all students remains largely unmet.

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