

SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ARKANSAS



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PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- Inform parents, stakeholders, and other interested parties about key issues in special education and the work of the taskforce
- Review key data presented before the taskforce, additional data points, and parent stories to highlight important perspectives
- Make recommendations for consideration and inclusion into the larger task force report

ISSUE OVERVIEW

- **Staffing Ratios**
- **Paperwork and Individual Education Plan (IEP) Meetings**
- **Teacher Shortages**
- **Identifying Students with Disabilities (Child Find)**
- **Attendance and Time in the Classroom**
- **Discipline of Special Education Students**
- **Availability of Services**
- **Individualizing Education - Response to Intervention (RTI)**
- **Other Areas in Special Education**

STAFFING RATIOS

Problem:

For some schools, higher student-teacher ratios make teaching challenging

Schools can apply for waivers that allow them to increase ratios for varying reasons



Recommendation:

One way to support districts and expand their capacity is to add more educators, reduce ratios, and give teachers paperwork relief by increasing funding in the adequacy matrix for special education. Picus and Odden, in a 2014 report, recommended that the matrix for funding special education should increase from the current 2.9 teachers per 500 students to 3.3 per 500 students.

THE IEP PROCESS: PAPERWORK AND CONFERENCES

Problem:

Special Education teachers spend a lot of time preparing paperwork; they consider it overwhelming and stressful

Paperwork deters people from wanting to teach in this area

Parents have concerns about the IEP meeting and its fidelity



Recommendation:

Schools should have a clearer way of informing parents of their rights and options. School districts should report to the ADE how they are informing parents about important issues, like how to refer their child for evaluation; what to expect in the process; how to submit grievances; and their ability to contact Disability Rights of Arkansas for more support or education. One idea is to create a short, easy-to-read document for parents that explains their special education rights and options. Schools should then be responsible for giving that document to parents and reviewing it with them during the initial IEP meeting.

TEACHER SHORTAGES

Problem:

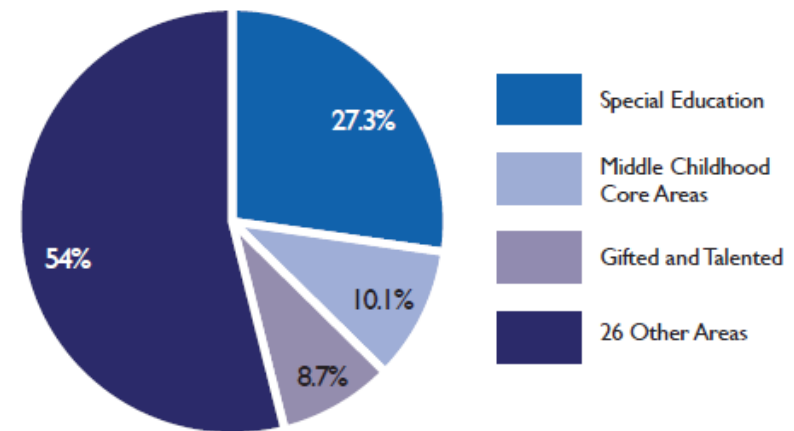
We have people certified to teach Special Education, but only half are actually teaching in this area

Schools are forced to rely on waivers to fill voids in their classrooms

Recommendations:

1. Support a paraprofessional-to-teacher program
2. Establish financial aid incentives for those entering paraprofessional-to-teacher programs

SPECIAL EDUCATION HAS THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF LICENSURE WAIVER REQUESTS FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS AMONG ALL SUBJECTS



SOURCE: Data from the Bureau of Legislative Research Teacher Recruitment and Retention Report, April 12, 2016

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES (CHILD FIND)

Problem:

We have good policies in place, yet children still fall through the cracks in identification

Accounts of school leaders discouraging parents from getting their child evaluated – stigma building

Parents report that it took too long to get their children identified and the rights services

There's an under-identification of children with emotional disturbance disabilities

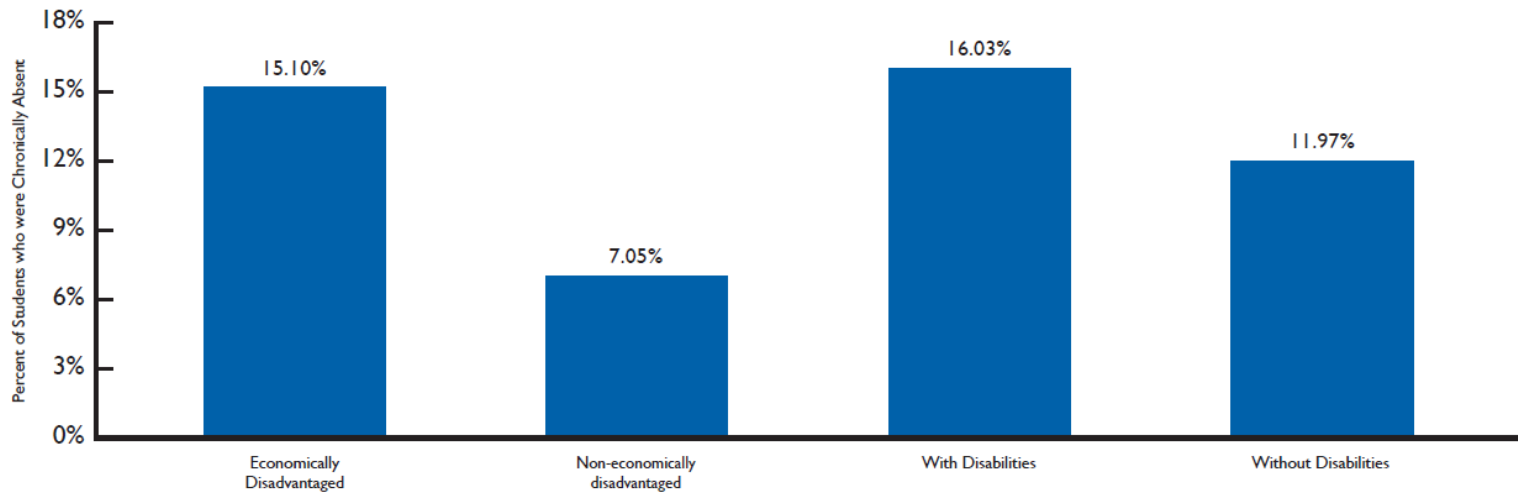
Recommendation:

Because gaps in identification exist, the state should strengthen its accountability process to ensure that school districts are abiding by their Child Find plan and reviewing parent requests on time.



ATTENDANCE AND TIME IN THE CLASSROOM

RATES OF CHRONIC ABSENCE IN SUBGROUPS OF THIRD GRADERS (2014-2015 SCHOOL YEAR)



SOURCE: Analysis by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families using data from the Arkansas Department of Education

Problem:

Third-grade students with disabilities are more likely to be chronically absent than children without disabilities

Recommendation:

The Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading is creating a toolkit to help administrators reduce chronic absences in their schools. This resource needs to be available to superintendents and school leaders across the state so that we can raise awareness about strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism for all students, including those with disabilities.



DISCIPLINE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

Problem:

Time out of the classroom impacts learning

Students with disabilities who have more disciplinary removals are more likely to have lower proficiency rates

Recommendation:

Schools should change their methods and practices of discipline to become less reliant on suspensions and time out of the classroom

FROM A FORMAL APPROACH TO A RESTORATIVE APPROACH

What was the rule and who broke it?	→	What was the harm, and who all was affected by it?
What is the punishment, per the student handbook?	→	How do we make amends, repair the harm, re-connect to community?
Administrator decision	→	Victim/Offender/Community decision

SOURCE: Language from a presentation by Nancy Riestenberg at the Minnesota Department of Education



AVAILABILITY OF SERVICES

Problem:

Organizations and institutions serving people with disabilities often work in silos and are concentrated in central and NW Arkansas, which means limited services for those who live in rural Arkansas

Project Connect is a great resource in NW Arkansas that could expand statewide, but the General Assembly did not provide funding to do

Arkansas has a Governor's Developmental Disability Council but it has little visibility

Recommendation:

To ensure that people in rural communities have access to services, the General Assembly should fund Project Connect's expansion throughout the state. They should also make sure that the staffers in those locations have the capacity to serve a variety of disabilities beyond Autism Spectrum Disorder. We then recommend revamping the Governor's Developmental Disability Council, or creating an ongoing entity that would give people with disabilities and disability advocates the opportunity to address their concerns and develop solutions. We also suggest that a resource document that lists the types of services available and contact information be made available and distributed to parents. That information should also have a dedicated, regularly updated space on the Special Education Division website.



INDIVIDUALIZING EDUCATION – RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RTI)

Problem:

RTI looks differently in each school since every district has autonomy over how it implement the frameworks

There isn't a way to track how effective each school is in using the frameworks



Recommendation:

To have a better picture of how RTI is working in Arkansas, the state should track student progress based on practices in each school.

OTHER AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- **Reviewing distribution of funding for special education**
- **Addressing inequitable teacher salaries among districts**
- **Improving outreach to parents and guardians**
- **Expanding the pipeline and financial capacity for districts to support professionals in special education**



RECOMMENDATIONS OVERVIEW

- Increase funding in the matrix for more teachers; take a comprehensive look at salaries.
- Streamline paperwork for teachers (without removing critical information).
- Create clearer ways of informing parents of their rights and options in special education
- Support an incentivized paraprofessional-to-teacher program
- Strengthen accountability methods of schools in the Child Find process
- Expand services to rural areas
- Use restorative discipline practices
- Track student progress to measure impact of RTI practices



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