

CROSSING THE LINE



**Exploring Equity
in Special Education
Across the United States**

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Introduction

The U.S. education system has long been concerned with equity, but the recent Every Student Succeeds Act catapulted the issue to the forefront with specific reporting rules that require education agencies at every level to collect and use data to do more. As equity takes a front line position in ESSA, special education becomes especially important from a measurement and reporting perspective. At the state level, enormously varied rates of special education classification beckon a closer look into the distribution of those rates and related perceptions of educators about issues like classification rate appropriateness, contributing factors and the resulting outcomes.

This is the first in a series of research briefs by the Frontline Research & Learning Institute (the Institute) exploring equity issues related to special education in and across states.

The goal of this research brief series is to provide actionable insights that provoke questions and spur discussion about how states and local districts equitably address the needs of students.

We began by ideating several big questions about equity in special education: What does equity mean for special education services provided by school systems? How do parents, educators, students, academics, specialists or other groups define special education equity? Is equity only applicable to the state in which a student lives? What does equity in special education programs look like across states? Are special education students equitably served regardless of the disability and the state they live in? Are special education classification rates an indicator or non-indicator of education equity?

These questions led to the actionable insights provided in this series of research briefs. The intent of the series is to provide a starting point for conversation focused on equity issues when it comes to serving students and the diverse needs they present.



According to the recent report, *Advancing Equity through ESSA: Strategies for State Leaders*,¹

ESSA acknowledges state responsibility and rebalances the federal role to allow greater state autonomy and flexibility in pursuing this equity mission while keeping in place important guardrails. Achieving equity means that family income, race/ethnicity, English-language proficiency and disability status no longer predict educational opportunities and outcomes. Achieving equity in public education will require addressing deep-seated inequities in funding, access to rigorous curriculum and access to effective teachers and school leaders, among other factors.

In this first research brief, we take a look at the national landscape of special education classification rates and explore how educators perceive the appropriateness of these rates in their school systems. What insights can we glean from the diverse classification rates that will reveal a deeper understanding of equitable or inequitable practices across state lines?



Key Finding of this Report:

Despite the fact that classification rates vary greatly across states, the majority of nationwide respondents

believe that the appropriate number of students are classified in their local system.

¹The Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers. 2016. *Advancing Equity through ESSA: Strategies for State Leaders*. Washington, D.C.

Crossing the Line: Exploring Equity in Special Education Classification Across the United States

The Institute explored the following questions using the most recent public data from the U.S. Department of Education along with a survey (2017) of our partner educators nationwide. The survey collected perceptions of educators related to the following guiding questions:

- How do classification rates vary across U.S. states?
- What are educators' perceptions of the appropriateness of special education classification in their local school systems?
- What are the contributing factors to over- or under-classification rates?
- What do educators say about the contributing factors of special education classification confronting students and schools today?

By 2014-15, the number of children and youth served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was 6.6 million, or 13 percent of total public school enrollment. The general range of classification rates based on the percentage of public school enrollment, 2014-15, is shown in Figure 1 (next page). The range of classification percentages at the lowest point was 8.6 percent in Texas, while the highest was 17.8 percent in New York, approximately twice that of Texas.

*By 2014-15, the number of children and youth served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was **6.6 million**, or **13%** of total public school enrollment.^{2 3}*

²The count of students ages 3-21 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is based on a 2014 statistic, the most recent year available. The 2013 statistic is used for Wyoming as 2014 data was not available.

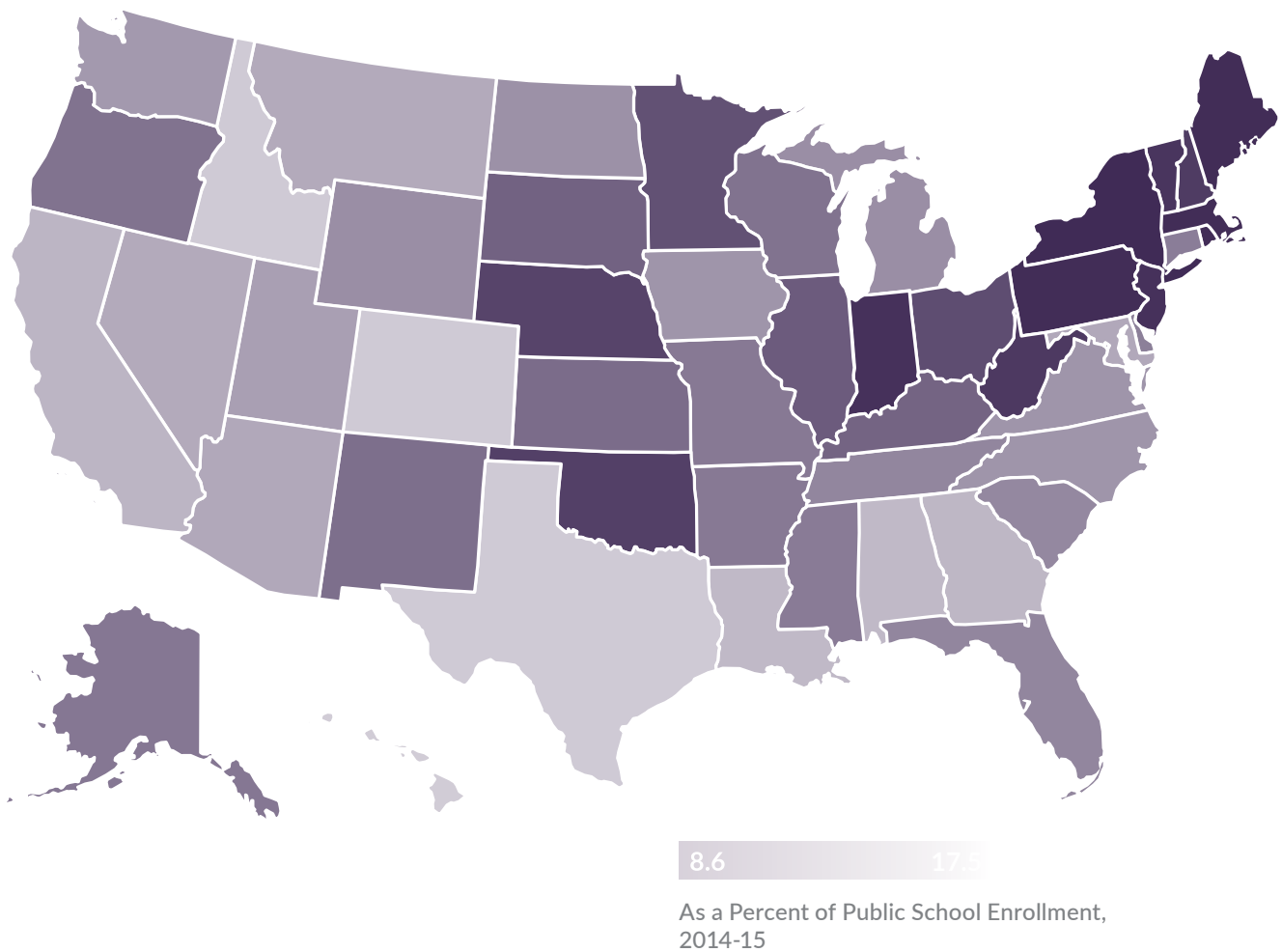
³U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved July 26, 2016, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html#bcc>.

Using a heat map, Figure 1 represents the range of rates, low to high, by color intensity. The lower the state's rate, the lighter the color. The higher the classification rate, the more intense the color.

Figure 1:

U.S. Special Education Classification Rates

Source: *Special Education Classification Rates Across U.S. States*⁴



⁴U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved July 26, 2016, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html#bcc>



When analyzing specific states, the highest percentages are clustered in four northeast states with 17.8 percent in New York followed by 17.6 percent in Massachusetts, 17.5 percent in Maine and 17.1 percent in Pennsylvania.

On the lower spectrum, the percentages are scattered across the nation with Texas at 8.6 percent followed by the next lowest percentage at 9.8 percent in Idaho, then Colorado at 10.4 percent and Hawaii at 10.5 percent.

However, variation among the states' classification rates has much to do with how states define and implement due process procedures and identify students with special needs **versus the true population that actually exists.**

The percent range from lowest to highest across the country is noteworthy given the variance in span. However, variation among the states' classification rates has much to do with how states define and implement due process procedures and identify students with special needs versus the true population that actually exists.

IDEA allows districts significant flexibility at the local level in determining the methods they use to identify and classify special education students.⁵ It is therefore acknowledged that the students who meet the requirements of an eligible category in one state may not meet the requirement in another state.

⁵ Center for Public Education. (2009). Special Education: A Better Perspective. Retrieved from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Evaluating-performance/Special-education-At-a-glance/Special-education-A-better-perspective-full-report.html>.

Exploring Educator Perceptions

So, how do educators perceive the appropriateness of classification rates in their local school systems? How do their perceptions compare to the national statistics?

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute conducted a survey of over 3,000 educators from various positions during the summer of 2017. We asked participants about their perceptions of special education in their schools and districts. Participants included superintendents, administrators for special education, principals, special education and general education teachers, along with related service providers. Administrators of special education and special education teachers accounted for over half of all responses.

In addition, the number of participants across states varied. The vast majority of respondents came from Texas, followed by Massachusetts and New York.

Survey Details

Frontline Research & Learning Institute:
Special Education Classification Survey
SURVEY NAME

Jun - Jul

2017 DISTRIBUTION DATES

12

TOTAL QUESTIONS

3,665

TOTAL RESPONDENTS

19

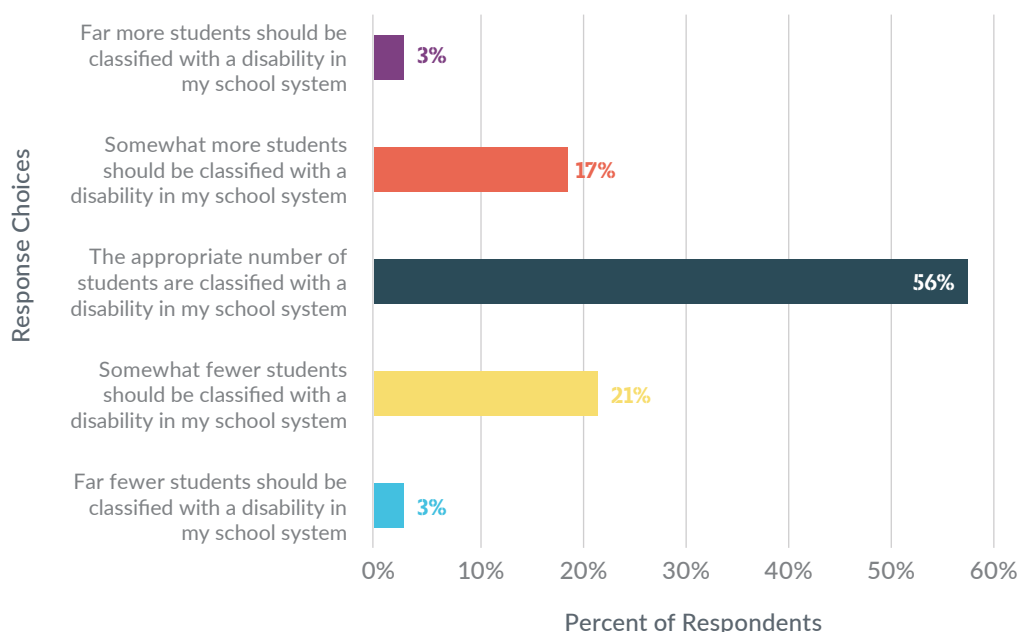
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Overall, when participants were asked about the number of students classified for special education in their local system, the majority (**more than 50%**) believed the appropriate number of students was classified.

Figure 2:

Perceptions of Classification Rates, Frontline Research & Learning Institute Survey, 2017

In your school system, how do you think the number of students who are classified with a disability compares to the number of students who should be classified with a disability?



When responses were disaggregated by participant role, we noticed some similarities and differences in perspective.

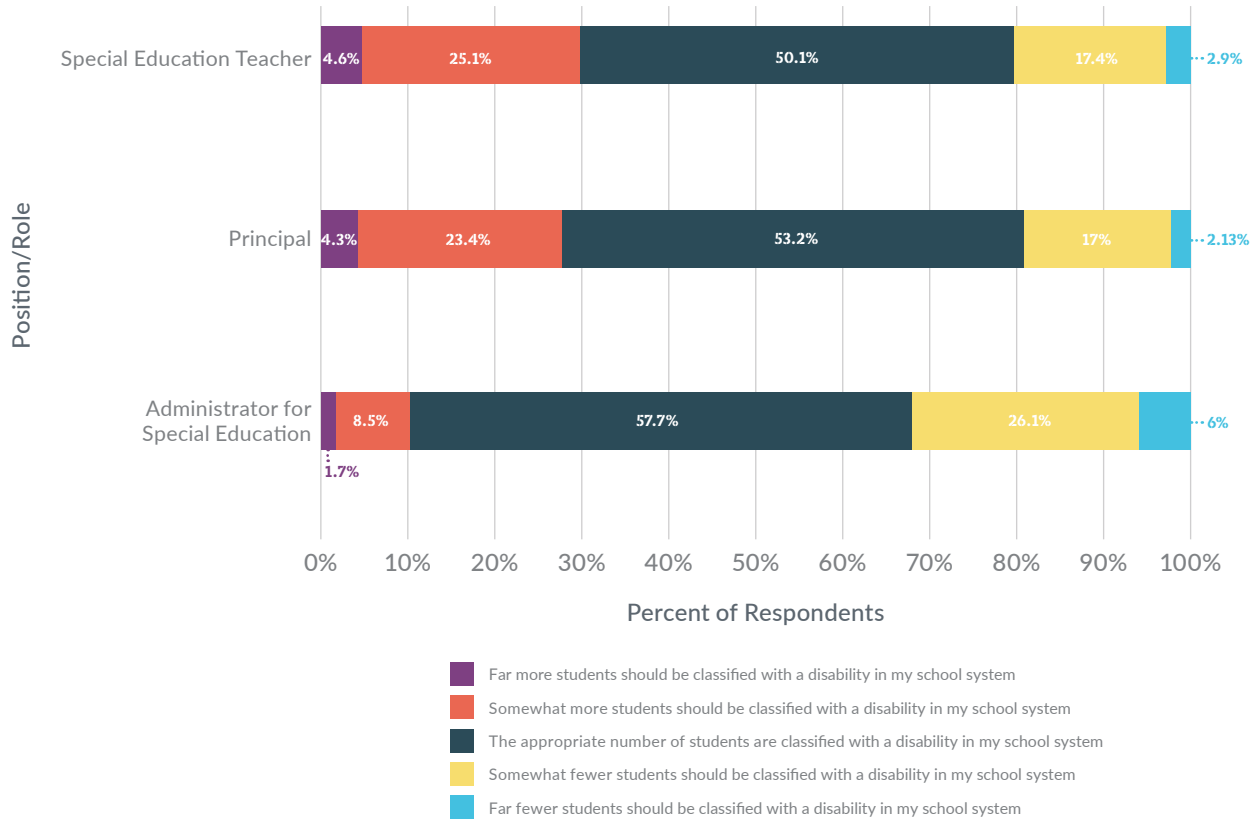
How would the perceptions vary if we looked at the responses of these same roles from the four lowest classification states (Texas, Idaho, Colorado and Hawaii) in comparison to responses from the four highest classification states (New York, Massachusetts, Maine and Pennsylvania)?

..... **See Figure 3
on next page**

Figure 3:

Perceptions of Classification Rates by Role, Frontline Research & Learning Institute Survey, 2017

In your school system, how do you think the number of students who are classified with a disability compares to the number of students who should be classified with a disability?



 Key Finding

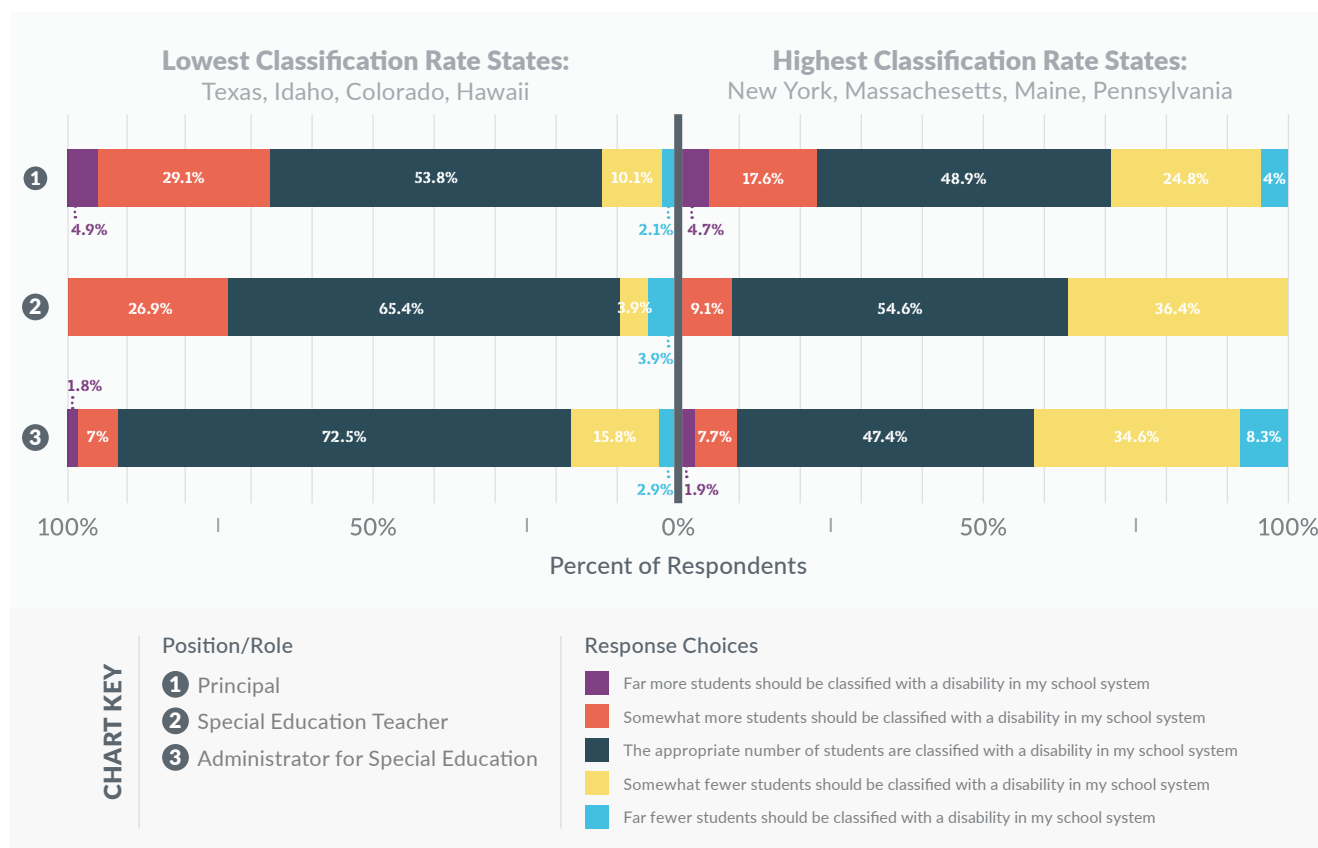
A greater percentage of special education teachers and principals believed more students should be classified compared to the number that currently is in their school system. On the other hand, a greater percentage of administrators/directors of special education believed fewer students should be classified than are currently in their school systems.

The side-by-side comparison of the lowest and highest classification rate groups sparked further conversation. In the group of four states with the lowest classification rates, there was greater agreement by all roles that the appropriate number of students was classified in their school systems in comparison to the group of four states with the highest classification rates. When respondents disagreed, those in high classification states advocate for reductions, while those in low classification states advocated the inverse.

Figure 4:

Response Comparison of Lowest and Highest Classification States, Frontline Research & Learning Institute Survey, 2017

In your school system, how do you think the number of students who are classified with a disability compares to the number of students who should be classified with a disability?



The majority of respondents from **both sides believed the appropriate number of students are classified in their school systems.**

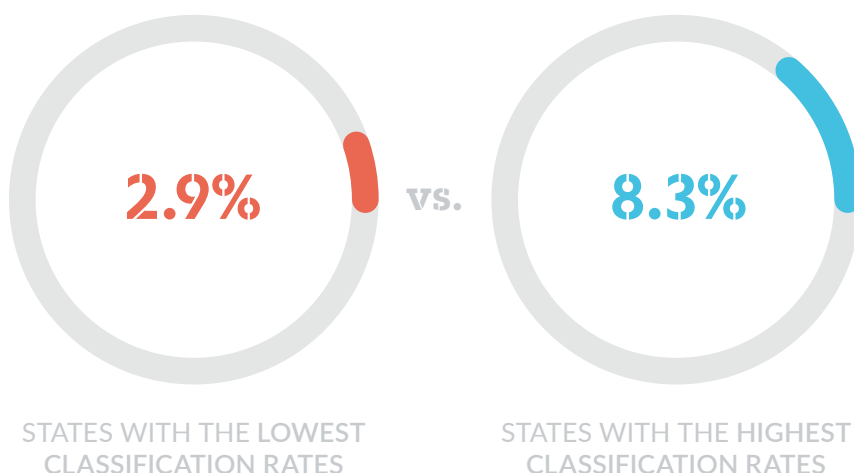
*Special Education Administrators in states in the lowest classification group think **far fewer students should be classified** than in states in the highest classification group.*

Within the four states with the lowest classification rates, special education teachers and principals believed **somewhat more** students should be classified with a disability, while in the four states with the highest classification rates, special educators and principals perceive **somewhat fewer** students should be classified.

Administrators of special education in the states with the lowest classification rates voiced far fewer students should be classified 2.9% versus 8.3% of administrators of special education in the states in the highest classification group.

Figure 5:

Percent of Special Education Administrators Who Say Far Fewer Students Should Be Classified



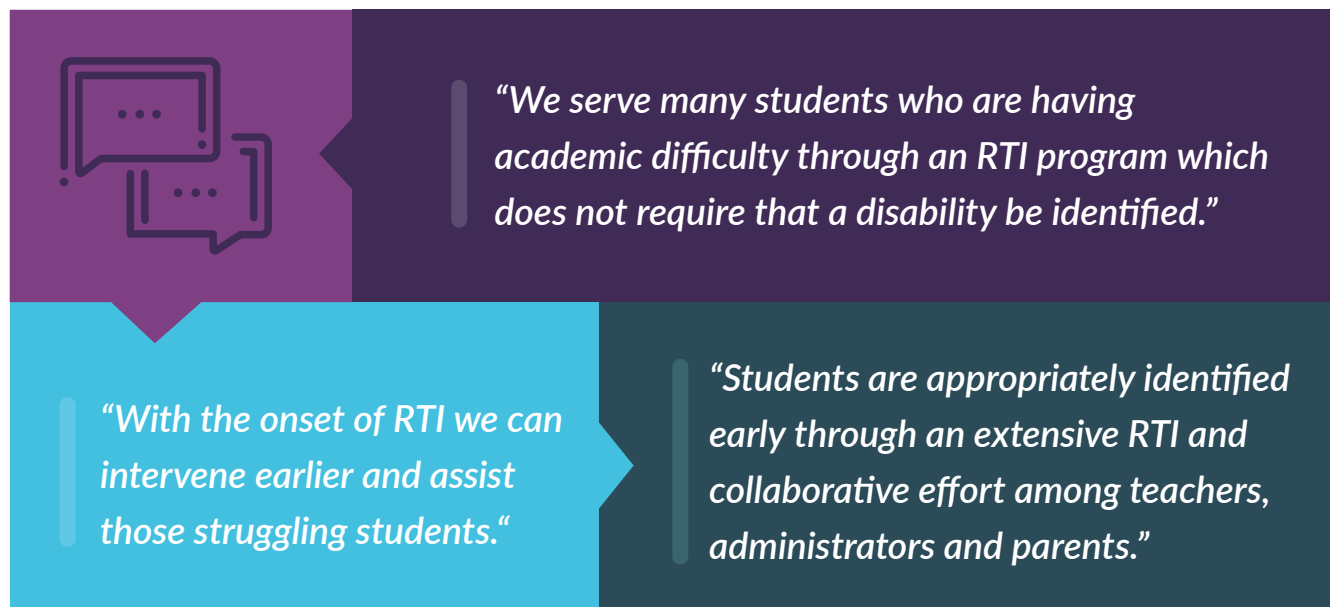
Contributing Factors of Under- or Over-Classification

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute recognizes there is great variance in the type of interventions and services offered in schools and districts. For example, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA strongly promoted Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI, as a multi-tiered approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs, is a possible contributing factor in fewer students identified with specific learning disabilities.⁶

Likewise, educators perceived a number of contributing factors that influence the classification rates in one direction or the other.

Many survey respondents cited RTI as the reason fewer students are classified for special education.

Figure 6: Sample Excerpts from Survey Respondents



⁶ RTI Action Network. What is RTI? Retrieved from <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>

“More students could be helped with RTI if it was done correctly [in our school system].”

Other respondents mentioned their RTI system is still developing, or in some cases incorrectly implemented to some degree. In these cases, participants are not seeing the positive outcomes as mentioned above.

Another contributing factor mentioned was the lack of differentiation and specialized support provided by general education teachers. English learners, in particular, are often misclassified for special education when schools do not have ESL specialists to identify language proficiency levels and to collaborate with general education teachers to target supports and interventions aimed at increasing language proficiency skills.



.....
Figure 7: Sample Excerpts from Survey Respondents

“I believe our district’s Response to Intervention is still developing and not meeting the needs of students who require interventions. Because of this I feel that students either should be receiving interventions or if interventions were done with fidelity by teachers/and student wasn’t making progress we as a service team could then support the students with special education supports. Many students don’t get either—but are still falling behind.”

“We need better general education interventions.”

“ESL students are identified [as special education students] when many times it is only a language barrier affecting their learning.”

“Many students who are being placed in special education are casualties of poor teaching practices. Those who do get placed, are still not getting the individualized, specialized support they need.”

Actionable Insights that Engage

This first research brief in our series presents an overview of the disparity in special education classification rates across the nation. We are hopeful these insights initiate conversation about how your district's classification rate compares with your state's or how your state compares with the nation.

A low or high classification rate does not necessarily indicate inequitable practices, but rather, reflects local resources and varying contributing factors that contribute to possible over- or under-classification. Some questions to support a deeper understanding of your local district include: ***What measures in place are working successfully to address the needs of students? How do you know they are working successfully? What story does your data tell and with whom are you sharing your story?***

Our second research brief will take a deeper look at contributing factors based on survey results and explore the perceived outcomes of over- and under-classification. As educators look at data with respect to equity issues, we must also remember that equity is not the same as equality. We certainly do not have equal or close to equal rates of special education classification across the nation. However, as we gain insight based on statistics—and as we explore perceptions—we will have tools to examine the equity strategies that we are employing at a local or state level to address the needs of each individual student regardless of family income, race/ethnicity, English-language proficiency and disability status.

Some questions to support a deeper understanding of your local district:

- ① *What measures in place are working successfully to address the needs of students?*
- ② *How do you know they are working successfully?*
- ③ *What story does your data tell and with whom are you sharing your story?*

About the Authors

Dr. Thomas Reap

Dr. Thomas Reap began his career as a school psychologist in the North Rockland School District in New York, later became the Director of Special Education for the Eastchester School District in New York, and served as the president of the Lower Hudson Pupil Personnel Association.

Dr. Reap also built a successful consulting practice assisting other districts in administering special education programs. After 22 years of working in school districts, Dr. Reap founded Centris Group (now part of Frontline Education), the most successful software provider for administering special education programs in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Dr. Reap holds a Doctorate in Psychology and a Master of Science degree in Education. He is a licensed psychologist, school administrator, district superintendent and certified as a school psychologist.

Jo Ann Hanrahan

Jo Ann Hanrahan has over 20 years of experience in K-12 education serving students, teachers, district and state education leaders. She started her career as a classroom teacher in Milwaukee Public Schools and then transitioned into administrative roles in the areas of professional learning, teacher alternative certification and educator effectiveness.

As a co-designer of Wisconsin's first equivalent research-based educator effectiveness system, she was instrumental in the statewide rollout, leading the implementation of innovative technology solutions to support communication, optimize data collection and analysis and promote networking. Subsequently, she served as a consultant for a number of national and international educator effectiveness initiatives and research projects.

Jo Ann leverages her passion for education, research and technology to improve teaching and learning for students of all ages. With a Master of Arts in Education and decades of diverse experiences, she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. and serves Frontline Education as the Director of Research & Data Analysis.

Learn More

For more insights into K-12 education, visit

FrontlineInstitute.com

About the Institute

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the education community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education data and analytics capabilities in partnership with over 12,000 K-12 organizations and several million users nationwide. The Institute's research reports and analysis are designed to provide practical insights for teachers and leaders as well as benchmarks to inform strategic decision-making within their organizations.