

Improving the Academic Achievement of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess the general effectiveness of placing special education students in inclusive classroom settings. This quantitative study used archived statewide data to measure changes in placement and make comparisons. Results from this study indicated an increased number of special education students meeting the expectations of the state accountability system.

Keywords: Inclusion, Mainstreaming, Special Education, Student Achievement

The effects of the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” (NCLB, 2002), the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), Performance Based Monitoring Assessment System (TEA, 2004), inclusion and grade level assessment on the achievement level of students with disabilities are examined in this article. Achievement levels described in this study were measured by recording the passing rates for students with disabilities who were administered grade-level state-developed assessment tests in Texas. The data collected and examined included numbers of students in special education who spent more than 80% of the educational day in a general education setting.

Review of Literature

McDonnell, Thorson, Disher, Mathot-Buckner, & Mendel (2003) address the achievement gap between students in special education and students in general education classrooms in their article “The Achievement of Students with Developmental Disabilities and their Peers without Disabilities in Inclusive Settings: An Exploratory Study.” The authors document the widening achievement gap between students in special education and general education as those students age. More recently, Levinson (2011) documents the same widening gap in Massachusetts between students in special education and students in general education. The author comments wryly that the outcomes of recent legislation attempted to address achievement gaps fell short, noting: “the rising tide did not raise all boats” (p. 1).

The general education student in Texas is exposed to a curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), that spirals broader in content scope and higher in cognitive level as they progress from grade to grade. Meanwhile, students in special education many times received an alternate or modified curriculum proscribed by their individual education plan (IEP). Since they were not exposed to or had limited exposure to grade-level TEKS, they may not have made the same types of achievement gains as their peers who were exposed to grade appropriate curriculum. The achievement gap between the two groups diverged as McDonnell, et al. (2003) and Levinson (2011) describe.

Both NCLB and IDEIA require greater academic rigor, exposure to the general education curriculum, and increased accountability by school districts for students with disabilities. NCLB requires that all educational institutions “apply the same high standards of academic achievement to all public elementary school and secondary school students” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002, para.4). All students should be receiving instruction based upon grade-level criteria. The clear intent of this legislation is to attempt to narrow the “achievement gap” between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. IDEIA requires students with disabilities to receive education in the general education classroom as much as is appropriate. The act also calls for students to be assessed using state grade-level criteria as well.

Texas requires student learning to be measured with assessment tools and state mandated tests that have been redesigned to measure the achievement of students with disabilities. Previously, students receiving special education services were allowed to participate in an alternate standardized testing. The Texas State Developed Alternative Assessment II (SDAA II) allowed students to be tested below grade level, and schools could be considered successful if students passed these non-grade-level tests (TEA, 2009b). Very few students in special education

participated in the grade-level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test or TAKS previous to the enactment of these landmark legislations (TEA, 2008b).

The reauthorization of IDEIA and NCLB required states to assess students using grade-level criteria. Texas was the first state to present alternative testing for students in special education that meet the federal requirements of ‘grade level’ standards, which is a modified assessment (TEA, 2008b). All students in Texas are now taking grade-level standardized assessments (TEA, 2009a).

Before the enactment of IDEIA and NCLB, students with disabilities in were routinely placed in special education classrooms for as much as 100% of the school day. Some mainstreamed students were routinely pulled out of the general education classroom and received more of their instruction in a special education classroom. Both of these placements had students using an alternate curriculum or an alternate grade-level curriculum that matched a diagnosis achievement level and not necessarily an age-appropriate level. The success of students placed in general education and passing the state mandated grade-level assessments described in the findings of this study might cause one to question the appropriateness of some of those previous placements.

School leaders and classroom teachers have begun to raise questions about the appropriateness of the universality required by many of these legislative requirements (Levine, 2011). Some educators cite the need for more use of an “individual education plan” that has been the bedrock of special education since the enactment of PL-94-142 (1975). Curriculum was once delivered on the professionally determined appropriate achievement-level of a student. Despite the concerns of general educators, administrators and special educators alike, this practice is becoming a procedure of the past. More students are now receiving instruction based on grade-level competencies as opposed to instruction dictated by achievement level. Although numerous negative attitudes and oppositions to inclusion exist (Brandes & Crowson, 2009; Estell, Jones, Pearl, Acker, & Farmer, 2008), access to the general education curriculum, in the general education classroom, has improved the academic success of students with disabilities.

As required by federal law, Texas has maximized the time in the general education classroom for students receiving special education services. Since the 2004-05 school year the percentage of students in special education has fallen. The percentage of students in special education in 2004-05 was 11.6% of the total state PK-12 population. According to TEA AEIS data the percentage of students in special education has fallen to 9.0% for the 2009-10 school year (TEA, 2009a).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to assess the effectiveness of placing students who receive special education services in inclusive classroom settings as measured by state mandated testing. More specifically, this study attempts to address how the increased access to the general education curriculum, for more than 80% of the school day, has impacted the achievement level of students who receive special education services within the major core areas of reading and mathematics.

Method

Archived data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was used to compare the number of students receiving special education services who were receiving instruction in the general education classrooms during the years 2003-2009 to the number of those students passing the grade-level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) state assessment (TAKS). Examined data consisted of statewide summary reports identifying the number of students receiving special education services that participated in and passed the TAKS grade-level assessment in 2003-2009. Data were additionally retrieved from TEA that identified the number of student receiving special education services in the general education classroom more than 80% of the school day during the years 2003-2009. This information was retrieved from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data.

Selection of Participants

There are several subsets of students drawn from the total student population in Texas who take the TAKS test. Students, identified as Special Education who passed the Reading/ELA and Math TAKS test from the years 2003 until 2010 were examined. This total population was compared to students in the state of Texas, grades 3-11, who were in the general education classroom for most of the school day.

Schools are required to report the instructional arrangement (IA) of each student to TEA. The IA code for those students who receive 100% of their instruction in a general education classroom is 40. For students receiving special education services who are educated in the general education classroom more than 80% of the school day (but less than 100%), the IA code is 41. All students receiving special education services who had an instructional arrangement code of 40 or 41 were included and identified as students who receive more than 80% of their instruction in a general education setting.

Collection & Analysis of Data

Most of the data from this study were retrieved from the Texas Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) reporting system. Collection and verification of data required a number of contacts with TEA departments (e.g. assessment, accountability, research, IDEA, PEIMS), U.S. Department of Education, and Texas' Region 20 Education Service Center.

TAKS data were found on the TEA website through tables expressing the number of students who took the TAKS assessment. The number that passed, or met standard, according to TEA's Panel's recommendation were also retrieved. The data were disaggregated to identify total number of TAKS participants and of those the number of special education participants. The number of students in the Special Education category who met the standard (or passed the test) was recorded.

Data were given for each subtest of the TAKS, including Reading, English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics (Math), Social Studies, and Science. Results were included for the first retest in designated areas for grades 3-11 only. Students are allowed to retest in 12th grade if unsuccessful in meeting the standard at the Exit Level or 11th grade assessment; however, for this

study, the data were only used for grades 3 through 11 in the category tagged as Special Education and in the areas of Reading, ELA, and Math.

Upon request, TEA staff generated a PEIMS report (TEA, 2010) with data identifying the number of students receiving special education services who were educated in the general education classroom for more than 80% of the school day. These data were disaggregated by the students' IA (coded as 40 or 41), grade level, and school year. The data were then consolidated into the tables and charts found below.

Findings

Results from this study indicated an increased number of students receiving special education services in the general education classroom for more than 80% of the school day. These students are meeting the expectations of the state in increasing numbers. As the number of these students in the general education classroom increases, so do the number of students passing the Reading/ELA and Math portions of the TAKS assessment. The data for the last school years measured, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, show a slight decrease of students in the general education classroom, in conjunction with a decrease in students' test scores (TEA, 2009; TEA, 2010).

Limitations of this study are related to the general nature of the population categories and changing factors influencing student placement. There is speculation by many that schools adjust student placements based upon accountability intricacies found in the Performance Based Monitoring Assessment System (PBMAS) and NCLB. The resulting actions of schools based upon Response to Intervention (RTI) may also be a factor that influences student placement since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. An increasing number of students educated in Texas public schools each year may also skew observed results.

Results

General Education Setting

In 2003-04 there were 153,192 students receiving special education services in the state of Texas who received more than 80% of their instruction in a general education classroom. This number increased to the largest amount of students in 2007-08 with the significant increase of 32,209 students to a total of 185,401. Thirty-two thousand children, who were previously educated in the resource room, were given a chance to learn in a regular classroom setting and perform on grade-level (TEA, 2009b).

This number decreased in the 2008-2009 school year by about 1300 students. This decrease may be due to school districts striving to meet state requirements of performance as opposed to the federal requirements of AYP. Accountability intricacies of PBMAS and AYP may influence districts to even "game the system" to some extent.

Students Passing Reading/ELA TAKS

As a general statement, when the number of students receiving special services were allowed more access to the general education classroom, the total number of students meeting the Reading and ELA TAKS standard increased. In the school year of 2007-08, the number of students in the general education classroom increased by 32,209 from the 2003-04 school year. These students were allowed access to the general education curriculum and 49,424 more of them were successful in passing the TAKS Reading or ELA assessment.

Students Passing Math TAKS

As with the reading scores, the total number of students meeting the Mathematics TAKS standard increased as well. As the number of students in the general education classrooms increased from 153,192 in 2003 to the largest student population in 2007-08, the number of students passing the TAKS in the area of math increased by 26,761 students. Access to the general education curriculum provided an opportunity for 26,761 more students to experience success.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based upon the results from this study, students receiving special education services who are in the general education classroom more than 80% of the school day are improving academically in reference to state mandated test results. The number of students with disabilities in the general education classroom trends with the number of students with disabilities meeting the state standards for both Reading/ELA and the Mathematics TAKS assessment. The push of NCLB, monitored by the federal guidelines of AYP, to provide access to the general education curriculum may be helping to close the academic achievement gap. When the instructional arrangement changed for the 2008-2009 and the 2009-10 school year, and the number of students receiving special education services leveled off, the number of students passing the TAKS also decreased. This short trend however could be related to the testing program itself.

For those stakeholders who question inclusion, the results of this study, while general in nature, may indicate a new level of success for students in an inclusionary setting. Texas has raised the standards for students with disabilities and in the broad picture we see increased success. While many considerations come into play when determining educational placement for students, it is important to consider the overall success of these students.

Finally, now schools need to meet the challenge in the classrooms. Spady (1998) contends that focusing on outcomes creates an inevitable need for educators to accommodate for the differences in learning rates. Rising standards and inclusionary placement have benefited many Texas children. While a continuum of placement is still important, our mantra should remain “all students can learn” when making these vital decisions.

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