

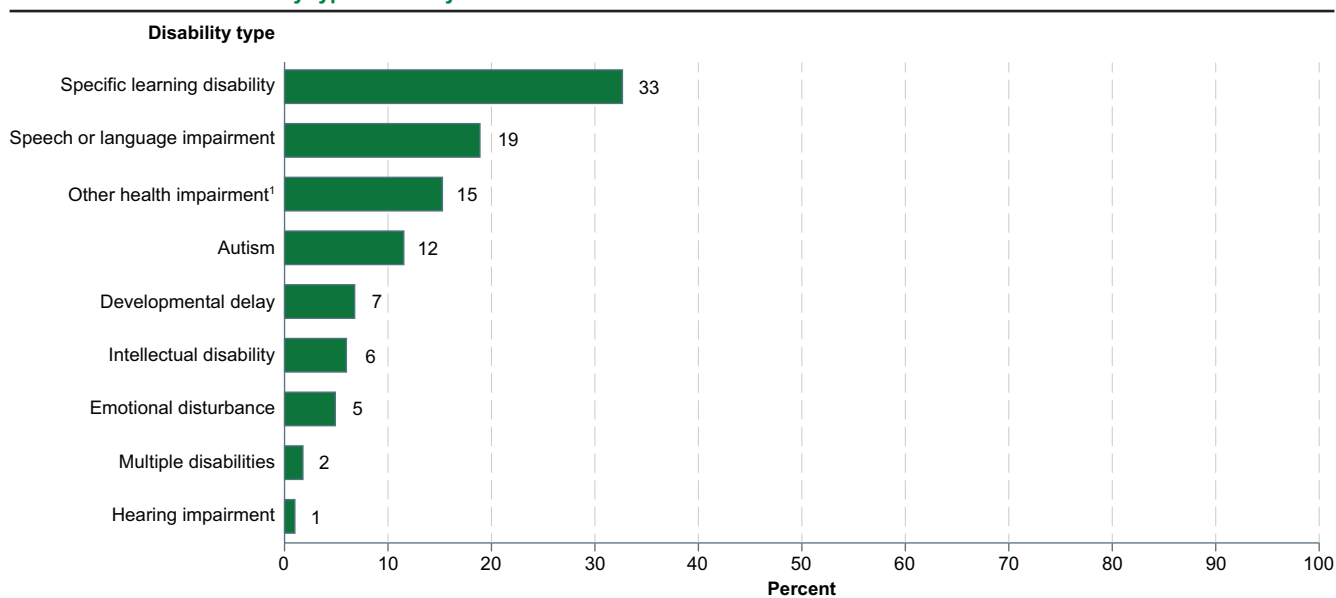
Students With Disabilities

In 2020–21, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.2 million, or 15 percent of all public school students. Among students receiving special education services, the most common category of disability was specific learning disabilities (33 percent).

Enacted in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), formerly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandates the provision of a free and appropriate public school education for eligible students ages 3-21. Eligible students are those identified by a team of professionals as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance and as being in need of special education and related services. Data collection activities to monitor compliance with IDEA began in 1976. From school year 2009-10 through 2020-21, the number of students ages 3-21 who received special education services under IDEA increased

from 6.5 million, or 13 percent of total public school enrollment, to 7.2 million, or 15 percent of total public school enrollment.¹ In fall 2020, after the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, overall enrollment in public schools was 3 percent lower than in fall 2019 (see [Public School Enrollment](#)). Meanwhile, the number of students receiving IDEA services was about 1 percent lower in 2020-21 than in 2019-20. This was the first drop in the number of students receiving IDEA services since 2011-12. However, the percentage of students who were served under IDEA was higher in 2020-21 (15 percent) than in 2019-20 (14 percent), continuing the upward trend.

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of students ages 3–21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), by selected disability type: School year 2020–21



¹ Other health impairments include having limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems such as a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, or diabetes.

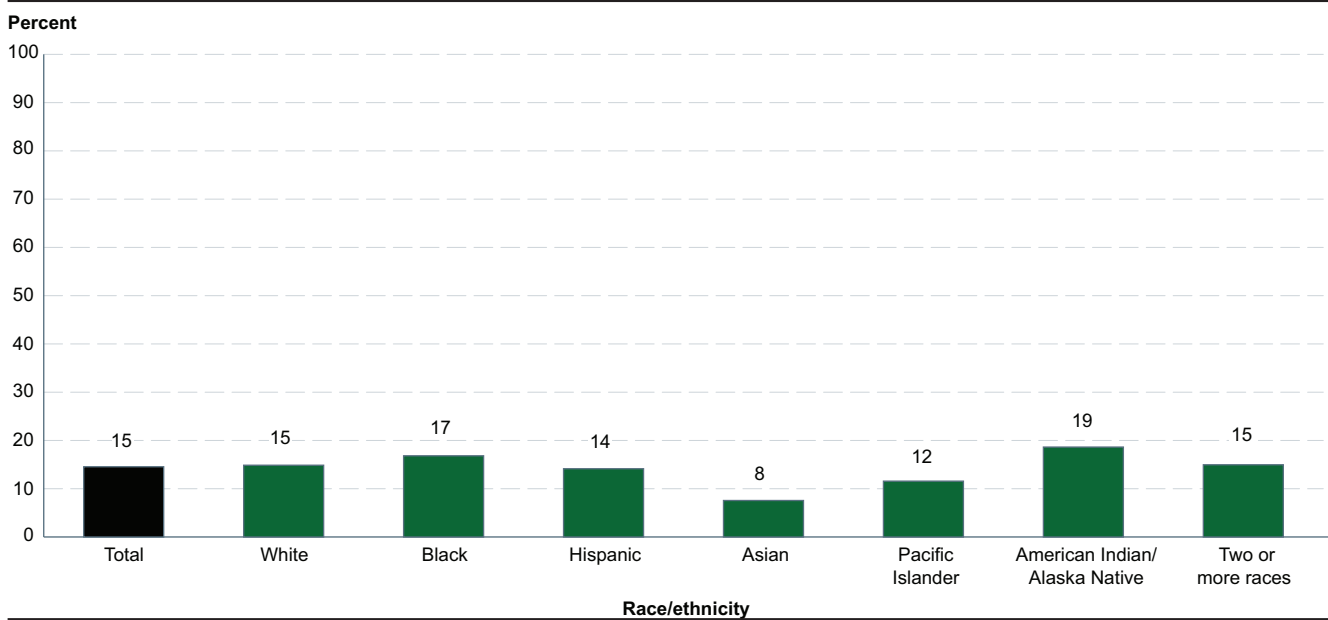
NOTE: Data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia only. Orthopedic impairment, visual impairment, traumatic brain injury, and deaf-blindness are not shown because they each account for less than 0.5 percent of students served under IDEA. Due to categories not shown, detail does not sum to 100 percent. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database. Retrieved February 25, 2022, from <https://data.ed.gov/dataset/idea-section-618-data-products>. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 204.30.

Among students who received special education services under IDEA in school year 2020-21, the category of disabilities with the largest reported percentage of students was “specific learning disabilities.” A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Thirty-three percent of all students who received special education services had specific learning disabilities, 19 percent had speech or language impairments,² and 15 percent had other health impairments (including having limited

strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems such as a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, or diabetes). Students with autism, developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbances each accounted for between 5 and 12 percent of students served under IDEA. Students with multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, and deaf-blindness each accounted for 2 percent or less of those served under IDEA.

Figure 2. Percentage of students ages 3–21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), by race/ethnicity: School year 2020–21



NOTE: Based on the preliminary total public school enrollment in prekindergarten through grade 12 by race/ethnicity. Although data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia, data limitations result in inclusion of a small (but unknown) number of students from other jurisdictions. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database. Retrieved February 25, 2022, from <https://data.ed.gov/dataset/idea-section-618-data-products>; and National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education,” 2020-21 preliminary. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 204.50.

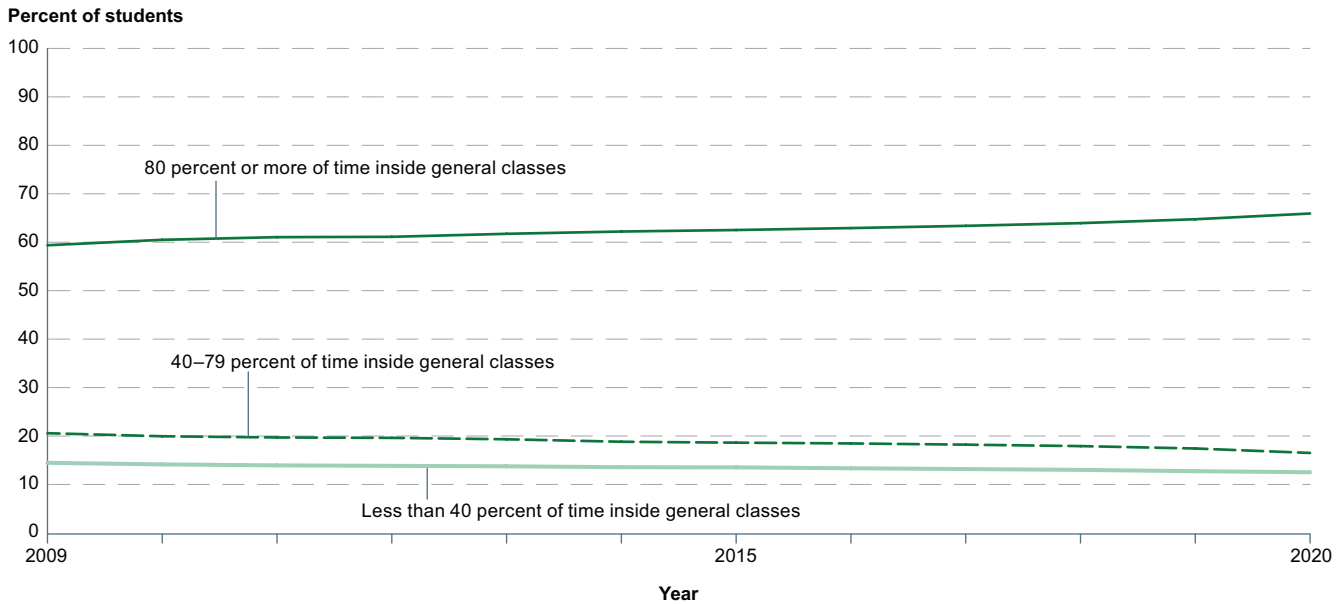
In school year 2020-21, the percentage of students served under IDEA was highest for American Indian/Alaska Native students (19 percent) and Black students (17 percent). The percentage was lowest for Pacific Islander students (12 percent) and Asian students (8 percent).

The percentage distribution of students receiving special education services for various types of disabilities differed by race/ethnicity in school year 2020-21. For most racial/ethnic groups, specific learning disabilities and speech or language impairments were the two most common types of disabilities, accounting for at least 42 percent of students receiving IDEA services. Among Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students ages 3-21, specific learning disabilities and speech or language impairments together accounted for more than 50 percent of those who received special education services in school year 2020-21. For Asian students, in contrast, although these two disabilities accounted for 42 percent of students receiving IDEA services, the

most common disability for Asian students was autism (27 percent). The percentage of students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds receiving IDEA services due to autism ranged from 7 to 12 percent.

Data on special education services for males and females are available only for school-age students,³ rather than students ages 3-21. Among those school-age students enrolled in public schools in school year 2020-21, a higher percentage of male students (18 percent) than of female students (10 percent) received special education services under IDEA. In addition, the percentage distribution of school-age students who received various types of special education services in 2020-21 differed by sex. For example, the percentage of students served under IDEA who received services for specific learning disabilities was higher for female students (42 percent) than for male students (31 percent), while the percentage who received services for autism was higher for male students (15 percent) than for female students (6 percent).

Figure 3. Among school-age students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), percentage who spent various amounts of time inside general classes: Fall 2009 through fall 2020



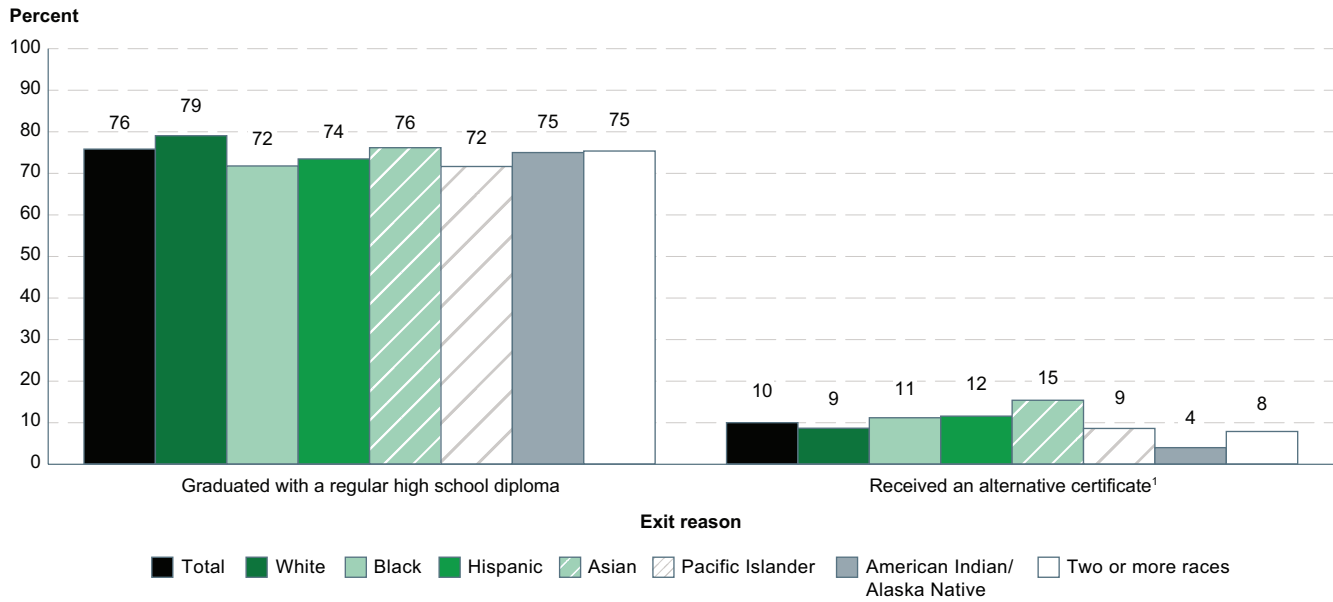
NOTE: Data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia only. For fall 2009 through fall 2018, school-age children include children ages 6 through 21. Due to changes in reporting requirements in the fall 2019 data collection, the number of 6- to 21-year-olds served may include some 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten. Starting in the fall 2020 data collection, school-age children include 6- to 21-year-olds and 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database. Retrieved February 25, 2022, from <https://data.ed.gov/dataset/idea-section-618-data-products-state-level-data-files>. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 204.60.

Educational environment data are also available for school-age students served under IDEA. Ninety-five percent of school-age students served under IDEA in fall 2020 were enrolled in regular schools. Three percent of students served under IDEA were enrolled in separate schools (public or private) for students with disabilities; 2 percent were placed in regular private schools;⁴ and less than 1 percent each were homebound or in hospitals, in separate residential facilities (public or private), or in correctional facilities. Among all school-age students served under IDEA, the percentage who spent 80 percent or more of their time in general classes in regular schools increased from 59 percent in fall 2009 to 66 percent in fall 2020.⁵ In contrast, during the same period, the percentage of students who spent 40 to 79 percent of the school day in general classes decreased from 21 to 17 percent, and the percentage of students who spent less than 40 percent of their time in general classes decreased from 15 to 13 percent. From 2019 to 2020, changes in the percentages of students who spent various amounts of time in general classes reflected the overall trends between 2009 and 2020.

In fall 2020, the percentage of students served under IDEA who spent 80 percent or more of the school day in general classes was highest for students with speech or language impairments (88 percent). Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of students with specific learning disabilities (75 percent), developmental delays (69 percent), other health impairments (69 percent), and visual impairments (69 percent) spent 80 percent or more of the school day in general classes. Less than one-third of students with deaf-blindness (28 percent), intellectual disabilities (19 percent), and multiple disabilities (15 percent) spent 80 percent or more of the school day in general classes.

Data are also available for students ages 14-21 served under IDEA who exited school⁶ during school year 2019-20. Approximately 428,000 students ages 14-21 served under IDEA exited school in 2019-20: 76 percent graduated with a regular high school diploma, 13 percent “dropped out,”⁷ 10 percent received an alternative certificate,⁸ 1 percent reached the maximum age⁹ to receive special education services, and less than one-half of 1 percent died.

Figure 4. Among students ages 14–21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) who exited school, percentage who exited for selected reasons, by race/ethnicity: School year 2019–20



¹ Received a certificate of completion, modified diploma, or some similar document, but did not meet the same standards for graduation as those for students without disabilities. Includes 96 students from two states who exited an educational program through receipt of an alternate diploma.
NOTE: Data in this figure are for the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Bureau of Indian Education, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, the Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Section 618 Data Products: State Level Data Files. Retrieved February 25, 2022, from <https://data.ed.gov/dataset/idea-section-618-data-products-state-level-data-files>. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 219.90.

Among students ages 14-21 served under IDEA who exited school in school year 2019-20, the percentages who graduated with a regular high school diploma, received an alternative certificate, and “dropped out” differed by race/ethnicity. The percentage of exiting students who graduated with a regular high school diploma was highest for White students (79 percent) and lowest for Black and Pacific Islander students (72 percent each). The percentage of exiting students who received an alternative certificate was highest for Asian students (15 percent) and lowest for American Indian/Alaska Native students (4 percent). The percentage of exiting students who “dropped out” was highest for American Indian/Alaska Native students (20 percent) and lowest for Asian students (6 percent).

Among students ages 14-21 served under IDEA who exited school in school year 2019-20, the percentages

who graduated with a regular high school diploma, received an alternative certificate, and dropped out also differed by type of disability. The percentage of exiting students who graduated with a regular high school diploma was highest for students with speech or language impairments (89 percent) and lowest for students with multiple disabilities (44 percent). The percentage of exiting students who received an alternative certificate was highest for students with intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities (34 percent and 33 percent, respectively) and lowest for students with speech or language impairments (3 percent). The percentage of exiting students who dropped out was highest for students with emotional disturbances (27 percent) and lowest for students with deaf-blindness (3 percent).

Endnotes:

¹ Totals presented in this indicator include imputations for states for which data were unavailable. See reference tables in the *Digest of Education Statistics* for more information. Data for students ages 3-21 and school-age students served under IDEA are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia only. The number of children served as a percentage of total enrollment is based on total public school enrollment in prekindergarten through grade 12. Enrollment data for 2020-21 are preliminary.

² Speech or language impairment is defined as a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

³ Starting in the 2020-21 data collection, school-age students include 6- to 21-year-olds and 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten.

⁴ Refers to students who are enrolled by their parents or guardians in regular private schools and have their basic education paid for through private resources but receive special education services at public expense.

⁵ For fall 2009 through fall 2018, school-age students include students ages 6-21. Due to changes in reporting requirements in the fall 2019 data collection, the number of 6- to 21-year-olds served may include some 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten in that year. Starting in the fall 2020 data collection, school-age

students include 6- to 21-year-olds and 5-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten.

⁶ Data for students ages 14-21 served under IDEA who exited school are for the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Bureau of Indian Education, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, the Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

⁷ "Dropped out" is defined as students who were enrolled at some point in the reporting year, were not enrolled at the end of the reporting year, and did not exit for any of the other reasons described.

⁸ Refers to students who received a certificate of completion, modified diploma, or some similar document but did not meet the same standards for graduation as those for students without disabilities. In 2019-20, the number of students who received an alternative certificate includes 96 students from two states who exited an educational program through receipt of an alternate diploma.

⁹ Each state determines its maximum age for receiving special education services. At the time these data were collected, the maximum age across states generally ranged from 20 to 22 years old.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, tables 204.30, 204.50, 204.60, and 219.90

Related indicators and resources: [Disability Rates and Employment Status by Educational Attainment](#) [*The Condition of Education 2017 Spotlight*]; [English Learners in Public Schools](#); [Students with Disabilities](#) [*Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*]

Glossary: Disabilities, children with; Enrollment; High school completer; High school diploma; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); Private school; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group; Regular school