

Performance Audit of Special Education: Service Delivery and Access

Legislative Auditor's conclusion

Districts meet state and federal timelines for deciding whether students qualify for special education.

Coordinated implementation of six strategies across all school districts could increase inclusion for students receiving special education.

Key points

- Federal law and state rules dictate how school districts decide whether students qualify for special education.
- Special education enrollment has grown faster than general education. It has approached pre-pandemic figures.
- Once parents give consent, districts complete 92% of evaluations for special education within the state requirement of 35 school days.
- In 2022-23, two-thirds of students who received special education were served in general education classrooms at least 80% of the time.
- National experts identify six strategies to increase the number of students served in general education classrooms. Washington uses elements of these strategies, but implementation is not coordinated across all districts statewide.
- The Legislature has not explicitly set a public policy objective for inclusion.

Student refers to students who receive special education services unless the text indicates otherwise.

Inclusion means serving a student in general education classrooms as much as possible based on their unique needs.

Recommendation

If the Legislature wants to improve inclusion, it should state its public policy objective.

If the Legislature sets an objective for inclusion, it could direct the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to set performance metrics, develop a plan, and identify resource needs and options to achieve the objective.

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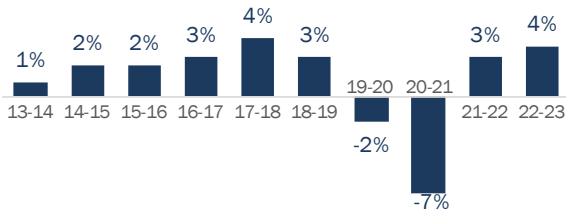
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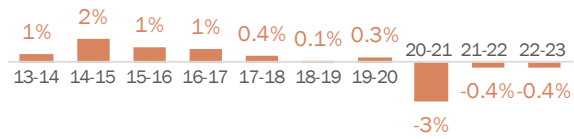
Full Report leg.wa.gov/jlarc/AuditAndStudyReports

The annual growth rate for special education has outpaced general education

2022-23 special education enrollment: 184,000
14% total growth



2022-23 general education enrollment: 973,000
1% total growth



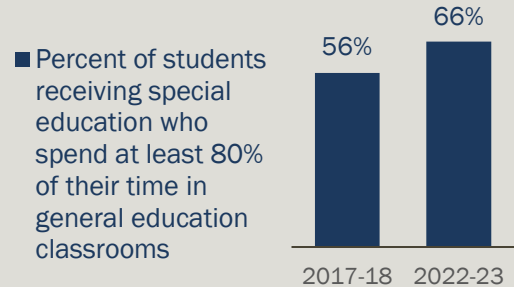
Districts complete 92% of evaluations for special education on time

- Once parents gave consent, districts must complete evaluations within 35 school days.
- Timeliness did not vary significantly by district, disability type, economic status, or housing status.



The Legislature has not specified its policy objective for inclusion

- Washington ranks 37th among all states for inclusion.
- OSPI's goal is to have 69% of students who receive special education spend at least 80% of their time in general education classrooms by November 2025.
- Parts of the statutory funding formula for special education encourage inclusion.



National experts recommend implementing and aligning six strategies across all districts to improve inclusion

1. **Increase opportunities for young children with disabilities** (ages 3-5) to be with their nondisabled peers.
2. **Offer three tiers of support** for all students who struggle with academics and/or behavioral challenges.
3. Train current teachers and pre-service teachers to **use practices with demonstrated success**.
4. **Use instructional technology** to increase accessibility and improve student outcomes.
5. Design learning materials and activities to **allow for multiple means of engagement and expression**.
6. **Enhance training, coaching, and mentoring** of administrators, principals, and other school leaders.

OSPI and school districts use many of these strategies, but not in a coordinated or consistent manner

The lack of implementation across all districts limits the reach and impact of the strategies.