

# Trends in the Educational Placement of Students With Intellectual Disability in the United States Over the Past 40 Years

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## Abstract

In 1975, federal law mandated that children with disabilities be educated in their least restrictive environment, or alongside peers without disabilities in general education classrooms to the maximum extent appropriate. More than 40 years later, I investigated how national trends in educational placement have changed over time for students with intellectual disability. Specifically, I examined the degree placements have trended toward less restrictive environments. I found historical trends of incremental progress toward less restrictive settings, but no evidence of such progress in recent years. Furthermore, most students were educated predominantly in segregated settings every year. I discuss how these findings relate to previous studies, as well as implications for individualized education program teams and advocates for educational inclusion.

**Key Words:** *least restrictive environment; intellectual disability; inclusion; educational placement*

In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), mandating that all public schools provide educational services to children and youth with disabilities, including children with intellectual disability (ID). The law was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004.

Throughout its 40-year history, an important concept in this legislation has been least restrictive environment (LRE), or an aim to educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms alongside peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. In the original 1975 version, EHA stated that “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities... [should be] educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such

that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” (EHA, 1975, sec. 1412). In 2004, IDEIA even more strongly emphasized a preference for placement in general education classrooms, stating that “the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible” (IDEIA, sec. 601).

Decisions about the educational placement of individual students are made by an individualized education program (IEP) team. The IDEIA requires that this team include the child’s parents, at least one general education teacher, at least one special education teacher, a representative of the local educational agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise (e.g., related service personnel), and (whenever appropriate) the student with a disability. This team must consider the unique educational needs of a students with a disability, consider the degree which these needs

might be met in a general education classroom, and identify alternative placements if and when those needs cannot be met in a general education classroom. There is a continuum of placements that IEP teams can consider. These placements range from full inclusion (i.e., the student spends the entire school day in a general education classroom) to no inclusion (i.e., the student with ID spends the entire school day in a self-contained special classroom that only serves students with disabilities). Intermediate options involve a student spending some, but not all, of the school day in a self-contained special education classroom.

Making these decisions can be difficult, and involves weighing the potential benefits of inclusive education against education in a self-contained setting. Scholars have made competing arguments about the potential impact of these placements on student outcomes. Some scholars argue that grouping children with similar abilities in a self-contained special education classroom can allow for more focused and intensive intervention (Kauffman, Landrum, Mock, Sayeski, & Sayeski, 2005). They argue that there are limits to a general education teacher's ability to differentiate instruction, and that students with the most diverse needs might not be well served in general education classrooms. Advocates for inclusion counter that evidence-based practices can be effectively delivered in general education settings (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008/2009; Taub, McCord, & Ryndak, 2017). They support this argument by presenting evidence that students with ID—even those with very severe levels of impairment—can make progress in general education classrooms. Indeed, when educated in general education classrooms, students with severe disabilities can learn academic content (e.g., Coyne, Pisha, Dalton, Zeph, & Smith, 2012), improve adaptive behavior and functional skills (e.g., McDonnell et al., 2003), and build social competence and develop friendships with peers (e.g., Carter et al., 2016). Related to this point, they argue that without access to general education teachers with expert content knowledge and opportunities to learn and practice communication and social skills with students without disabilities, it is impossible for students with disabilities to fully access the general education curriculum (Jackson et al., 2008/2009).

Advocates of inclusion (including me), hope that schools will increasingly deliver high-quality instruction to students with ID in general

education classrooms. This does not mean that the ultimate goal is for all students with ID to spend the entire school day in a general education classroom. Rather, the goal is to provide an individualized high-quality education that promotes optimal outcomes for each student with ID. IEP teams should continue to make individualized decisions about how to include a given student to “the maximum degree appropriate.” However, given that general education classrooms are the best context for accessing the general education curriculum and practicing social skills (Carter, Bottema-Beutel, & Brock, 2014; Jackson et al., 2008/2009; Taub, et al., 2017), “the maximum degree appropriate” should involve at least *some* time in general education classrooms for all students. Furthermore, students from other disability groups have been increasingly included in general education classrooms (e.g., students with learning disabilities; McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004) and have experienced very positive educational outcomes (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Therefore, there is reason to believe that similar progress might be possible for students with ID.

It is not clear whether schools have increasingly placed students with ID in less restrictive placements, especially in recent years. Although the United States government collects data annually that can be used to gauge progress toward less restrictive educational placements for students with ID, analysis of this data has somewhat limited. I only identified five publications by three different research groups on changes in placement patterns over time for students with ID. McLeskey, Henry, & Hodges (1999) examined educational placement of students with disabilities in two different school years, and separated their analysis by disability group. They found that between 1988 and 1995, there was an increase in the proportion of students with ID who spent longer amounts of time in general education classrooms. Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, and Rentz (2006) analyzed educational placement data for students with ID between 1989 and 2000. They found trends toward fewer students being placed in separate classes and schools, and more students being placed in general education classrooms for part or most of the school day.

Smith (2007) focused on state-level educational placement data for students with ID from three different school years (i.e., 1992–1993, 1997–1998, and 2002–2003). Smith concluded

that the proportion of students with ID who spent 80% or more the school day in general education settings increased between 1992 and 1998, but decreased between 1998 and 2003. In a later analysis, Smith (2010) sampled state-level data for different years within a similar time period (i.e., 1989–1990, 1994–1995, 1998–1999, and 2003–2004). He also analyzed national trends in placement between 1986 and 2004. Smith again focused solely on the category of students who spent 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms. Similarly, he found that the proportion of students in this category initially increased (peaking in 1998–1999) and then declined. More recently, Kurth, Morningstar, and Kozleski (2014) analyzed 3 years of educational placement data for students with low-incidence disabilities (including ID) in the most restrictive educational settings. They found the proportions of students with ID placed in separate schools, residential placements, and homebound/hospital placements remained unchanged between 2007 and 2009.

Although these five studies make important contributions to better understanding trends in the educational placement of students with ID, they have some key limitations. First, all of the analyses focused on a relatively small sample of time, ranging 2 to 10 years. Second, several analyses focused on specific placements in isolation. For example, Smith (2007) focused only on students who spent 80% or more of the school day in a general education classroom, and Kurth et al. (2014) focused only on students in the most restrictive educational settings. Focusing on only a subset of the eight educational placement categories might obscure trends and shifts between different placement categories. Third, the most recent data in any of these analyses is from 2009 (i.e., Kurth et al., 2014), and more recent data are now available that could better inform current practice.

Therefore, I designed the present study both to update these prior studies and address their limitations. In order to more fully analyze longitudinal trends specifically for students with ID, I obtained national educational placement data for this population for every year over the past 40 years (i.e., 1976 to present). In order to provide a complete picture of how educational placements have changed over time, I included students with ID across all placement categories in my analysis. This descriptive study aims to address

the following research question: How has the educational placement of students with ID changed in the United States over the past 40 years? Specifically, has the proportion of students served in less restrictive environments increased over time?

## Method

### Acquisition of Data

I acquired educational placement data of students with ID in the United States from 1976–2014 in three different ways. First, I downloaded data spreadsheets for 2005–2014 from the U.S. Department of Education website (2017). Second, I contacted the IDEA Data Center to request additional data that was not posted to the website, and they provided data spreadsheets for 1990–2004. Third, for all years prior to 1990, I manually transferred data from digital copies of EHA or IDEA Annual Reports to Congress into a computer spreadsheet. I downloaded reports for 1976–1989 from the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) with the exception of 1983, which was not properly archived to ERIC. I acquired the 1983 report from Hathitrust Digital Library ([www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org)). At least some relevant text in three reports archived on ERIC (i.e., 1980, 1982, and 1985) was illegible due to poor scanning of hardcopies; I downloaded alternate copies for these years from the Hathitrust Digital Library.

### Variables and Definitions

I focused on the proportions of students 6 to 21 years old with ID who were placed in each federally reported educational environment. This group of students includes only those with a primary label of intellectual disability; students who might later receive a primary label of intellectual disability (i.e., younger students with a label of developmental delay), or students with a secondary label of intellectual disability, were not included. Although reports prior to 2011 used the label of mental retardation, I have chosen to use the updated term—intellectual disability—throughout this article. For 1984–1986, the Annual Report to Congress only included data across students 3 to 21 years old with disabilities; therefore, data for these 3 years represents the larger group of students 3 to 21.

**Students served outside of regular public schools.** Environments outside of regular public

schools include separate schools, residential facilities, correctional facilities, homebound/hospital environments, or parental placement in a private schools. For some years, these categories were not mutually exclusive. For example, the number of students served in a correctional facility or parentally placed in a private school represented a duplicate count of children who were also counted as being served in a separate school. Because of these differences in data reporting, I collapsed all students served outside of regular public schools into a single category that does not duplicate counts and can be compared across all years.

**Students served within regular public schools.** Educational placement categories and their definitions for students served within regular public schools have changed over time since the first EHA Annual Report to Congress in 1979. In some cases, names of categories have changed but their definitions have functionally remained unchanged. In two specific points in time (i.e., 1984 and 1990), definitions of categories did functionally change. According to the Data Accountability Center at the U.S. Department of Education (2012), data collected after each change should not be directly compared to data collected prior to the change for students placed within regular school buildings. Therefore, I analyzed data separately for three time periods. In the following paragraph, I provide federally reported categories and definitions for students served within regular public schools for each of these time periods (i.e., 1976–1983, 1984–1989, and 1990–2014). Definitions were obtained from the IDEA Data Collection History published by the U.S. Department of Education (2012).

In 1976–1983, placement categories included general education class and separate class. These categories were not operationally defined. In 1984–1989, placement categories included general education class (i.e., students receiving special education and related services for less than 21% of the school day), resource room (i.e., students receiving special education and related services for 21%–60% of the school day), and separate class (i.e., students receiving special education and related services for more than 60% of the school day). In 1990–2014, placement categories included students served at least 80% of the school day in general education classrooms, 40% to 79% of the school day in general education classrooms, and less than 40% of the school day in general

education classrooms. These definitions differ from previous definitions in their emphasis on placement within or outside of a general education classroom (as opposed to the proportion of time receiving special education services, which may have been delivered within or outside of a general education classroom).

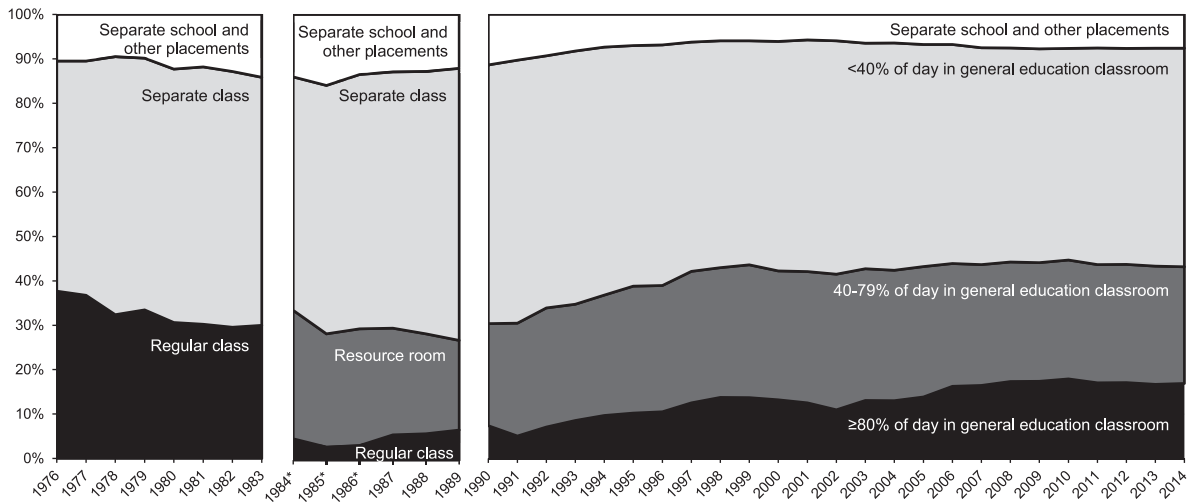
### Data Analysis

For each year, I divided the number of students with ID within each category by the total number of students with ID to calculate a percentage. I graphed the percentage of students in each category in each year in a stacked area graph (see Figure 1). I stacked categories from least to most restrictive so the reader can follow trend lines for combinations of categories. For example, across 1990–2014 there are three trend lines. The first, just above the first stacked category, represents students placed in general education classrooms for at least 80% of the school day. The second line, located along the top of the second stacked category, represents the sum of students placed in a general education classroom for 40% to 100% of the school day. The third trend line, located along the top of the third stacked category for 1990–2014, represents the sum of students placed in regular public schools. For 1990–2014, I identified the year that each trend line peaked, and the year in which there was the greatest year-to-year change.

### Results

Results are graphed in Figure 1. For precise counts and percentages of students in each placement category in each year, see Tables 1, 2, and 3. In 1976–1983, the proportion of students in less restrictive settings decreased over time. The proportion of students served in general education classrooms decreased from 37.7% in 1976 to 30.0% in 1983. The proportion of students served in regular public schools decreased from 90.9% in 1976 to 86.4% in 1983.

In 1984–1989, an overall trend is less clear. The proportion of students in general education classrooms started at 4.8% in 1984, trended down to 2.9% in 1985, and slowly trended upward to 6.8% in 1989. The combined proportion of students in general education classrooms and resource rooms trended downward from 33.6% in 1984 to 26.9% in 1989. The combined proportion of students in regular public schools



*Figure 1.* Proportion of students ages 6–21 receiving special education services under the label of intellectual disability in the United States by educational placement category between 1976 and 2014. Breaks in graph represent years in which definitions of placement categories were changed, and categories with new definitions cannot be directly compared to those with the old definitions. \*Data are not available for only students ages to 6–21; data reported include students 3–21.

increased slightly from 86.0% in 1984 to 87.9% in 1989. The category that increased most during this time period was for students placed in a separate class (i.e., 52.4% in 1984 to 61.1% in 1989), and the category that decreased most during this time period was for students placed in a resource room (i.e., 28.8% in 1984 to 20.1% in 1989).

In 1990–2014, the proportion of students in less restrictive placements initially increased and then plateaued. After an initial drop between 1990 and 1991, the proportion of students who spent at least 80% of the school day in general education

classrooms trended upward to 13.8% in 1998, trended slightly downward to 11.0% in 2002, trended upward to peak at 17.9% in 2010, and decreased slightly after that time to 16.9% in 2014. The proportion of students spending at least 40% of the school day in general education classrooms trended upward from 30.4% in 1990 to 43.6% in 1999, and then remained at a similar level through 2014; this proportion peaked in 2010 (i.e., 44.7%). The proportion of students served in regular public schools initially trended upward from

**Table 1**  
*Number and Percentage of Students With Intellectual Disability by Educational Placement 1976–1983*

Year	General Education Class		Separate Class		Separate School and Other Placements	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1976	349,579	37.7	480,895	51.8	97,243	10.5
1977	311,240	36.7	447,088	52.8	88,675	10.5
1978	269,290	32.4	483,179	58.1	78,971	9.5
1979	277,172	33.5	469,522	56.7	81,775	9.9
1980	244,024	30.6	455,131	57.1	98,255	12.3
1981	226,593	30.2	434,598	57.9	88,777	11.8
1982	216,358	29.6	421,624	57.6	94,116	12.9
1983	207,977	30.0	387,657	55.9	98,155	14.1

*Note.* Placement categories were not operationally defined prior to 1984. Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of students with intellectual disability in a given placement category by the total number of students with intellectual disability.

**Table 2**  
*Number and Percentage of Students With Intellectual Disability by Educational Placement 1985–1989*

Year	General Education Class		Resource Room		Separate Class		Separate School and Other Placements	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1984	33,712	4.8	202,615	28.8	368,107	52.4	98,467	14.0
1985	19,242	2.9	167,167	25.4	366,910	55.8	104,717	15.9
1986	21,236	3.3	169,217	26.2	369,071	57.1	86,927	13.4
1987	33,809	5.7	142,565	23.9	342,281	57.5	76,702	12.9
1988	33,825	5.9	128,171	22.4	336,457	58.9	72,991	12.8
1989	37,958	6.8	112,978	20.1	343,067	61.1	67,790	12.1

*Note.* General education class = students receiving special education and related services for less than 21% of the school day; resource room = students receiving special education and related services for 21–60 percent of the school day, and separate class = students receiving special education and related services for more than 60% of the school day. Separate school and other placements include students placed in public separate facilities, private separate facilities, public residential facilities, private residential facilities, and homebound/hospital environments. Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of students with intellectual disability in a given placement category by the total number of students with intellectual disability.

88.6% in 1990 to peak at 94.1% in 1999, and then slightly trended downward to 92.4% in 2014.

### Discussion

Federal law mandates that students with all disabilities, including ID, be educated alongside peers without disabilities in general education classrooms to the maximum extent appropriate. It is unclear from previously published research whether schools have trended toward placing these students in less restrictive environments over time. In this study, I analyzed federal data from the past 40 years to determine how educational placement has changed over time for students with ID. I found historical trends of incremental progress toward less restrictive settings, but no evidence of such progress in recent years. These findings extend the literature in a number of important ways.

First, although some progress was made between 1990 and 2010, U.S. schools have not consistently progressed toward serving children with ID in less restrictive environments. The most rapid progress toward inclusive placements was made in the 1990s, with more gradual progress in the 2000s, and a plateau between 2010 and 2014. This finding is consistent with previous findings, but places them in a broader context. For studies that focused on all placement categories across a small sample of time, the present study contextualizes their findings within a larger timespan. For example, Mcleskey et al. (1999) and Williamson et

al. (2006) identified a trend toward more inclusive placements in the 1990s; the present analysis shows that this trend only continued until 1999, when progress toward inclusion plateaued.

For studies that focused on a subset of placement categories, the present study contextualizes their findings relative to other placement categories and within a larger time span. For example, Smith (2007, 2010), found that the proportion of students placed in general education classrooms for 80% or more of the school day increased in the early 1990s and then decreased in the late 1990s and early 2000s. When one examines Figure 1, it is clear that Smith was focusing on a short-term trend that differs from the long-term trend. The decrease in this category between 1998 and 2002 was temporary, and was followed by a steady increase between 2002 and 2010. In addition, the number of students placed in general education classrooms for at least 40% of the school day between 1998 and 2002 was relatively steady. Therefore, it seems that the decrease in students in the  $\geq 80\%$  category can be explained by a temporary increase in the 40% to 79% category, and then this pattern reversed in subsequent years. Kurth et al. (2014) found that between 2007 and 2009, the proportion of students in the most restrictive placements remained unchanged. The present analysis shows that the proportion of students in the most restrictive placements increased between 1976 and 1985, decreased between 1985 and 2001, increased slightly between 2001 and 2007, and has

Table 3  
*Number and Percentage of Students With Intellectual Disability by Educational Placement 1990–2014*

Year	>80% of day in general education		40%–79% of day in general education		<40% of day in general education		Separate School and Other Placements	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1990	40,943	7.4	126,876	23.0	321,823	58.3	62,741	11.4
1991	26,732	5.1	134,235	25.4	312,402	59.2	54,337	10.3
1992	37,466	7.1	141,028	26.8	298,957	56.8	48,934	9.3
1993	47,317	8.6	144,298	26.2	314,669	57.0	45,469	8.2
1994	55,118	9.7	154,354	27.1	317,803	55.8	41,876	7.4
1995	60,189	10.3	167,587	28.5	318,291	54.2	41,028	7.0
1996	62,248	10.5	168,516	28.4	321,132	54.2	40,694	6.9
1997	75,172	12.6	177,136	29.6	309,384	51.7	37,197	6.2
1998	83,638	13.8	177,777	29.2	310,406	51.1	36,017	5.9
1999	83,784	13.7	182,854	29.9	308,643	50.5	36,238	5.9
2000	80,958	13.2	178,159	29.1	316,806	51.7	37,242	6.1
2001	75,951	12.6	178,635	29.5	315,670	52.2	34,729	5.7
2002	63,838	11.0	177,503	30.5	305,797	52.6	34,401	5.9
2003	72,713	13.1	164,764	29.7	282,155	50.8	35,930	6.5
2004	73,893	13.0	166,874	29.4	290,496	51.2	36,459	6.4
2005	75,590	13.9	160,186	29.4	272,728	50.0	37,005	6.8
2006	84,835	16.2	144,540	27.7	257,660	49.3	35,294	6.8
2007	81,877	16.4	135,607	27.2	242,937	48.8	37,335	7.5
2008	82,454	17.3	128,354	27.0	229,504	48.2	35,819	7.5
2009	80,337	17.4	123,102	26.7	222,160	48.2	35,738	7.7
2010	79,834	17.9	119,461	26.8	212,478	47.7	34,023	7.6
2011	73,432	17.0	114,872	26.6	210,257	48.8	32,591	7.6
2012	72,586	17.1	112,956	26.6	206,618	48.7	32,370	7.6
2013	69,675	16.7	111,215	26.6	205,027	49.1	31,653	7.6
2014	70,183	16.9	109,247	26.3	204,390	49.2	31,515	7.6

*Note.* Separate school and other placements include home, homebound/hospital environments, parental placement in private schools, separate schools, and residential facilities. Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of students with intellectual disability in a given placement category by the total number of students with intellectual disability.

changed little between 2007 and 2014. These findings bolster the case made by Kurth et al., who argued that a lack of change in placement rates demonstrate a lack of commitment to LRE. In fact, the proportion of students in the most restrictive environments increased between 2001 and 2007, and then never decreased.

Second, for every year in the past 40 years, the majority of students with ID were educated in restrictive environments in which they spent little or no time alongside peers without disabilities. Although the aim of this article is to focus on changes in educational placement over time, it is striking that across the past 40 years, 55.3% to 73.1% of students with ID spent

most or all of the school day in self-contained classrooms or schools. Given the legal mandate for students with disabilities to be placed in general education classrooms for the maximum extent appropriate, it is surprising that such a large proportion of students was consistently placed in restrictive settings.

One explanation is that IEP teams have made individualized decisions based on student needs, and they often decided these needs would be best met outside the general education classroom. Although this might be true in some cases, there is strong evidence that factors other than individual student characteristics also impact educational placement. Specifically, inclusion rates differ

dramatically across the United States in ways that cannot be explained by individual student characteristics (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Kurth, 2015; Smith, 2007). For example, 4.8% of students with ID in Illinois were placed in a general education classroom for 80% or more of the school day in 2014; in the same year, 64.9% of students in Iowa were placed similarly (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Put another way, students with ID in Iowa are 13.5 times more likely to spend most of the school day in a general education setting compared to students in the bordering state of Illinois. Large discrepancies are also evident within individual states. Brock and Schaefer (2015) found that urban school districts in Ohio were more restrictive than rural districts, and that the largest urban districts were the most restrictive. These large and systematic differences in placement cannot be explained by differences in student characteristics and needs; therefore, factors other than individual student characteristics must be driving educational placement. Scholars have speculated that these other factors might include school staff and administrator commitment to inclusion, family involvement and advocacy, socioeconomic status, and/or ethnic and racial diversity (Brock & Schaefer, 2015). There is not currently strong empirical evidence to pinpoint which of these factors is strongly associated with educational environments. However, making placement decisions based on *any* factor other than individual student needs is inconsistent with the legal mandate for LRE.

### Implications for Practice

Findings from this study have important implications for special education teachers, general education teachers, families, students, school administrators, related service personnel, and other individuals who might make up IEP teams. As these team members work together to make placement decisions, they should consider several guiding principles. First, in order to comply with the legal mandate of LRE, IEP teams should treat the general education classroom as the default educational placement unless there is a compelling reason why services could be delivered more effectively in a self-contained setting. Second, IEP teams should make placement decisions based solely on individual student support needs, and not on other factors (e.g., convenience or past precedent). Third, IEP team should be particularly cautious about placing students in separate

schools or self-contained settings for the entire school day. Given that general education classrooms are the best context for accessing the general education curriculum and practicing social skills, all students with ID could benefit from at least some time in general education classrooms (Carter, Bottema-Beutel, & Brock, 2014; Jackson et al., 2008/2009). Fourth, contrary to common concerns among some educators, there is no compelling evidence that the presence of students with severe disabilities in a general education classroom inhibits the academic progress of their peers without disabilities (Smith, 2010). On the contrary, there is evidence that when peers are strategically engaged in supporting students with ID, inclusion can improve the academic performance of both students with ID and their peers without disabilities (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1998). Therefore, IEP teams should not allow concerns about peer achievement to preclude opportunities for students with ID to be included in general education classrooms. Instead, they should address these concerns by using evidence-based practices such as peer support arrangements to promote inclusion that is beneficial for both students with ID and their peers without disabilities.

Findings from this study also have important implications for advocates of inclusion. The lack of progress in recent years toward more inclusive educational placements for students with ID is concerning. There are a number of possible solutions. For example, advocacy and non-profit organizations could improve efforts to educate families about the potential benefits of inclusion and their role in the development of their child's IEP. In addition, teacher educators and school administrators could improve their pre- and inservice preparation of teachers and paraprofessionals to provide high quality inclusive educational experiences for students with ID. There is evidence that once administrators and educators experience or observe positive examples of inclusion, they are much more likely to advocate for inclusive placements in the future (Praisner, 2003).

### Limitations and Future Directions for Research

Limitations to this study suggest avenues for future research. First, the definitions of intellectual disability has changed over time. Identification of students with ID has shifted from relying primarily



on an intellectual quotient to a dual emphasis on both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. In addition, researchers have observed that in recent years some children who previously would have had a primary educational label of intellectual disability now have a label of autism (Shattuck, 2006). As data accumulates for additional school years, researchers may be able to better discern if either of these factors might have played a role in educational placement trends. Second, the data in this analysis do not account for the quality of education within each placement. It is unclear the degree to which students received a high quality education in any environment. In future studies, researchers might investigate whether students in less restrictive placements typically receive high quality instruction and support that meets their individualized needs. This would likely involve observational measures to determine quality. In addition, researchers should continue to develop and test practices designed to promote optimal student outcomes in inclusive settings. Third, because this analysis focused on national trends, it is possible that regional or state trends were obscured. In future studies, researchers might investigate whether regional and state trends differ from national trends. Researchers have already found some geographic patterns of placement across and within states (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Kurth, 2015). Fourth, this analysis is descriptive, and does not answer questions about why little progress has been made toward more inclusive education in recent years. Some researchers have proposed reasonable explanations (e.g., increased emphasis on standardized testing; Smith, 2010), but more could be done to examine whether these hypotheses are supported by empirical evidence.

## Conclusion

Findings from this study show that over the past 40 years, most students with ID have been educated in restrictive settings, and although incremental progress has been made toward less restrictive settings in the past, there is no evidence of such progress in recent years. Furthermore, there is evidence that placement decisions are being made based on factors other than individual student characteristics and support needs. These trends should be concerning to advocates of inclusion. It is my hope that recent data are not indicative of a long-term trend, but instead a temporary setback within a larger pattern of

progress toward less restrictive educational settings for students with ID.

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