Students with Disabilities and Differentiated Assistance

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Under California's System of Support, differentiated assistance (DA) provides supports to eligible districts to boost student group performance levels. This brief describes the districts that were eligible for DA in 2019 based on the performance levels of their students with disabilities (SWD). It also analyzes how SWD performance on State Priority Areas (SPAs) and indicators factored into districts' eligibility for DA. Findings show that, among the 333 districts identified for DA, eligibility was driven, in part, by SWD performance for over half of those districts. These 187 districts were most frequently identified for DA based on SWD performance in SPAs 4 (Pupil Achievement) alongside 5 (Pupil Engagement). These results highlight intersectional challenges facing SWD—challenges that districts can address through their continuous improvement process.

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Introduction

Across California, about 12 percent of K–12 students in public education received special education services in 2018–19.[1] Under California's Statewide System of Support, a variety of supports are available for these students to promote their educational success. These supports range from generalized supports to differentiated assistance (DA), a support program customized to the needs of districts and aimed at addressing performance challenges.[2] Districts can qualify for DA based on how well their students with disabilities (SWD) perform on a set of multiple indicators ranging from achievement in math and English language arts (ELA) to chronic absence. The aim of this policy brief is to understand how the performance of a district's SWD factors into its designation for DA. This understanding can help focus a spotlight on the performance of SWD and areas where districts are in most need. Given the state's multiple indicators system, understanding the role of SWD performance in determining which districts are identified for DA helps reveal intersectional challenges and highlights opportunities to better serve SWD.

Eligibility for Differentiated Assistance and Students with Disabilities

How Districts Are Identified for Differentiated Assistance: An Overview

In order to understand how the performance of a district's SWD factors into its eligibility for DA, we need first to understand how districts are identified for DA using California's multiple indicators system. This involves classifying the performance of student groups, including SWD, on a set of indicators into status and change levels. These levels are then combined into color-coded performance levels that are used to determine which districts are identified for DA. Below, these aspects are described in more detail.

Indicators, status, and change. For each district, student groups are classified into status and change levels based on how well they performed on five indicators:

- English language arts (ELA) and math (Grades 3–8, 11)
- Graduation rate (Grades 9–12)
- Chronic absence rate (Grades K–8)
- Suspension rate (Grades K–12)
- College/Career readiness indicator (Grades 9–12)

Status levels (Very High; High; Medium; Low; Very Low) are based on a group's current year performance on the indicator. Change levels (Increased Significantly; Increased; Maintained; Declined; Declined Significantly) capture how much a group changed on the indicator from the prior year.

Color-coded performance levels. Status and change levels for each indicator are combined in a five-by-five table (Table 2) and a corresponding color is assigned to the intersection of each status and change level. Red represents the lowest performance category followed by Orange, Yellow, Green, and then Blue (the highest performance level).

Table 2. Five-by-Five Color Table and Color Coded Performance Levels

Status Levels	Change Levels: Declined Significantly from prior year	Declined from prior year	Maintained from prior year	Increased from prior year	Increased Significantly from prior year
Very High	Yellow	Green	Blue	Blue	Blue
High	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green	Blue
Medium	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green
Low	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Very Low	Red	Red	Red	Orange	Yellow

Note. Adapted from the 2019 California School Dashboard Technical Guide (p. 21).[4] Note that for indicators like chronic absence and suspension rates, the status categories are listed in reversed order.

Using performance colors to determine differentiated assistance. Table 3 shows how the performance colors are used to determine DA using the indicators and their alignment with four State Priority Areas (SPAs). One way a district can be identified for DA is if one or more student groups in a district has a Red performance level on an indicator for at least two of these four SPAs. For example, a district would qualify for DA if its SWD population was Red on chronic absence (Priority 5) and suspensions (Priority 6).

Table 3. State Priority Areas and Performance Colors Used to Determine Differentiated Assistance

State Priority Area	Indicators
Priority 4: Pupil Achievement	Red on both English language arts and math; or Red on English language arts or math and Orange on the other test (Grades 3–8, 11)
Priority 5: Pupil Engagement	Red on graduation rate indicator (Grades 9–12); or Red on chronic absence indicator (Grades K–8)
Priority 6: School Climate	Red on suspension rate indicator (Grades K–12)
Priority 8: Outcomes in a Broad Course of Study	Red on college/career indicator (Grades 9–12)

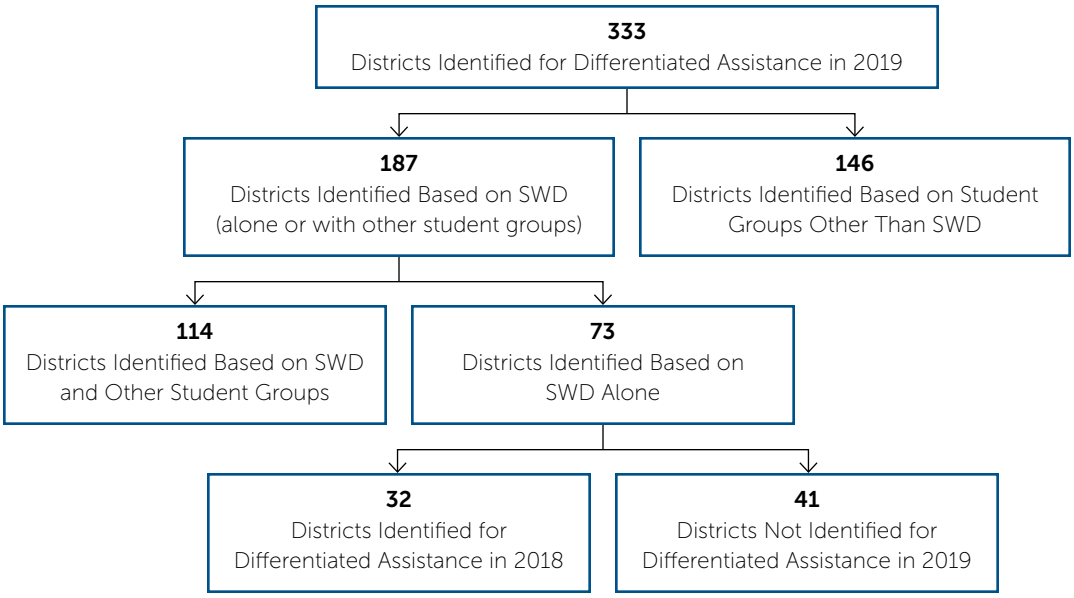
Note: The other SPAs used to determine DA are listed here: https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/leaproposedcrit.asp

Using these performance criteria, I investigate (a) the number of districts that were identified for DA in 2019 based on SWD performance levels; (b) how identification changed between 2018 and 2019; (c) how SWD performance on combinations of the four SPAs led to identification; and (d) a breakdown of how SWD performance on the specific indicators within priority areas led to identification. Finally, I describe the districtwide SWD performance on the indicators underlying DA. These analyses are based on the California Department of Education's (CDE) DA eligibility and California School Dashboard data files.[3]

Performance of Students with Disabilities and Identification for Differentiated Assistance

Of the 333 districts who were identified for DA in 2019 (among 1002 county offices of education and districts), 187 (56 percent) were eligible for assistance because SWD in the district were Red on indicators in at least two SPAs. Many of these districts were also eligible for assistance based on the performance of additional student groups such as socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. As shown in Figure 1, of the 187 districts, 114 were eligible based on additional student groups while the remaining 73 were eligible based solely on SWD. Of those 73 districts, 32 received DA in 2018 while the remaining 41 were not identified for assistance in 2018.

Figure 1. Districts Eligible for Differentiated Assistance in 2019



Finally, the performance levels of some districts' SWD changed sufficiently enough over time that the districts moved out of identification for DA. For example, between 2018 and 2019, of the 78 districts that were identified for DA in 2018 based on the performance levels of their SWD alone, close to half (37 districts) were no longer identified for assistance in 2019. The remaining 41 districts continued to be eligible for DA.

Breakdown by Four State Priority Areas

Table 4 provides a breakdown of SPA combinations among the 187 districts that were identified for DA in 2019 based, in part, on their SWD performance levels. The most frequent combination is Priority 4 (Pupil Achievement) alongside Priority 5 (Pupil Engagement), relevant to about one in every five of these districts. About 63 percent of these districts were identified for assistance based on Priority 4 alongside another priority area or areas. Also, 40 percent of these districts were eligible for assistance based on Priority 8 (Outcomes in a Broad Course of Study) alongside another priority area or areas.

Table 4. Districts Qualifying for Differentiated Assistance in 2019 Based on Performance Levels of SWD, Breakdown by Four State Priority Areas

State Priority Areas				# of Districts	Percent
4: Pupil Achievement	5: Pupil Engagement	6: School Climate	8: Outcomes in a Broad Course of Study		
ELA and Math	*Graduation Rate or Chronic Absence*	*Suspension*	*College and Career Readiness*		
■	■			35	18.7
	■		■	33	17.7
■		■		30	16.0
	■	■		24	12.8
■	■	■		17	9.1
■	■		■	14	7.5
■			■	13	7.0
		■	■	7	3.7
	■	■	■	5	2.7
■	■	■	■	5	2.7
■		■	■	4	2.1
			Total	**187**	**100**

Note. ■ denotes a district was eligible for DA based on the performance of their SWD in that specific priority area.

Breakdown by Indicators within State Priority Areas

To further understand how performance on specific indicators affected whether districts were identified for DA, Table 5 provides a detailed breakdown. Over two thirds of districts (125 out of 187) were identified for assistance due, in part, to Red performance on suspensions among SWD. About one in two districts (101 out of 187) were identified for assistance due, in part, to Red on chronic absence. Also, nearly a quarter of districts (49 out of 187), were eligible based on a combination of Red on chronic absence and achievement. Of the 118 districts that were eligible due to ELA and math performance, 56 districts had Red performance levels in both subjects. Finally, 81 districts had SWD who were Red on college and career readiness; of those, 33 districts were also Red on chronic absence.

Table 5. Districts Eligible for Differentiated Assistance in 2019 Based on Performance of Students with Disabilities, Breakdown by Indicators within State Priority Areas.

State Priority Areas						# of Districts
4: Pupil Achievement		5: Pupil Engagement		6: School Climate	8: Outcomes in a Broad Course of Study	
ELA	*Math*	*Graduation*	*Chronic Absence*	*Suspension*	*College and Career Readiness*	
			●	●		24
			●	●	●	19
●	●			●		13
▲	●			●		12
●	●		●	●		11
●	●		●			11
▲	●		●			8
●	▲		●			8
		●		●	●	7
		●	●	●	●	7
●	●				●	7
				●	●	7
▲	●	●			●	6
▲	●				●	5
●	▲			●		5
●	●	●				4
●	●	●		●	●	3
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●	●	●			●	3
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●	●	●	●			1
●	▲				●	1
			●	●	●	1
		●	●	●	●	1
					Total	**187**

Note. ● denotes Red performance level on indicator; ▲ denotes Orange performance level on indicator.

Performance of Students with Disabilities on Multiple Indicators

To examine the districtwide performance of SWD on each indicator and how SWD performance compares to students overall, Figures 2, 3, and 4 display scatterplots of change from 2018–19 against status in 2019 for each district by indicator. Each plot displays the color-coded performance levels corresponding to status-change combinations shown in Table 2. For each plot, status (the x-axis) is measured in the relevant metric for each indicator while change (the y-axis) is the difference between the current and prior year status values. How each indicator is measured is summarized in Table 6.

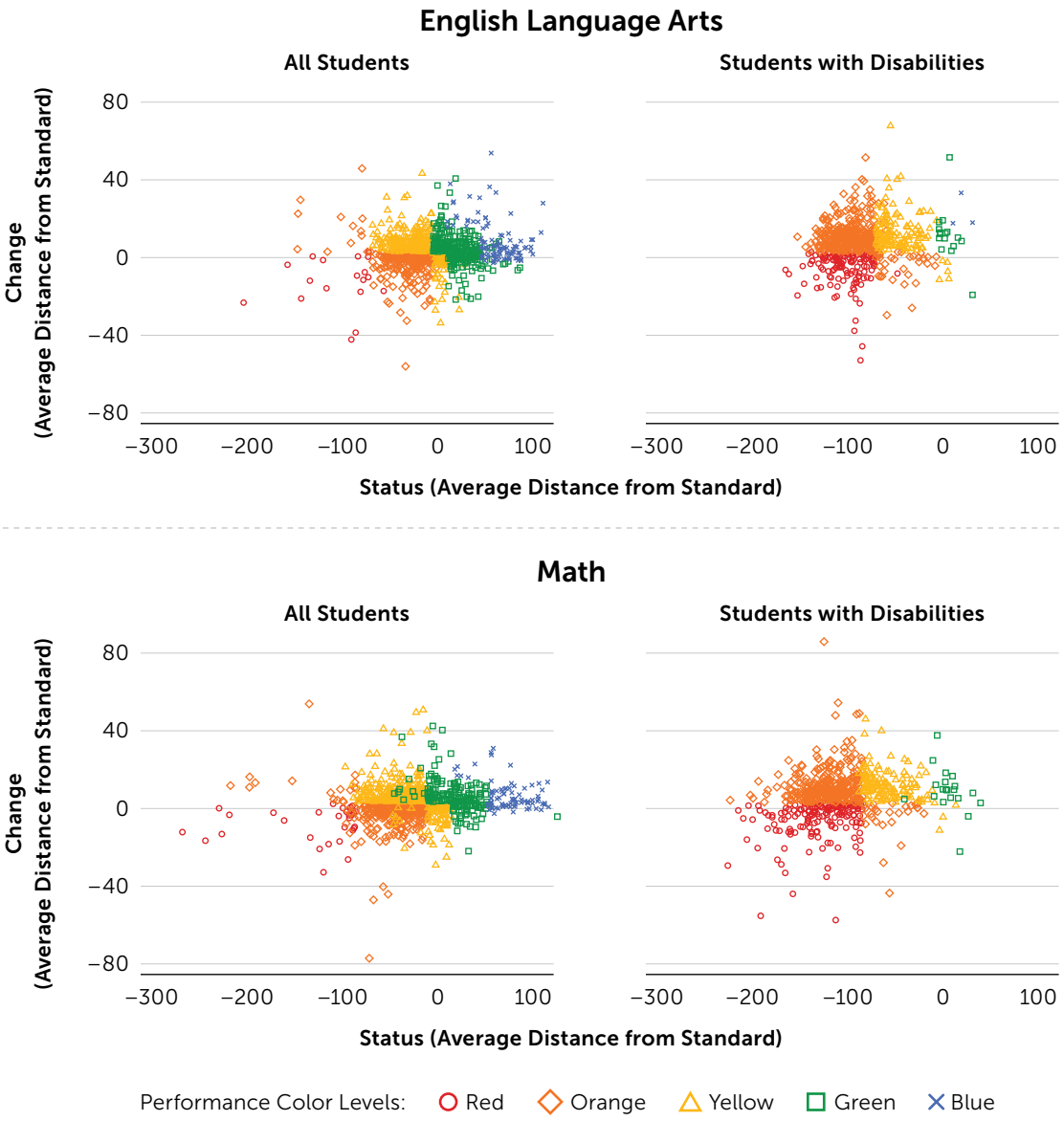
Table 6. Measurement of Indicators

Indicators	Measurement
ELA and Math	The distance from a student's score on the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments and California Alternative Assessments (CAAs) and the Standard Met threshold on the test. These distances are then averaged for each district.
Graduation	Combined 4- and 5-year cohort graduation rates in the district.
Chronic Absence	Percentage absent 10 percent or more of instructional days in the district.
Suspension	The percentage of students suspended one full day in the district.
College and Career Readiness	Based on the percentage of students in the district who graduated in 4 years and were "prepared" on eight different underlying measures (e.g., a-g completion and advanced placement courses).

Note. The other SPAs used to determine DA are listed here: https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/leaproposedcrit.asp

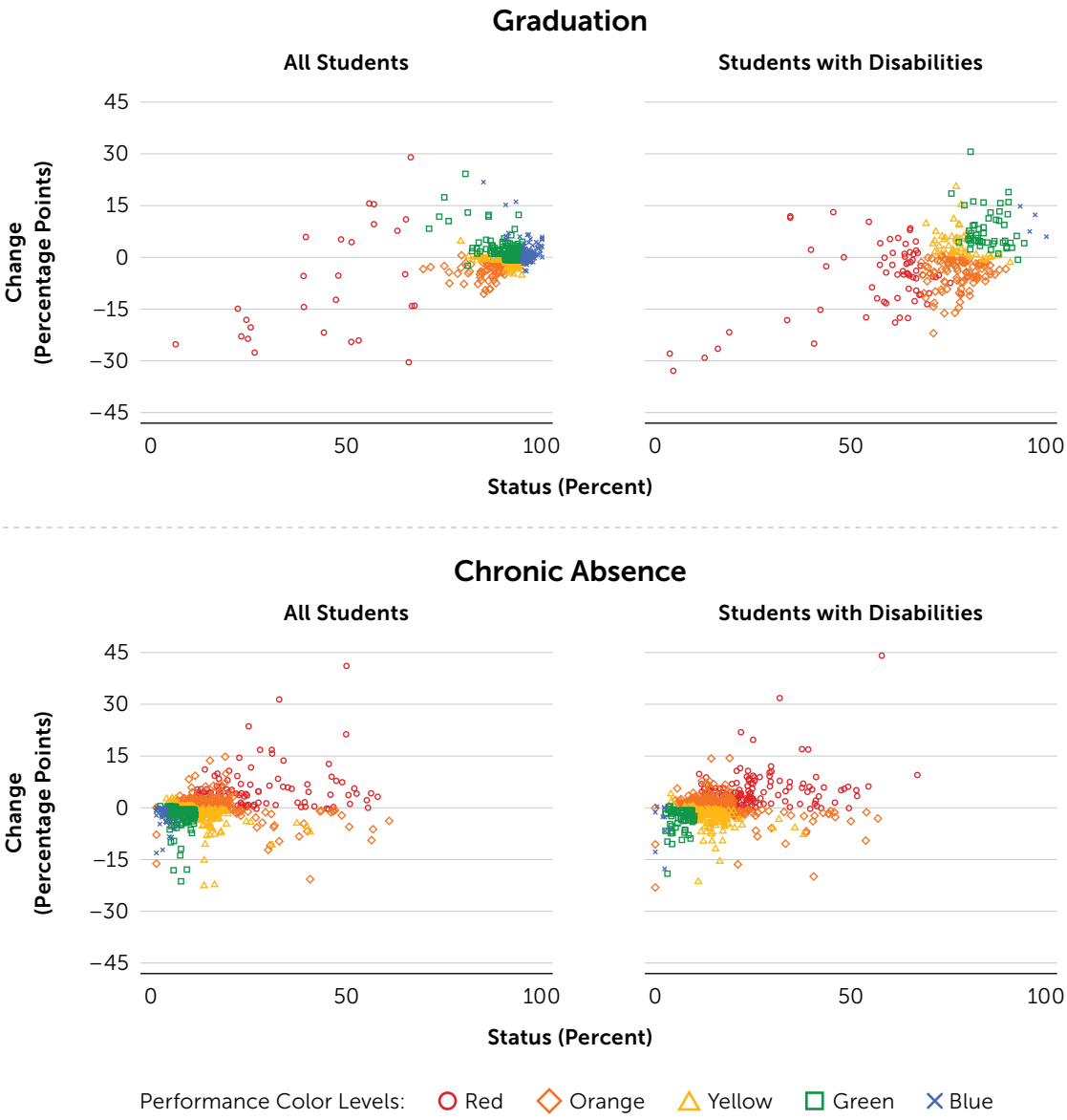
Pupil achievement. Figure 2 shows that for ELA and math, districtwide performance of SWD is more concentrated in the Orange and Red performance levels relative to all students districtwide. Also, fewer districts were in the highest performance levels (Green or Blue) for their SWD math and ELA achievement levels. Though many districts experienced positive changes in ELA and math among SWD, low status levels combined with those gains has led many districts to be classified in the Orange performance level for their SWD.

Figure 2. Change Versus Status on English Language Arts and Math Performance



Pupil engagement. As shown in Figure 3, compared to districtwide student performance there are lower concentrations of SWD in Blue and Green performance levels on both graduation and chronic absence indicators. Districts whose SWD have higher status on the graduation indicator (i.e., a higher graduation rate) tended to have experienced more positive change from the prior year. Although the SWD populations in some districts experienced positive gains in graduation, their low status levels (i.e., low graduation rates) meant that many still had a Red performance level. Patterns in chronic absence show that many districts across the status distribution experienced increases in chronic absence for SWD (i.e., higher change values). Districts with higher status (i.e., higher chronic absence rates) in the current year tended to experience larger increases from the prior year.

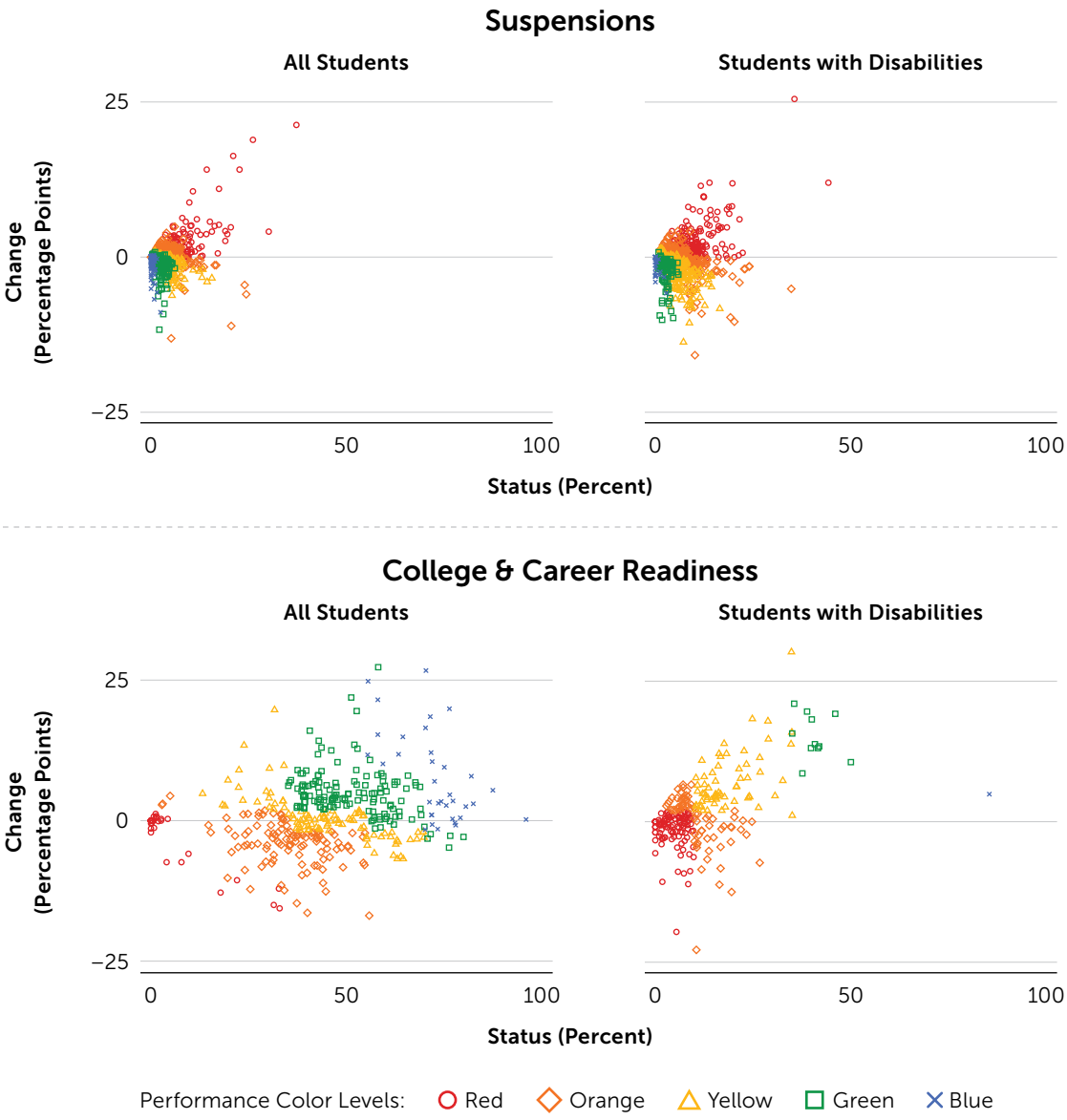
Figure 3. Change Versus Status on Graduation and Chronic Absence



Suspensions and college/career readiness. As Figure 4 shows, performance of a district's SWD on suspensions tends to be more highly concentrated in the Red performance levels relative to students districtwide. There is also a larger number of districts with higher suspension rates for their SWD populations. However, many districts experienced declines from the prior year and therefore these districts are more heavily represented in the Yellow and Orange performance levels. As with the other indicators, districts' SWD are heavily concentrated among the Yellow, Red, and Orange performance levels on the college and career readiness indicator (CCI), with only a few districts in the Green or Blue performance levels. Yet, at the same time, many districts also experienced positive gains on the CCI among their SWD populations as shown by the concentration of

Yellow performance levels. This shows encouraging signs that even though status levels on the CCI may be low, some districts experienced gains in the CCI for their SWD.

Figure 4. Change Versus Status on Suspensions and College and Career Readiness



Conclusion

These analyses show that over half of the districts that qualified for DA in 2019 did so based, in part, on the performance levels of their SWD (187 of 333 districts). Among these 187 districts, the most common combination of SPAs leading to identification was Pupil Achievement alongside Pupil Engagement, relevant to about one in five districts.

Among districts eligible for assistance due to SWD, Red performance levels for SWD in chronic absence alongside suspensions rates was most common. Finally, districts' SWD populations tended to be more heavily concentrated in the two lowest performance levels on each indicator. However, many districts experienced positive gains as well.

These patterns reveal that districts receiving DA to support their SWD will need to tackle simultaneous challenges that are often intertwined. To address these challenges, districts under DA should leverage their continuous improvement process to understand the root causes of these intersectional challenges. In conducting a root-cause analysis, districts should consider conducting finer grained analyses of the kinds of students facing these complex challenges—including by students' disability type, and also by their gender, race, and ethnic background. Doing so can, for instance, shed light on disproportionate challenges that can lie at the intersection of a child's race and disability status.[5] For example, Black students with disabilities have been shown to experience higher suspension rates relative to their White counterparts.[6] Thus, a more intersectional approach can reveal who is most in need of supports so that assistance can be tailored and targeted to improve their performance. Knowledge of how challenges play out at both the system and student levels can be critical in developing more holistic and robust strategies to promote the performance levels of SWD.

Endnotes

1 California Department of Education. (n.d.). California School Dashboard. www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2019

2 California Department of Education. (n.d.). California's system of support. cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp

3 California Department of Education. (2019). *LCFF eligibility file field name description.* cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/documents/assistancestatus19.xlsx; California Department of Education. (2019). *2019 dashboard: Data files and record layouts.* cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/datafiles2019.asp

4 California Department of Education. (2019, December). *2019 California school dashboard technical guide: Final version, 2019–20 school year.* cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/documents/dashboardguide19.pdf

5 Losen, D. J. (2018, April). *Disabling punishment: The need for remedies to the disparate loss of instruction experienced by Black students with disabilities.* Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice. today.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/disabling-punishment-report-.pdf

6 Losen, 2018.

Author Biography

Kevin Gee, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. He examines the impact of a broad array of adverse experiences on children's school outcomes, including children who are vulnerable to truancy, bullying, food insecurity, and abuse and neglect. His research deepens our knowledge of the plight of these children, many of whom often lie on the periphery of education systems both in the U.S. and abroad. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, and *Education Week*.

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Related Publications

Gee, K., & Kim, C. ***Chronic Absence in California: What New Dashboard Data Reveals About School Performance.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2019.

Humphrey, D. C., & O'Day, J. ***The Early Implementation of California's System of Support: Counties, Differentiated Assistance, and the New School Dashboard.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. December 2019.

Myung, J., & Hough, H. ***Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities: A Summary of the PACE Policy Research Panel.*** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2020.

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