# Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities:

## A Summary of the PACE Policy Research Panel

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More than 725,000 of California's K–12 students qualified for special education services in 2018–19, but they entered a system that is often ill equipped to serve them. This brief summarizes the findings from 13 research publications produced as part of the PACE Policy Research Panel *Special Education: Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities in California*. We find opportunities for improvement in early identification; transitions into and out of special education services; educator preparation and development; and availability of mental and physical health services. Comprehensive implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework would address the needs of all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs), but will require substantial investments. Policy can better equip schools by establishing expectations on inclusion, developing educator capacity, systematizing data, and fostering interagency collaboration.

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## Introduction

By law, students with disabilities (SWDs) are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in a least restrictive environment (LRE). In the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) 2019 annual assessment of state compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), California landed in the category of "needs assistance (two or more consecutive years)" based on the state's level of compliance with federal law and its outcomes for SWDs. It was, in fact, the sixth consecutive year that California was determined to "need assistance" since OSERS revised its evaluation process in 2014.[1]

The state has made many new investments in K–12 education in recent years, with additional money going to students with high needs via the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). However, special education is not covered by the LCFF, and improving funding and services for this vulnerable population has become a critical priority for students, families, schools, and districts. Growth in state special education funding has not kept pace with district costs, making special education a pressing budgetary concern for over 90 percent of California districts.[2] And parents of SWDs are not satisfied with the quality of services their children receive: in California, the number of due process complaints per 10,000 students ages 3 through 21 served under IDEA is triple the national average.[3]

These challenges have made special education an urgent priority for policy and practice in California. The need for practical knowledge to guide the development of new systems made this topic well suited for a PACE Policy Research Panel (PRP), which is an approach to rapidly building and mobilizing knowledge on key topics. The PRP *Special Education: Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities* assembled leading researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to build and consolidate knowledge on how best to serve SWDs and make this knowledge more useful for system improvement. This brief summarizes the findings from 13 research projects[4] produced as a result of the PRP and is organized to address these key questions:

- Who are California's SWDs?
- How are SWDs currently being served?
- What could schools do to better serve SWDs?
- What policies can equip schools to better serve SWDs?

## Who Are California's SWDs?

Over 725,000 K–12 students in California received special education services in the 2018–19 school year.[5] Approximately 11.7 percent of California's K–12 students qualify for special education, up from 10.3 percent since 2014–15.[6] The steepest increase is in the number of students with relatively severe disabilities, which has nearly doubled since 2000–01, primarily due to significant growth in autism spectrum diagnoses. The largest group, accounting for more than 59 percent of special needs students, is comprised of those with learning disabilities and speech/language impairments.[7]

An analysis of data from the CORE districts[8] (Gee, Beno, & Witte, 2020) found that SWDs come from diverse backgrounds but that males, African Americans, English language learners, and foster youth are disproportionately represented relative to their representation among all students.

## How Are SWDs Currently Being Served?

California began using the California School Dashboard in 2017 to examine school and district outcomes not only for students on average but also for subgroups of students, including SWDs.[9] Based on Dashboard results, many districts are failing to meet standards for their SWDs. Among 1,002 total local educational agencies (LEAs) in California, 333 were identified for differentiated assistance in 2019; over half of these districts (187) were eligible for assistance, at least in part, because SWDs in the district were performing poorly (Gee, 2020), particularly in the state priority areas of Pupil Achievement and Pupil Engagement. The Dashboard shows that outcomes for SWDs within these LEAs are worse than for students overall when it comes to chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, and college/career readiness. Research produced by the PACE PRP identified five factors related to service delivery for SWDs that contribute to these lower outcomes: 1) underidentification of students needing services, 2) low inclusion rates, 3) underprepared special and general education teachers, 4) inadequate mental health and other services, and 5) lack of attention to postsecondary transitions.

### Students in Need Are Not Always Identified for Services

Students must be identified before they can begin receiving special education services. Decades of research and scholarly consensus conclude that intervention can reduce developmental delays and lessen adverse developmental effects—and intervention is more effective when begun early. Therefore, early screening and assessment systems are critical (Hunt, 2020).

Research has demonstrated that high-quality early intervention for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities has had improved outcomes and has generated long-term cost savings due to fewer students repeating grades, enhanced productivity, lower

welfare costs, increased tax revenues, and lower juvenile justice costs. Programs that provide health, early learning, and care from birth show a 13 percent return on investment per child per year (Hunt, 2020).

Despite the well-established consensus on the benefits of early identification, California continues to fall below national averages in identifying and serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with developmental disabilities. Ideally, all children should be screened, but fewer than 1 in 3 California children receive developmental screenings, and California ranks 43rd in developmental screening rates for young children (Hunt, 2020).

After they have been diagnosed, children age 3 and older receive special education services based on an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a legal document that specifies the instruction, supports, and services the child requires to make progress in school. Learning disabilities are diagnosed by (a) a severe discrepancy between student aptitude for learning and academic performance; (b) patterns of basic cognitive processing strengths or weaknesses impairing a student's ability to learn; or (c) failure to respond positively to an individually customized instructional intervention (Farkas, 2020).

After comparing students with similar needs for academic assistance, students of all racial/ethnic subgroup categories and most levels of need are identified for special education at a lower rate in California than national averages. And even though African American students are identified for special education at higher rates relative to their representation among all students, African American students who are low performing in reading and math are actually less likely to be identified for special education than similarly low-performing White students (Farkas, 2020).[10] Low performance is associated with many causes other than disability; however, the lower likelihood of a low-performing African American student receiving special education services raises equity concerns, particularly if special education services are the primary resource available in schools to help low-performing students.

### Inclusion Rates Are Low

The inclusion of SWDs in general education classroom settings is an important predictor of positive outcomes. SWDs who spend at least 80 percent of the school day in general education classrooms have fewer absences; higher academic performance; higher rates of grade progression and on-time graduation; and higher rates of college attendance and employment (Lindstrom & Beno, 2020). Due to the benefits of educating SWDs alongside peers without disabilities, placement of SWDs in a least restrictive environment (LRE) is stipulated in federal law. While each student's LRE is individually determined by their IEP team, the law states that student placement should maximize opportunities for students to interact with their peers without disabilities. However, in 2017–18, California had one of the lowest inclusion rates in the country: 56 percent compared to a national average of 63.4 percent (Humphrey, Gamse, Myung, & Cottingham, 2020). Furthermore, even when included in general education classrooms,

SWDs still experience barriers to accessing grade-level content, such as reduced cognitive demands of instruction (Lambert, 2020).

## General and Special Education Teachers Are Underprepared

In inclusive placements, the bulk of a student's school day is spent learning alongside peers without disabilities under the instruction of general education teachers. Thus, improving the educational experiences and outcomes of SWDs in California hinges on the capacity of both general education and special education teachers to meet students' learning needs. Research shows that teachers in both categories are underprepared.

**Special education teachers.** California districts are facing acute shortages of qualified special education teachers, with two out of every three new recruits now entering active teaching without having completed preparation. As a result, the students with the greatest need who require the most expert teaching are often taught by the least qualified teachers, and those teachers do not stay long enough to develop greater expertise—instead, they leave at twice the rate of those who are fully prepared. Faced with high costs of living, many experienced special education teachers are choosing to leave the profession. Additionally, it is projected that over a quarter of California's special educators who were teaching in 2014 will retire by 2024—a higher percentage than in any other subject area. There are few qualified teachers joining the workforce to replace them. Part of the reason for the challenge in recruiting and retaining teachers in special education is due to difficult working conditions. In other states, such as New York, the caseload limit for special education teachers is 20 students, or 25 students for grades 7 and above. By contrast, in California the caseload limit is 28 students but it is not uncommon for caseloads to increase up to 32 students (Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scottt, & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Given that special education teachers often have inadequate preparation, low salaries, and high caseloads, it is not surprising that California districts have difficulty recruiting and retaining these teachers.

**General education teachers.** Of all the elements of the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP), beginning teachers in California report feeling least prepared to identify and address special learning needs—and their supervisors concur: principals' perceptions of teacher preparedness across the six domains of the CSTP are lowest for teachers' readiness to identify and address special learning needs.[11] General education teachers in California feel overwhelmed by the prospect of teaching SWDs in an inclusion setting. This is likely a combination of insufficient preparation and lack of adequate support. California's schools have the second highest student–teacher ratio in the nation,[12] with fewer supports to provide classroom assistance or student support than in other states (Powell, Estes, & Briscoe, 2020). As a result, many California teachers have a "No Can Do" attitude about inclusion in their classrooms (Humphrey et al., 2020). To improve preparation, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) is revising Teaching Performance Assessments Design Standards for general education teaching in an effort to better prepare general education teachers for teaching SWDs (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2020).

### Mental Health and Other Services Are Lacking

In addition to instructional or academic supports, many SWDs can benefit greatly from mental and physical health services. Research shows that students are 21 times more likely to receive such services if they are provided on a school campus; however, California ranks near or at the bottom of all states in terms of providing access to healthcare or mental healthcare inside schools.[13] While California has far more Medi-Cal eligible children than any other state in the nation, it draws down less school-based Medicaid funding than 39 states; less than 5 percent of California's Medi-Cal-eligible students receive the mental health services to which they are entitled (Powell et al., 2020).

### Schools Do Not Always Support Successful Postsecondary Transitions for SWDs

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 describes the fundamental purpose of a free appropriate public education as preparing youth with disabilities for "further education, employment, and independent living." In California, 71 percent of SWDs in the Class of 2019 earned a high school diploma compared to 86 percent of all students. In terms of postschool outcomes, approximately half of SWDs were enrolled in higher education one year after high school, just 25 percent of SWDs were competitively employed, and just under 10 percent were participating in subsidized employment or training programs following high school (Lindstrom & Beno, 2020). While California has a historically low unemployment rate of 4 percent, individuals with disabilities continue to lag behind individuals without disabilities with an unemployment rate of 13 percent. The high unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities is compounded by their lack of workforce preparation in school (McFarlane & Guillermo, 2020).

## What Could Schools Do to Better Serve SWDs?

When it comes to serving SWDs, California consistently performs below national averages, whether it is in early identification, inclusion rates, student achievement, teacher preparation, provision of mental health services, or postsecondary transition services. Our research has identified four key practice and policy levers that could lead to substantive and meaningful changes for students with and without disabilities in California.

### Move Towards Comprehensive Implementation of the MTSS Framework

California's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)[14] is a framework for aligning necessary systems to provide targeted support to students for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success. MTSS is comprised of three tiers of instruction and supports that increase in intensity, duration, and individualization based on student needs. Tier 1 instruction is the general education that all students receive and includes core academic curriculum, positive behavior supports, and social-emotional learning (SEL) for all students, including those with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities; behavioral or social difficulties). Students who still struggle after Tier 1

are offered Tier 2 supports, which are evidence-based, targeted, small-group interventions. Tier 3 intensive supports are offered to students who are not responding to Tier 2 supports. Instruction and intervention at each tier can be informed by Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is grounded in learning sciences and neuroscience (Lambert, 2020; Stahmer, Oliver, & Schetter, 2020). However, more attention and resources must be allocated to the implementation of MTSS for educator training so that personnel can provide high quality Tier 1 instruction (Lambert, 2020), Tier 2 and 3 interventions, and ongoing data collection and monitoring (Farkas, 2020). Efforts such as the California Scale-Up MTSS Statewide (SUMS) Initiative[15] are beginning to build capacity to implement the MTSS framework in California schools; however, greater investment will be required.

### Attend to Transitions

The transitions into and out of special education services and among schools and programs can be confusing and burdensome for students and families. Furthermore, there is often a disconnect in the transition between infant/toddler services administered by the Department of Developmental Services (Part C of IDEA) and preschool services for 3- to 5-year-olds (Part B of IDEA) administered by the Department of Education. For example, only 1.8 percent of toddlers receiving services in California were deemed eligible for Part B services when they turned three (Kasari, 2020). To address this problem, well before the transition to preschool, a menu of early intervention and school services should be provided to each family to mitigate service gaps. Non-English-speaking families need competent interpreters to offer transition information very early in the process. Improvements in staff knowledge and expertise will require better training, higher expectations for interagency coordination, and greater oversight. Research shows that alignment in preschool through third grade—via the coordination of standards, curricula, practices, assessments, and professional development—can ensure that progress made in preschool years is sustained in kindergarten and beyond.[16]

In K–12, the highest entry rates into special education occur between kindergarten and fourth grade. However, many students who receive special education services may be re-evaluated and no longer qualify for services—or qualify for services under a different designation. These transitions can be disruptive; it is thus important to ensure continuity and stability of educational experiences for SWDs to promote their continued learning, growth, and development (Gee et al., 2020).

In terms of postschool transitions, all special education students ages 16 and above are required to have transition services included as part of their IEPs. Family involvement in the IEP process regarding transition services is critical to influencing positive postsecondary outcomes for SWDs. As with preschool transitions, parents should be provided with information and resources for transition services and options well before their child's transition to adulthood (Lindstrom & Beno, 2020). A key to successful transition is providing SWDs with work

experiences and opportunities for career exploration in K–12 schooling, including access to Career and Technical Education programs (McFarlane & Guillermo, 2020). School districts also need to develop interagency collaborations to promote successful postschool education and employment outcomes.

## What Policies Can Equip Schools to Better Serve SWDs?

There are many avenues for the state to support schools as they seek to improve instruction and services for SWDs. The following are policy recommendations that emerged from the set of 13 studies in this PRP.

### Establish Positive Expectations about Inclusion

Educators' attitudes and expectations about inclusion are of critical importance, as unconscious bias may interfere with educators' willingness to use evidence-based practices or to include SWDs in their classroom. False beliefs, such as the notion that including SWDs will compromise the education of more typically developing students, can result in the use of punitive or exclusionary practices, which are ineffective and harmful for all students (Stahmer et al., 2020).

What can the state do to influence educator attitudes and expectations? Policymakers can learn from practices in other states, like Florida, which has made notable progress on its inclusion rates and outcomes for SWDs through state policy. Florida's commitment to inclusion was codified in 2013 when state leaders enacted a key legislative statue defining it:

> *A school district shall use the term "inclusion" to mean that a student is receiving education in a general education regular class setting, reflecting natural proportions and age-appropriate heterogeneous groups in core academic and elective or special areas within the school community; a student with a disability is a valued member of the classroom and school community; the teachers and administrators support universal education and have knowledge and support available to enable them to effectively teach all children; and a teacher is provided access to technical assistance in best practices, instructional methods, and supports tailored to the student's needs based on current research.*[17]

And in 2014, Florida updated its Educator Certification Renewal Requirements to include a provision stipulating that every educator applying for certificate renewal must earn at least one college credit or 20 hours of in-service training in teaching SWDs (Humphrey et al., 2020). Like Florida, California could take a bold step forward by defining what inclusion means for the state and clarifying how it will be supported.

## Develop Capacity of the Educator Workforce to Support SWDs

Increasing rates of inclusion for SWDs in general education classrooms is an important but insufficient step towards meeting the needs of SWDs. California's educators—special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators—must be prepared and equipped to meet the needs of all students with high-incidence disabilities.

**Special education teachers.** California's severe shortage of qualified special education teachers can be mitigated through policy. By improving access to high-quality preparation programs; expanding and strengthening professional development; improving working conditions for special education teachers (e.g., reducing caseloads and increasing administrative supports); and increasing compensation,[18] the state can recruit and retain a stable workforce of well-prepared special educators (Ondrasek et al., 2020).

**General education teachers and administrators.** As California strives to increase its inclusion rates, general education teachers will play an increasingly pivotal role in educating the state's SWDs. Many students with high-incidence disabilities (about 80 percent of SWDs) have the cognitive ability to learn. Therefore, it is imperative for all educators to understand these disabilities and to develop the skills and knowledge required to support students with learning differences (Stahmer et al., 2020). Teacher development programs can in turn better support new teachers by integrating special education into student teaching, mentoring, and coursework to achieve greater program coherence (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2020). School leaders must clearly specify and communicate the importance of inclusion by strengthening and expanding professional development and ongoing job-embedded coaching and data-based supervision (Stahmer et al., 2020), including support for effectively implementing MTSS (as discussed above).

## Systematize and Communicate Data on Services and Outcomes for SWDs

To continuously improve its support for SWDs, California must develop and utilize a more unified and transparent data system. Ideally, the California Cradle-to-Career Data System Act, passed in 2019, will clear the way for a statewide data infrastructure that strengthens and informs the support of SWDs. A robust data system with interagency linkages and unique child identifiers can give insight into what services students receive from different agencies, how well they progress through different systems, and how resources are allocated. Such a data system would connect information starting from the earliest screening, referral, and evaluation through initiation and delivery of services. It would also link between children transitioning into and out of programs from preschool throughout K–12 and into the postsecondary transition, and would provide meaningful measures to monitor progress and determine outcomes (Hunt, 2020; Kasari, 2020; Lindstrom & Beno, 2020).

California can learn from other states about how to use data to improve service delivery and resource allocation for SWDs. A Massachusetts school data system, Resource Allocation and District Action Reports,[19] allows local districts and the public to compare achievement levels of

SWDs and inclusion rates, resource allocation, staffing, enrollment patterns, and trajectories with comparable districts. Access to comprehensive information on SWDs can empower districts to modify their approaches, allow the state to identify districts needing improvement, and provide opportunities for districts to learn from each other. Similarly, Florida has implemented a school- and district-based assessment system (Best Practices for Inclusive Education[20]) that is facilitated in order to promote self-reflection, stakeholder engagement, and deliberate improvement in inclusive practice (Humphrey et al., 2020).

### Foster Interagency Collaboration

Students with disabilities are often simultaneously entitled to services from multiple child-serving systems, and yet students and families are frequently unable to access the support they need when they need it. While interagency agreements are required between agencies, for the most part they remain siloed—without cross-system accountability and common goals, interagency alignment and collaboration is a goal yet to be achieved. Shared cross-system governance and accountability systems at the state and local levels with fiscal authority are critical to achieving system coherence and meaningful collaboration (Powell et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

California is taking steps to enact and strengthen many of the recommendations in this brief; however, the path toward meaningful improvement will require substantial, systematic, and sustained investment to deliver the special education and services that students with disabilities in California need and deserve. The research produced as part of the PACE Policy Research Panel *Special Education: Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities in California* provides a roadmap for policy and practice towards improving services at scale.

## Endnotes

*Correction.* The release of the first version of Ondrasek et al. stated that caseloads for special education resource specialists can exceed 32 students with approval of a state waiver; in fact caseloads can increase up to (but not beyond) 32. This error appeared in the report on pp. 19, 27; in the brief on pp. 6, 9; and herein on p. 5. The updated report and brief were released in March 2020.

[1] U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. State Performance Plans/Annual Performance Reports (SPP/APR). https://sites.ed.gov/idea/spp-apr

[2] Willis, J., Krausen, K., Byun, E., & Caparas, R. (2018). In the era of the Local Control Funding Formula: The shifting role of California's chief business officers. *Getting Down to Facts II*. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/era-local-control-funding-formula-shifting-role-californias-chief-business-officers

[3] *40th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2018.* Quotation at p. 196. http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep

[4] The set of PACE Policy Research Panel briefs and reports can be found here: www.edpolicyinca.org/initiatives/pace-policy-research-panels/organizing-schools-serve-students-disabilities

[5] California Department of Education. (n.d.). California School Dashboard. https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2019

[6] California Department of Education. (n.d.). Dataquest. https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest

[7] Petek, G. (2019). Overview of Special Education in California. Legislative Analyst's Office. https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2019/4110/overview-spec-ed-110619.pdf

[8] The CORE districts—Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Francisco, and Santa Ana unified school districts—together represent over one million students, nearly 20 percent of the students served in California.

[9] https://www.caschooldashboard.org

[10] Underrepresentation is also an issue for Latinx and Asian American students, but to a lesser extent.

[11] Bell, C., White, R., & White, M. (2018), A system's view of California's teacher education pipeline. *Getting Down to Facts II.* Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/systems-view-californias-teacher-education-pipeline

[12] Imazeki, J. (2018). Adequacy and state funding formulas: What can California learn from the research and national context? *Getting Down to Facts II.* Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/adequacy-and-state-funding-formulas-what-can-california-learn-research-and-national

[13] Reback, R. (2018). Investments in student health and mental health in California's public schools. *Getting Down to Facts II.* Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/investments-student-health-and-mental-health-californias-public-schools

[14] https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/CA-MTSS.aspx

[15] https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/California_SUMS_Initiative.aspx

[16] Koppich, J. & Stipek, D. (2020). PreK–3 alignment: Challenges and opportunities in California. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/prek-3-alignment

[17] Florida Statutes, 1003.57(2). https://www.flsenate.gov/laws/statutes/2013/1003.57

[18] In the 2020 PACE/USC Rossier Poll, California voters indicated willingness to increase the pay of special education teachers. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/pace-and-usc-rossier-polls-2020

[19] http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/radar

[20] http://www.floridainclusionnetwork.com/school-bpie

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# Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

***Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence***

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

1. bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
2. making research evidence accessible; and
3. leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

## Related Publications

In August 2019, PACE bought together researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from across the state to co-develop a research agenda of questions that, if addressed, could guide the development of better special education policy and practice in California. Following the meeting of this Policy Research Panel (PRP), *Special Education: Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities*, PACE commissioned 13 research projects to address the high priority areas identified. The full set of resulting publications can be found here: **edpolicyinca.org/initiatives/pace-policy-research-panels/organizing-schools-serve-students-disabilities**

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