



## POVERTY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENT

Photo Credit: Woodland Elementary School | Flickr

BY BRUNO YOUN '19

Federal, state, and local governments must coordinate closely to provide special education to hundreds of thousands of Californian kids with disabilities. Due to the complex bureaucratic web among the different levels of government, special education is a puzzling political topic. Some context is warranted on where special education funding comes from, how these funds are allocated, and who is responsible for implementing the programs. According to a Legislative Analyst's Office report on the 2017-18 California state budget, 60% of special education funding comes from local source, 30% comes from the state, and 10% from the federal government.

The federal government defines special education requirements and standards. In 2004,

the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required states to provide “specially defined instruction, and related services, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.” States can make only minor changes to the federal requirements, and incorporation of special education services falls to Local Educational Agencies—or LEAs—within each state. Especially relevant to our analysis are IDEA's least-restrictive-environment (LRE) provisions, which mandate that states ensure that children with disabilities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Despite special education being a federal mandate, its implementation varies greatly across states and municipalities.

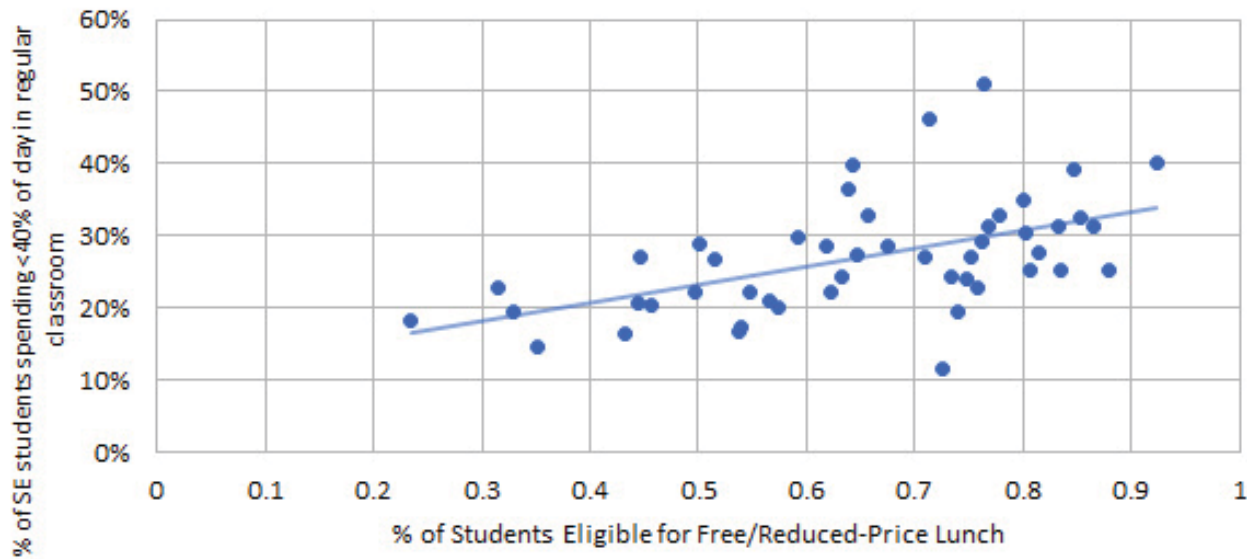
Our analysis is based on data gathered on almost every traditional school district in the Inland Empire, defined here as San Bernardino County and Riverside County, except for eight. Four districts were excluded for lack of data on special education enrollment and another four because of the adoption of community eligibility programs for free and reduced lunch, explained more fully below. Using simple linear regression, we have found FRL eligibility to be associated with the proportion of special education (SE) students aged 6-21 placed in general education classrooms for less than 40% of the school day. We obtained data on free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility from the California Department of Education’s Ed-Data partnership. Placement data (including the less-than-40% figures) came from the IDEA-mandated Annual Performance Report Measures aggregated by the CDE. Thus, to the extent that FRL eligibility is a viable proxy for low-income status, SE students in school districts with a higher proportion of low-

income students are more likely to spend the majority of their school day in segregated special education classrooms. Figure 1 shows a statistically significant ( $p=0.0002$ ) correlation between FRL eligibility and special education classroom placement. Each 1% increase in FRL eligibility corresponds to a 0.25% ( $\pm 0.06\%$ ) increase in percentage of SE students spending less than 40% of their time in a regular classroom.

Studies of school districts in other states have made similar findings. A 2011 state-commissioned report on Massachusetts school districts, produced by Dr. Thomas Hehir and Associates, found that SE students in lower-income districts were educated outside of general education classrooms at substantially higher rates than non-low-income students.

Our correlation only applies to SE students aged 6-22. We found no correlation between FRL eligibility and placement in separate pre-K

### SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM PLACEMENT AND FRL ELIGIBILITY



Note: Data from 2015-16 school year. N=48.  
 Source: California Department of Education Special Education Annual Performance Report Measures 2015-16; CDE Ed Data Education Data Partnership

## TIME IN SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES

Area	<40% of day in regular classroom	>80% of day in regular classroom
Inland Empire sample	27.00%	49.95%
National	10.85%	65.14%

Source: California Department of Education Special Education Annual Performance Report Measures 2015-16, National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) FFY 2015 SPP/APR Indicator Analysis Booklet

programs. Whatever causes lie behind this association may not fully take effect in early childhood.

The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals is admittedly an imperfect proxy for the socioeconomic status of a school district’s students. For instance, it is possible that some families who are not eligible game the system to become eligible. Some critics of FRL eligibility as a metric point out that recently instituted “community eligibility” programs allow school districts with over 40% of students identified as eligible to allow free lunches to all students. These programs may call into question FRL eligibility as a metric of the socioeconomic status of schools and districts in a general sense. But we exclude the only four school districts in our Inland Empire sample that have adopted community eligibility programs as of September 2016, per the Food Research and Action Center Community Eligibility Database.

Of course, these findings alone do not suggest any particular causal relationship. Several hypotheses have been put forth to explain the higher separate-classroom placement rates of lower-income students. One posits that lower-income students are more likely to have disabilities that are harder to accommodate in a regular classroom. In other words, the least restrictive environment is more often a separate classroom for kids in lower-income districts. If this hypothesis were the dominant explanation for the trends found, it is a relatively reassuring one because it supposes that the special education system is working properly. If it were the only explanation, the special education system would be identifying the right kids (and only the right kids) and placing them in the least restrictive environment feasible.

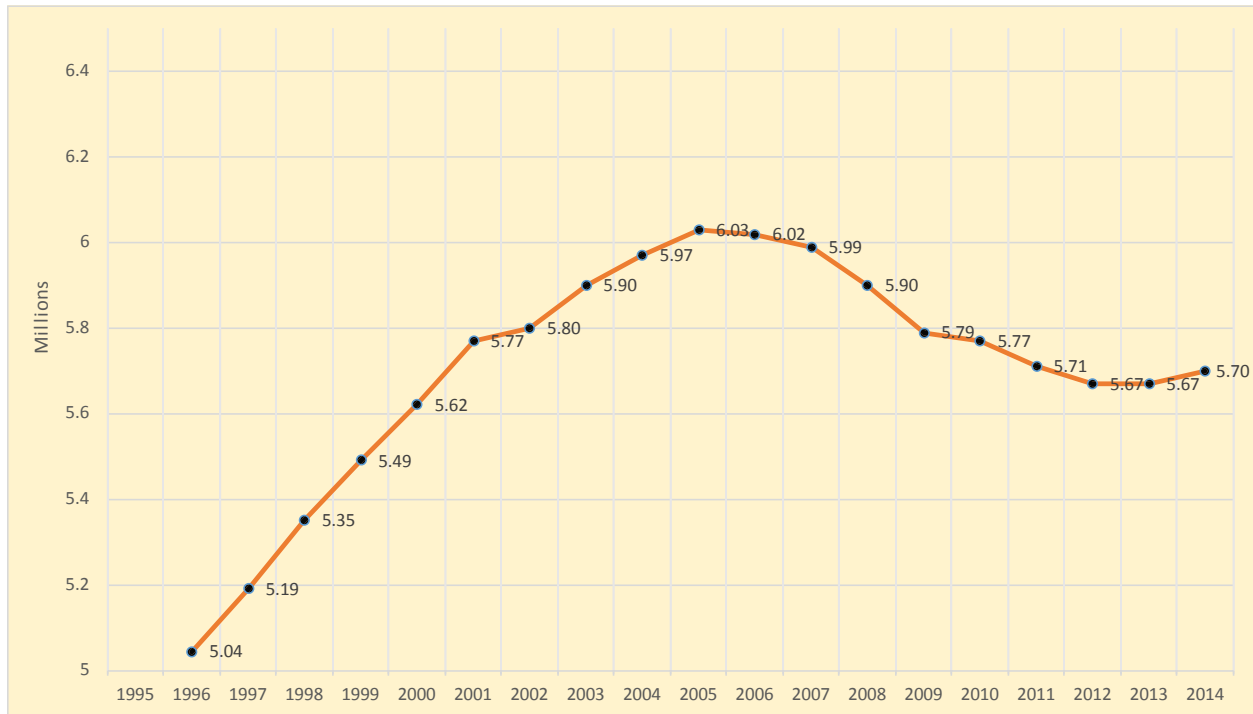
Because the severity of a given disability varies widely within disability categories, it is difficult to establish that one disability is inherently more difficult to accommodate in a regular

## INLAND EMPIRE DISTRICTS – FRL ELIGIBILITY

Subgroup	Average FRL Eligibility
All Districts (n=48)	65%
Districts not meeting target for <40% of day spent in regular classroom (n=27)	73.1%
Districts meeting target for <40% of day spent in regular classroom (n=21)	53.9%

Sources: California Department of Education Special Education Annual Performance Report Measures 2015-16, CDE Ed Data Education Data Partnership

## U.S. SPECIAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENT



Source: Education Week, April 19, 2016

classroom than another. Further complicating any quantitative assessment of this hypothesis is that disability categories that are more strongly associated with separate classroom placement are largely low-incidence disabilities, such as emotional disturbance and intellectual disability. We cannot rule out this explanation altogether, but it is not necessarily the only one.

Another hypothesis suggests that poorer school districts are placing special education students in separate classrooms because of some disproportionality that causes higher special education identification rates among low-income students. What follows, according to this narrative, is that lower-income students are misidentified with disabilities whose diagnostic criteria are particularly subjective (e.g., specific learning disability) and placed into separate classrooms. The 2011 Massachusetts study found

that lower-income students were more likely to be identified for special education, even when they attend high-income school districts. Such misidentification may be the result of a failure of the general education system to meet the needs of these students.

Race may also be a factor. The disproportionate identification of African-American students, for example, is well-documented. The Massachusetts report also found that African-American and Latino special education students were more likely to receive separate classroom placements, even after controlling for low-income status. In our sample, however, very few of the school districts are marked as disproportionate in any respect for 2015-16. To be sure, a binary categorization that divides school districts into “disproportionate” and “not disproportionate” boxes cannot capture every instance of racially

biased placement. Additionally, a lack of disproportionality in a given year does not necessarily imply a lack of disproportionality overall. Racial disproportionality may have some explanatory power, but it appears to be of limited use in our study.

A third explanation holds that traditional school districts are denying services to SE students to avoid paying the cost of providing them. This practice, of course, violates IDEA. School districts with more low-income students would be under greater financial pressure and have more incentive to deny services. Squaring with this hypothesis is the fact that most special education funding in California comes from local sources. Service denial is not a recent phenomenon; the Department of Education issued a letter in 2011 to warn districts away from the tactic. A 2013 investigative effort from NBC Bay Area journalists also found widespread denials among Bay Area school districts. That report counted more than 10,000 disputes between families and school districts over special education services from 2010 to 2013. The parents of poorer students are presumably less likely to have access to the legal and financial resources necessary to advocate for their children when they feel that they are being deprived of services.

One form of service denial is the inappropriate placement of SE students in separate classrooms. It might be cheaper to place an SE student in such a classroom. For example, it may be more

expensive to hire aides to accompany some SE students in several regular classrooms than to place the students in a separate classroom. SE students who could be accommodated in a full-inclusion placement are placed instead into a separate classroom. Local educational agencies also deny services by refusing to identify children who clearly have disabilities, thus avoiding the legal obligation to provide services. Intuitively, we might expect school districts with more low-income students to be under greater financial pressure and thus practice this kind of denial to a greater extent. If the services necessary to support a regular-classroom placement are costlier than a separate-classroom placement, it stands to reason that those whose disability is not recognized would disproportionately be placed otherwise in regular classrooms.

There likely exist causes other than the three articulated here. For instance, in school districts with more low-income students, parents presumably have less access to outside therapy and other services that might influence placement outside of formal legal channels. It is difficult to form a comprehensive ordering of causes that declares some more dominant than others. Doing so would require further investigation into the explanatory power of the three hypotheses we present, as well as others not mentioned here. ♦

*The author wishes to thank Nicholas Sage '20 and Melia Wong '19 for their assistance researching this article.*