

# Special education



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

TYPE OF RESEARCH: Qualitative. Number of mentally retarded children in US in mainstream room or least restrictive environment. ● POPULATION SAMPLE:

Children in schools across the US, all fifty states

● SUMMARY OF PROCEDURES:

Review of placement rates for children with mental retardation, in all 50 states, during the 1990s. The rate during the 1990s, as well as the increase, are compared to those since 2000. Comparison of rates before 1990s was obtained from previous survey data.

● SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

Results indicate that by the end of the 1990s, students with mental retardation were twice as likely to be included in traditional classrooms, as in the previous decades. “ In 1990, almost three-fourths of students with MR were educated separately from their typical peers” (McLeskey). By 2000, just over half were still educated separately, away from traditional classrooms and peers. Additionally, researchers found that location is a large determining factor in whether students receive an education in which inclusion is part of the plan. Rates vary according to states and regions. The large variation, among states

that are demographically similar, suggests differences in policy

● STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF STUDY:

The study suggests that states have developed programs with varying success,

Depending on resources, interpretation of IDEA legislation and ability of educators. It

also suggests that some states are not willing to recognize the benefit of traditional

education with peers, outside of separate environments. Such differences also indicate

lack of training for educators, who must manage the traditional classroom, including

special needs children.

Despite the variations from state to state, the numbers indicate that overall, new

legislation has been effective. The outlook is particularly positive when the study looks

at past decades. In the 1970s, education of mentally retarded children outside of a

separate setting was nearly unheard of. The general outlook of the study gives plenty

encouragement to parents of children with mental retardation. It indicates that education

for mentally retarded children is mostly headed in the right direction.

However, the variations or differences in programs from one state to the next can

indicate trouble in the future. As budgets for school districts and regions become tighter, there will be less funding available for ongoing training of educators. Less will be available for career and program development. With rising fuel costs, it may become more difficult to provide inclusion services to mentally retarded children. Parents may have more difficulty finding appropriate educational services for their children. Children with milder mental retardation may be overlooked, in an effort to meet NCLB standards or mandates. Many schools are combining and cutting services, across the US. NCLB has not been shown as effective, overall. So, it is risky to assume that other legislation, such as IDEA will continue to produce results. Inclusion of nearly half of mentally retarded students is misleading. This is an average. Some states may include more students, while others include much fewer. For those students in districts or states that have made little progress, there may be many more students not reaching their full potential.

Stagnation in development of such programs makes it difficult to realize

future potential

Increases in mentally retarded students educated in inclusion programs.

## References

McLeskey, J. et al. (2006). Students with Mental Retardation Making Gains in the General Classroom, UF Study Finds. Accessed October 5, 2008 from <http://news.education.ufl.edu/node/54>.

Students with mental retardation making gains in the general classroom, UF study finds

Aug. 8, 2006

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A study by COE researchers - including (from left) doctoral candidate Pam Williamson, Professor James McCleskey, and doctoral candidates David Hoppey and Tarcha Rentz - found that schools are making real, but uneven, progress in bringing students with mental retardation into the general classroom.

GAINESVILLE, Fla. --- Students with mental retardation are far more likely to be educated alongside typical students than they were 20 years ago, a University of Florida study has found.

However, the trend once known as “mainstreaming”—widely considered the best option for such students - appears to have stalled in some parts of the country, the study’s authors report. And a student’s geographic location, rather than the severity of his disability, often determines how he will spend his school days, the researchers say.

“We’ve known for a long time that students with MR (mental retardation)

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are better off educationally if they can spend at least part of the day in a typical classroom,” said James McLeskey, chair of special education in UF’s College of Education and an author of the study. “ We’ve found that there are still lot of students who could be included in the general classroom, but aren’t included.”

Before the mid-1970s, most children with mental retardation were completely segregated from other children in the school system, if they were formally educated at all. Society widely viewed these children as uneducable, and those who did attend school were sent to institutions solely for children with mental retardation.

Both children and their parents often viewed these institutions as dehumanizing and ineffective – and by the late 1960s, educators had assembled a large body of research to show that children with mental retardation did indeed perform much better when schooled, at least part-time, among the general student population. That research led Congress to pass a 1975 law requiring a more inclusive environment for students with mental retardation.

Surveys in the 1980s and early 1990s showed that schools had made little progress toward implementing that mandate. In an article published in the spring 2006 issue of the journal *Exceptional Children*, UF researchers – including doctoral candidates Pam Williamson, David Hoppey and Tarcha Rentz – revisited the question, taking a comprehensive look at placement rates for students with mental retardation in all 50 states and the District of Columbia during the 1990s. They found some very good news.

“ Inclusion seems to have genuinely caught on in the 1990s,” said Williamson, the lead author of the study. “ By the end of the decade, a

student with MR was almost twice as likely to be educated in the general classroom as a similar student the beginning of the decade.

In 1990, almost three-fourths of students with MR were educated separately from their typical peers, learning in separate classrooms or entire schools dedicated to children with mental retardation. By 2000, only slightly more than half of students with MR were educated separately.

Still, a handful of states – Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota and Vermont – accounted for much of the gain seen nationwide, with many other states marking little or no progress.

A simple move across state lines, the researchers say, can have a major impact on a child's educational career. Various states have widely different policies on who can be identified with mental retardation, and how they are educated. Some states identify mental retardation in as few as three out of every 1, 000 students; others identify as many as 30 students per 1, 000.

Demographically similar states such as Alabama and Mississippi differ widely in their reported rates of mental retardation – suggesting the differences are due to policy, not environmental factors.

“ For a student with mental retardation, geographic location is possibly the strongest predictor of the student's future educational setting,” Williamson said.

Many of these students can have functional work lives in adulthood, Williamson said. However, if they aren't exposed to their peers in the general classroom, students with MR may not pick up the social and academic skills they need to do so.

Inclusion can also have a beneficial effect for students already in the general classroom. When typical students attend school with classmates who have

MR, the researchers say, they learn leadership skills and become more tolerant. They even score higher, as a group, on standardized tests.

“ The inclusive classroom environment seems to work better for students who are struggling, academically, but not identified as having MR,” McLeskey said. “ That tends to bring up averages on test scores for typical students in the entire class.”

In the current era of high-stakes testing, that effect could work to the benefit of students with MR. Under past school accountability rules, many states did not count the scores of students in MR-only classes when conducting statewide achievement tests – an incentive to administrators to keep students with mental retardation out of the general classroom.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, however, schools must report test scores of all students, including those in separate special education classes.

“ All these students count now, and schools have an incentive to improve their scores,” McLeskey said. “ Inclusion seems to be the best way to do that.”

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