



Getting Down to **FACTS**

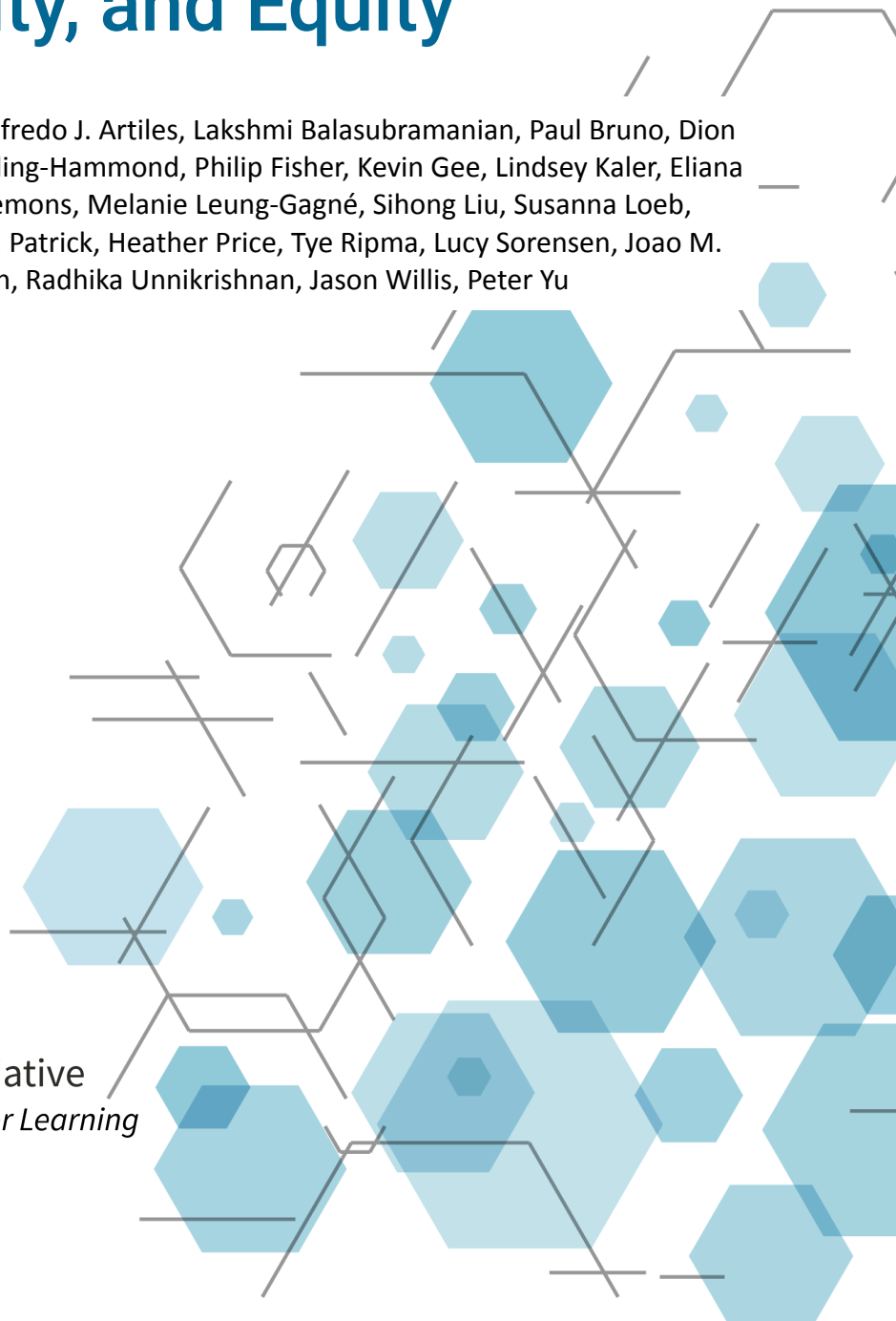
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Special Education in California: Growth, Capacity, and Equity

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Introduction



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Students with disabilities have a legal right to a free and appropriate public education under federal law. In California, fulfilling that promise requires a large and complex system that serves more than 865,000 students with disabilities, over 10 percent of all students with disabilities in the country, and spans multiple layers of governance, staffing, funding, assessment, and service delivery.

California's special education system is expanding in scale. The number of students identified for special education has grown, overall spending has increased, and more staff are supporting students with disabilities. At the same time, the Getting Down to Facts III technical reports show that growth in scale has not always been matched by growth in capacity or coherence. Staffing shortages, siloed professional roles, administrative and compliance demands, regional variation, and persistent disparities continue to shape students' experiences.

This brief draws on multiple technical reports to summarize five key findings about special education in California: growth in identification, staffing, and spending; workforce capacity and siloing; compliance demands across a multilayered system; disparities at the intersections of race, language, and disability; and data limitations that constrain transparency and improvement. Across these areas, the evidence points to a central challenge: California's special education system is growing, but its ability to deliver consistent, student-centered, and equitable supports remains uneven.

Findings

1

The number of students identified for special education, the staff who support them, and overall special education spending have all increased.

The number of students identified for special education in the state has increased, mirroring national patterns. Growth is being driven both by rising identification overall and by increases in certain disability categories, particularly autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Bruno; Kaler et al.). Staffing to support special education students and services has also increased, with some segments of the workforce growing at faster rates than others (Kaler et al.; Lemons et al.). Along with these trends, special education spending has more than doubled over the past 20 years (Bruno).

2

Staffing challenges and professional siloing limit schools' ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Recruitment, training, retention, and collaboration challenges affect teachers, related service providers, and paraeducators. Siloing between general and special education, and between teachers and paraeducators, makes it harder to build shared responsibility for students with disabilities.

3

Administrative and compliance requirements absorb substantial time and resources across California's multilayered special education system.

These requirements can protect students' rights, but they can also create tensions with direct services and instructional needs when they are misaligned or duplicative. Districts and regional agencies often spend substantial effort navigating eligibility, reporting, and governance requirements, leaving less time and capacity for instructionally useful assessment, collaboration, and student support.

4

California's education system creates unique burdens and notable disparities for students and families, particularly when race and language intersect with disability status.

The intersection of race, language, and disability status creates unique and often compounding obstacles for families and students in public education. Disparities in opportunities and outcomes exist for students with disabilities, and these disparities can be greatest for students with intersectional identities including Black students and multilingual learners of English with a disability (Artiles et al.).

5

California's current data systems make it difficult to answer critical questions about special education staffing, spending, and students' educational opportunities and outcomes.

Across the technical reports on special education, researchers highlight questions they were unable to answer and data that is not publicly available or collected. These data could help policymakers and practitioners better understand how special education is working in California and what needs to be done to improve the system.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

The number of students identified for special education, the staff who support them, and overall special education spending have all increased

As of the 2024–25 school year, California serves over 865,000 students with disabilities, representing about 15 percent of the total student population in the state (Kaler et al.). This reflects a notable increase from just under 10 percent of the student population in 2003 (Bruno). Additionally, while the total student enrollment in California decreased slightly between the 2022-23 and 2024-25 school years, the number of students with disabilities increased by roughly 9 percent (approximately 71,000 students) during that same time period (Kaler et al.). This recent rise is driven significantly by increases in the number of students identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which saw a 27.5 percent increase over three years. Other Health Impairments (OHI) also grew by approximately 15 percent in that period (Kaler et al.).

Kaler, O'Neill, Strach, and Moffitt find a seven percent increase in pupil services personnel (e.g., school counselors, social workers) and an 18 percent increase in paraeducators between the 2022-23 and 2024-25 school years (see Table 1). Although they observe a five percent decrease in the anticipated number of special education teacher hires from 2023 to 2025, the number of anticipated special education hires more than doubled from roughly 2,200 in 2012 to roughly 4,700 in 2025.

Table 1. Annual Changes Among Student and Staff Groups, 2023-2025

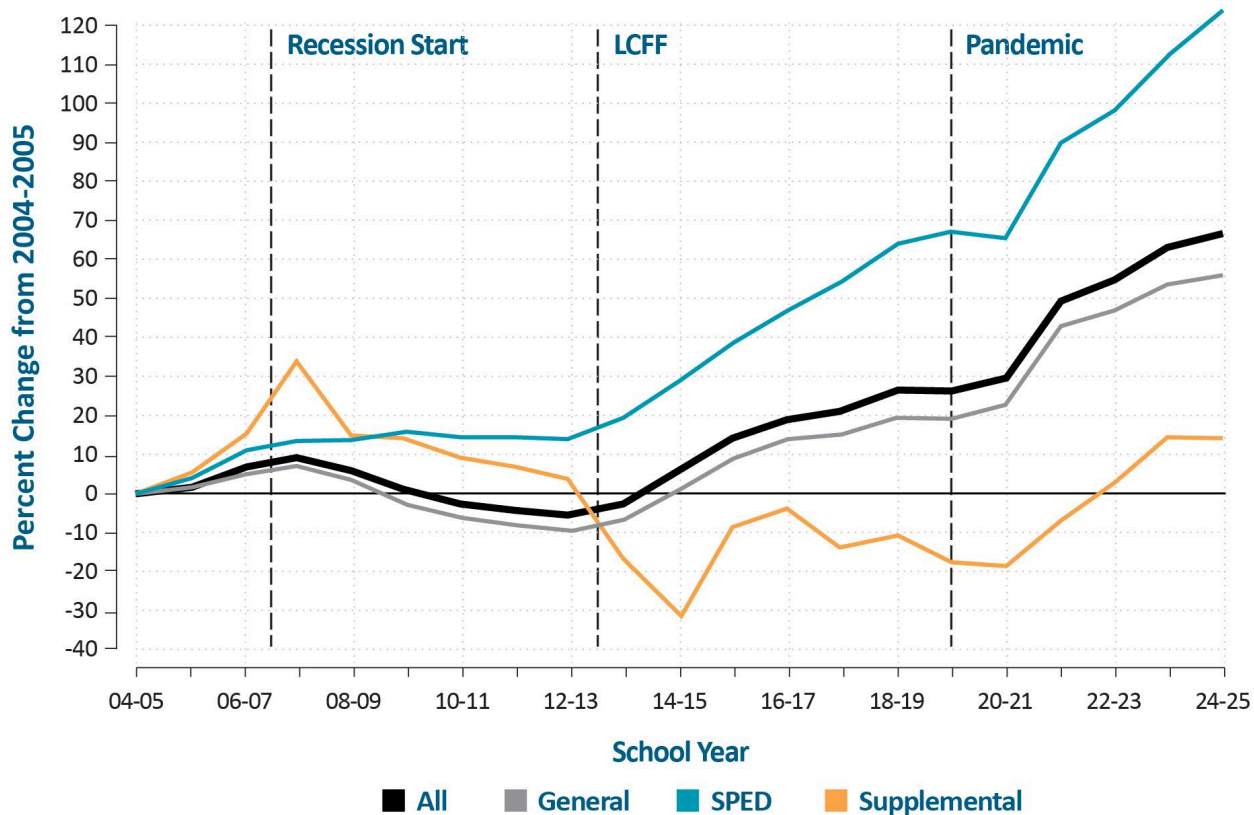
	2023	2024	2025	Average % Change	Total % Change
All Students	5,852,544	5,837,690	5,806,221	-0.40	-0.79
Students with Disabilities	793,985	836,846	865,213	+4.40	+8.97
Included in GE >80%	58.1%	59.1%	60.1%	+1.71	+3.44
Included in GE 40-79%	15.9%	15.2%	14.3%	-5.16	-10.06
Included in GE <40%	17.4%	17.1%	16.8%	-1.74	-3.45
Certificated Staff	370,727	377,026	379,739	+1.21	+2.43
Pupil Services	34,824	36,535	37,392	+3.63	+7.37
Teachers	284,608	285,891	286,126	+0.27	+0.53
Estimated Teacher Hires (SPED)	4,935	5,103.7	4,689.9	-2.35	-5.23
Classified Staff	282,800.9	299,266.3	318,575.8	+6.14	+12.65
Paraeducators	90,877.79	98,900.23	106,833.5	+8.43	+17.56
Teacher Credentials Issued	19,845	23,985	-	+20.86	+20.86
Educator Specialist Credentials	4,737	5,633	-	+18.91	+18.91
Services Credentials Issued	16,936	16,983	-	+0.28	+0.28
Pupil Services Credentials	12,651	12,445	-	-1.63	-1.63

Note. Data in the following rows is provided by the CDE: all students, certificated staff, estimated teacher hires, and classified staff. Data for teacher credentials issued and services credentials issued is provided by the CTC.

Lemons, Balasubramanian, Katz, and Unnikrishnan also document that the paraeducator workforce, which provides critical support to students with disabilities, is growing significantly faster than the teacher workforce and is more diverse. Their analysis suggests that schools are increasingly relying on paraeducators to support students’ learning and behavioral needs.

Spending on special education has also increased over the past 20 years, more than doubling between 2004-05 and 2024-25 (Bruno). Bruno indicates that he is unable to explain these results with certainty but suggests that some of the rise is attributable to the increase in students identified for special education, particularly in disability categories that require more costly services and supports.

Figure 1. Inflation adjusted changes in student spending per ADA on educational goals in California districts



Staffing challenges and professional siloing limit schools’ ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities

Although the technical reports indicate the number of staff employed in California schools is rising, they also indicate that more staff and training are needed to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Kaler and co-authors suggest that to understand the system of staffing for special education

it is essential to consider the full range of staff supporting students with disabilities, including, but not limited to, teachers, related service providers, and paraeducators. Drawing on interviews with 82 California principals, they find that these administrators experience “no slack in the special-education staffing system” and present evidence that the aggregate staffing data may not reflect the on-the-ground realities of those tasked with delivering special education services. Principals described wanting more staff to support special education, facing acute challenges recruiting qualified special educators and related service providers, and struggling to retain all staff serving students with disabilities including paraeducators in positions marked by low pay, part-time status, and limited training. These findings are supported by Smith and Li who find that, among beginning education specialist teachers in California in 2024-25, three-quarters were not fully certified. Additionally, Leung-Gagné et al. find that teacher turnover rates are significantly higher among special education teachers. In 2023–24, one in five special education teachers (20 percent) left their positions — a rate 30 percent higher than other classroom teachers (Leung-Gagné et al.).

Lemons and co-authors, whose technical report focuses on the paraeducator workforce in California, similarly conclude that low wages and part-time employment contribute to systemic instability. They find that paraeducators often receive training focused on compliance requirements (e.g., mandated reporting) but have limited preparation in core areas such as instructional and behavioral support. In addition, paraeducators frequently work in professional isolation, with no paid time to collaborate with teachers, unclear job responsibilities, and supervisors who are not always prepared to manage and support them effectively. Together, these conditions can lead to the underutilization of a workforce that can be highly effective in supporting students with disabilities (Lemons et al.).

Both Kaler et al. and Lemons et al. identify siloing as a significant systemic barrier to effectively serving students with disabilities. Siloing between general and special education creates a culture of restricted responsibility that acts as a major impediment to inclusive practices, reflecting a failure to consistently recognize that all students are general education students first (Kaler et al.). Similarly, the siloing of the paraeducator role leads to professional isolation and a “hand-off” model where paraeducators are assigned to a student rather than integrated into student support teams (Lemons et al.). These structural divides make it difficult to build professional communities that are collectively equipped and accountable for the success of students with disabilities.

Administrative and compliance requirements absorb substantial time and resources across California’s multilayered special education system

California’s Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) are the foundational unit of the state’s special education governance. Ripma and McClellan find that districts rely on these mandatory regional education service agencies primarily for shared administrative infrastructure to navigate complex compliance requirements. They note that administrative and compliance demands are shaped not only

by federal mandates but also by state policy. They further contend that the cumulative burdens of state requirements are substantial, particularly for small and rural local education agencies (LEAs), and have not been systematically assessed relative to their benefits. Although SELPAs also provide direct student services, Ripma and McClellan find that LEA administrators experience the quality, affordability, and availability of those services as uneven. When SELPA services fall short, districts often build partnerships outside their SELPAs and turn to private providers. SELPA-level expenditures substantially exceed the state funding allocated for regionalized operations. Although the state provides approximately \$20 per ADA for these purposes, the median SELPA reports about \$44 per ADA in SELPA-level expenditures. Because these expenditures reflect both administrative functions and shared service provision, however, the available data do not allow for a clear distinction between spending on administration and spending on services. As a result, the state has limited visibility into how SELPAs allocate these funds and what services LEAs receive across regions. Ripma and McClellan’s findings suggest that SELPAs devote substantial time and resources to administrative and compliance functions that are valued by LEAs but that far exceed state funding and may be misaligned with, or come at the expense of, consistent direct services and student-centered supports.

At the local level, Kozleski’s study of special education assessment in California highlights the significant time and resources devoted to determining students’ eligibility for special education. Kozleski finds that comprehensive eligibility assessments are estimated to cost between \$2,500 and \$7,000 per student in professional time and resources and tend to function more as administrative “gatekeeping” mechanisms for access to services than as drivers of improved teaching and learning. Lower-cost, ongoing instructional assessments (e.g., curriculum-based measurement) remain underused and underdeveloped. Kozleski also finds that the time required for evaluations reduces the capacity of school psychologists to work directly with students and to collaborate with other educators to address the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Together, these patterns illustrate how compliance-oriented processes in California’s special education system can absorb significant resources and professional time in ways that are in tension with the direct service and instructional needs of students with disabilities.

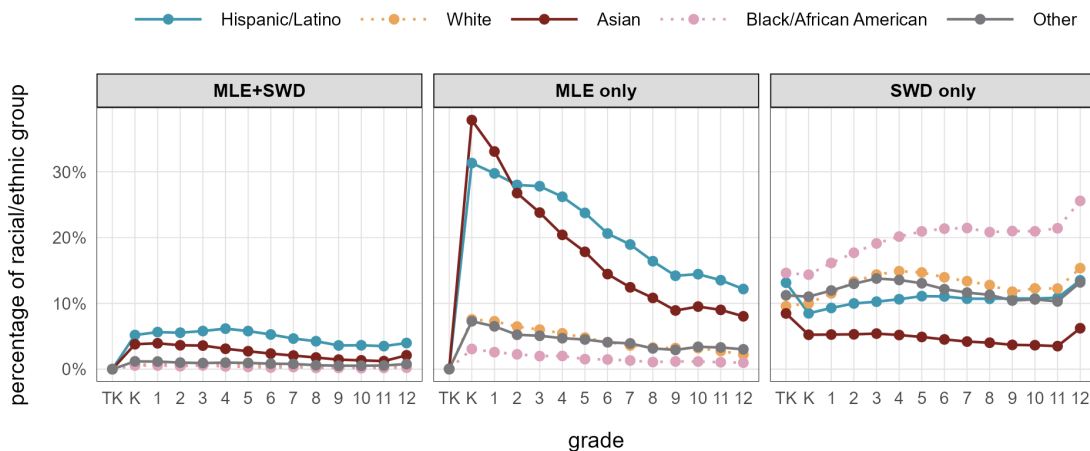
California’s education system creates unique burdens and notable disparities for students and families, particularly when race and language intersect with disability status

Disparities in opportunities and outcomes exist for students with disabilities. Metrics related to students with disabilities and their families appear across many of the technical reports. For example, Fisher, Arpino, and Liu’s study finds that families who have a child with a disability report greater levels of hardship, especially around childcare strain, than families without a child with a disability. Gee and Yu show that students with disabilities have a higher rate of chronic absenteeism; and Burns and Price

find the prevalence of disability among long-term English learners (LTELs), especially in the high school years; one third of 12th grade LTELs also have a special education designation. Artiles and Souto-Maior’s study of multilingual learners of English (MLEs) with disabilities—dually identified students—gives the clearest and most detailed account across the technical reports of some of the disparities dually identified students specifically and students with disabilities more generally face in California’s public schools.

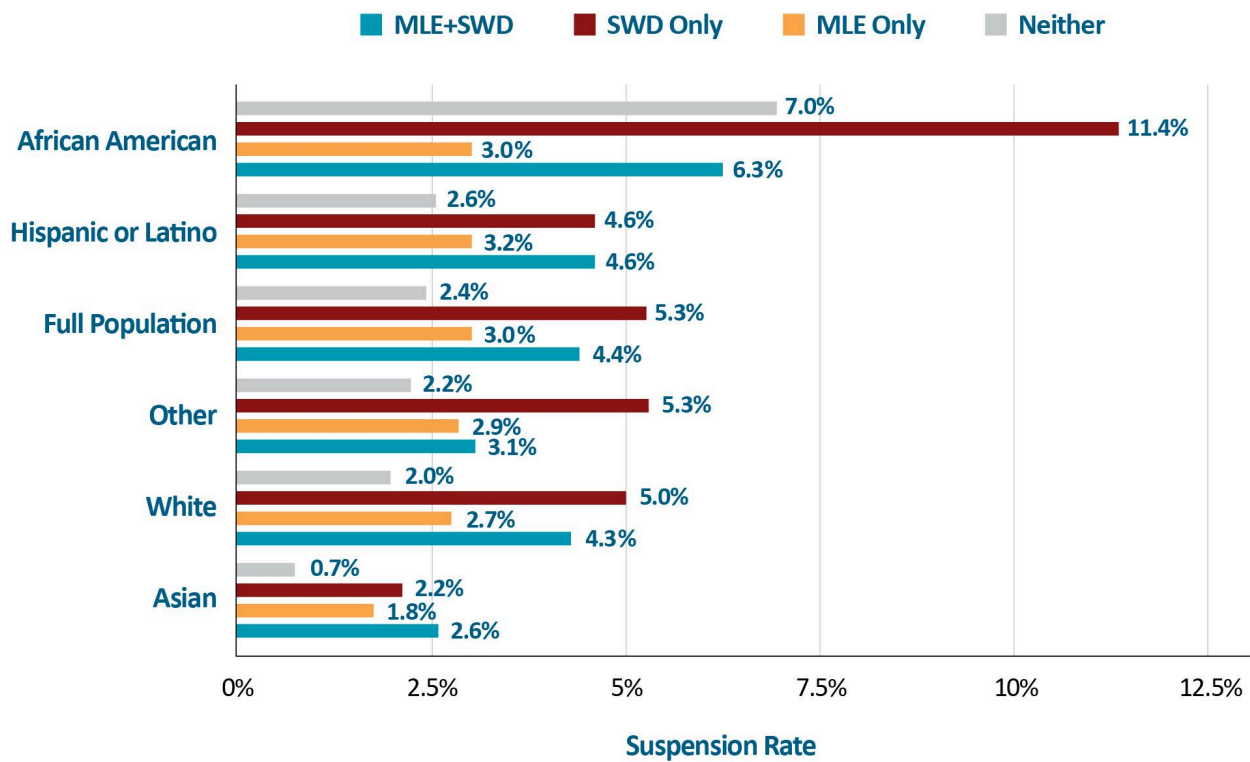
Artiles and Souto-Maior’s findings highlight how race, language, and disability status, and their intersections, create unique and often compounding obstacles. For example, when looking at students who are not MLEs, they find that Black/African American students are disproportionately identified relative to their share of total enrollment and that their identification rates increase across grades (see **Figure 2**). When looking at suspension rates by student group and race/ethnicity, Artiles and Souto-Maior find racial disparities in discipline that are compounded by disability status and most pronounced for African American students at the intersection of race and disability status (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 2. Distribution of group representation by grade (and disaggregated by race), California public schools, 2024-25.



MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification. To aid visualization, y-axis scales are independent across panels and alternating line types (solid/dotted) further distinguish groups.

Figure 3. Annual suspension rates by student group and race/ethnicity, California public school students, 2024-25



MLE = Multilingual Learner of English classification; SWD = Student With Disability classification.

Finally, looking at a range of educational opportunities and outcomes for dually identified students, Artiles and Souto-Maior find that dually identified students face substantial disadvantages from language reclassification rates to college enrollment, with inclusive placement being the one exception. They find that only 60 percent of dually identified students are reclassified as English proficient by Grade 12, compared to 75 percent of multilingual learners without disabilities, and they find that 44 percent of dually identified students enroll in college versus 66 percent of students with neither classification. They also find that counties with a larger enrollment share of dually identified students had better outcomes, suggesting that opportunities exist to identify promising organizational and programmatic approaches to support students facing the greatest barriers.

California's current data systems make it difficult to answer critical questions about special education staffing, spending, and students' educational opportunities and outcomes

While California's administrative data systems were critical to the studies cited here, researchers noted important ways in which limitations in those systems prevent some fundamental questions related to the operation and outcomes of special education from being answered. Kaler et al. and Lemons et al. noted significant hurdles in identifying and tracking the special education workforce including the inability to identify the number of special education teachers using publicly available data (Kaler et al.) and the absence of robust, disaggregated state data on the paraeducator workforce (Lemons et al.). Ripma and McClellan point out that the state lacks data on how SELPA regionalized expenditures are used in practice, limiting insights into the services SELPAs are delivering. Artiles and Souto-Maior describe limitations of publicly available data to know how dually identified students' reclassification trajectories unfold over time. Researchers suggest that addressing these gaps could give policymakers and practitioners a clearer picture of how special education operates in California and where changes are needed to strengthen the system.

Implications for California

The research points to four areas where the evidence has direct bearing on decisions California is now facing.

Supporting and strengthening the special education workforce

Meeting the needs of students with disabilities depends on a broad workforce that includes special education teachers, general educators, related service providers, paraeducators, and administrators. The evidence points to continued challenges in recruitment, training, retention, supervision, and collaboration across these roles (Kaler et al.; Lemons et al.). It also highlights the importance of preparing general educators to teach students with disabilities and equipping teachers and administrators to work effectively with paraeducators (Kaler et al.; Lemons et al.). Stronger state-level data on staffing, spending, and student outcomes would make it easier to understand how workforce investments relate to service quality and where capacity gaps are most consequential (Kaler et al.; Lemons et al.).

Aligning regional governance, compliance, and direct services

Research on SELPAs highlights the importance of regional governance in California’s special education system (Ripma and McClellan). Mandatory SELPA participation creates a structural tension because LEAs retain legal responsibility for student outcomes while key supports are organized regionally (Ripma and McClellan). LEAs’ use of inter-district consortia and private contracts when SELPA support is weak or insufficient points to unevenness in regional service delivery (Ripma and McClellan). These findings raise questions about the transparency of SELPA spending, the alignment between regional administrative functions and direct services, and the extent to which state-specific reporting requirements support or constrain local capacity (Ripma and McClellan; Willis and Loeb).

Rebalancing diagnostic assessment toward effective differentiation

Current assessment practices often function more as gatekeeping mechanisms for service eligibility than as tools for improving instruction. Reforming the diagnostic system requires action across multiple levels of the special education system. Kozleski suggests that locally, professional development in differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, and tiered intervention models such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), as well as reallocating assessment budgets to coaching and collaborative planning could help shift the focus from gatekeeping diagnostic assessments to student outcomes. At the state level, Kozleski posits that piloting weighted funding systems that allocate additional support based on instructional need and revising funding formulas that currently tie resources to disability categories could incentivize instructional flexibility. Reforming special education assessment can help California shift toward ensuring all students have access to meaningful, high-quality learning opportunities and supports for success.

Addressing disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes

The findings show significant disparities for students in special education, particularly at the intersections of race, language, and disability (Artiles et al.). These disparities appear in identification, discipline, reclassification, college enrollment, chronic absenteeism, and family hardship (Artiles et al.; Burns and Price; Gee and Yu; Fisher et al.). Artiles and Souto-Maior’s report on multilingual learners of English with disabilities points to the importance of integrated services that address both language development and disability-related needs, professional preparation that equips educators to meet those needs, and data systems that make dually identified students’ outcomes visible. Their findings also point to opportunities to learn from counties where dually identified students experience stronger outcomes.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed here suggests that California’s special education system is expanding in scale, while capacity and coherence remain uneven. Staffing shortages and siloed roles, heavy compliance demands across a multilayered governance structure, and persistent disparities, especially for students at the intersections of race, language, and disability, can undermine the delivery of student-centered instruction and supports. Limitations in current data systems also make it difficult to connect investments to service quality and student outcomes, weakening oversight and continuous improvement. Moving forward, policy efforts that strengthen the workforce, align regional governance and compliance with direct services, rebalance assessment toward instructionally useful practices, and improve data transparency can help California better deliver on the promise of equitable educational opportunity for students with disabilities.

The central challenge is ensuring that growth in identification, staffing, and spending is matched by the capacity, coordination, and transparency needed to improve students’ daily experiences.

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