

Chapter 5

Special but Unequal: Race and Special Education

Matthew Ladner and Christopher Hammons

Race, Poverty, and Special Education: An Introduction

Congress made special education services a major concern of school districts when it enacted Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, in 1975. That act ushered in an era in which the federal government became active in financing and regulating special education services provided by local districts.

It is well known that public schools place a disproportionate number of minority students into special education programs and classes.

This act, now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandates a “free appropriate public education” for all children with disabilities regardless of the severity. This law also provides parents of a special education student with decisionmaking authority over their child’s education, and requires that an individualized education program (IEP) be developed for each child with a disability. The law further requires that students with disabilities receive education services in the least restrictive environment. In 1997, Congress reauthorized the IDEA, requiring states to align more closely the IEPs of disabled students with the standards and curricula of children in general classrooms, and to include regular classroom teachers in the decisionmaking process. The IDEA also requires inclusion of students with disabilities in state and district assessment programs and in setting and reporting performance goals.

On the surface, American school districts and states seem to vary widely in the number of students classified as needing special education services. In 1995-96, Massachusetts certified 17.1 percent of its students in special education programs, while Illinois, New Jersey, and Ohio reported only 4.3 percent, 5.4 percent, and 3.9 percent special education rates, respectively. Variation among individual school districts is even greater.¹

The federal definition of “learning disabilities” is especially vague, which presumably contributes to variation in diagnosis rates. The referral and identification process varies so much, in fact, that a child could be diagnosed as mildly mentally retarded in one setting but as having no disability in another.² Yet the incidence of learning disabilities and more recognizable physical disabilities (for example, blindness and deafness) across states does not differ significantly. In fact, there is slightly greater variance among physical disabilities than learning disabilities.³

Whether learning disabilities are randomly distributed across jurisdictions, or the identification process makes them appear to be so, both scenarios suggest a lack of “systemic drivers” to the special education process.⁴ If learning disabilities are close to being randomly distributed, we should not expect to find factors such as race or income associated with variance in special education rates. However, if special education rates vary strongly across jurisdictions according to certain demographic variables, then we can conclude that special education diagnosis is not randomly distributed but is influenced by other factors as well. Most special education researchers take this latter position.

Many scholars have identified poverty, for example, as an underlying variable that influences special education rates. Analysts have consistently associated mild mental retardation diagnosis with low socioeconomic status,⁵ and research suggests that this may account partially for the disproportionate representation of African-American children in that category, as those youngsters tend to come from lower-income backgrounds.⁶

It is well-known that public schools place a disproportionate number of minority students into special education programs and classes.⁷ African-American students accounted for 16 percent of the total U.S. student population in 1992, but represented 32 percent of students in programs for mild mental retardation (MMR), 29 percent in programs for moderate mental retardation, and 24 percent in programs for serious emotional disturbance.⁸ A statistical examination of 1978 data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights found regional differences in the tendency to label minority students as educable mentally retarded (EMR), with the South showing the greatest difference between minority and white EMR designations. Alabama had more than four times as many minorities labeled EMR as whites.⁹ Virginia lawmakers recently began an inquiry into overrepresentation of minority students in special education, citing the fact that African Americans represent 20 percent of the state’s student population but 28 percent of its special education students, including 51 percent of those labeled EMR. In 1999, the Roanoke, Virginia, chapter of the NAACP asked the Office for Civil Rights to investigate whether the Roanoke schools had violated federal civil rights laws.¹⁰

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An Analysis of Counties and Districts

The literature on special education leads to the following assumptions: minorities often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; poverty is associated with learning disabilities; minorities are disproportionately represented in special education programs; and, as a result, special education rates among minority students are much higher than for white students. We tested these assumptions with county- and district-level data, using standard statistical techniques.

County-level data represent the aggregation of school-district data within counties. District-level data on special education enrollments are unavailable in most states, but county-level data are

available from all states. Caution must be employed, however, because relationships between variables at the aggregate level may be the result of the aggregation itself.¹¹ For instance, a researcher performing a statistical analysis of urban counties alone might conclude that certain variables are unrelated to each other, when, in fact, the aggregating of data from both suburban and urban districts has canceled out the effect. The best strategy to deal with this potential problem is to examine as many levels of analysis as possible. Our analysis looks at both county and district levels, and it shows strikingly similar results. Additional checks at both state and school levels demonstrate a consistent pattern.¹² We conclude, therefore, that the results presented below do not result from aggregation.

Many states do not have a sufficient number of counties to perform a statistical analysis, and

Table 1. County-level Analysis of Special Education Rates in Selected States: Percentage of Minority and Free/Reduced-Lunch Eligible Children

Dependent variable: special education rates in all counties of selected states
Independent variables: percentage of minority and free/reduced-lunch eligible children

	Percentage of Minority Students	Percentage of F/R Lunch
California	-.037 (.014)**	.028 (.02)
Colorado	.018 (.030)	-.018 (.023)
Florida	-.058 (.018)**	.058 (.029)*
Georgia	-.037 (.014)*	.06 (.021)**
Maryland	-.046 (.015)**	.079 (.024)**
New York	-.05 (.024)*	.068 (.044)
Oregon	.022 (.030)	-.026 (.052)
Texas	-.079 (.013)***	.056 (.022)**
Wisconsin	.075 (.021)***	.03 (.030)

Note: OLS regression; entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parenthesis. Data source: Mark S. Littman and Deirdre A. Gaquin, *Education Statistics of the United States* (Washington, DC: Bernan Press, 1999).

* p .05 ** p .01 *** p .001

other states have small minority populations. Nevertheless, Table 1 presents regressions from a cross-section of states with county-level data. The dependent variable is the percentage of IEP students; the independent variables are the percentage of minority students and the percentage in a free/reduced lunch program.

The county-level analysis shows that the poverty variable is statistically significant in four of nine states, and behaves according to expectations: Increased levels of poverty lead to higher special education enrollments. The race variable proves to be statistically significant in seven of nine states. The race variable, however, behaves exactly contrary to our expectations. In six of the

seven states with a significant relationship between race and special education (California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New York, and Texas), counties with *higher* percentages of minority students have significantly *lower* numbers of students in special education on average. Only Wisconsin, where there was a significant positive coefficient associated with higher percentages of minority students, behaved according to expectations with higher minority enrollment leading to higher special education enrollment.

Florida and Maryland organize their school districts on a countywide basis, meaning that the results presented in Table 1 for those states are essentially district-level results.¹³ Table 2 presents an additional control variable for these two states: spending per pupil at the district level. Is it

Table 2. Analysis of Special Education (Dependent Variable), Race, Poverty, and Spending per Pupil in Florida and Maryland School Districts

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Maryland</i>	<i>Florida</i>
Spending per Pupil	-.0008 (.000 5)	.0004 (.0004)
Percentage of Minority Students	-.034 (.016)*	-.063 (.018)**
Percentage of F/R Lunch Students	.065 (.025)**	.057 (.029)
Constant	17.52 (3.52)***	11.97 (2.13)***
R-Square	.44	.15
N	23	66

Note: OLS regression; entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parenthesis. Data source: Mark S. Littman and Deirdre A. Gaquin, *Education Statistics of the United States* (Washington, DC: Bernan Press, 1999). * p .05 ** p .01 *** p .001

possible that districts with higher percentages of minority students simply have fewer resources to spend on special education, but these differences are lost in the aggregation of state- and county-level data? Inclusion of a spending-per-pupil control variable will account for this possibility.

Table 2 shows that controlling for spending per pupil fails to achieve statistical significance, while a higher poverty rate (as measured by the level of free/reduced lunch students) raises special education enrollment and an increased number of minority students in a district lowers it. The possible aggregation problem still remains, however. Although Florida and Maryland districts are run on a county basis, they represent the aggregation of many schools into large districts. Dividing Florida into county-size districts ensures, for instance, that wide variations among schools within the same district will wash out at the aggregate level.

District-level data from Texas are the most revealing and lend themselves especially well to analysis. The Texas district-level data contain additional information not readily available in other states, including detailed financial and student information. These data enable us to distinguish among separate categories of minority students, specifying percentages of African-American and Hispanic students, for example. The Texas data also include information on the percentage of school-district revenue raised locally (higher local revenue is a sign of greater property wealth) as well as revenue per pupil and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Regressing these independent variables against the percentage of students classified in special education programs shows that they all have significant effects on special education enrollment. The results are presented in Table 3.

The financial variables perform according to expectations: higher proportions of economically disadvantaged students are associated with higher special education rates. Likewise, as the percentage of local revenue increases, special education rates decline: richer districts have fewer students in special education. Total revenue per pupil has a significant yet weak effect on special education rates.

Table 3. Race, Spending, and Special Education in Texas School Districts: District-level Analysis with All Texas School Districts

Dependent variable: percentage of students exempted from the TAAS accountability exam due to special education status

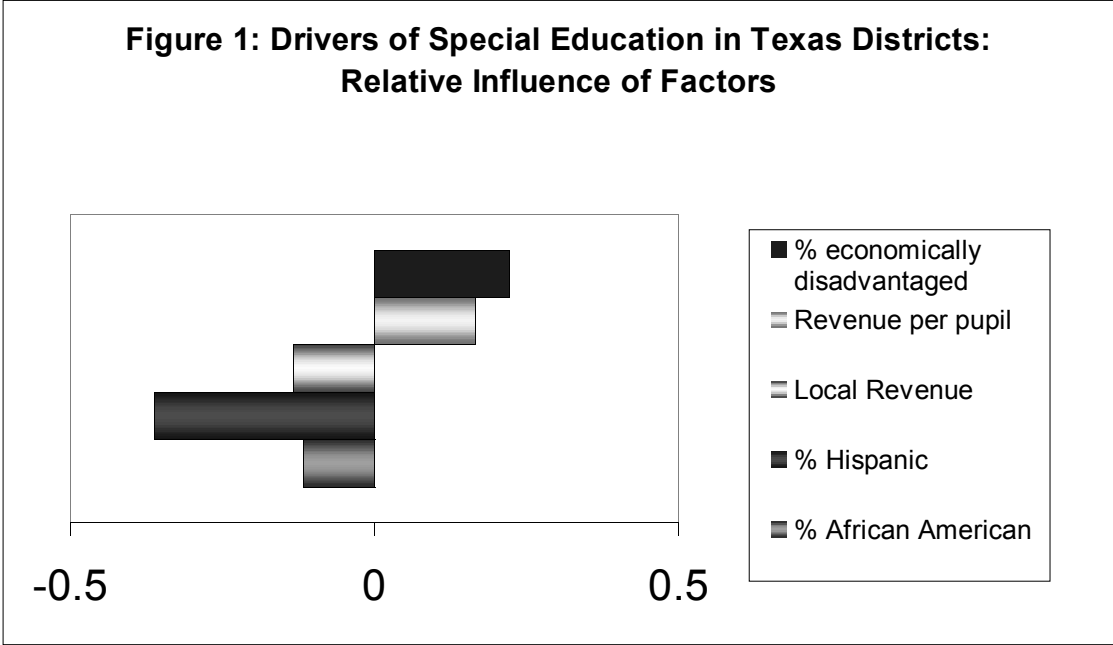
Independent Variables:

Percentage of Free/Reduced Lunch Students	.090 (.009)***
Percentage of African-American Students	-.073 (.010)***
Percentage of Hispanic Students	-.108 (.006)***
Percentage of Local Revenue	-.045 (.006)***
Revenue per Pupil	.0007 (.00007)***
R-Square	.29
Constant	10.95 (.567)***
N=1059	

Note: OLS regression; entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parenthesis. Data source: Texas Education Agency, *AEIS Report, 1997-8*.

* p .05 ** p .01 *** p .001

Figure 1 presents the relative effects of various independent variables such as race, revenue, and poverty on special education enrollment in Texas. All factors presented in Figure 1 are statistically significant. The influence of race, however, stands out. In Texas districts, minority enrollment—especially Hispanic enrollment—significantly decreases the number of children in special education programs. Even with separate controls for poverty and revenue, the race variables prove significant.



The Relationship Between Minority Student Enrollment and Special Education Certification

Previous literature suggests that minority students are overrepresented in special education, but the analysis presented here suggests that a larger percentage of minority children is associated with fewer students in special education. The relationship between the percentage of minority students and the percentage of students enrolled in special education is all the more mysterious when you consider the fact that minorities overall are more likely than whites to be enrolled in special education.

Why greater percentages of minority students are associated with significantly lower special education rates represents the central paradox of this study. Our research question is: *How can we explain statistics showing that minorities are more likely to be placed in special education when our data indicate that districts with higher percentages of minorities have lower percentages of special education students?* We explore different answers to this question, which we have formulated into four hypotheses. We developed these hypotheses by interviewing officials with expertise in special education. Each hypothesis is independently assessed. The variables developed in the exploration of each hypothesis are included in a summary model from which final conclusions are drawn.

Hypothesis 1—Financial Status: Majority-minority districts provide fewer special education services due to a lack of resources.

Many educators assert that the quality of education is directly related to funding.¹⁴ The poor quality of education in many urban districts, particularly majority-minority districts, is often attributed to insufficient funds. The mantra of many educators is that more money is needed. Given the recurrence of this charge, might it also be the case that enrollment in special education programs suffers in districts with fewer financial resources? If so, we would expect to see lower enrollment in poorer districts and higher enrollment in more affluent districts. We

tested this hypothesis by focusing on three related variables.

First, we examined district-level per-pupil spending. Though states typically fund districts on a per-pupil basis, spending per pupil is not always the same across districts. Some larger urban

Our data reveal no correlation between special education enrollment and per-pupil district expenditures.

districts have much greater demands on their resources, and available funds are used for a greater variety of expenses. Given our initial findings, however, one might expect to see lower spending per pupil associated with lower rates of special education.

Second, we looked at class size as a function of school resources. The argument is often made that poorer school districts are forced to crowd more students into classrooms. This practice may be a consequence of insufficient facilities and a shortage of teachers. The lower enrollment in special education in less affluent districts, therefore, may be a result of overcrowding in the schools. One educator we interviewed

suggested that teachers in larger classrooms may have a more difficult time identifying students with special needs simply because there are so many students of different skill levels.

Third, we examined variations in teacher pay. Salary issues are a recurrent theme in education reform. Critics charge that teacher wages are too low to attract and retain qualified people, a charge with which many educators concur.¹⁵ “The pay for teachers in general is not great,” observed Evy Friend, Director of Exceptional Student Education Programs and Services in the Florida Department of Education. “Attracting special education teachers is even more difficult because of low prestige, a disproportionate amount of paperwork, and the increased threat of litigation.” Considering this, one might expect to find a statistically significant relationship between teacher pay and special education enrollment.

To determine the relationship of these variables to special education enrollment, we weighted each school district in terms of its relative size compared to all other districts in the sample. A handful of large urban districts with many students would otherwise have a disproportionate influence on the analysis. Dade County, for example, accounts for over 15 percent of all students in Florida. Dade County also has over 85 percent minority students. Hence, thousands of the state’s minority students are located in that one district. To resolve this problem, we weighted each district by the proportion of minority students that it has compared to the proportion in the state as a whole.

Table 4 provides correlation statistics between our dependent variable (the percentage of students enrolled in special education courses) and our three independent variables (per-pupil spending, student-teacher ratio, and teacher salary). With regard to enrollment in special education programs, the data reveal no correlation with per-pupil district expenditures. Given the weak effect reported in our previous regressions, this is not entirely surprising.

Table 4 indicates that spending per pupil tends to be slightly greater in districts with more minorities. This may simply reflect greater financial resources because these districts have a larger number of students eligible for aid from state and federal governments.¹⁶ The link between

Table 4. Percentage of Students Enrolled in Special Education Courses Correlated with Possible Predictors



funding and quality of education, however, is difficult to establish. “There’s little relationship between spending and student performance in those high-poverty schools,” says Eric Hanushek, an economist at the Hoover Institution. “If anything, the schools that spend more money have less to show for it.”¹⁷

Table 4 also reveals an interesting pattern. Increased class size is indeed associated with lower rates of enrollment in special education programs. This finding is intuitively appealing because larger classes might make it more difficult to identify the needs of individual students. This assumption was reasserted by many of the educators we interviewed. If overcrowding occurs more often in less affluent districts, which tend to be majority-minority districts, this might help partially explain why districts with greater percentages of minorities enroll fewer students in special education. Table 4 indicates that schools with many minority youngsters also tend to have slightly more crowded classrooms. Although the relationship is modest, it is difficult not to consider class size a contributor to special education enrollment rates.

A third variable of interest is teacher salary. Nationwide shortages of teachers have made pay a hot-button issue for education reform. Average salary for starting teachers in 1999 was roughly \$26,000, with great variation depending on the state and district. The educators we spoke with, however, disagreed on whether salary or location is the bigger barrier to attracting good teachers.

“The pay in urban districts is better, but the cost of living is higher, and the classroom discipline problems may be worse,” observed Dr. Irene Savary, Director of Exceptional Education Programs for Wakulla County School District in Florida. On the other hand, Catie McRae, Director of Exceptional Student Education in Gadsden County School District, Florida, noted that, “Rural areas typically have a harder time getting qualified teachers because it’s harder to find people willing to relocate to these areas. This, coupled with lower pay, makes it hard to recruit and retain good teachers.”

Table 4 shows that districts with higher salaries typically have lower enrollment in special education programs; conversely, districts with low pay place significantly more students in special education. We do not contend that variations in salary directly influence the rate at which students are placed in special education programs; rather an examination of salary allows us to look for relationships between a district’s resources and its special education rates.

Districts with more white teachers have a greater rate of minority enrollment in special education, especially among African-American students.

At first, it would appear that more affluent districts (with higher salaries) are placing fewer students into special education programs. One possibility is that these numbers must reflect wealthy districts with few minority students. Yet our data indicate that districts with more minorities actually have slightly higher salaries than predominantly white districts. The experts we consulted did not consider this finding unusual, noting that the cost of living in urban areas, where minorities tend to be concentrated, is greater and hence usually translates into higher pay for teachers.

Salary, then, may not be the best measure of district affluence. Poor urban districts may have reasonably well-paid teachers. By contrast, schoolteachers in affluent districts may be less well-paid; recall those communities where students drive much nicer cars than the instructors. A better measure might be to look at differences in urban versus rural settings and to measure per-capita income and poverty levels. We do exactly that in the next section. However, these findings support our initial contention that districts with more minorities place fewer students in special education.

Of the variables examined here, both class size and salary are related to special education rates. To test the relative importance of the two variables, we examine two additional models. It is evident in Table 5 that both variables are significant; neither drops from the equation. The table also indicates that teacher pay is a stronger predictor of special education enrollment than the student/teacher ratio. It is important to remember that the regression model does not imply that one variable *causes* a change in the other. The model only denotes that changes in one variable can predict changes in the dependent variable.

Resources do matter—at least as predictors of special education enrollment. We cannot determine whether they actually influence the process by which students are placed in special education courses. What we can say is that districts with both bigger classes and bigger salaries tend to place smaller percentages of students into special education courses. In the next

Table 5. Measuring District Resources: Salary and Class-Size as Predictors of Special Education Enrollment



section, we examine the possibility that the relationship truly being measured here is one of urban versus rural districts. We will also return to the question of class size and salaries in our final analysis.

Hypothesis 2—District Competence: Urban districts are less competent in identifying special-needs students.

If financial resources do not make a difference in special education enrollment rates, we must look elsewhere for explanations. It may be that special education rates vary between districts as a result of district competence in identifying students with special needs. To this end, lower rates of special education enrollment in districts with greater percentages of minorities could indicate that minority students are poorly served by their school districts, regardless of available finances. We hypothesize that success in identifying learning disabilities might be partially a function of the competency of districts in which minority students are enrolled.

Data from the 1990 census show that, in Florida and Texas, urban districts generally have a greater percentage of minority students as part of the total student body than rural districts. This is a national trend as well. It has been estimated that in the mid-1990s, for example, 53.8 percent of urban schools had predominantly African-American student populations.¹⁸ In some cities the number is higher: Milwaukee, 61 percent; Philadelphia, 64 percent; St. Louis, 80 percent; Atlanta, 92 percent; and Birmingham, 94 percent.¹⁹

Our data indicate that the more urban a school district, the lower the percentage of minority students enrolled in special education programs in that district.

Urban districts often come under fire for doing a poor job of educating students, particularly

special education youngsters.²⁰ Our data indicate that the more urban a school district, the lower the percentage of minority students enrolled in special education programs in that district. There are three reasons why this might be the case.

First, urban districts, particularly inner-city schools, under-identify students with special needs because these schools have different priorities. Second, urban schools face a host of problems that preoccupy and distract them.²¹ Third, it is not easy to find good teachers who want positions in the inner city. “One of the greatest complaints of new teachers is that the students are terribly behaved and have little respect for authority,” says Dr. Savary. “It’s one of the reasons so few people want to go into teaching nowadays. And with fear of lawsuits, we basically have to rely on uniformed police to resolve discipline problems.”

Districts with high percentages of minority students—regardless of whether they are urban or rural, rich or poor—actually tend to place fewer of their pupils in special education programs.

These factors lead to the possibility that urban districts may be less effective in providing quality education to students in general and particularly those with learning disabilities. It is a hypothesis supported by many national studies that indicate lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and generally poor academic performance in urban districts. Might it also be, then, that efforts to identify students with learning disabilities are simply not as effective in such districts?


According to Diane Johnson, Director of the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System in Tallahassee, that is a real possibility. “Schools vary greatly in the total number of students they refer to special education,” says Mrs. Johnson. “The academic standards of the school are an important factor. Schools with low academic standards may fail to identify students who are not performing well on tests because expectations are not high to begin with.”

It is difficult to test district competency because no standardized measure exists. However, two surrogate measures are available. First, district dropout rates may provide some indication of the district’s general level of organizational competency. Pupil retention is a problem in many districts that struggle to maintain academic standards, and it is a particular problem in urban areas. We use the percentage of students dropping out of the public school system, as measured at the district level in Florida in 1996-1997. We hypothesize that higher dropout rates are associated with lower district competency—that the schools have somehow failed to keep students enrolled. Although retention may be related to factors outside the district’s control, our goal is to see if special education rates among minorities suffer as a result of problems related to urban districts, and a high dropout rate is one of these problems.

Second, we use scores on high school math competency exams as an indicator of general academic success. These test scores may provide some indication of the quality of education. Once we account for differences in wealth and race, we can see whether urban schools score lower than non-urban schools, and determine if there is an “urban” effect on education that is independent of the effects of low-income and minority enrollments.

As expected, these variables show some relationship to enrollment in special education. Table 6 reveals that urban areas tend to place a smaller percentage of their students into special education than do rural areas. Districts with higher dropout rates tend to place fewer kids in special education. And districts with higher math scores tend to have higher rates of special education enrollment. In sum, special education rates are lower both in urban districts and in

Table 6. District Competence: Drop Out Rates, Math Scores, and Urbanization



areas with lower levels of academic success when measured in terms of retention rates and skills tests.

Table 6 also indicates that lower test scores and higher dropout rates are associated with urban districts. Hence, these districts do not demonstrate the same level of academic achievement as non-urban districts. To this end, one might conclude that urban districts are less successful in educating their students and that, as a result, students with learning disabilities are more likely to be overlooked.

Others might say that the problems of urban districts are not due to lack of competence but to problems beyond the scope of the schools. We examined a number of possibilities:

- the percentage of students on free lunch programs and per-capita income (as indicators of poverty);
- crime rate and district teenage pregnancy rate (as indicators of general urban problems);
- the percentage of minorities in the district; and
- the level of urbanization, measured as the number of people living in cities within the

Table 7. District Competence: Community Culture Influences on Special Education Enrollment, Florida Only

district.

Table 7 presents the correlations for these variables. Three of the four have a negative relationship with special education enrollment: the percentage of students in free-lunch programs, the crime rate, and the percentage of minorities in a district. In districts that have high crime, high poverty, and high concentrations of minorities, and also are urban, special education enrollment tends to decline. Unraveling this mystery requires us to determine which of these variables is most important. (Of course, they are all related to some degree.) Is the lower rate of enrollment in special education programs predominantly an urban phenomenon linked to poverty and school climate, or does this occur in other districts as well? To test this question, we use a regression model with the same variables.

The results in Table 8 show that poverty is an important predictor of special education enrollment (Model 1), but it is insignificant once crime is taken into consideration (Model 2). Model 3, however, indicates that once the level of urbanization is also factored in, crime and poverty both become insignificant. Hence, the phenomenon we are studying occurs in urban rather than rural areas.

Table 8. Regression of Urbanization, Crime, and Poverty as Predictors of Special Education Enrollment.



The most intriguing statistic from Table 8 is in Model 4, which indicates that urbanization, crime, and poverty are all not strong predictors of special education enrollment once the minority composition of the district is taken into consideration. Lower special education enrollment appears to be more determined by the racial composition of the student body than by a district's wealth, school climate, or urbanization.

These findings are in line with the opinions of many educators with whom we spoke, who did not note any real difference between urban and rural districts. Usually their concerns were class size, funding, and classroom discipline, but they did not feel that these issues were exclusive to urban schools. Although there may be some element of urbanism that we have failed to consider—for instance, student morale, school violence, or academic standards—there appears to be little statistical difference between urban and rural districts, or rich or poor districts with regard to special education enrollment.

In sum, the data again indicate that the percentage of minority students in a district is the driving force in determining special education rates. Contrary to the assumption that more students in these districts are enrolled in special education programs, districts with high percentages of minority students—regardless of whether they are urban or rural, rich or poor—actually tend to place fewer of their pupils in special education programs.

Hence the puzzle continues. As shown earlier, the cause does not seem to be a function of finances. Our data also indicate that special education levels seem unrelated to generic urban problems. Instead, there seems to be an effect stemming from the racial composition of the district. Identifying the cause of that effect is the objective of the next two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3—Parental Attitudes: The finding that districts with a high percentage of minority students place fewer pupils in special education programs can be explained by the fact that minority parents are reluctant to place children in special education programs because they fear that their children will be given lower quality instruction, will never return to the regular classroom, and/or will be stereotyped.

Parental understanding and support are important to any educator, even more so for teachers who work with students with special needs. Parental attitudes could play an important role in determining levels of enrollment in special education programs. Attitudes are difficult to measure, however, and a new survey of parental attitudes was beyond the scope of this study. Still, it seems likely that parental attitude toward placing a child in a special education program is not only important but might be associated with a variety of factors. Determining what these factors are, and how they influence parental support, may help shed light on variations in special education enrollments.

The possibility exists that varying special education rates may reflect differences in demands placed on schools for such services.

Reluctance to enroll a child in special education may be caused in part by the perception that such a placement will result in a negative label or stereotype. “We often encounter resistance from parents who don’t want their kids placed in special education programs,” says one high level official on the Florida school system. “The primary reason is that they fear the label. It has a stigma attached to it for some people. The other reason is

that they fear [that] once the student is placed in a special education program, they will be in special education for the rest of their schooling.”

Researchers have found that such concerns are especially widespread among minority parents, particularly African-Americans, who are said to resist placing a child in special education because they fear that the child will experience academic isolation, that other disabled students will have a negative effect on their child’s behavior, and that there will be other implications of the special education label for their child. The fact that our statistical analysis indicates lower special education rates among minority students in districts with a greater percentage of minorities adds empirical support to this hypothesis.

Parental support for placing a child in special education may stem partly from a parent’s ability to get answers to questions and gather information. Learning that their child may have special needs can be difficult for some parents. Although it is common for parents to have concerns about placing their child in special education classes, some claim that this concern is fueled by lack of information. Parents who resist enrolling their children in special education programs may do so in part because of inability to find answers to their questions. Special education

jargon and labels can be particularly confusing.²² A desire for information, the patience to navigate a complex bureaucracy, the ability to formulate questions, and the confidence to confront authority figures are critical for parents who seek answers.

This could mean that the educational background of the parent may in part determine his or her success in obtaining information. “Parents who are better educated are usually more aggressive in seeking answers to their questions,” according to one district official in Texas. “This does not mean that parents who are not as well-educated are less concerned about their child’s education. Parents with less education are often less vocal, less familiar with the lingo, and sometimes feel less secure confronting teachers and administrators.”

On the other hand, minority parents may simply be expressing completely rational concerns, given the way special education programs function in their communities. Assessing the source and accuracy of hostility toward special education programs lies outside of the scope of this research. The possibility exists, however, that varying special education rates may reflect differences in demands placed on schools for such services. Simply put, predominantly white communities may have a greater desire for special education services than predominantly minority communities. Such a difference may reflect socioeconomic factors such as education levels or different cultural values.

Using data from the 1990 census, we can determine the educational attainment level of any county in the United States. There is great variation. Florida facilitates comparison because of its use of county-level school districts. Using the percentage of people over age 25 who have completed high school as a measure of educational attainment, the range is a low of 54 percent in De Soto County to a high of 85 percent in Leon County. This is not the most accurate measure of education among parents because it does not differentiate among adults with children in school and those without; however, it does allow some general comparisons among school districts and is the best measure available.

We find no relationship between adult educational attainment at the district level and the percentage of minority students in special education, either as a percentage of all students in the district or as a percentage of minority students alone. The relationship is statistically insignificant in both cases, no matter whether we use high school or college graduation as a measure of education. Although both measures are crude, they still reflect the likelihood that a parent will have a high school or college diploma. To this end, we cannot say that lower levels of education among minority parents reduce the likelihood of their child enrolling in special education programs. However, our analysis revealed no relationship between wealth or education among adults in the district and levels of enrollment in special education programs by minority students. This does not mean that these variables do not affect the attitudes of some parents toward special education programs, only that such effects do not show up at the district level. A study of parent attitudes using survey data may reveal different relationships.

Some of the educators with whom we talked suggested that, because special education students get special treatment, parents often become the biggest supporters of enrolling their child.

It is interesting to note that many districts make great efforts to reach out to parents regardless of race, income, or education. Such has been the advice of many special education reformers and researchers.²³ Their intent is to reduce any anxiety parents may have regarding special education programs and involve them more in the decisionmaking process.

“Parents are a big part of the equation,” contends Teresa Williamson, Special Education Director for Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas. “It’s really important to offer parents as much information as they need to make informed decisions.” The Texas Education Agency has established a Parent’s Information Hotline that parents may call to ask questions, express concerns, or lodge complaints if they do not have success at the district level. According to Claudia Knowles, a veteran TEA specialist who oversees the hotline, “We get calls from parents of all races and backgrounds. It doesn’t seem to be limited to one particular group.”

Districts with more white teachers have a greater rate of minority enrollment in special education, especially among African-American students.

Some of the educators with whom we talked suggested that, because special education students get special treatment, parents often become the biggest supporters of

enrolling their child. According to Catie McRae of the predominantly black Gadsden County School District in Florida, “Word gets out that these programs can be a great help to students who are struggling in school. Many parents actually encourage the placement of their kids into these programs. The kids get more attention and it gives them more opportunity to jump some of the barriers that traditionally get in the way of students, such as retention tests.” In this sense, special education may be seen as a means of advancement, rather than a barrier to academic success. Such perceptions, it should be noted, vary widely according by community.

Hypothesis 4—Social Segregation: The finding that districts with a high percentage of minority students place fewer pupils in special education programs can be explained by the fact that predominantly white districts place a higher percentage of their minority students into special education services than do predominantly minority districts.

Evidence that minority students are placed into special education programs at higher rates than white students is nothing new.²⁴ What is new is our counter-intuitive finding that districts with the highest concentration of minorities tend to have the lowest rates of special education enrollment, not the highest, despite the fact that minorities are enrolled in special education at higher rates than whites. In attempting to explain this paradox, we have focused intently on minority districts, looking at such factors as district revenues, district competency, and parental attitudes to explain why special education enrollment is so much lower in minority districts.

One area we have so far neglected is the racial composition of the district itself. Although districts with higher proportions of white students may have greater percentages of students in special education programs than minority districts, it does not necessarily follow that white districts place higher percentages of *white* children in these programs. Districts with higher percentages of white students may simply be placing more of their *minority* students into special education programs. Such a phenomenon could help explain the fact that districts with higher

Table 9. District Composition and Special Education Enrollment



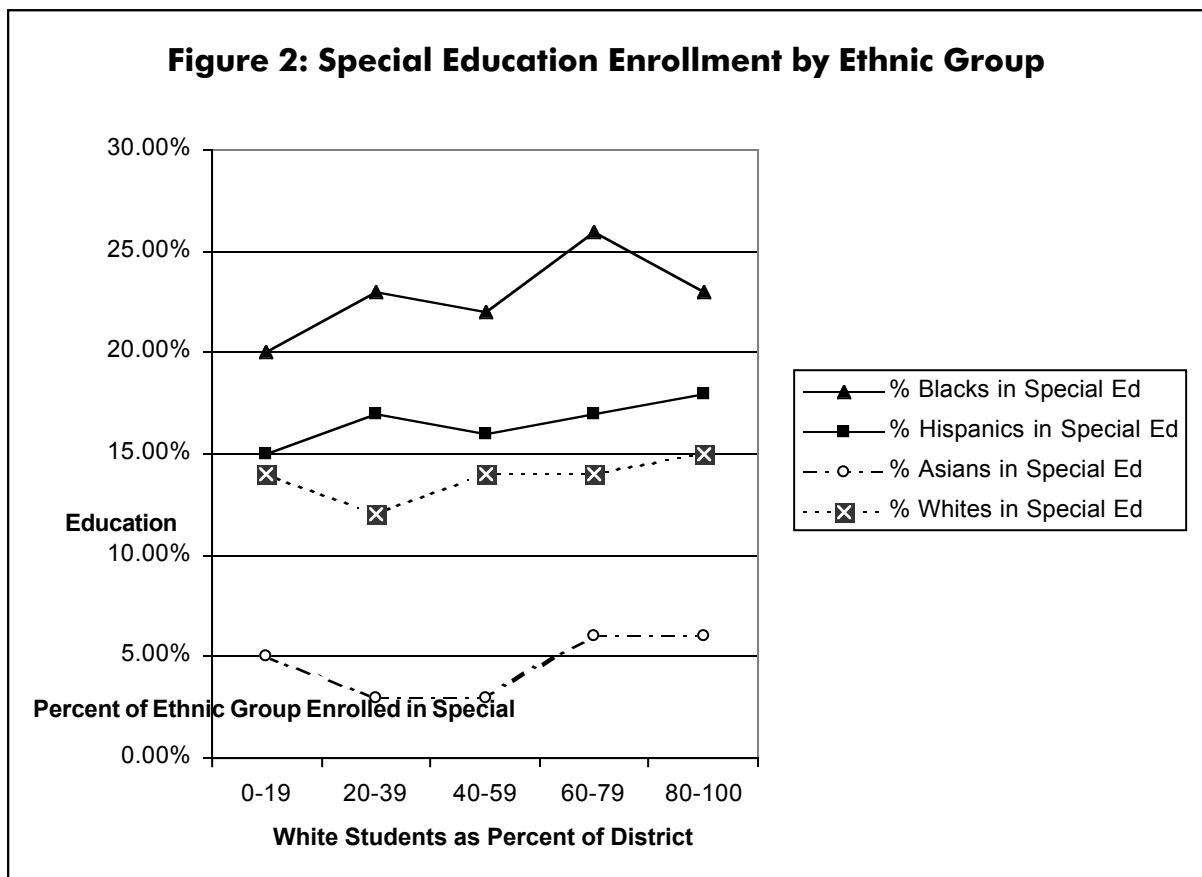
percentages of white students also have higher special education rates, even as minority students demonstrate greater special education rates in the aggregate.

To test this possibility, we divided special education students into minority and non-minority groups. For purposes of our analysis, minority students consisted of black, Hispanic, and Asian students. (Native-Americans were such a small percentage of the population that they did not alter the analysis.) Table 9 reveals a direct relationship between the racial composition of the student body and the racial composition of students placed in special education. Districts with a greater percentage of white students place a slightly higher *percentage* of their *minority* students into special education compared to primarily minority districts.

The correlation between the percentage of white students enrolled in special education and the percentage of white students in the district is insignificant. If predominantly white districts simply enrolled a larger number of special education students in general, we should see an increase in enrollment in both white and minority rates. However, what we see is an increase only in the rates of enrollment among minority students. This would seem to indicate that, in predominantly white districts, minority students are treated differently.

To explore the impact of ethnicity in special education, we plotted the enrollment rate of different ethnic groups in special education programs against the percentage of the student body that is white. The results are presented in Figure 2. Two things are immediately evident.

- *First, white districts enroll a greater percentage of minority students in special education than majority-minority districts. Enrollment rates for all ethnic groups are highest in*

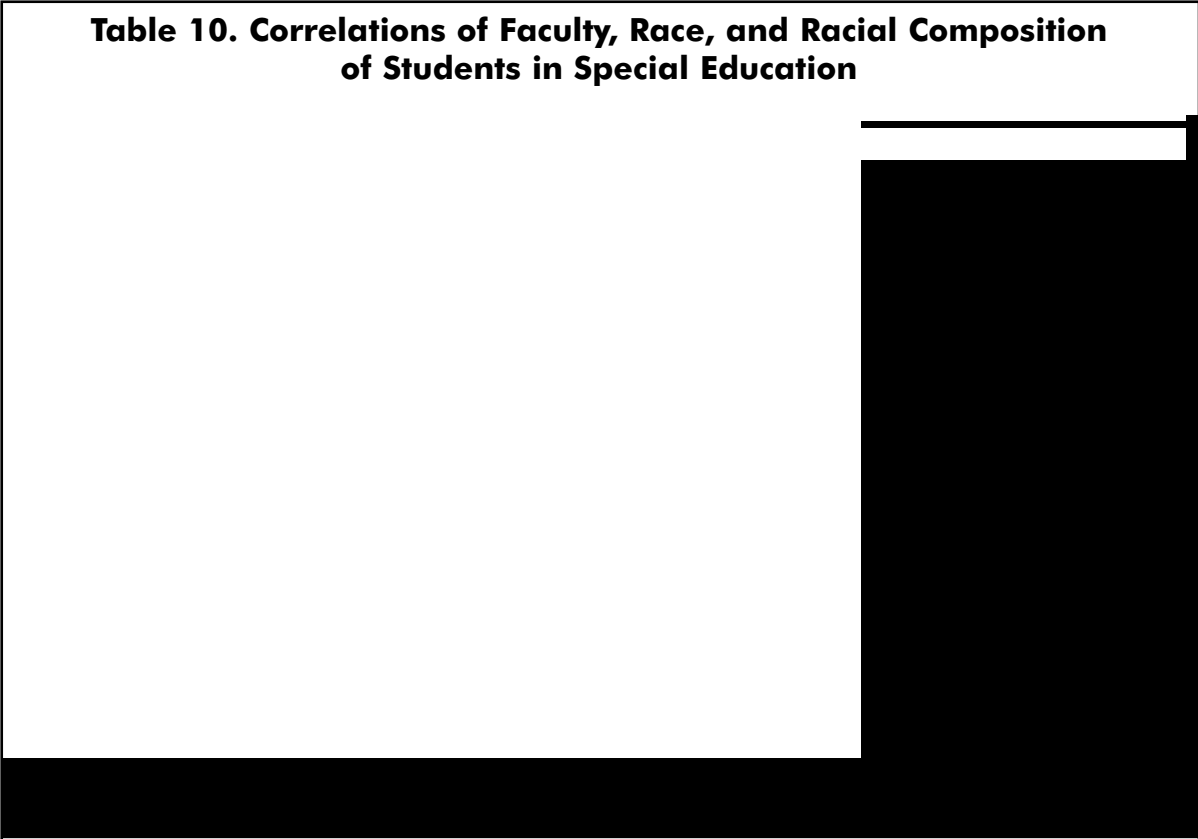


primarily white districts, and enrollment rates seem to vary most for blacks and Hispanics in predominantly white districts (60 percent white or greater).

- Second, a greater percentage of black students are placed in special education programs than any other racial group.* Black students have a much higher special education rate than Hispanic and white students in every category. Similar trends have been reported elsewhere.²⁵ In predominantly white districts, special education enrollment among blacks is 9-10 percent higher than in other districts. Although this difference may not appear significant, it means that in predominantly white districts, almost one in every four black students is in special education. It also represents an enrollment rate 50 percent higher than that of white students. Hispanic student enrollment is consistently a few percentage points higher than white students but lower than black students.

There is some evidence, then, that in districts with predominantly white students, minority students—particularly black students—are treated differently. One could say that the disparity in rates of enrollment reflects little more than differences in academic standards among the districts. That is, perhaps minority students have a more difficult time in white districts because such districts maintain more rigorous academic requirements than inner-city districts. Academic difficulties of a minority student may be interpreted as a learning disability because the student is “slow” or not on the same learning level as his or her white peers.²⁶

Table 10. Correlations of Faculty, Race, and Racial Composition of Students in Special Education



There are two problems with this highly controversial assertion. First, our previous analysis of Hypothesis 2 indicated that the racial composition of the school is more important than variables that we might associate with the school’s academic standards (dropout rate, test scores, spending, and level of urbanization). To this end, the quality of the school seems unrelated to, or to have little influence on, enrollment once the racial composition of the student body is taken into account.

Second, our analysis indicates that race is important not only in terms of the student body, but also the faculty. Table 10 reveals that districts with more white teachers have a greater rate of minority enrollment in special education, particularly for African-American students. The correlation for African-Americans is almost the same as for Hispanics. Special education rates for white students are unaffected by the racial composition of the faculty. Again, it seems that minority kids are singled out, but this time the data point toward the race of faculty members as an explanation for higher minority student enrollment in special education.²⁷

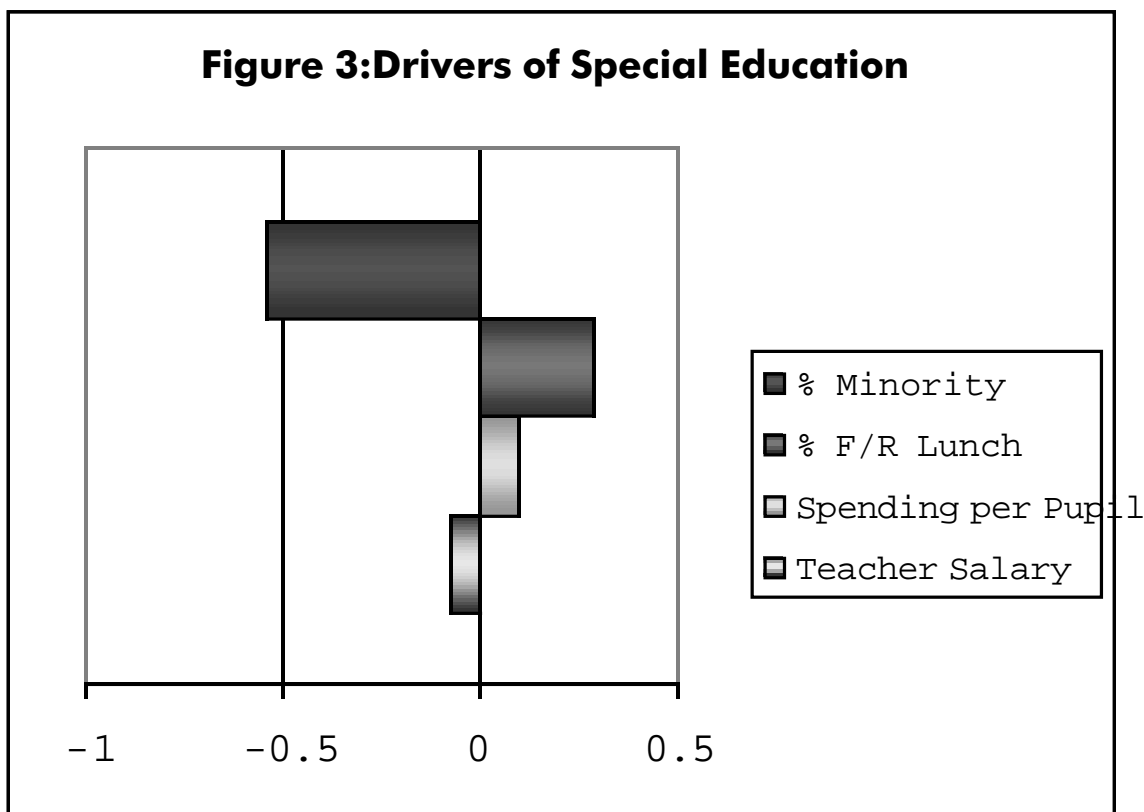
Conclusions

The data indicate that minority students are treated differently in predominantly white districts than in predominantly minority districts. Districts with predominantly black teachers, for example, have lower special education rates for all students, but particularly for African-American and Hispanic students. That is, the data reveal that in districts with a predominantly black faculty, minority students see a reduction in special education enrollment that is three to four times

Table 11. Final Model: Class Size, Salary, Student Body, and Spending as Predictors of Special Education Enrollment

greater than the reduction seen by white students. This does not mean that minorities have lower special education rates than whites in these districts, only that these rates drop greatly in districts with minority faculty while those of white students experience only a slight decrease. This is illustrated in Figure 2, where the difference among black, Hispanic, and white students is lowest in districts with less than 20 percent white faculty (that is, predominantly minority districts).

These findings indicate that enrollment in special education might be determined in part by race—not only of the student but also of the student’s teachers and/or fellow students. Table 11 presents a final comprehensive model combining district-level data from Texas and Florida, weighted by population (districts with high populations are given a higher weight). Our dependent variable is again the number of students enrolled in special education in each district, and the key independent variable of interest is again the percentage of minority students in each district. Control variables include those that demonstrated some influence in our four major hypotheses—teacher salaries, teacher-to-student ratio, spending per pupil in the district, and the percentage of students eligible for a free or reduced lunch.



The control variables behave according to expectations. The spending-per-pupil variable is significant and positive: more spending leads to more special education. The class-size variable is negative but not statistically significant. Poverty (as determined by free- or reduced-lunch eligibility) proves strongly significant and positive, with higher percentages of low-income children leading to higher rates of special education. *Race, however, impacts special education rates far more than any other variable.* Figure 3 presents the relative size of the impacts for the statistically significant variables in the model. The percentage of minority students in the district is the strongest driver of special education enrollment in our model. In fact, the effect is nearly double that of the next highest variable and has a greater overall impact than the other three combined. The racial composition of the district, therefore, is a key predictor of special education enrollment.

One argument advanced by commentators is that the educational system is inherently racist and classist.²⁸ Rather than claiming outright bigotry on the part of the faculty, these researchers contend that faculty are trained to teach white, middle-class kids. Students who fall outside this teaching paradigm suffer.

Other researchers contend that minority children often bring to the class different language patterns that might not be compatible with those of white teachers. Others argue that minority students excel under certain teaching styles but tend to suffer under the teaching methods used in predominantly white schools.²⁹ Still other researchers contend that minority children are socialized differently and hence develop different perspectives on authority and how to relate to the teacher.³⁰ One of the most common assertions is that the content of the traditional curriculum is incongruent with the experiences and lives of minority students.³¹

The short version of these commentators' arguments is that many public schools, designed to serve white middle-class students, pose an additional challenge for minority students. White teachers, according to many researchers, often are untrained in recognizing and dealing with these differences or remain unaware of them. The result is that many teachers evaluate lack of progress or differences in learning among minorities as deficiencies. Minority students are compared against a standard model based on white, middle-class norms.

When asked about this hypothesis, a top official in one of the largest districts in Texas commented that any time a student is placed in a situation where the other students and faculty are of different cultural groups, there is going to be a problem. "What we find is that in many cases, these children self-select themselves out of the school, and essentially refuse to participate in the learning process. Self-selection may take the form of withdrawing from classroom activities and becoming increasingly introverted, to behavioral problems and attempts to disrupt the learning process." Because these students often perform poorly in terms of academics, they are

We simply have no way to know what the special education rate "should be" in any district or any state. What we do know is this: Race plays a powerful role in the placement of children in special education.

more likely to meet the legal requirements for special education enrollment. This might explain why we see a pattern of increased minority special education in predominantly white districts and increased white and black enrollment in predominantly Hispanic districts. The numerical minority gets marginalized.

State and district officials voiced two recurring themes for this pattern in our interviews. First, some officials suggested that some white parents may attach less stigma to special education and may be more willing to litigate—or threaten litigation—if students do not receive the help they need. One district official even speculated that white parents might prefer that their child receive a special education label rather than be identified as simply a poor student. The result of these pressures may be that white districts have a tendency toward overclassifying white children as special education-eligible. However, this cannot explain the discrepancy between the negative coefficients for our race variables and

the fact that minorities are enrolled in special education at a disproportionately high level. The phenomenon described in these interviews relates only to white parents wanting special education services for their own children rather than to minority parents in predominantly white districts.

In our interviews, district and state officials noted great reluctance among minority parents to place students in special education. Administrators claim that special education is often viewed by minority parents as a failing that reflects on the family and signals that there is something "wrong" with the student. Alternately, minority parents may have rational concerns about placing their students in special education because such programs fail to yield benefits. Unfortunately, it is impossible to "prove" any of these theories because no objective measure of a "norm" for special education exists.

We simply have no way to know what the special education rate "should be" in any district or

any state. *What we do know is this: Race plays a powerful role in the placement of children in special education.* The evidence presented above goes beyond the finding that children of different racial groups are placed into special education at varying rates. It shows that the influence of race survives the inclusion of a variety of control variables and plays the most powerful role.³²

The results demonstrate conclusively that school districts do not make special education placements in a color-blind fashion. Commentators have noted the expansion and possible abuse of special education designations. If one suspects that over-diagnosis occurs, then logic dictates that it is happening primarily in predominantly white districts where special education rates, especially among minorities, are much higher. The most positive interpretation of these data might explain the disparate rates as a function of parental demand; minority parents in primarily white districts may be more likely to want their children placed in special education, and they therefore may be receiving the services they want for their children with special needs. Perhaps, however, these findings represent racial bias: that special education is, in part, a de facto method for intra-district and intra-school racial segregation. In all probability, there is likely no single overarching explanation that applies to all districts. The fact that the special education process is glaringly impacted by race, however, surely warrants both concern and further research.

¹ Mark S. Littman and Dierdre A. Gaquin, *Education Statistics of the United States*, 1st ed. (Washington, DC: Bernan Press, 1999).

² See Donald MacMillian, "Development of Operational Definitions in Mental Retardation: Similarities and Differences with the Field of Learning Disabilities," in *Better Understanding Learning Disabilities: New Views from Research and Their Implications for Education and Public Policies*, ed. G. Reid Lyon (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 1993), 117-152.

³ See Mark Kelman and Gillian Lester, *Jumping the Queue: An Inquiry into the Legal Treatment of Students with Learning Disabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 67-75.

⁴ A "systemic driver" is an independent variable (such as the percentage of Hispanic students in a state's school districts) that has a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable (such as special education enrollment).

⁵ See M. Yeargin-Allsopp, C. D. Drews, P. Decouflé, and C. C. Murphy, "Mild Mental Retardation in Black and White Children in Metropolitan Atlanta: A Case-Control Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 85 (1995): 324-328.

⁶ See United States Department of Education, "Factors Associated with the Provision of Special Education to Students with Disabilities in Inner Cities." Internet document available at <<<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/OSEP96AnlRpt/chap4b.html>>>.

⁷ See Jane Burnette, "Reducing the Disproportionate Representation of Minority Students in Special Education," *ERIC/OSEP Digest #E5661998* (Reston, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, 1998).

⁸ See P. Robertson and M. Kushner, et al., "An Update of Participation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Special Education: The Need for a Research and Policy Agenda," *The Bilingual Special Education Perspective* 14 (1994): 3-9.

⁹ See Jeremy D. Finn, "Patterns in Special Education Placement as Revealed by the OCR Surveys," in *Placing Children in Special Education: A Strategy for Equity*, ed. Kirby A. Heller, et al. (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1981), 334-342.

- ¹⁰ See "Committee Studies Over-Representation of Blacks in Special Ed," *Newport News*, 20 September 2000.
- ¹¹ See Gerald H. Kramer, "The Ecological Fallacy Revisited: Aggregate Versus Individual Level Findings in Economics and Elections, and Sociotropic Voting," *American Political Science Review* 77 (1983): 92-111.
- ¹² Additional regressions were performed on both the state level of analysis, and on the level of schools. The fact that information was only available from 36 states limits the utility of the state-level analysis, although the same relationship between race and special education appeared at the state level as at county and district levels. Similarly, a sample of 600 individual schools from Texas demonstrated a very similar relationship between variables as was found at the county and district levels. After examining the state, county, district, and school levels of analysis, we concluded that our findings are not the result of ecological fallacy.
- ¹³ Florida includes gifted-and-talented students in figures, but these students have been removed from Florida data employed in this paper.
- ¹⁴ See Michael S. Knapp, Patrick M. Shields, and Brenda J. Turnbull, "Academic Challenge in High-Poverty Classrooms," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (1995): 770-776; and Allan Odden, David Monk, and Yasser Nakib, "The Story of the Education Dollar: No Academy Awards and No Fiscal Smoking Guns," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (1995): 1-12.
- ¹⁵ See Ann Bradley, "If I Were a Rich Man," *Teacher Magazine* 11 (2000): 14-15.
- ¹⁶ See Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve* (New York: Free Press, 1994); and James M. Kauffman, "Historical Trends and Contemporary Issues in Special Education in the United States," *Handbook of Special Education*, eds. James M. Kauffman and Daniel P. Hallahan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981).
- ¹⁷ Quoted in John Tierney, "Money Per Pupil Is an Incomplete Response," *New York Times*, 21 June 2000, sect. B, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ See Michael Nettles and Laura W. Perna, "Schools and Staffing Survey, 1993-1994," in *The African-American Education Data Book, Volume 11: Preschool Through High School Education* (Fairfax, VA: Frederick D. Patterson Institute of The College Fund/UNCF, 1997).
- ¹⁹ See Jerome E. Morris, "What is the Future of Predominantly Black Urban Schools? The Politics of Race in Urban Education Policy," *Phi Delta Kappan* 81 (1999): 316-319.
- ²⁰ See Ted Gotsch, "Urban Disabled Children Lay Behind Non-City Peers," *Education Daily* 33, no. 77 (2000): 1-2.
- ²¹ See Cynthia Esposito, "Learning in Urban Blight: School Climate and Its Effect on the Performance of Urban, Minority, Low-Income Children," *The School Psychological Review* 28 (1999): 365-377; and E. Kelley, J. Glover, J. Keefe, C. Halderson, C. Sorenson, and C. Speth, *School Climate Survey (Modified) Form: Examiner's Manual* (Reston, VA: NASSP, 1986).
- ²² See H. Mehan, A. Hartwick, and J. L. Meihls, *Handicapping the Handicapped: Decisionmaking in Students' Educational Careers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).
- ²³ See Thomas C. Lovitt and Suzanne Cushing, "Parents of Youth with Disabilities: Their Perceptions of School Programs," *Remedial and Special Education* 20 (1999): 134-142; Pamela Pruitt, Donna Wandry, and Diane Hollums, "Listen to Us! Parents Speak Out About Their Interactions with Special Educators," *Preventing School Failure* 42 (1998): 161-166; and A. P. Turnbull and H. R. Turnbull, *Families, Professionals, and Exceptionality: A Special Partnership* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997).
- ²⁴ See A. J. Artiles and S. C. Trent, "Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education: A Continuing Debate," *The Journal of Special Education* 27 (1994): 410-437; B. Harry, *The Disproportionate Representation of Minority Students in Special Education: Theories and Recommendations* (Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1994); and Eugene C. Valles, "The Disproportionate Representation of Minority Students in Special Education: Responding to the Problem," *The Journal of Special Education* 32 (1998): 52-54.
- ²⁵ L. M. Dunn, "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—Is Much of it Justifiable?" *Exceptional Children* 35 (1968): 5-22; and J.E. Keulen, "Why Is There an Overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education Classes?" *College of Education Review* 7 (1995): 76-78.
- ²⁶ See K. Holt, "Why Must We Pluralize the Curriculum," *Educational Leadership* 49 (1992): 12-16; T. Lucas, R.

Henze, and R. Donato, "Promoting the Success of Latino Language-Minority Students: An Exploratory Study of Six High Schools," *Harvard Educational Review* 60 (1990): 315-340; and F. Stevens, "Closing the Achievement Gap: Opportunity to Learn, Standards, and Assessment," in *Closing the Achievement Gap*, ed. B. Williams (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1996).

- ²⁷ Faculty and student-body compositions tend to mirror each other, making any definitive conclusions about the impact of faculty versus student populations difficult to reach.
- ²⁸ See E. W. Gordon and C. Yowell, "Cultural Dissonance as a Risk Factor in the Development of Students," in *Schools and Students at Risk*, ed. R. Rossi (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994); and Marleen Pugach and Barbara Seidl, "Associate Editors' Exchange Responsible Linkages Between Diversity and Disability: A Challenge for Special Education," *Teacher Education and Special Education* 21 (1998): 319-333.
- ²⁹ See L. Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: New York Press, 1995); and J. Irvine and D. York, "Learning Styles and Culturally Diverse Students: A Literature Review," in *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, ed. J. Banks and C. M. Banks (New York: Macmillan, 1995).
- ³⁰ See S. Heath, *Ways and Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and L. A. Vogt, C. Jordan, and R. G. Tarpe, "Explaining School Failure, Producing School Success: Two Cases," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18 (1987): 276-286.
- ³¹ See M. Asante, "Afrocentric Curriculum," *Educational Leadership* 49 (1991): 28-31; and M. D. Harris, "Afrocentrism and Curriculum: Concepts, Issues, and Prospects," *Journal of Negro Education* 63 (1992): 301-316.
- ³² Several of our findings agree with those presented at a recent Capitol Hill forum releasing findings in a series of papers commissioned by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project. The papers' findings show that African-Americans make up 16 percent of the student population but over 25 percent of students labeled emotionally or behaviorally disturbed, and that African-American students in wealthy suburban schools are more likely to be labeled mentally disabled than those in poorer urban schools. See Ted Gotsch, "Tracking Urged to Stem Racial Gap in Special Ed," *Education Daily* 34, no. 43 (2001): 3-4. Drafts of several of the papers discussed at this forum are available at <<<http://www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/conferences/SpecEd/moreinfo.html>>>.