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K-12
SCHOOLS

**ACCESS TO
EDUCATIONAL
DISABILITIES
RESOURCES**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

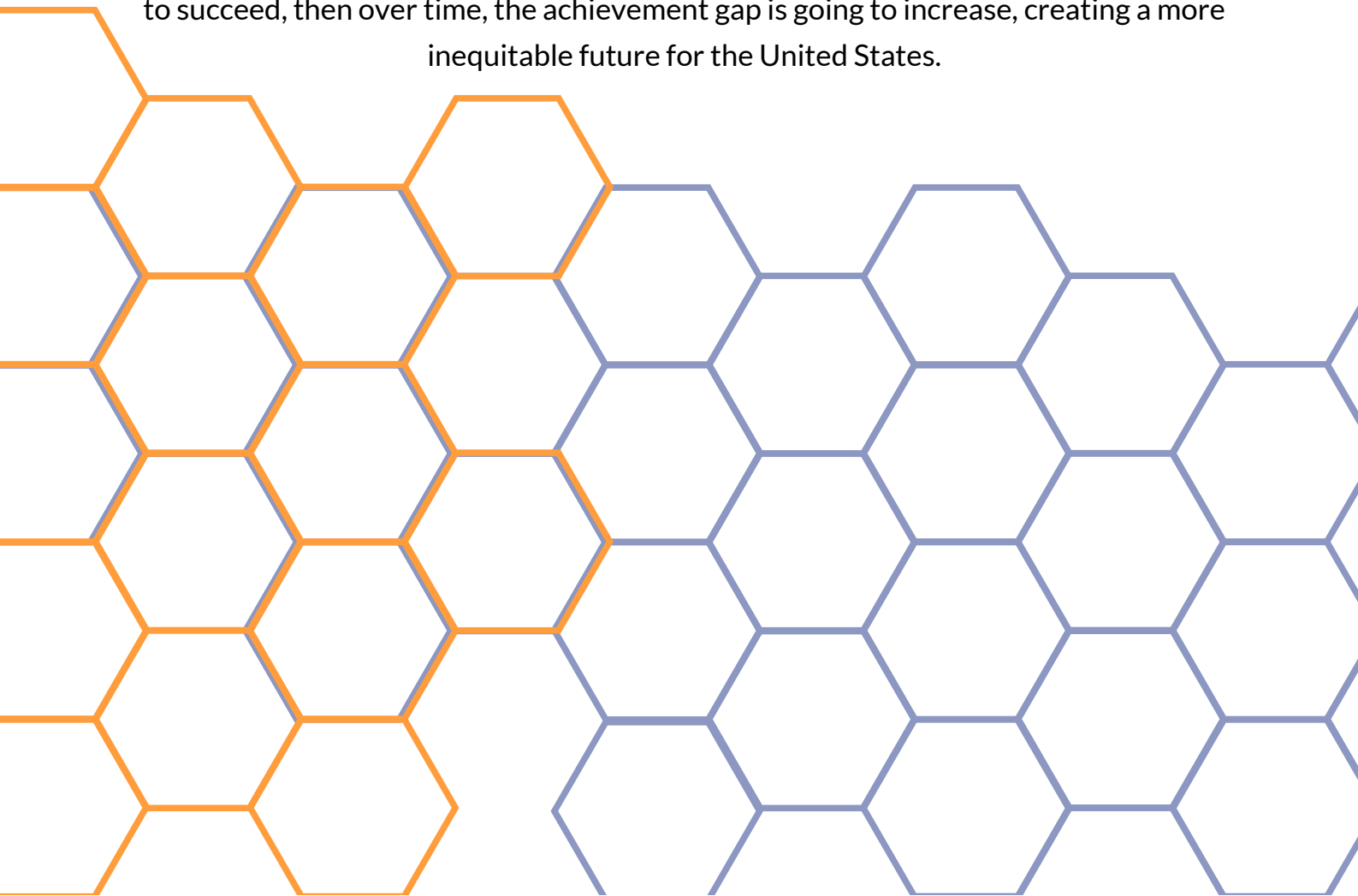
In the United States, public K-12 education is available to all students, but the issue of accessibility to equal and quality education is being called into question. Specifically, looking at kids who struggle with learning disabilities, such as ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and ADD. A lack of educational disability resources will lead to an increase in the achievement gap of students. These achievement gaps can contribute to the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty and inequality as well. It is important that we address this problem at a young age, in the classrooms. The following report looks at current policies in place to help children with learning disabilities, as well as looks to create a new policy proposal that meets a variety of goals and is supported by research.

Through an analysis of the policy goals and alternatives, it was proved that the most effective solution is to strengthen the current existing programs in K-12 public schools in the United States alongside a combination of increased funding and oversight from the local Departments of Education.

The policy recommendation is a three pronged approach that will increase educational equity in K-12 public schools. The first prong includes increasing funding for existing resources; specifically, manipulatives/ classroom resources, reading specialists and occupational therapists, as well as seminars and courses for teachers. The second prong requires that all public educators continue their education through mandatory seminars on teaching kids with learning disabilities. The last prong addresses the need for oversight and follow through from the local Departments of Education.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

The inequity in access to educational disabilities resources within K-12 public schools in the United States is a problem requiring additional policy action. Regulations listed under Section 504 require that school districts “provide ‘free and appropriate public education’ (FAPE) to each qualified student with a disability who is in the school district’s jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability.” (U.S. Department of Education) Many private schools specialize in helping students with specific disabilities, such as The Jemicy School in Baltimore, Maryland which works solely with students who have dyslexia or other language based learning differences. However, these private institutions are not accessible to all, specifically due to the cost barrier for families. Many public K-12 schools attempt to provide equal access and quality of disabilities resources, but unfortunately are not always able to achieve this goal. “Whether for instruction or testing, accommodations provide students with opportunities to achieve the same outcomes and to obtain the same benefits as students without disabilities. By addressing barriers, accommodations create better access to learning opportunities for students with disabilities.” (Vanderbilt University, 2022) If the ‘playing field’ is not leveled, then students with disabilities are directly starting at a level of disadvantage. If students are not given the opportunities and resources that they need to succeed, then over time, the achievement gap is going to increase, creating a more inequitable future for the United States.



LOOKING AT THE SCOPE

Access to disabilities resources for students is an important issue that is currently being addressed by the government, but not to its full capacity. Policies such as Individuals with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and No Child Left Behind provide a good introduction, but a large issue still faced is the enforcement of these policies. Oftentimes, no one “follows up” on these programs to make sure they are being implemented, which defeats the purpose of having them. In the *Wynne v. Tufts University School of Medicine* court case a student was denied accommodation for testing and therefore, was dismissed from the school. Additionally, in *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia*, the “plaintiffs were seven “exceptional” children (i.e., mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, physically handicapped, hyperactive and other children with behavioral problems) who were poor and without financial means to obtain private instruction.” (LexisNexis) After being assured they would be placed in federally funded programs, they were not even enrolled for the fall semester. These are just two examples of how the programs have the right wording to be upheld, but lack the “follow through.”

If we do not address the achievement gap at a young age, then it will only continue to worsen. In 2018 a “meta-analysis of 23 studies found that on average, students with disabilities performed more than three years below their nondisabled peers. This achievement gap suggests that students with disabilities still have limited access to the instruction needed to succeed in school.” (University of Texas).

Early detection and response is imperative to helping students. “Studies have shown that children who receive early treatment for developmental delays are more likely to graduate from high school, hold jobs, live independently, and avoid teen pregnancy, delinquency, and violent crime, resulting in a large savings to society. Yet, only 30–50 percent of all children with disabilities are identified before starting school.” (National Center for Learning Disabilities).

Children who suffer from learning disabilities often have negative psychological side effects. It is not only important to help them academically, but also prevent the further development of mental health concerns. If not addressed early on and provided with resources, negative feelings will only grow stronger throughout their education. (Papanastasiou) Along with this, students have a harder time socially because they feel “behind the curve” or do not pick up on social queues as easily as their peers. Addressing the root of this issue, by providing them with classroom accommodations will help them feel less socially isolated. A recent survey conducted by the University of Macedonia at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki titled “Bullying - School Education: Psychosocial, Educational Consequences and their Response” showed that people with learning disabilities suffer school bullying at a rate of two to ten times the usual (40%) due to their degrading school failure, leading to low self-esteem and isolation.” (Papanastasiou).

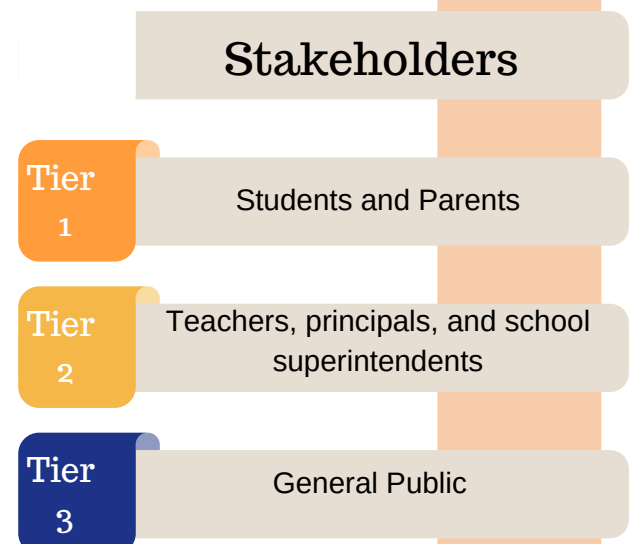
CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM

When thinking about the issue of access to educational disabilities resources in K-12 public schools, two main causes of the problem should be considered. The first issue is the lack of funding and improper allocation of funding for disabilities resources. “Annual funding levels vary dramatically across the country, with an average range from \$4,000 to \$10,000 for students without disabilities and \$10,000 to \$20,000 for students with disabilities.” (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association) As expected, more funding is needed for students with disabilities, than students without disabilities, which may cause a problem in public schools that are funded by their state or local governments. More funding needs to be allocated towards helping students with disabilities and providing them with resources needed for success. Funding is not currently being allocated towards teacher education and professional development, classroom manipulatives and resources, and educational testing.

The improper use or implementation of resources poses a second issue. Insufficient state and local efforts for oversight directly leads to the improper use and implementation of said resources. Sometimes resources are available, but are not incorporated properly into the individual classrooms, the school, or the district as a whole. Programs are well developed but no one is checking to make sure they are actually doing what they are supposed to be doing, through governmental oversight.

STAKEHOLDERS

To best look at the impacts of these policies, we divided the stakeholders into three tiers, with students and parents being at the top. Students, specifically ones with learning disabilities, would benefit from improvements to these policies. Increased access to resources will help parents understand how to support their child at home and throughout the academic journey. The second tier of stakeholders would be teachers, principals, and school superintendents. These people are responsible for implementing the policies and following up to make sure that the outlined goals are achieved. It is also important to have teacher feedback when developing these policies to ensure their feasibility. The third level of stakeholders would be the general public. While they might not deal with the students or be sitting in the classrooms, everyone benefits from a more educated society. More accessible education leads to more, greater educated people which can increase our nation's productivity as a whole.



HISTORY OF THE ISSUE

Various policies within the United States exist with attention focused on the improvement of education for students with learning disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) which “ensures that all children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living.” (American Psychological Association, 2010). IDEA allows for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to be created for students. An IEP is a written statement for a student with a documented disability, laying out specific steps that students, parents, and educators can take to reach the goals described. Part D of IDEA gives national grant money to ensure the success of these programs.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights act that prevents discrimination against children with disabilities in programs that receive federal funding. Public schools receive federal funding and even some private schools do as well.

Section 504 states that “no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States...shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” (U.S.

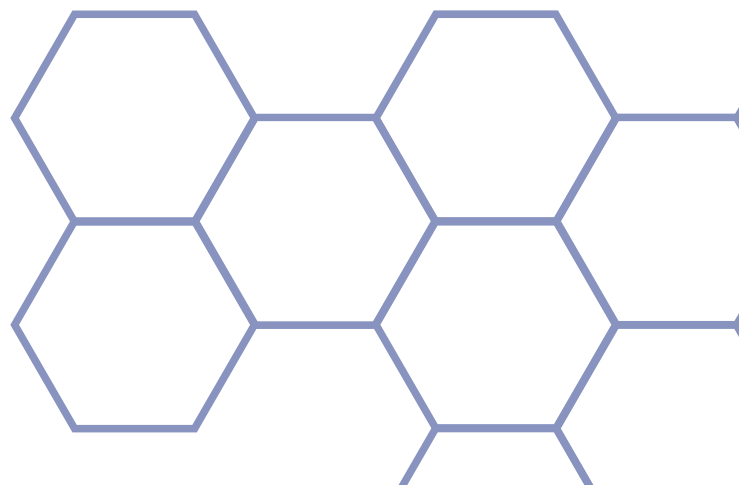
Department of Education). Section 504 focuses specifically on ensuring *equal* access through encouraging the use of accommodations and modifications. (Wright 2022) Compared to IDEA, Section 504 does not require an IEP and requires less procedural safeguards in order to gain the same benefits.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was created to hold schools accountable for the learning and growth of students. NCLB became very controversial because it punished schools who did not show any improvement. In terms of students with disabilities, NCLB required all state assessment scores to be divided into groups, one of those being students with disabilities. These scores are gathered at each school and reported to the state. NCLB also requires that students with disabilities perform at a certain proficiency level. This is not intended to add additional pressure to the students, but to follow up with the school to make sure they are catering towards the educational needs of all students. (National Center for Learning Disabilities) Improvements in reading proficiency scores have been shown since the implementation of this program in 2001. (Jewell)

Table 1: Percent of Fourth Grade Students Meeting State Reading Standard i Washington State

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
All Students	66	66	66	67	74
Special Education Students	27	29	30	31	39
Students with Limited English Proficiency	21	24	25	24	37

US Department of Education



POLICY HISTORY

1973

Section 504 is passed

1975

Education For All Handicapped Children Act is passed

1990

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

2001

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

2004

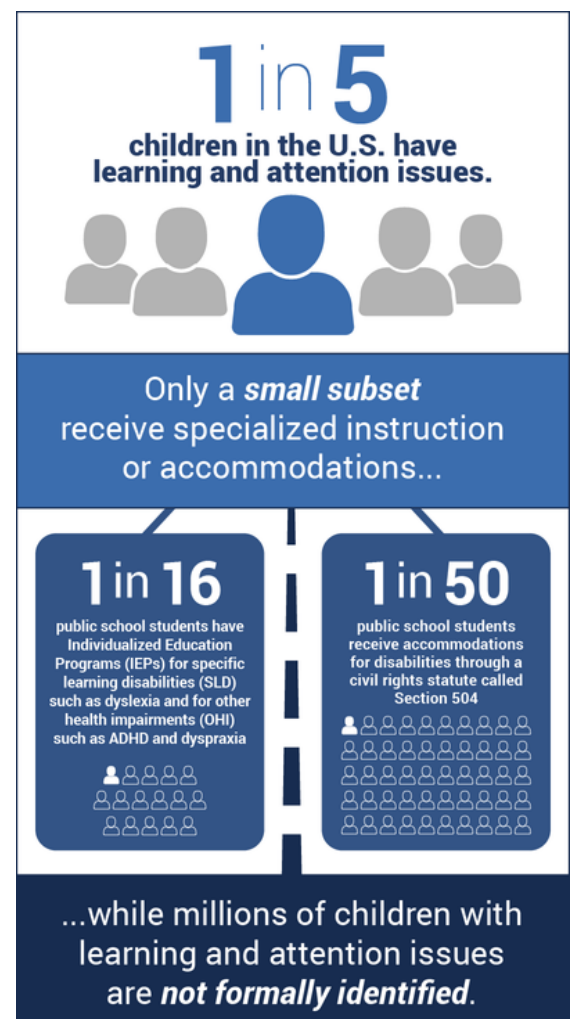
IDEA is reauthorized again

WHY SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT CARE?

A strong education lays the foundation for a strong society, which in turn creates a better economy, higher literacy rates, and better health outcomes, among various other things. “A new study from Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine shows that older people with inadequate health literacy had a 50 percent higher mortality rate over five years than people with adequate reading skills.” (Northwestern University, 2007). This all starts with the K-12 education system. If from a young age, kids are set up for failure, then they will not be encouraged to pursue higher education. This means catering towards the needs of all individuals. In 2017, approximately 1 in 5 children had attention issues, which equates to 65.56 million people in the United States who have learning or attention deficit issues. (LDA) This is a large percentage of our country, and if we allow for 20% of our country to fall behind in the education system, then we are not doing everything we can to achieve the best we can, as a nation. There is so much talk about improving the economy and infrastructure, but that starts with our youngest generation. It can also play a huge role in fighting generational poverty and other social determinants. “For example, if a low-income parent is able to secure a place for her child in a high quality daycare program, that child is likely to benefit from exposure to a wider array of learning opportunities than he or she might have at home....

may also open the door for the parent to take on employment or further her education in order to improve her career prospects.” (University of Pennsylvania)

Overall, the country as a whole benefits from having a strong education. If students feel as though they are benefiting from school they will be more inspired to pursue higher education, and therefore creating a better, more advanced society.



POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Expansion of Early Screening

Identifying children's learning disabilities early on in their educational career, can help those students to find resources that they need to succeed from the beginning. and can ensure that students have the appropriate support and professional tools needed to better understand in school. Currently, some students are not being diagnosed with learning or attention issues until late into their elementary school years (or later), which causes issues because they are performing poorer than their peers and now have to catch up. According to the Psychoeducational Assessment Center, educational testing can cost between \$2000 - \$5000, in most cases schools require students to be retested every 4 years which can add up to a lot of money over the years.

Expanding early screening initiatives can happen through programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start, Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Federal and state investments should be reconsidered and expanded to these existing programs. One option is to develop a type of preliminary testing that schools can offer in Kindergarten and fourth grade to see if further testing would be recommended. Not all families can afford the official testing, so with preliminary testing for free at school, families can reassess their child's potential need for testing. Additionally, educators can be aware of the potential learning disability present and be cognizant of it, when working with that student in an educational setting.

Empowerment of Students and Families

Children who have learning disabilities suffer from higher rates of stress and anxiety. As mentioned earlier, people with learning disabilities suffer school bullying at a "rate of two to ten times the usual (40%) due to their degrading school failure, leading to low self-esteem and isolation." (Papanastasiou). Providing parents with courses and resources on how to best handle these emotions will help children to feel supported. It is crucially important to prepare students for the transition from K-12 education to either further education or employment since this transition can be very challenging especially for students with disabilities. Focusing on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can also contribute to students with learning disabilities navigation through school, employment, and, in the long run, life.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES CONT.

Continuous Education for Educators

Despite educators' desire to help students, sometimes they are not equipped enough to support their students to the fullest potential. Rethinking how to prepare new educators to teach and support diverse learners must occur, as well as teachers already in the classroom. Specifically, changes to the Higher Education Act's Title II should be made. Including more opportunities for interactive, clinical experiences through mentorship programs, may be helpful to educators to be able to recognize the early signs of a learning disability or attention deficit. Building a certain level of expertise of educators and healthcare providers to recognize early signs is beneficial. Perhaps, an investment in early screening could be beneficial as well. Professional development seminars or programs should be required (or at least available) to educators, as well. For example, educators could benefit from having Orton-Gillingham, Multi-Sensory Learning Approaches seminars in order to provide more innovative approaches to teaching, specifically with students who have dyslexia or other language based learning differences.

Strengthen Existing Resources

Lastly, strengthening existing resources in K-12 public schools could be very beneficial. Specifically, investing more in strengthening current programs, as well as providing oversight to these existing programs. A randomized school "drop in" by the local Superintendent could be one effective way to provide oversight periodically to schools. This would essentially function as a way of enforcement and to see "are the schools doing what they should be doing?" This could also serve as an opportunity for the Department of Education to see where they can improve and if certain schools need more funding. By providing additional funding and oversight for current programs, access and equity in disabilities resources may be better. Funding would come from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This section also does not require proof of an IEP, which means there are less requirements to be met in order to receive federal funding.

POLICY GOALS AND CRITERIA

Our overall goals are to increase access and equity, as well as emphasize the importance of access to disabilities resources in K-12 public schools around the United States. By giving students the resources that they need to succeed, the hypothetical playing field is being leveled, giving every student an equal chance to work towards success. Increasing access to these resources will help to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment, system, and overall better United States.



Lower Levels of Stress and Anxiety

The first goal the policies should work to achieve is lower levels of stress and anxiety. While learning differences are not considered to be emotional disabilities, students will often suffer from self esteem issues, anxiety, and depression. From a young age children are told “they could do so well, if only they tried harder,” which is anything but the truth. Students who suffer from learning differences are already trying harder than the general population to come close to being on the same level. A study that looks at social and emotional problems related to dyslexia states that “the pain of failing to meet other people’s expectations is surpassed only by dyslexics’ inability to achieve their goals. This is particularly true of those who develop perfectionistic expectations in order to deal with their anxiety. They grow up believing that it is “terrible” to make a mistake.” (Ryan) This is why focusing on decreasing levels of stress and anxiety would allow students who suffer with learning differences to reach their full potential. One way that we could measure this is by looking at how they interact with their peers, if they continue to avoid social interactions and raising their hand that would be an indication that their levels of stress act as a barrier to them. If we see students start to come out of their shell more, even in non educational settings, we would consider that a success of that policy.



Increase Performance on Exams

The second goal is to increase student performance on exams. For some students their learning disability can mean that they do not read and comprehend as quickly as students who do not possess said learning disability. The obvious way to achieve this goal is by seeing improvements in the scores on exams. This does not mean that the child is scoring within a certain percentile of the class, just comparing their scores now to their scores prior. If students with disabilities are performing the same or better than students without disabilities, then we know that they are learning and keeping up the pace.

POLICY GOALS AND CRITERIA CONT.



Improve Reading Comprehension

The third goal we have acts as an extension of our second goal, with more of a focus on improving reading comprehension skills. Oftentimes schools offer standardized tests that track their reading comprehension compared to their class, school, state, and country. While we are not looking at comparing them to others in the country, this score can be used to see in what areas they need to focus on more in order to improve. This can also be measured by teacher feedback and grades on report cards. In schools that have learning or reading specialists for students with learning disabilities they should be encouraged to give specific feedback on report cards.



Level the Playing Field

Another goal we want to focus on is leveling the 'playing field.' Having a learning disability is not something that someone can control or change, so why should we fault them for it? The criteria we can use to measure this is comparing them to other students in their grade, are they all falling below average? Are some students falling towards the middle? Or even better - are these accommodations allowing children to excel and have above average scores?



Improve Long Term Outcomes

The final goal we have is to increase long term performances. We want students to use the benefits that these policies have lined up to succeed in their life after high school. Having these policies in place will also be a benefit to students who attend public universities, as they are required to enforce them. The hope would be that private universities will follow suit to implement the same policies. We can see this goal achieved through having a large percentage of students who continue onto higher education or into the workforce in their desired career.

ANALYSIS

Expansion of Early Screening

Expanding early childhood screening for learning disabilities would be beneficial and ranked “high” in one category, but also has various sections where it is not ranked as highly, falling into the “medium” category. Expansion of early screening would directly help in the long run to level the playing field because if students are being screened at an early age, then they will hopefully in turn receive accommodations that would create an equal starting point for them. Improving test scores and reading comprehension skills are ranked as medium due to the fact that early screening could help to improve these measurements, but is not a guarantee.

Additionally, a lot of funding would go into this initiative even though a significant portion of the students being screened will not show signs of a disability and therefore, will not reap the benefits of the early screening. Lastly, expansion of early screening could decrease levels of stress and anxiety for students and families, but could also increase these levels especially in regards to the financial component. As noted by the Psychoeducational Assessment Center, educational testing can range anywhere between \$2,000 - \$5,000, which can financially burden many families. As with any new diagnoses, families may experience feelings of doubt or concern, leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety.

Empowerment of Students+ Families

Empowerment of students and families is a great anxiety and stress reducer; however, it offers few benefits towards leveling the playing field. It is very effective at lowering the stress and anxiety levels of students and families because they will be empowered and motivated to strive to their fullest potential through their teachers, school administrators, and the school district as a whole. Besides being beneficial to the emotional and mental health of students and families, empowerment does very little in the department of improving performance on exams or reading comprehension skills, besides placing the students in a better mental mindset prior to classes or exams, which may encourage them to work harder. Lastly, empowerment of students and families was ranked low in terms of leveling the playing field, as little connection has been documented between the two.


ANALYSIS CONT.

Continuous Education for Educators

Continuous education for educators provides outstanding results for improvement on exams and reading comprehension skills, as the teachers or specialists are more equipped to teach specific students and cater to their needs. If students are understanding the material better in class then they will most likely perform better on the exams. Increased test scores and reading comprehension skills will result from better teaching and more “catered to the student” programming which is the goal of continuous education for educators. A medium ranking was shown for lowering levels of stress and anxiety amongst teachers because they may feel more equipped to teach specific students following the conclusion of specified courses, however this may not be the case for all.

Strengthen Existing Resources

Lastly, strengthening existing resources received five “high” rankings; the greatest score possible through the policy matrix. Strengthening existing resources would be able to greatly lower stress and anxiety levels amongst students through the knowledge and help of gaining their appropriate resources and accommodation. Additionally, parents’ stress and anxiety levels may lower due to their knowledge and understanding that their students’ IEP or 504 Plan will be implemented correctly. If students’ IEPs or 504 Plans are being followed correctly, then the playing field will be successfully leveled, resulting in an equal “starting position” for all students. Additionally, if the playing field is leveled, then students’ reading comprehension skills and performances on exams will drastically improve as well. Students will be starting out at an equal position and be granted the necessary accommodations to remain at this position, which will allow them to learn more in classes, increasing their knowledge and improving their skills. Years from now, these improvements will lead to greater long term success, especially in higher education and the workforce. Through the matrix, it can be concluded that the best policy alternative is to strengthen the existing resources in K-12 schools.




POLICY RECOMENDATION



Increasing
funding for
existing
resources

After analyzing the different policy alternatives and comparing them to the goals, we have developed a three pronged policy recommendation that will help meet as many goals as possible. The first point of this is to increase funding for existing resources; specifically, classroom resources, school personnel, and education courses for teachers. In some 504 Plans and IEPs, they state that some kids are entitled to have certain accommodations, such as manipulatives, white boards, or other materials that the school might not otherwise supply. Allocating money specifically to make sure schools have those resources is important. Oftentimes, certain sets are missing pieces, have been worn down over the years, or they just don't have them which is not acceptable when a government document calls for those resources. The second resource that should receive more funding is guidance counselors, reading specialists, and occupational therapists. In a public school setting, the guidance counselor may issue 504 Plans and IEPs, alongside their other responsibilities of taking care of the social and emotional well being of the general school. Not all guidance counselors are well versed in understanding learning disabilities, so they might not even have the best recommendations. By increasing funding, public schools can hire more guidance counselors, or even better reading specialists or occupational therapists. By increasing the number of staff, we can better ensure that these kids are getting quality education and having their needs met. Reading specialists are also a great addition to the team because they can work with children outside of the classroom to reach their specific goals and also to help take weight off of the teacher. The third resource that should receive more funding is courses and seminars for teachers. These additional classes will help teachers to not only be able to assist students, but to recognize early signs of learning disabilities and help set them up with the right training. Examples of courses include Orton Gillingham's Multisensory Learning Approach and Lindamood-Bell Instruction for Reading and Comprehension.

POLICY RECOMENDATION



Required seminars for teachers

Going off of that last point, the second prong of our policy recommendation is to require all teachers to take seminars or courses. These classes will range from recognizing signs of a learning disability to learning specific teaching styles that will help cater towards students' individual needs. Not all families can afford to send their children to private schools that have teachers who are specialized in learning disabilities. The idea of No Child Left Behind is to hold teachers and schools accountable for providing a quality education. This should not just mean those students who do not require special education. The average public school size in America is 527 students. (Public School Review) If 1 in 5 children have a learning disability, at an average school at least 100 kids will probably have a learning disability. As the name of the policy itself states, no child should be left behind.



Bi-monthly Check Ins

Some responsibilities of the state and local governments include oversight or checking in on programs. This is why the third part of our policy proposal would be implementing bi-monthly check-ins to make sure that local public schools are meeting the requirements and fulfilling the needs of students. These should be done by either the school district's Superintendent or another member of the local Department of Education, as a non-scheduled visit, to allow the opportunity to get a feel of the authentic school environment. The schools will be evaluated through a checklist of criteria including child to staff ratio, teacher degrees and qualifications, administrative support, and curriculum support and development. Visits will consist of a one hour self guided evaluation. These visits will occur during the first week of every other month, but schools will not be aware of the date and time.

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