



FACTS

from OSEP's National Longitudinal Studies

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Special Education: Serving Children Earlier, Providing Expanded Services

Federal special education legislation has evolved considerably since its inception in 1975. Over time, it has strengthened early intervention services and planning for the transition of youth with disabilities to adulthood, increased accountability for the academic achievement of students with disabilities, and reiterated the importance of access for students with disabilities to the general education curriculum, among other improvements. How have changes in policy and practice affected the experiences of children and youth with disabilities receiving special education services?

Two studies funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U. S. Department of Education¹ enable a comparison between nationally representative samples of 15- to 17-year-olds receiving special education services in 1987 and 2001.² Among the important differences noted in that comparison are that children with disabilities in 2001 were being identified and served earlier than they were in 1987, and that the services provided were more comprehensive.

Age at Identification and First Service for Disability

The average age at first identification reported by parents of youth with disabilities in telephone

interviews³ in 2001 dropped by about 8 months, compared with reports of parents in 1987, from 6.6 years to 5.9 years (Exhibit 1). Disability-related services also began significantly earlier for youth with disabilities in 2001; their average age at first service was 7.4 years, compared with 8.5 years for youth with disabilities in 1987. These changes narrowed the average lag between identification and first service from 1.9 to 1.5 years.

**Exhibit 1
CHANGES IN AGE AT FIRST IDENTIFICATION OF AND SERVICE FOR DISABILITY**

	Youth with Disabilities in:		Percentage Point Change
	1987	2001	
Percentage whose disability/delay first was identified at age:			
Birth to 2	16	19	+3
3 or 4	6	10	+4*
5 or 6	27	31	+4
7 to 10	37	30	-7*
11 or older	14	11	-3
Average age when disability/delay first was identified	6.6	5.9	-.7**
Percentage who first received service for a disability/delay at age:			
Birth to 2	4	9	+5**
3 or 4	6	8	+2
5 or 6	18	22	+4
7 to 10	44	43	-1
11 or older	27	19	-8**
Average age when first began receiving service for a disability/delay	8.5	7.4	-1.1***

Source: NLTS and NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

Statistically significant difference in a two-tailed test at the following levels:
* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.

¹The National Longitudinal Transition Study was conducted by SRI International (SRI) for OSEP from 1985 through 1993. SRI is conducting the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) currently. The two studies' similar design features allow comparisons to be made for a single age group of youth with disabilities. In both samples used in these analyses, 26% of youth are 15, 35% are 16, and 38% are 17 years old.

²More detailed discussion of the two studies' methods and findings from early comparisons between them are reported in M. Wagner, R. Cameto, & L. Newman. (2003). *Youth with disabilities: A changing population*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at www.nlts2.org.

³After identifying the "learning problems or other disabilities for which (name of youth) has gotten special services, parents were asked "About how old was (name of child) when (he/she) started having this difficulty or condition?" and "About how old was (name of youth) when (he/she) started getting special services from a professional for this difficulty?"

The decline in the average age at first identification of a disability noted for youth with disabilities as a whole resulted from significant reductions in age for youth in five disability categories—learning disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbances, orthopedic impairments, and other health impairments; the declines ranged from 8 to 18 months (Exhibit 2).⁴ A significant drop in age at first service was evident for youth in all categories, except hearing impairment. Significant declines averaged 1 to 2 years.

In general, little change in age at identification and first service was evident for categories for which the ages already were among the lowest of the disability categories. For example, there was essentially no change in the average age of identification for youth with sensory impairments or multiple disabilities, for whom the average age already was age 2 or younger. Although most categories of youth whose disabilities first were identified at school age (e.g., those with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances) had significant declines in the average age at identification, no decline occurred for youth with speech impairments.

Services Provided to Youth with Disabilities

In 2001, parents of youth with disabilities reported⁵ that many more of their adolescent children were receiving services for their disabilities than parents

had reported in 1987. In 2001, nearly three-fourths of youth with disabilities were receiving at least one of the eight support services from any source investigated in NLTS and NLTS2, compared with 57% of youth in 1987. This increase was entirely attributable to increases in services received from or through the schools attended by youth (Exhibit 3). In 1987, one-third of youth with disabilities received one or more of the designated support services from or through their schools; by 2001, more than half were receiving such services.

Schools were reported to be providing almost all of the types of services to a significantly greater percentage of students with disabilities in 2001 than in 1987, with the exception of life skills training and tutoring. Vocational services, speech therapy, and mental health services experienced the greatest increases—about 10 percentage points. With these changes, vocational services and speech therapy were the most commonly provided services; almost one-fourth of students received these kinds of services from their schools in 2001.

Between 1987 and 2001, significant increases were reported in the receipt of services from schools by youth in every disability group (Exhibit 4). The largest increases were experienced by categories of youth who were among the least likely to have received support services from their schools in 1987.

Exhibit 2
AGE AT IDENTIFICATION OF AND FIRST SERVICE FOR DISABILITY, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY

	Learning Disability	Speech/ Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Multiple Disabilities
Average age when disability/delay was first identified									
1987	7.3	5.9	4.8	7.4	2.2	1.8	3.2	6.1	2.1
2001	6.5	5.8	4.1	6.5	2.5	1.8	1.7	4.8	2.3
Change in average age	-.8**	-.1	-.7*	-.9*	+3	.0	-1.5***	-1.3**	+2
Average age when first began receiving service for a disability/delay									
1987	9.0	8.4	6.8	9.5	4.6	5.3	4.9	8.5	4.6
2001	8.0	7.4	5.7	8.5	4.1	3.5	2.9	6.7	3.4
Change in average age	-1.0***	-1.0**	-1.1***	-1.0***	-.5	-1.8**	-2.0***	-1.8***	-1.2*

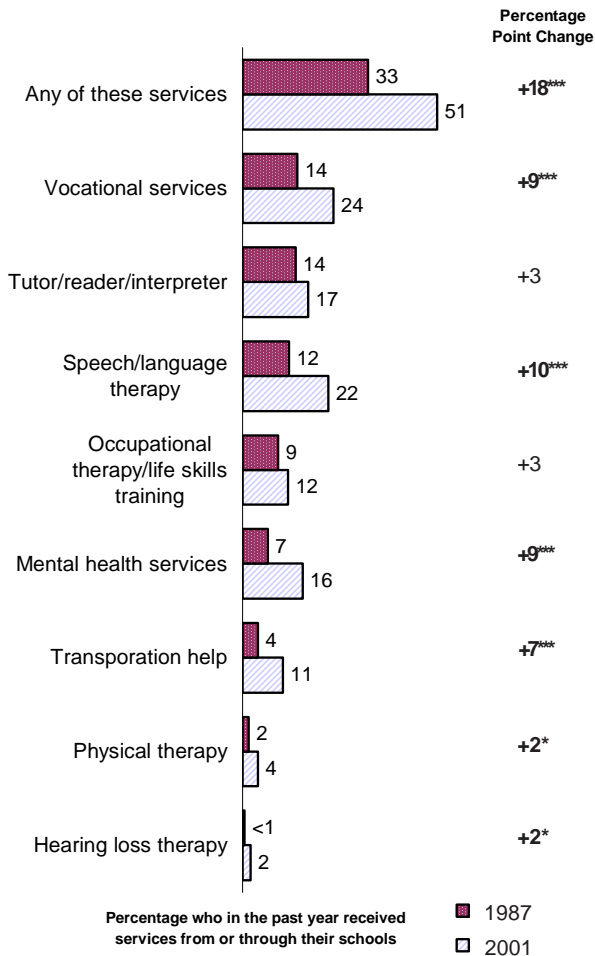
Source: NLTS and NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

Statistically significant difference in a two-tailed test at the following levels: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.

⁴ Findings are reported for the nine disability categories that were in use in both 1987 and 2001. The 1987 categories of deaf and hard of hearing are combined into hearing impairment. Youth with deaf-blindness are included in multiple disabilities. Because the categories of autism and traumatic brain injury were not in use in 1987, youth in those categories in 2001 were reassigned to other categories on the basis of the primary disability description of parents. If no other disability description was provided beyond autism or traumatic brain injury, youth were included in the other health impairments category.

⁵ Parents were asked "at any time during the last 12 months, has (name of youth) received any of the following services (read list)? (For each received) Was any of that from or through (his/her) school or district?"

**Exhibit 3
CHANGES IN SERVICES RECEIVED BY
YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES FROM OR
THROUGH THEIR SCHOOLS**



Source: NLTS and NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Statistically significant difference in a two-tailed test at the following levels:
* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.

For example, in 1987, only about one-fourth to one-third of students with speech or visual impairments or emotional disturbances were receiving the services investigated in NLTS and NLTS2. Increases of at least 30 percentage points meant that at least 60% of youth in these disability categories were receiving one or more of these services from their schools in 2001.

But even among categories of youth who had been receiving services at relatively higher rates initially, large increases were noted. For example, increases of 20 to 26 percentage points among youth with

hearing or orthopedic impairments or multiple disabilities resulted in almost 80% or more of these students receiving services from their schools in 2001.

The most notable exception to these large increases was youth with learning disabilities. With an 11 percentage-point increase over time, about 40% of youth with learning disabilities were reported by parents to be receiving any of the designated related or support services from their schools—a significantly lower rate of reported service receipt than for any other group.

Increases in school-funded speech/language therapy were the most widespread across categories, followed by increases in vocational services and mental health services. Transportation services increased significantly for all categories of youth, except those with learning disabilities or speech or hearing impairments.

It is not surprising that increases in broadly relevant services, such as vocational training, were experienced by most categories of youth, regardless of disability. However, another kind of service that could have broad applicability across disability categories was help from a tutor, reader, or interpreter. Significant increases in receiving these services from schools were seen only for youth with emotional disturbances, hearing impairments, visual impairments, or multiple disabilities.

As expected, increases in more focused services were concentrated among particular disability groups. For example, significant increases in hearing loss therapy occurred for four groups, with youth with hearing impairments having the largest increase, as would be expected. Similarly, the largest increase in mental health services occurred for youth with emotional disturbances, and the largest increase in speech/ language therapy occurred for youth with speech impairments.

Youth from lower-income households had greater increases and increases in a wider range of services than did youth from higher-income households. Youth of different racial/ethnic backgrounds experienced increases in a variety of services.

Exhibit 4
CHANGES IN SERVICES RECEIVED BY YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES FROM OR THROUGH THEIR SCHOOLS, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY

	Learning Disability	Speech/ Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Multiple Disabilities
Any of these services									
1987	30	37	40	25	58	32	58	33	62
2001	41	67	69	60	80	63	78	57	88
Percentage point change	+11*	+30***	+29***	+35***	+22***	+31***	+20***	+24***	+26***
Vocational services									
1987	15	8	16	11	15	7	9	14	8
2001	21	15	29	29	26	29	25	25	34
Percentage point change	+6	+7*	+13***	+18***	+11**	+22***	+16***	+11*	+26***
Help from a tutor, reader, or interpreter									
1987	15	9	13	7	31	16	16	12	6
2001	17	14	14	16	48	27	16	15	19
Percentage point change	+2	+5	+1	+9**	+17***	+11*	0	+3	+13**
Speech/language therapy									
1987	9	31	19	3	42	6	18	11	46
2001	15	66	44	13	57	20	32	23	66
Percentage point change	+6*	+35***	+25***	+10***	+15**	+14***	+14**	+12**	+20**
Occupational therapy/life skills training									
1987	8	2	16	4	8	11	16	9	19
2001	7	6	24	13	15	26	37	16	57
Percentage point change	-1	+4	+8*	+9***	+7*	+15**	+21***	+7*	+38***
Mental health services									
1987	6	2	4	13	7	3	5	7	6
2001	12	8	16	34	18	14	9	18	21
Percentage point change	6*	+6*	+12***	+21***	+11***	+11**	+4	+11**	+15***
Transportation help									
1987	1	2	10	<1	19	16	35	8	33
2001	3	5	26	19	25	38	48	18	50
Percentage point change	+2	+3	+16***	+19***	+6	+22***	+13*	+10**	+17*
Physical therapy									
1987	<1	0	4	<1	2	8	36	7	16
2001	1	2	9	2	4	14	42	5	40
Percentage point change	+1	+2*	+5*	+2	+2	+6	+6	-2	+24***
Hearing loss therapy									
1987	0	<1	<1	0	27	<1	0	<1	2
2001	1	1	3	<1	51	6	2	2	6
Percentage point change	+1	+1	+3*	<1	+24***	+5**	+2*	+1	+4

Source: NLTS and NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

Statistically significant difference in a two-tailed test at the following levels: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.



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