

## 2. THE EDUCATION-RELATED HISTORIES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By Mary Wagner

Engaging and learning in school are dynamic processes that involve students' interacting with curricula, classroom materials and activities, teachers, and other students. These interactions occur in a variety of contexts that are defined by the characteristics of schools and classrooms. But the interactions that are at the heart of school engagement and learning are a function of more than schools, settings, and instructional programs. What students "bring to the table" in terms of prior experiences, interests, abilities, and limitations are key factors that help shape the nature of the educational process and how students progress through their school careers. By the time they reach secondary school, all students have an extensive education-related history that can influence how they view, participate in, and relate to their school experiences and, reciprocally, how school staff view and relate to them. For students who receive special education services, the experiences associated with their disabilities and their corresponding programs and services are additional components of their education histories.

This chapter describes several key aspects of the education-related histories of secondary school students with disabilities,<sup>1</sup> as a context for understanding their current school programs and experiences:

- Early experiences with services for a disability
- School mobility
- Grade-level progression
- Disciplinary problems.

These aspects of students' backgrounds are described for students with disabilities as a whole and for those who differ in their primary disability category and selected demographic characteristics, where significant.

### Early Experiences with Services for a Disability

Recognizing that prompt intervention when a disability or developmental delay is identified can be extremely important in ameliorating its effects, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 authorize funds for states to provide early intervention services for infants and toddlers (Part C) and mandate that individualized education programs be developed for students with disabilities ages 3 through 21 (Part B). The point at which children and youth with disabilities first participate in the special education service system can reflect the nature and severity of their disability, as well as on characteristics of their families, schools, and communities and the service systems within them.

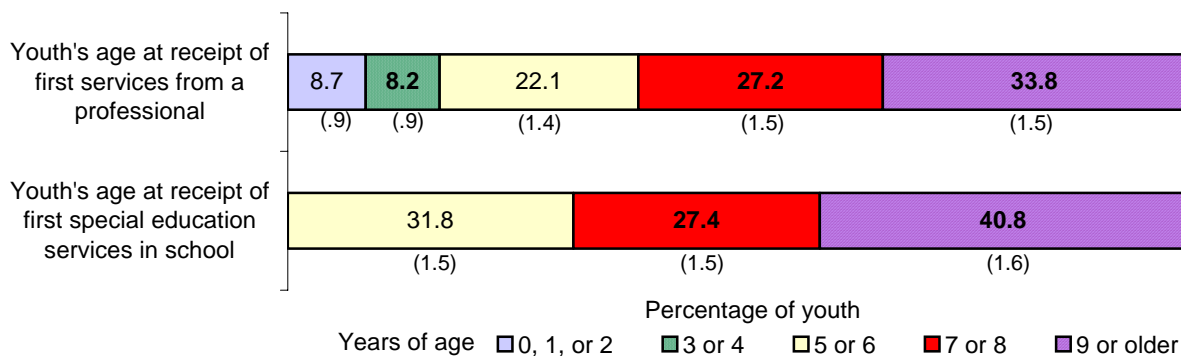
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<sup>1</sup> Other characteristics of students that also may shape their school experiences, including demographic and disability-related factors, are summarized in Appendix B and reported in more detail in Wagner, Marder, Levine, et al. (2003). The relationships between youth achievements and demographics, disability-related characteristics, and school program factors are reported in Wagner, Marder, Blackorby, et al. (2003).

This section presents parents' reports of the ages at which youth first received professional services for a disability or delay and the ages at which they first received special education services specifically. Findings regarding participation in early intervention and preschool education also are presented for youth whose disabilities were identified at ages that made them eligible for those services.

On average, children do not receive disability-related services from a professional until they start school; the average age of children first receiving such services is just over 7. According to parents, one in five youth with disabilities first begin to receive professional services for a disability at the age of school entry (age 5 or 6; Exhibit 2-1), although 30% of youth are identified as having a disability before they are 5 years old. Approximately one-third do not receive professional services until they are at least 9 years old. The average age at which children begin receiving special education services is just over 8; the gap in age between first professional services for a disability and first receipt of special education services points up the role of professionals other than school personnel as the first service providers for many youth with disabilities. Almost one-third of youth with disabilities have been involved with special education services since kindergarten. In contrast, 41% do not begin to receive special education services until age 9 or older.

**Exhibit 2-1  
YOUTH'S AGE AT FIRST RECEIPT OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FOR DISABILITY  
AND SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES AT SCHOOL**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
 Standard errors are in parentheses.

Among youth whose disabilities are identified earlier than kindergarten, many receive services for them through early intervention programs or preschool special education. Of the 19% of youth with disabilities who are reported to have had disabilities identified before age 3, more than half (58%) participated in early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities. Among the approximately 45% of youth whose disabilities were identified before age 6, 47% received special education services in their preschool years.

### School Mobility

It is estimated that about 15% of students in this country change schools each year (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). Although some school changes result from the natural

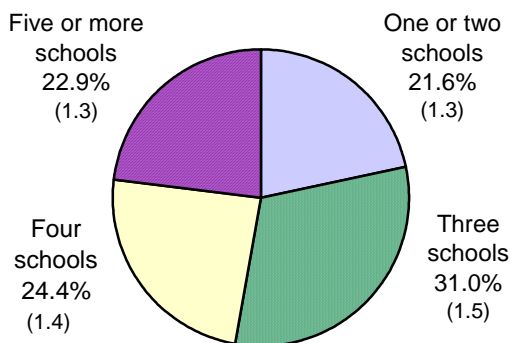
progression of students up through the grade levels (i.e., moving from elementary to middle and middle to high school), more frequent school changes are common for some students, particularly those from low-income households (Wright, 1999), a group that is overrepresented among students with disabilities (Marder, Levine, Wagner, & Cardoso, 2003).

Frequent school changes can have negative consequences for both students and schools. When students change schools, their instructional programs and relationships with adults and peers at school are disrupted. Research has demonstrated relationships between high rates of student mobility and poor school performance (Demie, 2002; Rumberger, 2002). Students who move more than three times in a 6-year period can fall one full academic year behind (Kerbow, 1996), and highly mobile students are more likely to be retained at a grade level than students who do not change schools frequently (Fowler-Finn, 2001). Negative impacts on social development and relationships also have been documented (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). Students with disabilities who are highly mobile also have higher rates of absenteeism than more stable students, other differences between them held constant (Newman, Davies, & Marder, 2003). Higher rates of dropping out of school can result from this cluster of factors (Rumberger & Larson, 1998); the U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) reports that students who change schools more than three times before eighth grade are at least four times as likely to drop out of school as more stable students.

Schools also are challenged in their instructional programs when large proportions of students are new each year. Because academic records often do not accompany mobile students, students may not be appropriately placed in classes or programs (Biernat & Jax, 2000). With many new students, classroom instruction can become more review oriented and slower paced than when schools have a more stable student population (Stover, 2000). High mobility can make scheduling and staffing decisions difficult (Florida Division of Teaching and Learning, n.d.), and a large number of transient students who test poorly can lower aggregate school performance scores that are used for accountability purposes.

About one in five students with disabilities have attended one or two schools since kindergarten (Exhibit 2-2)—the expected number if students change schools only to progress from elementary to middle and middle to high school. However, about one-fourth have attended four schools, and 23% have gone to five or more schools.

**Exhibit 2-2**  
**NUMBER OF SCHOOLS ATTENDED**  
**BY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: NLS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

### Grade-Level Progression

Although the majority of students progress to the next higher grade level with each year of schooling, some students either skip a grade because their skills are more appropriate to a higher grade level or, more frequently, are retained at a grade level because they have not met the requisite skill or content expectations. Estimates

are that 15% to 19% of American students are retained each year (American Federation of Teachers, 1997). The intention in making low-performing students repeat a grade is to provide an opportunity for them to master material missed in their first exposure to it. Public policy is shifting against the practice of “social promotion” of underachieving students, supported by some research that identifies positive impacts of retention on students’ achievement and attitudes toward school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994). However, other research on the effects of grade retention provides little consistent evidence that it benefits students academically (Holmes, 1989); in fact, grade retention is linked to higher rates of dropping out of school (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon, & Easton, 2000; Shepherd & Smith, 1990) and poor social adjustment and employment outcomes after high school (Jimerson, 1999). NLTS2 analyses of the relationship between grade retention and academic performance confirms that students who have been retained are more likely to continue to receive lower grades than other students, independent of other differences between them (Blackorby, Chorost, Garza, & Guzman, 2003).

According to parents, very few youth with disabilities (3%) skip a grade level during their school careers (Exhibit 2-3), with about an equal likelihood that the grade skipped is in elementary or in middle school. It is much more common that youth with disabilities repeat at least one grade level; more than one-third (36%) do so. This is a much higher rate of grade retention than for same-age youth in the general population (18%,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>2</sup> Most youth with disabilities who repeat a grade do so in elementary school.

<b>Exhibit 2-3 PREVIOUS EDUCATION-RELATED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES</b>		
	Percentage	Standard Error
Students whose parents report they have:		
Ever skipped a grade in school	2.6	.5
Skipped grade:		
Kindergarten through fifth	1.1	.3
Sixth through eighth	1.1	.3
Ninth through twelfth	.3	.2
Ever repeated a grade in school	35.9	1.4
Repeated grade:		
Kindergarten through fifth	28.0	1.4
Sixth through eighth	5.2	.7
Ninth through twelfth	3.2	.6
Ever suspended or expelled	32.7	1.5
Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.		

### **Disciplinary Problems**

It is often the case that at some point during their school careers, students get into trouble at school that results in disciplinary action. Occasionally, the trouble is serious enough to result in a formal suspension or expulsion from school. Having disciplinary problems at school is highly related to the likelihood of arrests among students with disabilities (Marder, Wagner, & Sumi, 2003).

According to parents, one-third of students with disabilities are suspended or expelled at least once in their school careers (Exhibit 2-3), including 26% who are suspended, 1% who are expelled, and 6% who have both experiences. Students with disabilities are much more likely to be

suspended or expelled than same-age students in the general population, among whom 22% are reported by parents to have been suspended or expelled.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Calculated for 14- through 18-year-olds from the National Household Education Survey of 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Calculated for 14- through 18-year-olds from the National Household Education Survey of 1999.

## Disability Variations in Education-Related Histories

The kinds of education-related experiences described thus far vary dramatically among youth who differ in their primary disability classification (Exhibit 2-4). Youth with sensory or orthopedic impairments, autism, or multiple disabilities are by far the most likely to begin receiving services as young children, with their average age for first professional services ranging from 2 to 4. These youth begin their special education services at school entry, on average.

**Exhibit 2-4**  
**PREVIOUS EDUCATION-RELATED EXPERIENCES, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY**

	Learning Disability	Speech/ Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Multiple Disabilities	Deaf-Blindness
Average age when first:												
Received professional services for disability	7.9 (.1)	7.1 (.2)	5.6 (.2)	8.1 (.2)	4.1 (.2)	3.4 (.3)	2.7 (.2)	7.1 (.2)	4.0 (.1)	7.2 (.4)	3.0 (.2)	2.3 (.3)
Received special education services	8.6 (.1)	7.8 (.1)	7.2 (.1)	9.0 (.1)	6.6 (.1)	6.8 (.2)	6.5 (.2)	8.5 (.1)	5.9 (.1)	8.1 (.3)	6.0 (.1)	6.2 (.2)
Percentage with disability identified by age 3 who received early intervention services	41.8 (8.7)	60.7 (6.7)	69.9 (4.4)	34.0 (8.4)	69.0 (3.8)	69.8 (4.4)	77.3 (2.8)	52.1 (5.9)	58.3 (3.7)	54.8 (9.7)	81.4 (2.6)	69.8 (5.5)
Percentage with disability identified before age 6 who received preschool special education services	36.5 (4.7)	47.5 (4.7)	66.3 (3.4)	29.9 (4.2)	69.5 (3.0)	59.5 (3.7)	73.3 (2.7)	35.9 (3.5)	71.2 (2.6)	56.6 (7.4)	80.9 (2.4)	78.4 (4.6)
Percentage who have attended:												
One or two schools	21.8 (2.0)	28.5 (2.2)	26.7 (2.3)	12.6 (1.7)	24.4 (2.5)	24.6 (3.0)	19.0 (2.2)	21.8 (2.-)	19.9 (2.2)	15.5 (3.3)	24.1 (2.3)	29.0 (4.7)
Five or more schools	21.0 (2.0)	12.9 (1.7)	19.6 (2.0)	40.2 (2.6)	19.5 (2.3)	17.6 (2.7)	20.2 (2.2)	24.9 (2.1)	29.3 (2.5)	25.3 (4.0)	25.8 (2.4)	25.7 (4.5)
Percentage whose parents report they have ever:												
Repeated a grade	34.7 (2.3)	33.3 (2.3)	45.3 (2.5)	37.7 (2.5)	29.7 (2.6)	24.4 (3.0)	26.8 (2.5)	36.4 (2.3)	22.4 (2.3)	31.9 (4.2)	29.8 (2.5)	34.5 (4.9)
Been suspended or expelled	27.2 (2.2)	16.8 (1.8)	32.8 (2.4)	72.9 (2.3)	18.2 (2.2)	12.5 (2.3)	13.1 (1.9)	41.4 (2.3)	17.4 (2.0)	30.3 (4.1)	18.0 (2.1)	14.3 (3.6)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

Standard errors are in parentheses.

In contrast, youth with mental retardation first receive professional services at school entry and begin special education services at age 7, on average. Youth with speech or other health impairments or traumatic brain injuries tend to first receive services at age 7 and special education services at age 8. Those with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances are the oldest when they first receive professional (age 8, on average) and special education services (age 9, on average).

Youth with orthopedic impairments or multiple disabilities whose disabilities are identified before age 3 are the most likely to receive early intervention services (77% and 81%, respectively). Along with youth with hearing impairments, autism, or deaf-blindness whose disabilities are identified before age 6, they also are among the most likely to receive

preschool special education services (ranging from 70% to 81% across the five disability categories). In contrast, youth with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances whose disabilities are identified by the appropriate ages for early intervention or preschool special education services are among the least likely to receive them; approximately 42% of youth with learning disabilities and 34% of those with emotional disturbances receive early intervention services, and 36% and 30% of them participate in preschool special education.

Between about 20% and 29% of students across most disability categories have attended one or two schools—the number expected for normal grade level progression—and about one-fourth or fewer have gone to five or more schools. This contrasts with 40% of youth with emotional disturbances who have attended five or more schools ( $p < .001$  comparing youth with emotional disturbances and autism, the category with the next highest rate of school mobility).

Few youth with disabilities in any category ever skip a grade in school; from 2% to 4% across categories do so. However, sizable percentages of youth in every category are held back a grade, ranging from 22% of youth with autism to 45% of youth with mental retardation ( $p < .001$ ). Suspensions and expulsions are experienced by youth in every category, as well, although the extent of these disciplinary problems ranges more widely. Fewer than 15% of youth with visual or orthopedic impairments or deaf-blindness are reported by parents as ever having been suspended or expelled from school. However, between 27% and 33% of youth with learning disabilities, mental retardation, or traumatic brain injuries have had those experiences, as have 73% of youth with emotional disturbances.

## **Demographic Variations in Education-Related Histories**

Several aspects of the education-related histories of youth with disabilities differ for those with different demographic characteristics.

**Age.** The number of schools attended increases as students age; 15% of 13- and 14-year-olds have gone to five or more schools, as have 25% of 17-year-olds ( $p < .05$ ). Also, older youth with disabilities are more likely than younger students to be suspended or expelled from school (36% of 17-year-olds vs. 27% of 13- or 14-year-olds,  $p < .05$ ), both logical findings, given the greater number of years in which to attend a variety of schools or run into trouble at school. Interestingly, however, older youth are not more likely to be retained at grade level (33% of 13- and 14-year-olds with disabilities have been retained, compared with 39% of 17-year-olds), reflecting the fact that most youth with disabilities who are held back a grade in school have experienced grade retention in elementary school.

**Gender.** Gender does not distinguish between youth with regard to most features of their previous education-related experiences, with the exception that boys with disabilities are much more likely than girls to have been suspended or expelled at some time in their school careers (38% vs. 22%,  $p < .001$ ).

**Household income.** There are differences in several education-related experiences for youth with different levels of household income (Exhibit 2-5). In general, youth from less affluent households first receive services for a disability later than youth from more affluent households (7.7 years for youth from households with incomes of \$25,000 or less vs. 6.9 years

**Exhibit 2-5**  
**PREVIOUS EDUCATION-RELATED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES,**  
**BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND RACE/ETHNICITY**

	Income			Race/Ethnicity		
	\$25,000 or Less	\$25,001 to \$50,000	More than \$50,000	White	African American	Hispanic
Average age when first professional services for disability began	7.7 (.2)	7.4 (.2)	6.9 (.2)	7.1 (.1)	7.9 (.2)	7.7 (.3)
Average age when first received special education services at school at age:	8.5 (.1)	8.4 (.2)	8.0 (.2)	8.1 (.1)	8.9 (.2)	8.7 (.3)
Percentage whose parents report they have ever:						
Repeated a grade	42.8 (2.6)	35.6 (2.9)	28.7 (2.7)	34.0 (1.9)	39.9 (3.4)	41.0 (4.4)
Been suspended or expelled	40.2 (2.6)	34.2 (2.9)	25.5 (2.6)	29.9 (1.9)	46.2 (3.4)	27.6 (4.0)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

for those from households of more than \$50,000,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, lower-income youth tend not to receive special education services at school as early as upper-income youth (age 8.5 vs. 8.0 for the lowest- and highest-income groups,  $p < .05$ ). However, there are no income-related differences in participation in early intervention services or preschool special education among youth whose disabilities are identified at ages that qualify them for such services.

Although, youth from households at different income levels do not differ with regard to school mobility, they do differ markedly in their experiences with grade retention and disciplinary actions. Youth from lower-income households are much more likely than higher-income youth to be retained at grade level (43% of those with incomes of \$25,000 or less vs. 29% for those with incomes of more than \$50,000,  $p < .001$ ) and to be suspended or expelled during their school careers (40% vs. 26%,  $p < .001$ ).

**Race/ethnicity.** Differences are noted for youth of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, consistent in direction with those found for household income. African American youth, who more often are from lower-income households than white students, begin to receive professional services for their disabilities later, on average, than white youth (age 7.9 vs. 7.1,  $p < .001$ ) and to receive special education services later (age 8.9 vs. 8.1,  $p < .001$ ). The average age for receipt of services for Hispanic youth falls between those of white and African American students. As with income-related findings, there are no significant differences in the rates at which students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds participate in early intervention or preschool special education or in their school mobility. However, African American youth with disabilities are much more likely than either white or Hispanic students to be suspended or expelled (46% vs. 30% and 28%,  $p < .001$ ). Unlike income-related differences noted above, there are no differences between racial/ethnic groups in their experiences with grade retention.

## Summary

This chapter has highlighted several aspects of what youth with disabilities bring to their secondary school careers in terms of prior education-related experiences. NLTS2 findings show that some youth with disabilities and their families have been dealing with disability-related service systems since before they entered school. About half of youth who have their disabilities identified at the ages to qualify for early intervention or preschool special education services participate in those programs, with program participation being most common for children with sensory or orthopedic impairments or multiple disabilities. Yet many more youth first receive services for their disabilities at school entry or in the first elementary school years; the average age at which youth first receive special education services is just over 8.

A large number of youth with disabilities experience the challenges of school mobility. Almost one-fourth have attended five or more schools during their educational careers—several more than would be expected from normal grade-level progression—with the associated disruption in instructional programs and relationships. Youth with disabilities also are much more likely than youth in the general population to receive the message of academic failure that is inherent in having to repeat a grade in school—more than one-third are retained at grade level at least once, usually in elementary school. Grade retention is particularly common for youth with mental retardation. One-third of youth with disabilities also receive school suspensions or expulsions—a much higher rate of these disciplinary actions than among students in the general population. High rates of school mobility and suspensions or expulsions are particularly pronounced for youth with emotional disturbances.

Having provided some understanding of the past education-related experiences that youth with disabilities bring to their secondary school years, the report now turns to a description of the schools that are the educational context during those years.