

### **3. Instructional Settings** *by Mary Wagner, Camille Marder, and Michael Chorost*

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Although this report focuses on the language arts classroom experiences of elementary and middle school students with disabilities, those experiences take place in the larger context of students' overall school programs. It is helpful to have a broad outline of that larger context in order to understand variations in classroom experiences. This chapter provides that overview by discussing the variety of instructional settings students with disabilities experience in their overall school programs. The settings that students experience for various kinds of classes are presented, as well as the amount of time students spend in those settings. Findings are presented for students with disabilities as a whole and for those who differ in their primary setting for language arts instruction—the central comparison of this report.

#### **Overview of Instructional Settings**

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- Multiple settings are the norm for elementary and middle school students with disabilities. The overall school day for two-thirds of students with disabilities includes both general and special education settings.
- The vast majority of students with disabilities (94%) spend a portion of their school day in general education classes.
- Almost three-fourths of students with disabilities have special education placements in their school programs.

#### **General Education Classes**

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- Students with disabilities are most likely to be in general education classes for nonacademic subjects (e.g., art or physical education; Exhibit 3-1). General education classes also commonly provide skills instruction.
- Students with disabilities who spend any time at all in general education classrooms spend the majority of their school day there. Such students average 4.8 hours in general education classes in a typical day, or about five class periods. Forty-two percent of students who spend time in general education classes are there for more than 6 hours a day.
- Students whose primary language arts instruction is in general education classrooms are quite likely to have instruction in other subjects in that setting as well, spending, on average, the equivalent of about six class periods per day there.

**Exhibit 3-1**  
**Participation of Students with Disabilities in**  
**General Education Settings**

	All Students with Disabilities	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
		General Education	Special Education
Percentage receiving instruction in general education classrooms for:			
No subjects	6.4 (1.8)	.0 --	14.7 (1.6)
Language arts	62.2 (1.5)	100.0 --	15.3* (1.6)
Other academics	81.0 (1.2)	99.1 (.4)	58.9 (2.2)
Nonacademics (e.g., art, physical education)	90.7 (.9)	95.0 (.9)	85.6 (1.6)
Skills instruction (e.g., study skills, life skills)	48.3 (1.6)	65.1 (2.2)	29.0 (2.1)
Average hours per day students spend in general education classes			
	4.8 (.1)	5.9 (.1)	3.0 (.1)
Of students in general education classes, percentage of time spent in those classes:			
<1 to 2 hours per day	16.6 (1.2)	5.8 (1.0)	33.3 (2.4)
2.1 to 4 hours per day	13.1 (1.1)	3.0 (.8)	28.8 (2.3)
4.1 to 6 hours per day	27.8 (1.5)	25.8 (1.9)	31.0 (2.3)
More than 6 hours per day	42.4 (1.6)	65.4 (2.1)	7.0 (1.3)
Sample size			
All students	5,274	2,288	2,983
Students in a general education setting	4,458	2,288	2,168

Standard errors are in parentheses.

\* These students receive language arts instruction in a special education setting in addition to their primary language arts instruction, which is in a general education setting.

- Virtually all of them take at least one additional academic subject and a nonacademic subject (e.g., art, physical education) in a general education classroom. Almost two-thirds (65%) have instruction in study skills, life skills, or prevocational skills in a general education classroom.

- The majority of students (59%) whose primary language arts instruction is in a special education setting take at least one academic subject in a general education setting. Most (86%) take a nonacademic subject, 29% receive skills instruction, and 15% receive some language arts instruction in a general education classroom.
- Students whose primary language arts instruction is in a special education setting still average 3 hours a day in general education classes, and more than one-third (38%) spend more than 4 hours in general education classes in a typical day. However, 15% of students whose primary language arts instruction is in a special education classroom spend all their time in such settings.

### **Special Education Settings**

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- More than one-fourth of students with disabilities, including almost half of students whose primary language arts instruction is in a general education classroom, spend no time in special education settings (Exhibit 3-2).
- Students who spend any time at all in special education settings average about 3 hours per day there. However, 13% of those students spend more than 6 hours a day in special education settings.
- Overall, 59% of students with disabilities receive language arts instruction in a special education setting, and almost half take at least one other academic course there. Almost four in 10 students receive skills instruction in a special education class, and 15% take nonacademic classes in such a setting.
- Almost half of students with disabilities whose primary language arts instruction is provided in a general education classroom spend no time in a special education setting. However, about one-fourth of them receive some language arts instruction in a special education class, in addition to their primary language arts instruction in a general education classroom, and almost as many take at least one other academic subject in a special education class. Skills instruction and nonacademic courses are less commonly taken in special education classes.
- Students whose primary language arts instruction is in a general education class, but who spend some part of their day in special education settings, average about an hour in them in a typical day. Fewer than one in five such students spend more than 2 hours per day in special education settings.

**Exhibit 3-2**  
**Participation of Students with Disabilities in**  
**Special Education Settings**

	All Students with Disabilities	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
		General Education	Special Education
Percentage receiving instruction in general education classrooms for:			
No subjects	27.6 (1.4)	48.9 (2.2)	.0 --
Language arts	59.0 (1.5)	26.5 (1.9)	100.0 --
Other academic subjects	49.2 (1.6)	22.3 (1.8)	82.2 (1.7)
Nonacademics (e.g., art, physical education)	15.1 (1.1)	6.6 (1.1)	25.5 (1.9)
Skills instruction (e.g., study skills, life skills)	38.8 (1.6)	18.4 (2.5)	62.3 (1.9)
Average hours per day spend in special education settings by students in them			
Percentage in special education settings who spend the following time in them:			
<1 to 2 hours per day	45.7 (1.8)	82.9 (2.3)	22.1 (1.9)
2.1 to 4 hours per day	22.5 (1.5)	11.1 (1.9)	29.7 (2.1)
4.1 to 6 hours per day	18.5 (1.4)	3.7 (1.2)	28.0 (2.1)
More than 6 hours per day	13.3 (1.2)	2.3 (.9)	20.2 (1.8)
Sample size			
All students	5,670	2,452	3,214
Students in special education settings	4,411	1,345	3,062
Standard errors are in parentheses.			

- Most students (82%) whose primary setting for language arts is a special education class also take at least one other academic class in such settings, and 62% receive skills instruction in them. One-fourth of such students also take nonacademic subjects in special education settings.
- Students whose primary setting for language arts is a special education class average the equivalent of about four class periods per day in them. However, one in five such students spend more than 6 hours per day in special education classes.

## Resource Rooms

- Resource rooms are the most common special education setting (Exhibit 3-3); almost half of students with disabilities spend at least part of their day in one, including about one-third who take language arts and one-fourth who take at least one other academic subject in one. Resource rooms also are the location in which 19% of students with disabilities receive skills training.
- Students who are instructed in resource rooms average 1.6 hours in them; only about one-third spend more than 2 hours there.

**Exhibit 3-3**  
**Participation of Students with Disabilities in Special Education Resource Rooms**

	All Students with Disabilities	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
		General Education	Special Education
Receive instruction in resource rooms for:			
No subjects	54.1 (1.5)	58.5 (2.1)	48.7 (2.2)
Language arts	34.2 (1.5)	24.8 (1.9)	45.7 (2.2)
Other academic subjects	26.2 (1.4)	20.0 (1.7)	33.8 (2.1)
Nonacademics (e.g., art, physical education)	4.8 (.7)	6.2 (1.0)	3.1 (.8)
Skills instruction (e.g., study skills, life skills)	18.7 (1.3)	15.8 (1.7)	21.9 (1.9)
Average hours per day spent in resource rooms by students in them	1.6 (.1)	1.0 (.1)	2.1 (.1)
Percentage in resource rooms who spend the following time in them:			
<1 to 2 hours per day	67.2 (2.2)	84.9 (4.2)	47.9 (3.3)
2.1 to 4 hours per day	24.7 (2.0)	11.0 (2.1)	39.7 (3.2)
4.1 to 6 hours per day	5.9 (1.1)	2.4 (1.0)	9.7 (2.0)
More than 6 hours per day	2.2 (.7)	1.8 (.9)	2.7 (1.1)
Sample size			
All students	5,640	2,422	3,214
Students in resource rooms	2,105	1,075	1,030

Standard errors are in parentheses.

**Exhibit 3-4**  
**Participation of Students with Disabilities in Self-contained Special Education Classes**

	All Students with Disabilities	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
		General Education	Special Education
Receive instruction in self-contained classrooms for:			
No subjects	71.2 (1.4)	94.0 (1.0)	43.2 (2.2)
Language arts	26.1 (1.4)	2.5 (.7)	55.0 (2.2)
Other academic subjects	24.2 (1.3)	2.5 (.7)	50.8 (2.2)
Nonacademics (e.g., art, physical education)	10.4 (.9)	.5 (.3)	22.6 (1.9)
Skills instruction (e.g., study skills, life skills)	20.3 (1.3)	2.1 (.7)	41.3 (2.2)
Average hours per day spent in self-contained classrooms by students in them	4.1 (.1)	1.3 (.2)	4.6 (.1)
Percentage who spend the following time in self-contained classrooms:			
<1 to 2 hours per day	20.6 (2.2)	77.3 (6.0)	10.6 (1.8)
2.1 to 4 hours per day	18.1 (2.1)	13.5 (4.9)	18.9 (2.3)
4.1 to 6 hours per day	34.1 (2.6)	6.6 (3.6)	39.0 (2.8)
More than 6 hours per day	27.3 (2.4)	2.6 (2.3)	31.5 (2.7)
Sample size			
All students	5,641	2,430	3,207
Students in self-contained classes	2,435	225	2,206

Standard errors are in parentheses.

- Forty-two percent of students whose primary language arts instruction is in a general education setting spend some time in a resource room, including one-fourth who have some language arts instruction there. Students are less likely to spend time in resource rooms for other academic subjects, nonacademics, or skills instruction. Those who have resource room placements average 1 hour per day in them.
- About half of students whose primary language arts instruction is in a special education setting have some instruction in a resource room, including 46% who receive their language arts instruction there and about one-third who take other academic subjects in one. These students average about 2 hours per day in resource rooms.

### **Self-contained Special Education Classrooms**

- Most students with disabilities (71%) receive no instruction in a self-contained class (Exhibit 3-4). When they do, they are about equally likely to take language arts (26%) or other academic subjects (24%) there. Students who spend any time in a self-contained classroom average about 4 hours per day there, although about one in five such students are there for 2 hours or less, and 27% are there for more than 6 hours per day.
- Few students whose primary language arts instruction is in a general education class spend any time in a self-contained classroom. Students who do average 1.3 hours per day there.
- More than half of students whose primary language arts instruction is in a special education class take at least one subject in a self-contained class, most often language arts. Half also take other academic subjects in a self-contained class. Students who have self-contained placements average most of their day in them.

### **Individual<sup>1</sup> or Homebound Instruction**

- Only 2% to 3% of students with disabilities are reported to receive individual or homebound instruction (Exhibit 3-5), regardless of their instructional setting for language arts. Skills instruction is the most common focus of individualized instruction.
- Students who have individual or homebound instruction average about an hour per day of such instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “individual instruction” is used here to refer to instruction provided to a student in a setting where no other students are present. It does not include the one-to-one time a teacher might spend with a student during a class in which other students are present but occupied with other activities.

**Exhibit 3-5**  
**Students with Disabilities Receiving Individual or Homebound Language Arts Instruction**

	All Students with Disabilities	Primary Language Arts Instructional Setting	
		General Education	Special Education
Percentage receiving individual or homebound instruction for:			
No subjects	97.3 (1.8)	97.8 (.8)	96.6 (1.1)
Language arts	.9 (.3)	.7 (.3)	1.2 (.5)
Other academic subjects	.9 (.3)	.6 (.3)	1.1 (.5)
Nonacademics (e.g., art, physical education)	.4 (.2)	.2 (.2)	.6 (.3)
Skills instruction (e.g., study skills, life skills)	1.3 (.4)	1.1 (.5)	1.6 (.6)
Average hours per day spent in individual or homebound instruction by students receiving it			
	1.2 (.3)	.8 (.3)	1.7 (.4)
Percentage receiving individual or homebound instruction who spend the following time in it:			
<1 to 2 hours per day	76.8 (7.2)	90.6 (7.4)	60.5 (10.9)
2.1 to 4 hours per day	10.3 (5.2)	1.7 (3.2)	20.5 (9.0)
4.1 to 6 hours per day	11.8 (5.5)	7.4 (6.6)	17.0 (8.4)
More than 6 hours per day	1.1 (1.8)	.3 (1.4)	2.1 (3.2)
Sample size			
All students	5,274	2,288	2,983
Students in individualized settings	217	120	97

Standard errors are in parentheses.

## Summary

Virtually all elementary and middle school students who receive special education also are general education students. Students with disabilities who spend any time in general education classes typically spend the majority of their day there, including the time for their academic subjects.

Fewer students with disabilities (three-fourths) spend any time in special education settings in the course of a typical school day. In addition, more than half of students who spend time in special education settings also take at least some academic instruction in general education settings.

Resource rooms are the most common special education setting. Almost half of students with disabilities spend part of their day in them. Self-contained classes are much less common; only about one-fourth of students with disabilities spend time in them, although some students do average most of their school day there. Individual or homebound instruction is rare.