

Publication Summary

The Long-Run Impacts of Special Education Ballis and Heath, 2021

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Across Australia, there has been a deliberate movement to discredit the role of special education (SE) programs in educating students with disabilities. Many policy planners, researchers, and educators in Australia feel that inclusive schooling is the only option for educating all students with disabilities. However, recent research (Ballis & Heath, 2021) challenges the notion of abolishing SE programs for students with disabilities, including students with less severe disabilities such as learning, behavioural and emotional difficulties. Although the study was conducted in the USA, the findings have significant implications in Australia.

In 2005, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) decided to cap enrolment in special education (SE) programs at 8.5 percent of the student population, a reduction from 13 percent, to control SE costs (Grundorf et al., 2004). School districts that did not implement these policies faced sanctions and state interventions. Although this policy was revoked in 2018, Ballis and Heath (2021) estimated that 225,000 fewer students were enrolled in SE programs annually across Texas in 2018. The Ballis and Heath (2021) study, reviewed here, examined the long-term impact of the SE capping policy on students who initially had access to SE prior to the policy but lost access to SE programs following its introduction.

Ballis and Heath used restricted-access administrative data from the Texas Schools Project to track public school students' selected education and labour market outcomes. Specifically, the authors tracked fifth-grade students enrolled in SE before the SE capping policy was implemented in 2005. The final sample of 227,555 students included fifth grade SE cohorts enrolled between 1999-2000 and 2004-2005. Within the total sample of 227,555 students, 189,042 students had malleable disability diagnoses such as learning disabilities, speech impairments, other health impairments (including ADHD), or emotional disturbance or received 50 percent of their instruction in general education settings. The authors defined this group as a "high-impact" because of their vulnerability to the SE capping policy.

To assess the impact of the SE capping policy, the authors used two novel strategies. Firstly, a difference-in-differences (DiD) strategy was used to estimate the average impact of reducing overall access to SE for students with disabilities. Secondly, the authors used the length of exposure to the policy to identify the long-term impacts of SE removal for students on the margin of SE placement decisions, precisely the group for whom the net benefits of SE are most unclear.

The findings indicated several adverse outcomes for students with disabilities who were subject to the SE capping policies. For example, SE students in the districts with 13 percentage points SE enrolment in 2005 and who experienced the SE capping policy after fifth grade, the increase in the likelihood of losing access to the SE program was 13 percent. The corresponding increase in the likelihood of SE removal for the high-impact sample was 14 percent.

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The impact of the SE capping policy on the educational attainment of SE students who lost access to SE programs indicated several adverse trends. For example, in districts that had 13 percent SE enrolment in fifth grade before 2005, exposure to the SE capping policy led to a decrease in the likelihood of (a) high school graduation by 2 percentage points and (b) college enrolment by 1.2 percentage points. For the high impact group, students experienced a 2.2 percentage point and 1.6 percentage point drop in the likelihood of high school graduation and college enrolment, respectively. However, the greatest effects of the SE capping policy were observed for students on the margin of SE placement decisions. For these students, loss of access to SE programs decreased high school completion by 51.9 percentage points and college enrolment by 37.9 percentage points. The study also found that the capping policy did not impact the educational attainment of students with cognitive and physical disabilities. Additionally, the study found that the long-term negative impacts of SE removal are greater for students in under-resourced districts.

The study also found that low-income and minority students were more likely to lose SE programs due to the SE capping policy. On average, students from low-income families were more likely to lose access to SE programs than non-low-income families. This difference was found to be statistically significant. Similarly, minority students were more likely to lose access to SE programs. However, for minority and low-income students on the margin of SE placement decisions, the impact of the SE capping policy was severe. The study found that low-income students were 49 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school and enrol in college if removed from SE programs. Similarly, minority students on the margin of SE placement decisions were 56 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school and 66 percentage points less likely to enrol in college if removed from SE programs.

Finally, Ballis and Heath examined the impacts of the policy on general education (GE) students. The results indicated that the general education students in the lower half achievement distribution were most adversely affected by the change in policy as they could not access the SE programs. Further, the authors reported that the reduction in educational attainment among GE students could be attributed to direct and spill over effects of lower and middle achievers not having access to SE programs due to the SE capping policy.

In conclusion, the authors argue that reducing access to SE programs during middle school and early high school negatively affects high school completion and post-secondary enrolment outcomes. In addition, the author contends that SE services prepare students with disabilities for future success. Finally, the authors believe that SE services would also be beneficial to GE students. For example, resources provided to reduce behavioural challenges in the GE classroom would equip teachers with skills to manage behaviour and GE students' ability to focus on their tasks. Finally, the authors suggest the need to invest in additional resources for marginalised and vulnerable SE students during early and later adolescence that might offer similar returns to those observed in early childhood investments.

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Reference

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