Use of Out-of-District Programs by Massachusetts Students with Disabilities

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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has long been a leader in the education of students with disabilities. Programs located outside of traditional school districts have been a critical source of education for Massachusetts students with disabilities for almost two centuries. Today, four decades after the passage of Chapter 766, and subsequently the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, guaranteed students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, out-of-district programs continue to serve a sizable number of Massachusetts students. Presently, more than 1 out of 20 Massachusetts students with disabilities are educated outside of their school districts, primarily in state-approved private special education schools and district-sponsored collaborative programs.

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the use of out-of-district programs by Massachusetts students with disabilities. Building on our 2012 study of Massachusetts students with disabilities who were educated in traditional school districts1, in this study we examined: the individual and community-level characteristics of students who received out-of-district placements, the processes by which these students were placed out-of-district, and the implications of these placements.

This study yielded a wealth of new information about the placement and performance of students with disabilities in out-of-district programs. Some of the key findings include:

- Low-income students with disabilities are much less likely to be placed out-of-district in private special education schools than their non-low income peers.

1 [http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/2012/0412sped.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/2012/0412sped.pdf)
• The majority of out-of-district placements appear to be the result of consensus decisions between school district personnel and parents.

• District special education directors reported much more contention over the placement of students with more common disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities. District special education directors also indicated that these placements made up a small but time-consuming minority of cases.

• There are no observable differences in the academic progress made by out-placed and non-out-placed students, but there is some evidence to indicate that out-placed students do appear to experience improved rates of school attendance.

• Communities that sent a larger percentage of their students who were eligible for special education to private schools, on average, received a larger per pupil reimbursement from the Special Education Circuit Breaker program in 2012.

Based on the findings from this study, we offer to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education several policy recommendations, which we list below:

• Improve general education approaches to discipline and behavior.
• Promote inclusion and universal design for learning.
• Improve high school options for students with disabilities.
• Establish a stronger system to promote interagency coordination and resolve interagency disputes.
• Create increased opportunities for private schools and public schools to collaborate to help support students in a more fluid manner.
• Work with the Legislature to restructure the circuit breaker to directly support the expenses related to children with complex needs.
In the remainder of this document, we introduce our research questions and present a summary of our main findings, followed by a more in-depth description of those findings. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

**Research Questions**

This report presents findings from our study of the use of out-of-district programs for students with disabilities in Massachusetts. In the study, we addressed three primary research questions:

**Question 1:** What are the student and district-level characteristics associated with placement in out-of-district programs?

**Question 2:** What are the processes and pathways through which students with disabilities are referred to and placed in out-of-district programs?

**Question 3:** What are the student and district-level implications of enrolling students in out-of-district programs?
Methods

The findings presented in this report are drawn from four main sources of data:

(1) **Massachusetts Student Information Management System (SIMS) and Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) files:** In the statistical analyses we present, we used data from student-level SIMS and MCAS files from the academic years 2005-06 through 2011-12.\(^2\) We examined these data using a number of different approaches including ordinary least squares regression modeling, multilevel multinomial logistic regression modeling, discrete time survival analysis, and propensity score matching.

(2) **Online Survey:** We conducted an online survey, which was completed by nearly 80 percent of current district-level directors of special education in the state of Massachusetts (\(n=221\)), which is an excellent return rate and speaks to the importance of this area of research to the field. In this survey, we asked special education directors about their overall experiences with out-of-district placements as well as a series of questions pertaining to the most recent student in their district who received an out-of-district placement.

(3) **Focus Groups:** We conducted five separate focus groups. We convened two focus groups of leaders of state-approved private special education schools, one focus group with leaders of collaborative programs, and two focus groups with parents of students who are currently being educated in out-of-district placements.

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\(^2\) For the purposes of this report, we refer to each academic year by the year in which it concluded (for example, we refer to the 2006-07 school year as '2007').
(4) **Interviews:** We conducted individual follow-up interviews with two state-approved private special education providers and two district directors of special education identified through our focus groups and online survey, respectively. 

Throughout this study we have shared preliminary findings with state officials, special education directors, parents, and collaborative and private school providers. These conversations provided key insights that informed our ongoing research and shaped our understanding of the findings. We include some of these informal data in this document.

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3 For descriptions of statistical, survey, focus group, and interview methods please see Appendix A at the end of this document.
Summary of Primary Findings

**Question 1:** What are the student and district-level characteristics associated with placement in out-of-district programs?

The overall number of students with disabilities placed in out-of-district programs remained relatively stable during the period from 2006-2012, but the characteristics of students who use these programs appeared to change in some important ways. The number of students with emotional disturbance enrolled in private special education schools decreased sharply since 2005, while the number of students with autism enrolled in these schools steadily increased during this period. It is notable that this increase in the number of students with autism in private special education schools, though substantial, did not reflect the overall increase in the number of students identified with autism in Massachusetts. We also found that low-income students placed in private special education schools at substantially lower rates than did their non-low income peers, despite their placement in collaborative programs at comparable rates. Lastly, we found variability in towns’ use of private special education schools, wherein some towns sent a substantially greater proportion of their students with disabilities to private out-placements than others. These findings were generally consistent across all six years of data examined in this study.

**Question 2:** What are the processes and pathways through which students with disabilities are referred to and placed in out-of-district programs?

We found that for children in most disability categories, late middle and early high school represented the main years in which they were first placed in out-of-district programs. One exception to this rule is students with sensory-related disabilities (such as hearing or vision impairments), who tended to first be placed in these programs in early elementary school.

The processes by which students were placed in out-of-district programs appear to follow three distinct patterns. Data from our surveys, focus groups, and interviews suggest that
safety concerns drove the out-placement process for the majority of out-placed students. This out-placement pattern was typically non-contentious, with parents as well as school and district officials supporting the out-placement decision. The second pattern that emerged involved a small, but time-consuming minority of cases and frequently involved students with learning disabilities. This process often included outside evaluators, advocates, unilateral placement by parents, and lawyers. Cases that fell into this category were often adversarial. Finally, special education directors and approved private special education administrators described a third process that involved other state agencies (primarily the Department of Children and Families (DCF)) placing students in residential settings without agreement of the student’s school district. This third process created protracted conflicts over fiscal and programmatic responsibilities. These conflicts were perceived by administrators to be harmful to students and difficult to resolve in the absence of an effective state-level mediator with the power to clarify students’ needs and the roles and responsibilities of each agency.

Question 3: What are the student and district-level implications of placing students in out-of-district programs?

Although some students do return to traditional public school settings after being out-placed, more than 75 percent of students who were placed in out-of-district programs remained in those placements.4 Out-placed students appeared to perform neither better nor worse than similar non-out-placed students on measures of academic achievement. When we examined post-placement trends in MCAS scores on the English Language Arts and Mathematics tests for students who were sent out-of-district after eighth grade and compared them to scores for comparable students who were not out-placed, we found no evidence of differences in their testing gains or losses. However, we did find limited

4 For the purposes of this study, we only had access to data from 2006 through 2012. Therefore, we do not know whether any students returned to traditional in-district placements for the 2012-2013 school year, or any subsequent school year. Additionally, this does not include out-of-state students or students parentally-placed in private schools.
evidence suggesting that the out-placement of students with disabilities may be associated with greater increases in their rates of attendance compared to similar non-outplaced peers. Lastly, we found that towns that sent a larger percentage of their students who were eligible for special education to private schools, on average, received a larger per pupil reimbursement from the Special Education Circuit Breaker program\textsuperscript{5} in 2012.

Below, we discuss these and other findings in detail. We conclude this report with a discussion of implications and recommendations.

\textsuperscript{5} For more information about the Special Education Circuit-Breaker Program see http://children.massbudget.org/special-education-circuit-breaker.
Part 1: Student and district-level characteristics associated with placement in out-of-district programs

Finding 1a: Rates of out-placement have remained stable over time, but the characteristics of students who use these programs are changing.

Massachusetts students with disabilities are educated in a range of settings. In 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) used ten distinct categories to describe these placements. Among the 198,875 students eligible for special education and related services in 2012, 182,284, or approximately 92 percent, were educated within traditional in-district placements (district public schools or charter schools). As Table 1.1 (below) illustrates, the remaining 16,591 students were educated in a range of non-traditional-public-school settings.

Table 1.1: Instructional settings for students with disabilities in 2012 (n=198,875)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Number of Students</th>
<th>Percentage of Students with Disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional public school</td>
<td>177,417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter school</td>
<td>4,867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private special education school</td>
<td>6,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private non-special education school</td>
<td>1,107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative program</td>
<td>5,039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-schooled (Related services only)</td>
<td>1,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early intervention/preschool</td>
<td>1,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional (SEIS program)⁶</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of state</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctional facilities</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁶ For more information about Special Education in Institutional Settings (SEIS) programs, see http://www.doe.mass.edu/seis/.
To focus our analyses on substantively meaningful and policy-relevant out-of-district placement categories, we combined some of these placement categories and eliminated others for the purpose of these analyses. Specifically, for this research we combined traditional public schools and charter schools into a single “in-district” category. We removed from the analyses other groups of children who were: (a) home schooled, (b) participating in early intervention or preschool programs, (c) receiving special education services provided within institutional settings (SEIS program), (d) incarcerated, (e) parentally-placed in a private non-special education school, or (f) educated out-of-state.  

The two primary out-of-district placement categories discussed in this report are: (1) private special education schools, and (2) collaborative out of district programs. All of the out-of-district schools that are included in this report were approved by DESE to provide education and related services for Massachusetts students with disabilities. The privately placed students are those for whom their local school district supported all or some of their tuition, transportation, or other special education associated costs. Collaborative programs are public regional inter-district partnerships that provide direct services for students with disabilities, transportation, and support for special education professionals. It is important to note that collaboratives provide some students with disabilities traditional in-district programs through their partnerships with the public schools and using public school classroom space. These students were considered as placed in-district and were not included in this analysis.

Approximately 6.01 percent of Massachusetts students with disabilities were educated in an out-of-district setting in 2012. As indicated in Figure 1.1, which displays out-of-district

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7 We chose to remove these students from our analysis because they were either not out-placed by their districts or because their numbers were too small to support the analyses conducted in this study.

8 On occasion throughout this report, we combine these two categories into a single category representing all out-of-district placed students in the Commonwealth.

9 For more information on collaborative programs see http://moecn.org/. For more information on approved private special education schools see http://maaps.org/.
placements over the 2006-2012 years, the percentage of students with disabilities placed in either collaborative or private out-of-district programs ranged from 5.97 percent in 2011 to 6.37 percent in 2007.

Figure 1.1: Percentage of students with disabilities in an out-of-district program

Although there were slight year-to-year differences in the percentage of students with disabilities who were placed in out-of-district settings, this rate was relatively stable over time. Additionally, the proportion of students in private special education schools and the proportion in out-of-district collaborative programs remained relatively consistent between 2006 and 2012.

Placement in out-of-district programs differed widely for students across disability categories, grade levels, and levels of family income. We display in Figure 1.2 the number of students, by disability category, placed in out-of-district settings in each year from 2006-2012. As Figure 1.2 shows, students with emotional disturbance made up the single largest category of students placed in out-of-district programs. Students with autism comprised the second largest group, followed by students with multiple disabilities, learning
disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. We observed fewer than 1,000 children from each of the other disability categories placed in out-of-district settings in any given year.

**Figure 1.2: Number of students in out-of-district placements by disability category** and year

We also examined rates of out-of-district placement as a proportion of students in each disability category, which we display in Figure 1.3 below. From 2006-2012, over 25 percent of students with hearing or vision impairment, or who had multiple disabilities, were placed in out-of-district programs. At somewhat lower rates, between 10 and 25 percent of students with emotional disturbance, and autism were placed in out-of-district programs. At the lowest rates, between 5 and 10 percent of students with intellectual

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10 Data on students with developmental delay, physical disabilities, other health impairments, neurological, or communication disabilities are not displayed in Figures 1.2 through 1.4. See table B.1, B.2, B.3, and B.4 in Appendix B for data on children from all disability categories.
disabilities or neurological impairments were placed in these programs, and less than 5 percent of students within all other disability categories were out-placed.

Figure 1.3: Percentage of students within each disability category in out-of-district placements, by year

There were important differences between the overall numbers and relative percentages of students who were placed in out-of-district programs within the disability categories of sensory disability, learning disability, and autism. For example, although the total number of hearing or vision impaired students educated in out-of-district settings was relatively small (see Figure 1.2 above), Figure 1.3 shows that this small number of students represented a relatively large proportion of all hearing or vision impaired students. Conversely, although students with learning disabilities made up the fourth largest (in terms of total placements) group of out-placed students, these students represented a small proportion of all students with learning disabilities. Although the proportion of students with autism who were served in out-of-district placements declined steadily from approximately 20 percent in 2006 to approximately 15 percent in 2012 (see Figure 1.3),

*Data on the following disability categories are not displayed: developmental delay, physical disabilities, other health impairment, neurological impairment, and communication.
the number of students with autism enrolled in out-of-district settings increased steadily during this period, from 1,562 students in 2006 to 2,365 students in 2012 (see Figure 1.2). This seemingly contradictory finding is likely attributable to the steady increase in the incidence of autism in the population during this period.

Within and between disability categories, we also observed important differences between the placement of students in collaborative programs as compared to private special education schools. As we observe in Table 1.1, there were more students with disabilities placed in private special education schools than in collaborative programs. In examining placement patterns by disability category, as the two panels in Figure 1.4 (below) show, one notable difference between collaborative and private special education schools involves placement trends for students with emotional disturbance and students with autism. Although the number of students with emotional disturbance enrolled in private special education schools, on average, declined over the 2006-2012 period, the number of students with emotional disturbance in collaborative programs increased slightly during this period.

**Figure 1.4: Number of children in private special education schools and collaborative programs by disability category and year**
Both private special education schools and collaborative programs experienced an increase in the placement of students with autism, but the rate of this increase was substantially higher in private special education schools. In 2006, 835 students with autism were placed in private special education schools, while 688 students with autism were in collaborative programs (a ratio of 1.2 to 1). In comparison, by 2012, 1,399 students with autism were placed in private special education schools, while 897 students with autism were educated in collaborative programs (a ratio of 1.6 to 1). In both types of programs, the placement of students with learning disabilities declined slightly, though steadily, over the six years that we examined.
Finding 1b: Low-income students are placed in private special education schools at substantially lower rates than their non-low income peers.

Low-income students with disabilities, i.e. those students with disabilities who were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, were consistently placed in private special education schools at lower rates than their grade-level peers with disabilities. Although low-income and non-low income students were placed in collaborative programs at comparable rates, low-income students were placed in private special education schools at approximately half the rate of non-low income students. When we held other student and town-level characteristics constant in a multilevel multinomial logistic regression model, we found that the odds that a non-low income student with a disability would be placed in a private special education school were more than five times the odds for a similar low-income student.\textsuperscript{11} We observed these patterns of difference between low-income and non-low income students within as well as between districts, suggesting that the differences were not driven by urbanicity or the availability of services. Further, we found these differences using an indicator of whether the student was ever designated low-income, as defined by free or reduced price lunch eligibility, during the period from 2007-2012 rather than using an indicator of whether the student was low-income in a given year. This suggests that the observed placement differences between low-income and non-low income students were not the result of a failure of private special education schools to report students’ eligibility for free or reduced priced lunch, as suggested to us by DESE and representatives from private special education schools.

The maps in Figure 1.5 below display low-income and non-low income students with disabilities who were placed in private special education schools in 2012. In these maps, each dot represents one private-school-placed student. Each dot is placed on the map in the student’s home district (the district from which the student was sent to a private out-of-

\textsuperscript{11} For more information regarding multilevel multinomial logistic regression models see Appendix A. In the model that yielded the odds ratios presented above, we controlled for the student’s disability category, grade, race, whether the student was over-age for grade, and the percentage low-income students enrolled in the student’s town of residence.
district placement). These maps illustrate substantially higher numbers of non-low-income students enrolled in private special education schools in 2012. The disproportionate numbers of private school enrollment by student income level is striking when we consider that across the Commonwealth there are, overall, a slightly higher number of low-income students than non-low income education students identified as disabled. In other words, these maps show that not only is there a greater number of non-low-income students sent out of district to be educated in private special education schools, but that these non-low-income students are privately out-placed at about twice the rate of their low-income peers (4.1 percent versus 2.2 percent). For student with learning disabilities and multiple disabilities, non-low-income students are placed at nearly three times the rate of their low-income peers (See Figure B.1 in Appendix B).

Our prior research refuted the popular narrative that “attributed the high rates of special education identification in Massachusetts to high-resource parents seeking to secure advantages... for their children” (Hehir, Grindal, Eidelman, 2012, p. 11). However, our analysis shows that income status does seem to be strongly associated with the likelihood of out-of-district placement.
These differences in private school placement between low-income and non-low-income students were consistent across all grades and disability categories throughout the 2006-2012 period. For example, among the 1,959 non-low income high school students with autism, 451 (23 percent) were placed in private special education schools. Meanwhile, among the 1,007 low-income high school students with autism, only 110 (11 percent) were placed in private special education schools. Similarly, 265 (3 percent) of the 9,898 non-low income high school students with learning disabilities attended private special education schools compared to 103 (less than 1 percent) of the 12,721 low-income high school students with learning disabilities.

The observed state-level differences in rates of placement in private special education schools for low-income and non-low income students did not appear to be driven by differences in the availability of within-district specialized programs in the urban districts that serve a larger number of low-income students. Indeed, these same patterns of

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12 See figure B.1 in Appendix B for parallel maps of students with emotional disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and learning disabilities.
difference between low-income and non-low income students existed when we looked specifically within districts, suggesting that the differences were not driven exclusively by urbanicity or the availability of services. For example, among high school students with disabilities in the five largest districts in the state (Springfield, Boston, Worcester, Lawrence, and New Bedford), we observed 14.6 percent of non-low income students enrolled in private special education schools, compared to 3.0 percent of low-income students. This pattern was generally consistent across all towns with non-trivial numbers of low-income and non-low income students with disabilities.

Finding 1c: Towns vary widely in their use of private special education schools.

Across the Commonwealth, approximately 3.3 percent of students with disabilities were educated in private special education schools. However, in some towns, 10 percent or more of students with disabilities were educated in private special education schools, whereas in other towns, less than 1 percent of students with disabilities were placed in these schools. These town-level rates of out-placement were more or less consistent across the 2006-2012 years. The map in Figure 1.6 below displays the percentage of students who were eligible for special education or related services who were placed in private special education schools in 2012. Communities that are lightly shaded placed a relatively small percentage of their students with disabilities in private schools, and those that are darkly shaded placed a relatively high percentage of students with disabilities in these programs.
In general, communities that were more wealthy, on average, tended to place students with disabilities in private special education schools at higher rates than less-wealthy communities, after accounting for relevant town-level characteristics. In ordinary least squares regression models in which we controlled for relevant town-level characteristics we found that town median family income was positively and significantly associated with the percentage of students with disabilities placed in private schools. It should be noted, however, that there were relatively wealthy communities that send very few children out. We found some qualitative evidence consistent with this finding in our focus group conversations with parents and collaborative directors. Two parents from affluent districts shared that their districts offered outplacements when they attempted to enroll their children with developmental disabilities in in-district kindergartens. In both of these cases, the parents were working to keep their children in district. Additionally, a collaborative director, referring to an affluent district in her area stated that the district, “just sends kids

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13 In these models we controlled for the total number of students who resided in the town, the percentage of students who received free or reduced priced lunch, the percentage of enrolled students who received special education, and whether or not the town was a member of a collaborative program.
out” rather than develop less-restrictive options for students with more complex needs.

Some special education directors reported that their districts lacked the resources or the number of students to build programs within district to support some students with disabilities, and these were the students whom they placed out-of-district.

Our district has no comparable program, nor resources to develop one at this time (Special education director in a very small sized school district). Due to the size of our district, we’re unable to effectively develop programs to support kids in-district...this is a concern. Budget implications have a significant impact on the creation of programs (Special education director in a very small sized school district).

This year our district referred out 5 elementary students with emotional disabilities that we couldn’t serve. We had not budgeted for an ED program at the elementary level this year because we didn’t anticipate the need. When the need arose we could not address it midyear and students were referred out. (Special education director in a medium sized school district).
Part 2: The processes and pathways through which students with disabilities are referred to and placed in out-of-district programs

Finding 2a: Late middle school and early high school are the primary years in which children were first placed in out-of-district programs.

Nearly 1 in 3 students who left a traditional public school to be placed in a private special education school did so in late middle school or early high school. This pattern was consistent for students from most disability categories with the exception of students with sensory disabilities (hearing or vision impairment), who were typically first placed in private out-of-district programs during elementary school. Figure 2.1 below presents the results of a discrete-time survival analysis, in which we modeled a student’s probability of initial placement in a private special education school by grade.\textsuperscript{14} We found five different profiles for the timing of students’ initial private special education school placement for different disability categories. The pattern for students with sensory disabilities was markedly different from the other four. Students with sensory disabilities were most likely to initially be placed in private special education school in the elementary grades. For students with autism, the peak probability for initial private school placement occurred in 8\textsuperscript{th} grade, slightly earlier than the remaining disability categories. Children from all other disability categories were most likely to move to an out-of-district private placement in early high school.

\textsuperscript{14} For more information regarding discrete-time survival analysis see Appendix A. In the model that yielded Figure 2.1 above, we controlled for the student’s disability category, grade, low-income status, gender, and language proficiency status, as well as the town-level characteristics of percentage of low-income students enrolled in the student’s town of residence, percentage of students in outplacements in the student’s town of residence, and whether the student’s town belonged to a collaborative.
These analyses also allowed us to examine the relationship between key student-related predictors and initial placement in private special education schools. Specifically, we found that in the year prior to initial placement, students who were educated in segregated settings, students who were retained in grade, students who attended school less than 90 percent of the time, and students who received an out-of-school suspension were substantially more likely to be placed in a private special education school in the subsequent year. However, the relationship between these predictors and initial private-school placement was different for students with different disabilities. For instance, the odds of out-placement to a private school for a student with emotional disturbance whose prior-year attendance was below 90 percent were 1.5 times the odds for a student with emotional disturbance whose prior-year attendance was above 90 percent. Among students with learning disabilities, though, the odds of initial private placement for students with prior-year attendance below 90 percent were three times the odds for students whose prior-year attendance was above 90 percent. Across all disability
categories, students who were educated in segregated settings in the prior year had odds of receiving a private placement that were sixteen times the odds for students who had been fully included in general education.

Parents and approved private-school administrators noted that beginning in middle school, larger settings, expectations for more independence, and greater academic rigor and accountability were a sudden transition for students accustomed to smaller and more nurturing environments. They also noted that students’ increased size and acuity often made some students physically impossible to manage. It is possible that these types of changes that accompanied the middle-school transition may be related to the higher rates of outplacement we observed in these years.

Throughout our focus groups and interviews, a theme emerged wherein administrators and parents alike noted that although many children’s local elementary schools contained effective inclusive programs and policies for children with disabilities, these practices seemed to be missing in-district at the middle and high school level. For example, in our focus group with administrators of approved private schools for children with autism, administrators noted that many schools have developed autism programs for elementary schools, but have not yet developed the expertise in middle school and high school.

There has been quite a bit of development at the elementary level in terms of expertise, resources, and acceptance of the degree of intervention that kids with autism need. We’re at the point now that that’s developed over the past ten years, and now these kids have to go to middle school, and the middle schools are definitely experiencing the growing pains of being able to serve those types of students (Approved private-school administrator).

Similarly, parents shared their concerns that the inclusion that their children with intellectual disabilities had experienced through elementary school would not continue in middle school, with a substantially separate classroom offered as the only option. In some cases, these rooms were for students with very different profiles and degrees of severity.
In fifth grade she was in the resource room with a variety of profiles. Just a variety of profiles, it wasn’t really appropriate for her. There were a lot of behavioral issues. There were a lot of - it was just a mismatch of diagnoses in that room (Parent of a child with a disability).

Another parent described the physical challenges her daughter faced navigating the large high school building in her power wheelchair in a way that fostered her independence.

I wanted her to get the service that she really needs, help her to be as independent as she can be and I knew at the high school they would hover around her. She always had a one-to-one aid but I didn’t think she would have any room to learn and maybe fail and learn again (Parent of a child with a disability).

In summary, both parents and providers felt that in-district programs at the middle and high school levels struggled to provide sufficient supports to address the unique challenges for many students with disabilities who required consistent responses to behavior, coordination of services, and modification of academic curriculum. This theme presents a plausible theory for why rates of outplacement peak around middle and high school for many students with disabilities.

**Finding 2b:** Special education directors reported that the majority of out-of-district placements were driven by safety concerns, and these placements tended to be non-contentious.

In the majority of cases described by district-level directors of special education, out-of-district placements were used for students in crisis, who presented a safety concern to themselves or others. In these cases, many special education directors described the efforts they had made to maintain the student in district before seeking an outplacement. They believed ultimately, however, that these students would benefit from more structured, therapeutic settings and more wraparound supports for families, such as those offered in out-of-district placements. These placements were generally made through a consensus process between parents, schools, and districts, and they only involved lawyers in 16 percent of the described cases.
When we asked directors of special education to describe the circumstances around the most recent child in their district to have been referred to an out-of-district placement, they repeatedly cited safety as the reason for sending students to a private special education school or collaborative. They described students who were self-injurious and/or aggressive towards other students or staff.

This student is highly aggressive and often times [he] requires two staff to manage. Although the staff can manage, the environment is not conducive to sustaining this type of support, especially as he moves up to the middle school. It also interferes significantly with other students’ learning as he is aggressive towards other students (Special education director in a medium-sized school district).

Special education directors believed that programs that gave students access to counseling or therapeutic services throughout the day, higher teacher-student ratios, and programs designed to teach students specific self-regulation strategies would benefit the student and allow him or her to eventually return to a less restrictive environment.

Until student behavior can be stabilized enough to enable access to appropriate instruction in public setting, he needs behavior management, therapy, and parental support services that can be intensive, private, and consistently implemented and evaluated (Special education director in a medium-sized school district).

Consistent with the special education directors’ descriptions, approved private-school administrators in our sample reported that when safety was an issue, outplacements occurred quickly. This provides further support for the assertion that the process to address these cases was relatively non-contentious, with stakeholders agreeing that private special education schools could indeed provide appropriate services for these children and families.

We see them a lot when they’re going into high school, the students that have the marginal diagnosis. We see them a lot when they violate a no tolerance
policy. They leer at someone. They touch someone. They look under a bathroom stall. They say they're going to blow something up. They're going to set a fire. I mean these are the kids placed immediately. (Approved private-school administrator).

**Finding 2c:** Special education directors reported that a small but time-consuming number of out-of-district placements were adversarial and involved outside evaluators, advocates, and lawyers.

Special education directors noted that when the out-of-district placement process was initiated by parents, the experience was often adversarial, time-consuming, and costly. Parents, too, were frustrated by the process and felt that local district administrators disregarded their perspectives. Special education directors, parents, and approved private-school administrators noted that this process was almost exclusively available to parents with the time and financial resources to build a case that their child was not receiving appropriate educational services in their local school district. While there was disagreement among the people we spoke with about whether placements in this category were in the best interest of the child or not, there was agreement that low-income families did not have the same level of resources, time, or advocacy in this process as their higher-income counterparts.

**Special Education Directors’ Experiences of the Process**

Special education directors reported that when parents initiated the out-of-district placement, the process was often adversarial and consumed significant amounts of time and resources. Specifically, special education directors expressed significant frustration over a practice whereby parents unilaterally placed students in private special education schools and then brought the case for tuition reimbursement after-the-fact.15 In many of these cases, special education directors disagreed with the placement, believing that students’ needs were being met in district, and that in-district offerings provided greater

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15 Many approved private schools we spoke with maintained a policy of not admitting students prior to receiving consent from a district, but this was not true of all approved private schools.
rigor and preparation for the world students would face post-high school. Special education directors frequently described that parents and advocates had a perception that private placements were superior to in-district offerings, without sufficient information to compare programs.

Directors of special education also noted a breakdown in communication and trust between parties when these types of out-of-district placement processes occurred. They described a process that was reduced to a battle over money rather than a focus on student needs.

I work in an affluent school district. It is rare that we have students who actually require out of district placements to address their needs. More often, parents are advocating for private school placements at public expense and expend substantial resources for expert witnesses, advocates, and attorneys to make their case (Special education director in a small-sized school district).

Districts are forced to place students as it is cheaper than litigation. The student’s needs do not factor into the equation. It is very sad and not the best way to take care of kids (Special education director in a small-sized school district).

The special education directors whose perspectives we heard throughout the course of this study suggested that it was the unilateral nature of this process that was the driving source of the conflict. Several of them were critical of the Bureau of Special Education Appeals for supporting unilateral placements.

Simply put, unilateral placements should not be allowed. If a parent wants something different for their child, they should be entitled to it, but should need to pay for it themselves. If they disagree with a school’s decision on placement, they have the right to litigate. But hearing officers almost always keep the student in the school they are currently in. It put school districts at an immediate disadvantage (Special education director in a medium-sized district).

*Parents’ Experiences of the Process*
Special education directors were not alone in their frustration with these outplacement cases; to the contrary, many parents also described their frustration with the adversarial process and noted that getting their children into out-of-district placements was costly and emotionally draining. Many noted that the process was the equivalent of a “full-time job.” Parents expressed repeatedly that their attempts to communicate with their local school district regarding the needs of their children were disregarded.

A lot of the people who have sought to leave the district their trust was broken by the actions of the district over time. Definitely in my case. But I see that a lot and I see that it’s hard for families to trust them when they act certain ways. I mean that’s a good example. When you ask a question and they get all defensive. It’s like, “No, wait a minute, I’m just asking a question. Can’t we talk about this and can’t you be open to my side of the story or some expertise that I can bring to the table?” I mean I do feel like parents are discredited often around their knowledge about their children and what they believe what their children need (Parent of a child with a disability).

Another common experience reported by parents was feeling that their children were unwanted in the in-district schools they attended. Parents described many incidents where their child was disrespected or mistreated, and the parents’ subsequent concerns went unaddressed. These types of experiences often led to parents seeking out advocacy to remove their child from the local school and place them in a collaborative program or private special education school.

When these kids [with disabilities] come into the classroom they're put in the back of the classroom and they're facing the wall. And the other kids, the whole other group were looking this way at the teacher. So, that was a point where we started – we got an advocate (Parent of a student with disability).

Parents described efforts they made to communicate with administrators at the school and district level to share their concerns about their child’s program, with minimal response.
I was told by the principal that every time she hit a staff person until I agreed to let her go into a separate substantial classroom she would be suspended. So, I felt like that was hanging over my head. And once we got into the separate classroom for kids with social and emotional behaviors kids were being restrained a lot, they had seclusion rooms. I actually went to a coffee gathering with the superintendent and asked him please, please review this program, I have real concerns about it. Never heard back (Parent of a child with a disability).

Parents also described school cultures where it was clear that their children were not welcomed or made to feel they were part of the school.

It was a brand new school. Big, beautiful elementary school and all the nice little kids were coming in through the front door in the busses. And the kids who rode the small vans, the kids in the substantially separate classroom, my kid, had to go in the backdoor next to the dumpster... All the other kids came in the front door. The principal is there to greet all the nice little second graders, “Hi. Good morning, good morning.” Why does my kid have to go in the backdoor? How come all the kids go here, and all the little special ed kids walk the other way to go out the backdoor? That angered me. That is so easy. Why can’t my kid come in the front and have the principal say, “Good morning [child’s name]” (Parent of a child with a disability).

Another theme that strongly emerged was parents’ frustration that rather than design an educational program to meet their children’s individual needs, districts expected students to fit into existing programs and structures, regardless of whether the services provided there would benefit students. Parents were concerned when their children’s service providers lacked the expertise their children needed, and they were displeased with what they perceived as overly-punitive approaches to managing their children’s behavior.

She started bolting in third grade. And she would run around the inside of the school and no one knew what to do. And lo and behold that well I found out they were punishing her for this behavior. They would make her eat in the classroom by herself. They would keep her in from recess (Parent of a child with a disability).

A parent, whose child with autism used a communication device, described her attempts to work with the school staff to use the device. She noted that the assigned speech therapist had no experience with assistive technology. Another parent noted that the reading tutors
assigned to her son had no expertise in working with students with dyslexia. A parent of a child with mild intellectual disabilities explained that her daughter was limited to a “life skills” program, even though she could benefit from more time in academic classes.

Some parents expressed that they wanted to partner with the school district in problem solving around the needs of their children, as opposed to instigating a unilateral process, but they often felt frustrated by districts’ rigid structures and responses.

Parents wanted to see districts engage in problem solving for their individual child rather than expect their child to conform to available options.

Look, this is a kid you got to think outside of the box. She’s not going to fit in the box and she deserves to have a different chance than the ones that are being presented here. And they disregarded that completely. Any input from us (Parent of a child with a disability).

Clearly, the sets of dynamics described in this section of our report indicate that this process is not working ideally for either families or district staff. Indeed, both parents and directors of special education noted how painful and exhausting these adversarial relationships had become. They independently described the system as “broken,” based in faulty perceptions of the expertise they each brought to the table, and ultimately taking time and resources away from the needs of students with disabilities.

Special Education Directors’ Concerns about Appropriateness of Placements

In addition to the perspectives we have included so far in this section, an important factor that seemed to exacerbate the tension surrounding these adversarial outplacements was the belief by special education directors that the placements themselves did not have the same level of rigor or expectations as the programs that they were providing in-district. They were especially critical of schools that specialized in educating students with specific learning disabilities.
Several special education directors noted that some programs seemed to emphasize self-esteem over academics and in some cases did not allow student access to assistive technologies.

A placement that has not been beneficial is one that provides low-level academic rigor and demands but insures the child "feels good." Such programs provide a false sense of achievement and success and does not provide the child with skills to complete and cope in the real world (Special education director in a medium-sized district).

One example is when several students had been placed at [approved private school] due to parent choice. We believe that our program has provided better integrity of instruction, exposure to peer models, and rich curriculum exposure. Observations and testing clearly indicated less progress made in that setting. This is one example of an ODD (out-of-district) placement that has not been beneficial. Similar results have been noted at other institutions where "dyslexia" is reported to be a specialty (Special education director in a small-sized school district).

An out-of-district placement for students with dyslexia whose parents unilaterally place them there has not been beneficial. There has been no growth in skills, no assistive technology used, and textbooks are dated (1960 in one case) (Special education director in a small-sized school district).

This perception on the part of special education directors may be contributing to some of the breakdown in trust and communication that was reported by both parents and administrators as part of this type of outplacement process.

**Finding 2d:** Special education directors reported that other state agencies placed students in residential programs without sufficient attention to their education programs, creating conflicts over fiscal and programmatic responsibilities that were harmful to students.

Special education directors and approved private-school administrators expressed concern over practices by the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Department of Youth Services (DYS), and other agencies that involved minimal communication and created conflict over fiscal and programmatic
responsibility. Children placed in foster homes or residential programs in school districts became the programmatic responsibility of school districts that often had very little information about their educational needs. Special education directors expressed concerns that they were fiscally responsible for placements that they felt were driven by concerns in the home, which should not be the financial responsibility of the school district.

Special education directors and approved private-school administrators described the challenges related to collaborating with state child welfare agencies. While many agreed that the push to maintain students in their home communities was worthwhile, existing policies seemed to have an unintended consequence of pitting agencies against each other in a time of constrained resources. Districts felt put upon to provide services for students who had been moved into their districts, or to pay for services in another setting, when they had limited input about the students’ needs or choices over the program.

These situations can be difficult because DCF [Department of Children and Families] is trying to address identified family and social environment issues that are not necessarily related to the student’s identified disabilities. They are typically seeking placements in a crisis atmosphere and where a "bed" may be available when options can be very limited. Even with good intentions, they are often unable to substantively involve schools in the placement process although such a process would be more ideal. In our student’s case, court involvement and substance abuse treatment were key factors to his placement, not educational issues (Special education director in a small-sized school district).

Approved private-school administrators shared examples of times when conflicts between school districts and a state agency resulted in denying students services.

Everyone agrees that the child needs the service. But nobody can agree whose statute it falls under to be responsible for paying for it. And so you end up with a child whose life is falling apart but it’s not clear within the current structure whose job it is to pay for that (Approved private-school administrator).

An approved private-school administrator described an example in which the breakdown of trust between agencies had created additional expense.
The school district doesn’t want the word “residential” on the IEP because what they’ve told us is they don’t trust DCF and that has happened in the past. DCF pulls out of the deal and the school district gets stuck with the whole tab. So, what they do with us is DCF will pay for a [Behavioral Treatment Residence\textsuperscript{16}] bed. The school district will pay for our day school. The total cost of the taxpayer is higher than it would be if they did a cost-share with a [residential educational] placement (Approved private-school administrator).

Another approved private-school administrator described the tension around students who are placed at her program in a Behavioral Treatment Residence but then enrolled for educational services in the regional high school.

Our BTR [Behavioral Treatment Residence] kids are consistently suspended because that’s their way of managing the behavioral and emotional needs that these kids are facing... You spend hours and hours in bureaucratic debate trying to determine which district is responsible. Bring the different districts together to the table because you have a fiscally responsible district and you have a programmatic responsible district and nobody really wants the kid. And so the kid keeps getting suspended and your staff has to take care of the kid (Approved private-school administrator).

Both approved private-school providers and district special education directors noted the need for a state-level mediator to assign fiscal and programmatic responsibility for children managed by state agencies.

Approved private-school providers recalled the now-dismantled Office for Children (OFC), which could provide assistance in resolving conflicts during the 1970’s through “Regional Review Boards.”

There were many times when I would call Office for Children and say we have a stuck case. We have a dangerous kid in our program. DYS or DCF, DSS

\textsuperscript{16} A behavioral treatment residence is assigned when a student needs a therapeutic residence, but is expected to attend their community school. These residences are often located within programs that offer educational services, but students assigned to a BTR would not receive education within that program. For examples see www.stvincentshome.org or www.annshome.org.
at the time, they’re not moving him and they have blinders on and I need your help (Approved private-school administrator).

Another approved private-school administrator noted the importance of the OFC in gathering stakeholders and delineating responsibilities.

You’d sit at a table with a group of people and someone’s in the room and could assign fiscal responsibility. Present the case of who the kid is and OFC [Office for Children] would look around and say, “You will do this.” So, you were getting kids services by putting the facts on the table. And everybody was at the table. It was a great system. (Approved private-school administrator).

District directors of special education also supported the idea of a mediator to help resolve disagreements between agencies.

There is no interagency platform to do cost sharing. It should be done at the state level. If you have disagreements you could go to the table and wrap services around kids (Special education director in a medium-sized school district).

Our research indicated that the Office for Children became the Office for Child Care Services in 1997 and was subsumed under the new Department of Early Education and Care in 2008. However, the functions performed by the Regional Review Boards were discontinued in 1980. Subsequently, the responsibility for interagency dispute resolution was spread across several agencies. For example, the Office of the Child Advocate is intended to resolve issues around the educational needs of foster children, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services developed a Unified Planning Team structure for children receiving services from more than three agencies, and MassHealth assigns an Intensive Care Coordinator to eligible students identified with an emotional disability. However, our findings showed little evidence that approved private-school administrators or directors of special education were aware of these services and processes, or that they used them to resolve interagency disputes. The ESE developed regulations and procedures to resolve assignment of responsibility between districts when a state agency has
custody of the student, but that process only assigns responsibility between and among districts and does not address disputes between state agencies and districts.
Part 3: Implications of placing students in out-of-district programs

**Finding 3a:** *A substantial majority of out-placed students never returned to a traditional public school.*

Students who were placed in out-of-district programs typically did not return to in-district settings. Although many private out-of-district providers contended that, on average, students spend no more than two years in their programs, this assertion was not supported by our analysis of the quantitative data. Special education directors expressed frustration with out-of-district placements for not doing more to prepare students to transition back to their school districts. Our analysis indicates that of the 24,561 students who were educated in out-of-district programs during the years from 2006-2012, only 5,329 (22 percent) ever returned to a traditional in-district program. Of these 5,329 students who returned to traditional public schools, nearly 60 percent (3,157) experienced multiple transitions into and out of out-of-district programs. Private-school placements tended to be more permanent than placements in collaborative programs, with fewer than one in five students in private-school placements ever returning to a traditional public school compared to 1 in 4 students in collaborative programs. Out-of-district placements also appeared to be less permanent for students from some disability categories. Specifically, more than one in four students with learning disabilities, communication disabilities, other health impairments, or emotional disabilities who were out-placed returned to a traditional public school at some point. This contrasts with the less than one in five students from other disability categories who ever returned to a traditional in-district placement.

In cases where safety and behavioral concerns motivated the outplacement, school districts may have felt less motivated to return students to their local schools and communities, where they had been labeled as disruptive. A special education director noted that in her region, where school choice allows parents to choose among schools in nearby towns, parents react very strongly to behavioral problems in the classroom, and thus her district stands to lose high-performing students to schools without such behavior-problem students included. An approved private-school administrator noted that for students with
autism-related behavior, the sending districts, not just the private placements, have to be committed to returning students as well.

When you're talking about rate of return, that's a two-way street. It requires a receiving district to have expertise in terms of autism education. It has an environmental flexibility about a child who might have difficulty, who might have a tantrum being unable to move. And the public schools for the most part, once a kid is out, they don't really want them back (Approved private-school administrator).

They also noted that schools' zero tolerance policies made it impossible to maintain students with aggressive behaviors in public schools for any amount of time.

However, we spoke with both special education directors and approved private-school administrators who were involved in building in-district programs that were specifically designed to maintain more students with substantial autism behaviors or emotional disabilities in district. They reported developing programs that would enable them to retain more students in their communities in the future, and save the district significant amounts of money over time.

**Finding 3b:** Placement in an out-of-district program did not, on average, lead to meaningful differences in students' performance on the English Language Arts or Mathematics MCAS tests when compared to similar students who were not out-placed. There is some evidence to suggest that placement in an out-of-district program was associated with greater increases in student attendance.

We compared the rates of attendance and MCAS performance of students who were switched from an in-district placement in grade eight to a private school or collaborative placement in grade 9 to a matched group of statistically similar students who were not placed in an out-of-district program in grade 9. We made this comparison using a statistical method known as propensity score matching, which uses observed characteristics to
“match” students to specific other students to provide the most appropriate and optimal basis for comparison.17 We examined the differences between each student’s grade 8 MCAS performance and that same student’s performance on the same measure in grade 10. When we compared the out-placed students to their propensity-score matched non-out-placed peers, we did not observe any meaningful differences between the two groups on their MCAS performance. In other words, students who enrolled in a private school or collaborative program, on average, appeared to do neither better nor worse than their matched peers who remained in district. We observed what appeared to be notable differences in attendance rates between these two groups, whereby students who enrolled in private or collaborative programs evidenced greater gains in their school attendance compared to their matched non-out-placed peers.

An important caveat to the findings we present from the propensity score analyses is that students with disabilities who were placed in out-of-district programs differed in important ways from students who were not placed in these programs. As we argued in findings 1a, 1b, and 2a, some of these differences, such as student age, disability category, and low-income status, were observable in the available data files. Nevertheless, many of the ways in which out-placed and non-out-placed students differed from one another were not reflected in these data. For example, we had no reliable record of whether a child represented a danger to himself or others, a characteristic that our survey and interview data suggested was often important in determining whether or not a child received an out-of-district placement. Therefore, although the propensity score approach helped to address some of the issues around finding appropriate comparison students, our inability to account for these unobserved differences made it impossible to draw a perfectly

17 Students were matched using a method called propensity score matching based on their gender, race, disability, low-income status, eighth grade English Language Arts and Mathematics MCAS scores, attendance, degree to which they were included with their typically developing peers, whether they lived in a town that was a member of a collaborative, and the percentage of students with disabilities in the town who were placed in private special education schools. In each case, these models produced “balanced” samples of out-placed and non-out-placed students whose probability of enrolling in either a collaborative or private special education school, as defined by these observed characteristics, was equivalent. Each out-placed student was then compared to a non-out-placed student who had a similar probability of out-placement. See Appendix A for additional details.
comparable sample of non-out-placed students against whom we could evaluate the academic achievement and attendance rates of students placed in out-of-district programs. We therefore encourage the reader to interpret these findings with caution.

**Finding 3c:** *Towns that sent a larger percentage of their students with disabilities to private schools, on average, received a larger per-pupil reimbursement from the Circuit Breaker program in 2012.*

In 2012, 286 entities in Massachusetts, including 3 charter schools, received Circuit Breaker reimbursements (CBRs) totaling more than $200 million dollars. CBRs ranged from a low of $336 for Shutesbury (total enrollment 146) to a high of $10,192,527 for Boston (total enrollment 56,037). Across all school districts, the average CBR was approximately $217 per pupil enrolled. The map in Figure 3.1 displays the approximate amount of money districts received from the Circuit Breaker in 2012.

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18 Note that this per pupil amount is based on a district's total enrollment of general and special education students.
We examined these data in an ordinary least squares regression model, where we were able to hold constant town median family income, total enrollment, and whether or not the town was a member of a collaborative. Of the many variables included in these models, only the percentage of students in a district who were placed in a private special education school was a consistent statistically significant predictor of the districts per-pupil circuit breaker reimbursement. Specifically, these analyses indicated that a one-percentage point difference in the percentage of students with disabilities placed in private special education schools was positively associated with an approximately $30 per pupil difference in reimbursement from the Circuit Breaker. For example, an average-sized district that placed 3 percent of their students with disabilities in private schools, on average, received approximately $493,000 in Circuit Breaker funds in 2012, while a similar town that placed
4 percent of its students with disabilities in private schools received, on average, almost $574,000. The results of these analyses are displayed in Figure 3.2 below.

Figure 3.2: Predicted Circuit Breaker Per Pupil Expenditure by Town Percentage of Students with Disabilities Placed in Private Special Education Schools

Despite this strong quantitative finding, we found little in our qualitative work that Circuit Breaker funding was explicitly on the minds of district staff as they engaged in the out-placement process. In our survey, special education directors, by and large, did not mention the Circuit Breaker specifically. One special education director who specifically mentioned it related the case of a student who had returned to his traditional school after failing in an out-of-district placement.
They did not help when his absences continued and the placement terminated him. We took him back to the public school, hired an agency to go into his home and get him to school, put intense therapeutic services in place for him. He's attending regularly and his behavior is improving. No one from DCF or the courts or his former attorneys have called to see how he's doing. We spend a GREAT deal of money to support him in district, which is NOT reimbursed through circuit breaker (Special education director in a small-sized school district).
Part 4: Conclusion and Recommendations

The role of out-of-district placements in providing education for students with disabilities in Massachusetts is complex. Several “stories” emerge from this study. For some students, these placements offer needed supports and can be effective options when other placements have failed. This is particularly true for students whose behavior has proven difficult for school districts and parents to manage, and for students with complex multiple disabilities. In addition, most collaboratives and a number of private special education schools provide expertise to school districts on educating students within mainstream settings. Out-of-district placements appear to be more effective than traditional in-district programs at improving attendance for students who have missed school for a substantial amount of time due to absence or suspension. Thus, some Massachusetts children and families have benefitted from these schools and programs. However in some cases, the actual placement of a child in one of these programs is driven by parents with a high level of resources. As a matter of public policy, if these programs are deemed appropriate for some children, then parental income should not influence whether a child receives this type of programming. This is clearly not the case.

It is important to note that Massachusetts as a state incarcerates and institutionalizes very few children compared to most states.\(^1\)\(^9\) Residential special education programs often provide services to children who, in other states, might be in hospitals or juvenile correction facilities. The state should be proud of our efforts to avoid institutionalization. We could not determine from these data whether residential placements are used as a vehicle to avoid institutional placements or incarceration or how this phenomenon may have played out differently for low-income students compared to their non-low income counterparts. However, this study has revealed a disturbing lack of interagency collaboration. Many children who are served in out-of-district placements have complex needs that extend beyond the realm of education and include child protective services,

mental and physical health, and family support. Public and private providers and parents cited the lack of collaboration with other agencies frequently as a problem that can have negative consequences for children and families. Further, lack of interagency cooperation may result in education assuming the entire cost of placements that ideally should be shared. The fact that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) sometimes places students in residential schools without a thorough discussion and agreement with the public school serving the student is a concrete demonstration of this failure of agencies to collaborate. Numerous providers describe the children’s mental health system as “broken.” Several administrators interviewed for the study bemoaned the lack of a good interagency dispute mechanism and spoke favorably of the role that the Office for Children once served in brokering these relationships.

Though some children can benefit from out-of-district placements, these placements come with potential costs to children and families. Most placements result in children being removed from their natural communities, making relationships with other children in their communities more difficult to establish. Furthermore, children placed in these separate settings may be denied the academic benefits associated with more inclusive settings. Several parents we spoke to agonized over these implications when considering the placement of their children. It should be noted that most parents we spoke to initially wanted inclusive placements for their children but reported that such efforts had failed. Thus, a concern that arises over the extensive use of out-of-district placements by some school districts is whether the use of these placements has inadvertently relieved them of the responsibility to develop more inclusive options for children with disabilities.

Another concern that arises from this study is the lack of sufficient options for students with disabilities as they approach high school. Students are placed out-of-district at accelerated rates in grades seven through nine, and most do not return. Further, the lack of acceptable high school options is a theme that emerges from parent focus groups, private provider focus groups, and the special education director survey. Additional support for the concern that high school options may be inadequate comes from our previous study concerning vocational technical schools and students with disabilities. In that study, we
found that regional vocational schools serve proportionately larger populations of students with disabilities overall and graduate them in four years at higher rates than comprehensive high schools. However, we also found that these schools serve significantly lower numbers of students with emotional disturbance and autism. Our current study shows that these are the populations who are placed in out-of-district programs at the highest numbers. These findings add to the well-documented under-enrollment of students with significant disabilities in charter schools\(^\text{20}\). Taken together, this likely results in a widespread lack of sufficient acceptable options for students with significant disabilities in the high schools of the Commonwealth.

The issue of cost inevitably arises when providing for the needs of children with complex disabilities. The Commonwealth has established a fund, the Circuit Breaker, to address the high cost of certain placements. Though this fund can be used for children regardless of setting, it appears to be used primarily for out-of-district placements and appears to disproportionately favor districts that send a higher percentage of their students with disabilities out-of-district. These districts also tend to be serving more affluent communities. Furthermore, the fact that some children with arguably common and less complex disabilities, from overwhelmingly non-low-income homes are being sent to out-of-district placements raises questions about whether this fund is being used as intended. Why would an affluent suburb need significantly more support than less affluent districts such as Fall River or Lynn? Also, should not a school district receive extra support for educating students with complex needs in the mainstream? The point here is not to argue against increased state aid to support children with complex needs, but to question whether the existing Circuit Breaker program is performing in the way originally intended by the legislature. School districts need financial aid to support children with complex needs.

\(^{20}\) For more information regarding the under enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools see http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/591435.pdf
In light of the findings of this study, we believe the Commonwealth should take action to assure that children with disabilities have access to high-quality education in the least restrictive environment in a fiscally responsible manner.

We therefore offer the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1: Improve General Education Approaches to Discipline and Behavior.**

Many of the problems that students with disabilities experience in school that ultimately result in out-of-district placements have their genesis in the way in which the general education system responds to their needs and the advocacy of their parents. This study documents that the most frequently cited reason given by special education directors for out-of-district placements was behavior and safety. Research has shown that in order for schools to effectively support children with behavioral issues, whole school approaches work best.\(^{21}\) Yet, much of the data we gleaned from focus groups and surveys gives the strong impression that issues of student behavior are focused on the individual child, not on system-wide approaches. Some special education directors spoke of principals and teachers wanting children “out.” Our data show that children with autism are much more likely to be sent out-of-district if they have experienced suspensions prior to placement. The fact that students with autism are being suspended at all calls into question the behavior management practices employed by some districts. Further, parents spoke of rigid and punitive systems of behavior management that do not take into account their children’s disability-related needs.

As in our previous study that investigated the large numbers of students eligible for special education in Massachusetts, we continue to recommend that DESE support the Massachusetts Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for students experiencing behavior

issues in school. The state has begun doing work in this area. This study reinforces the need for expanding and intensifying this work.

**Recommendation 2: Promote Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning.**

Many parents we spoke to for this study wanted inclusive education for their children and worked to create opportunities for their children to succeed in district schools. In general, the decision to send their child to an out-of-district placement had been a painful one. Furthermore, many private providers, particularly those serving students with behavioral issues, spoke of wanting to “return” students to a less restrictive setting in district, but felt that districts were either unwilling or unable to serve them. Although the majority of special education directors in our study expressed a commitment to building their capacity and keeping students in in-district programs, we were a bit taken aback by some of the stories we heard from both parents and providers about the unwillingness of some administrators and teachers to make what appeared to be reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream programs goes beyond simply allowing children to enroll in a school; rather, inclusion often requires the mainstream to adapt. A child with a communication device requires people skilled in its use. A child with an intellectual disability is unlikely to develop friendships if she is being constantly moved from school to school, year after year. A young adult with dyslexia is less likely to be able to access a challenging text without text-to-speech software.

It should also be noted that our first study underscored the relationship between improved performance on MCAS and inclusive placements. Other studies have documented an association between inclusion and improved adult outcomes of employment and more
community involvement. Arguably, students who are out-placed may be denied these benefits.

As we emphasized in our first report, Massachusetts has many examples of successful inclusion, and a strong body of research exists that can help educators in implementing stronger practice through Universal Design for Learning. We reiterate what we recommended in our first study, that Massachusetts promote inclusion and Universal Design for Learning. The state is doing this through its tiered system of supports. However, given the seriousness of many of the issues identified in this report, the state may need to take a more assertive role with some districts and tie these efforts to its obligation to monitor the implementation of IDEA as we recommended in our first study.

**Recommendation 3: Improve High School Options for Students with Disabilities.**

This study found that the lack of sufficient options at the high school level appears to be driving a good deal of out-of-district placements. If Massachusetts is going to provide more effective options within the mainstream, the state simply needs better high school options for many students with disabilities. In our study on vocational education, we documented how many regional vocational schools are successful in educating many students with disabilities. There are also other high schools in the Commonwealth that have demonstrated success with other high school models. However, the problem is that there do not appear to be enough of these options.

The state should launch an initiative to identify high schools in the state that have demonstrated effectiveness in serving students with disabilities. The state’s data system should be used to identify those schools that have strong MCAS scores, demonstrate

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23 For more information about Universal Design for Learning see [http://www.cast.org/](http://www.cast.org/)
effectiveness in promoting high school graduation rates, and exhibit low drop-out rates for the broad array of students with disabilities. Attention should also be given to schools that can demonstrate strong rates of post-secondary employment and higher education enrollment rates for students with disabilities. These schools can thus serve as models for other schools and school districts to emulate.

Though it is important for the DESE to identify effective models it is also critical that the state intervene in districts whose high school(s) are performing poorly. Again, we recommend that this effort be tied to the state monitoring system. The state's data systems make it possible to identify schools that have high drop out rates, low MCAS scores for their disability subgroup, send large numbers of students to out-of-district placements, and segregate disproportionate numbers of students. Attention should also be paid to schools that cluster large numbers of students with disabilities in low-level courses. These low-performing schools should be required to take corrective action. As we recommended in our 2012 report, we here again recommend that any analysis used to identify schools for intervention take into account factors that may not be in the school's control such as the percentage of students who are low-income.

**Recommendation 4: Establish a Stronger System to Promote Interagency Coordination and Resolve Interagency Disputes.**

The complex needs of many children and their families extend beyond education and include the provision of mental and physical health services and ongoing in-home family support services. Some students need support in transitioning from involvement in the juvenile justice system. Though neither Chapter 766 nor IDEA envisioned that education would provide all the services a child or her family may need, it appears that education is frequently the sole source of funding for many children who might otherwise have claims to services from other agencies. Furthermore, schools and agencies often get involved in protracted and at times expensive disputes over funding. This is not only an inefficient process but also can result in harm to children and families. We recommend that the state develop clear interagency agreements with the major providers of children’s services: the
Department of Mental Health, the Department of Developmental Services, Office for Disabilities, Office for Children and Families and Youth Services, and the Department of Children and Families; and make those agreements widely available to school districts, service providers, and families. Although there appear to be some mechanisms to resolve these issues, we found little evidence that special education directors, parents, and private providers are using mechanisms. We recommend that the state consider how to more readily resolve such disputes.

** Recommendation 5: Create Increased Opportunities for Private Schools and Public Schools to Collaborate to Help Support Students in a More Fluid Manner.**

Currently most students with disabilities placed in out-of-district private special education schools are served in separate programs. Some are returned to public schools only to have to be placed again in another private school. Few students enjoy a more fluid system, in which children with complex needs are supported in the least restrictive environment for them, a setting which may change over time. The state should promote more fluid relationships between private providers and school districts that enable students who may have been in private schools to continue to be supported in less restrictive options back in their home districts. Furthermore, some private special education schools have expertise that could benefit districts as they build programs that may prevent the need for students to be placed out-of-district in more restrictive programs.

There are examples of these types of relationships in the state. The Walker School works with numerous school districts throughout the state on improving services for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The Learning Center for Deaf Children in Framingham serves many children in public schools. The Perkins School for the Blind provides early intervention services for most infants and toddlers in the state with vision loss or blindness and also serves many children in public schools. These efforts are welcomed by most school districts.
The Commonwealth approves all private special education schools. This approval process may be the best vehicle for promoting greater collaboration between in-district and out-of-district programs. Therefore, the Commonwealth should consider the degree to which private schools work collaboratively with school districts as part of the approval process. This process can also be used to identify school districts that fail to collaborate with private schools in reintegrating students who are ready to return to less restrictive programs. Serious consideration should be given to whether private special education schools that engage in protracted contentious relationships with school districts should receive state approval. Also, school districts that do not allow for students to reintegrate from out of district placements should be held accountable for this behavior through the DESE’s monitoring process.

Given the importance of this sector to the overall service system, parents, school districts, and the state need more information about each out-of-district program in order to make appropriate placement and approval decisions. We frequently noted comments from both parents and special education directors that they did not have sufficient information available about out of district providers upon which they could make decisions. DESE should consider requiring out-of-district special schools to provide data concerning MCAS scores, attendance rates, transition outcomes, and reintegration rates.

**Recommendation 6: Work with the Legislature to Restructure the Circuit Breaker to Directly Support the Expenses Related to Children with Complex Needs.**

Our analyses indicate that the Circuit Breaker benefits school districts that send more children to out-of-district placements. Districts receiving the greatest aid from this fund tend to be more affluent districts. Though theoretically the fund was designed to support children in any environment, the way in which it has played out seems to be primarily supporting students in separate out-of-district settings.

We recognize the need for districts to have support in educating students with the most complex needs requiring extraordinary cost. However, we recommend the Circuit Breaker
fund be reorganized to provide more equitable support to districts and to support students in all types of placements.
APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS

Quantitative Methods

*Ordinary Least Squares Regression Modeling*

We used Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models to address our questions about how town-level characteristics were associated with the rate of students with disabilities placed in out-of-district programs and how town-level characteristics were associated with Circuit Breaker funding. OLS regression methods permit us to estimate the relationship between variables of interest (e.g., predicting the per pupil Circuit Breaker reimbursement (CBR) a town receives as a function of the percentage of their students with disabilities placed in out-of-district programs) while taking into account the role of other variables (e.g., district wealth) in explaining the variability that we observe in our outcome (e.g., per pupil CBR).

*Multilevel Multinomial Logistic Regression Modeling*

We used multilevel multinomial logistic regression models in our analyses that examined how student and town-level characteristics were related to the probability of students being placed in out-of-district programs.

The multilevel nature of these models allowed us to account for similarities in the likelihood that students with disabilities would be out-placed that might be related to their residing in the same town. Put another way, we could account for systematic differences in out-placement likelihood that might be related to students residing in different towns. By using multilevel models, we were able to account for the portion of the student-level phenomena that may have been driven by town-level features. This provided a clearer picture of the relationship between probability of out-placement and student characteristics, taking town-level factors into account.
The multinomial nature of these models allowed us to incorporate that there were two out-placement options for students: they were either sent to private special education schools or to collaborative programs. The multinomial models made it possible for us to estimate the probability that a student would be enrolled in a private school while also taking into account the probability that that student would be enrolled in a collaborative.

The logistic nature of these models allowed us to test the probability that an event would occur (for example, a student with a disability being placed out), while taking into account a variety of factors that might also play into that event occurring (for example, the student’s low-income status, grade, race, whether the student was over-age for grade, and the percentage low-income students enrolled in the student’s town of residence). By using logistic models, we were able to estimate the likelihood that a student would be placed in an out-of-district setting, while also estimating the role-played by student and town-level characteristics in this likelihood. This allowed us to understand, on average, the likelihood of out-placement that was uniquely associated with specific student or town-level characteristics and to estimate comparisons between these probabilities (for example, the difference in odds of out-placement for low-income students compared to non-low-income students).

*Discrete-Time Survival Analysis*

We used discrete-time survival analysis (DTSA) to address questions about the timing of outplacements as it related to student-level characteristics (e.g. low-income status, disability category, prior-year attendance, etc.) as well as town-level characteristics (e.g. percentage of students in outplacements). Broadly, DTSA allows us to estimate the probability of an event occurring, over multiple consecutive time points, conditional on its not having yet occurred. Specific to the analyses we present in this report, we were able to estimate the probability that a student would be placed in an out-of-district program in any given grade, conditional upon not having been out-placed prior to that grade. In these models, we were able to include and account for relevant student and town-level
characteristics (as described above) in order to test hypotheses and present findings of
their interrelationships (e.g. the different profiles for timing of out-placement by disability
category, and the differing relationships between prior-year attendance and subsequent-
year out-placement for children in different disability categories).

Propensity Score Matching

We used propensity score matching to estimate the degree to which placement in an out-
of-district program was associated with students’ rates of attendance or performance on
Mathematics or English Language arts MCAS tests. This method permitted us to pair
students who were placed in out-of-district settings to otherwise similar students who
remained in in-distract programs. To do this we first fit a series of random-intercepts
logistic-regression models to predict the enrollment of students into these programs using
the following model for the \(i^{th}\) child in the \(j^{th}\) community:

\[
\text{P}\{\} \text{ represented the probability that a child would be placed in an out-of district program, and vectors } V \text{ and } X \text{ represented the child and community -level covariates respectively. These child and community-level covariates were student gender, race, disability, low-income status, eighth grade English language arts and mathematics MCAS scores, attendance, the degree to which the student was included with their typically developing peers in grade eight, whether they lived in a town that was a member of a collaborative, and the percentage of special education students in the town who enrolled in a special education school. These covariates were chosen because they were either theoretically relevant or because they were statistically significant predictors of program placement in bivariate analyses. Using these estimated probabilities, each out-placed student was than matched to a non-outplaced student with a similar estimated probability of being placed in an out-of-district program.
We then calculated gain scores by taking the differences between each outplaced student’s grade eight rate of attendance, MCAS English language arts and MCAS mathematics performance to that same student’s performance on the same measure in grade ten. Finally, we compared the gain score for each out-paced student to the gain score for his or her matched non-outplaced peer. These pair-wise differences in gain scores, aggregated across all of the pairs in the analyses, represent the basis for the comparisons we report in Finding 3b.

As we stated in the text, we urge the reader to interpret these findings with caution. Students with disabilities who were placed in out-of-district programs differed in important ways from students who were not placed in these programs. As we argued in findings 1a, 1b, and 2a, some of these differences, such as student age, disability category, and low-income status, were observable in the available data files. Nevertheless, many of the ways in which out-placed and non-out-placed students differed from one another were not reflected in these data. For example, we had no reliable record of whether a child represented a danger to himself or others, a characteristic that our survey and interview data suggested was often important in determining whether or not a child received an out-of-district placement. Therefore, although the propensity score approach helped to address some of the issues around finding appropriate comparison students, our inability to account for these unobserved differences made it impossible to draw a perfectly comparable sample of non-out-placed students against whom we could evaluate the academic achievement and attendance rates of students placed in out-of-district programs.

**Qualitative Methods**

To support and expand upon the quantitative research in this study, we employed a number of qualitative methods to better understand the out-of-district placement process from key stakeholders. We designed open-ended survey responses, and conducted focus groups and individual interviews. Our sampling and research methodologies are described below.
Open-ended Survey Responses

We distributed an online survey to every Special Education Director in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and received an over 80 percent response rate. Throughout the survey, we provided open-ended response areas that allowed participants to provide additional information. Many respondents took advantage of this opportunity and provided lengthy narratives detailing specific cases, processes, and recommendations. We open coded these responses using MAXQDA and analyzed the data and wrote thematic memos. These memos, along with the descriptive quantitative data, informed our sample design and protocols for focus groups and individual interviews.

Approved Private School Focus Groups

From our analysis of the surveys of special education directors and the quantitative data, we understood that students with emotional disabilities made up the majority of students in out-of-district placements. Using a list of all of the Chapter 766 approved private schools we developed an interactive map that allowed us to sort schools by student population characteristics such as disability category and percentage of students qualified for free and reduced price lunch. We selected ten schools from the list of Chapter 766 approved private programs that served a majority of students with emotional disabilities as their primary disability category. Among the schools in our focus group, the average percentage of students with emotional disturbance was 69 percent. We also selected schools from the sample that served higher than average numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced priced lunch. Within the ten schools in the sample, the average percentage of students qualified for free and reduced price lunch was 26 percent. The schools in our sample also varied in size, with some schools serving less than fifty students while others served more than two hundred. Finally, we sought schools from throughout the Commonwealth to potentially represent some of the geographic diversity within Massachusetts.
Based on quantitative analysis, we observed that students diagnosed with autism were being served in private special education schools was increasing, and so we also convened a group of schools whose majority population was students with autism. Among the twelve schools in the sample, the average percentage of students diagnosed with autism was 62 percent. The average percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch within these schools was less than 8 percent, which is reflective of private schools that primarily serve students with autism.

Jim Major, the executive director of the Massachusetts Association for Approved Private Schools, assisted us in inviting administrators from the identified schools.

In the focus groups we used a questioning routine, but the groups were conversational and allowed participants to respond to each other. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and open coded using MAXQDA.

*Parent Focus Groups*

We convened two focus groups with parents whose children are in out-of-district placements. We worked closely with two parent advocacy organizations, [the Seven Hills Foundation and the Federation for Children with Special Needs], to invite parents of students with disabilities who had been out-placed. We understood that by reaching out to parents through these organizations, we were more likely to have parents who advocated for their out-of-district placement, but given that this was an important theme in the survey, we wanted to hear these parents perspective. However, even within this sample there were several parents who were told by their district to seek an out of district placement.

In total, sixteen parents participated in our two focus groups. They came from urban, suburban, and regional school districts, predominately from the Central Massachusetts and Boston Metro west regions. Most were from medium to large sized school districts.
We used a questioning route, but groups were conversational and allowed participants to respond to each other. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and open coded using MAXQDA.

*Individual Interviews*

As part of our survey, Special Education Directors were given the option to provide their name and email contact information if they wanted to discuss their responses further. Over 100 respondents provided their contact information. We sorted this list by two criteria, size of district and percentage of students placed out of district. We then identified schools that were “high sending” and “low sending” and districts that were small, medium, and large. From those lists we randomly selected participants to contact. We reached out to six individual special education directors.

We individually interviewed two special education directors by phone. They were both from medium sized districts, one categorized as “high sending” and one categorized as “low sending.” We used a semi-structured protocol and the interviews lasted approximately one hour. These interviews were not recorded, but detailed notes were taken throughout. We wrote thematic memos immediately after the interview to capture relevant themes.

Additionally, based on themes within the Special Education Directors Survey, we reached out to three schools that serve predominately students with learning disabilities. We interviewed two administrators from these schools by phone. We used a semi-structured protocol and the interviews lasted approximately one hour. These interviews were not recorded, but detailed notes were taken throughout. We wrote thematic memos immediately after the interview to capture relevant themes.

*Limitations*

In this study we were not able to reach out specifically to low-income parents whose children were placed out-of-district, though we had some low-income parents who
participated in our focus groups. We were not able to interview school leaders, teachers, or school committee members who are also important stakeholders in these decisions. Finally, none of our qualitative data can be used to evaluate the quality of programs either within districts or private programs.
Table B.1: Number of students in out-of-district programs by year

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<td>304</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/ Blind</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>2,848</td>
<td>2,853</td>
<td>2,707</td>
<td>2,399</td>
<td>2,202</td>
<td>2,101</td>
<td>2,136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
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<td>395</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disability</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>821</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple disabilities</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurological impairment</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disability</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision impairment or Blind</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table B.4: Number of students within disability category in an collaborative programs by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing impaired</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/ Blind</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>1,557</td>
<td>1,636</td>
<td>1,745</td>
<td>1,758</td>
<td>1,669</td>
<td>1,739</td>
<td>1,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>729</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disability</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple disabilities</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurological impairment</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disability</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision impairment or Blind</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure B.1 Number and percentage of students with disabilities who enrolled in private special education schools in 2012 displayed by sending district and student low-income status and select disability categories.

Note: students for whom home district was not reported are not included in this figure

Non-low income students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students with disabilities</td>
<td>4,019</td>
<td>4.1% of non-low income students with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Behavioral Disability</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>16.5% of non-low income students with ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>1,074</td>
<td>10.1% of non-low income students with Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>1.4% of non-low income students with LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disabilities</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>17.7% of non-low income students with multiple disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Low-income students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students with disabilities</td>
<td>2,262</td>
<td>2.2% of low-income students with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Behavioral Disability</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>9.5% of low-income students with ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>5.4% of low-income students with Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>0.5% of low-income students with LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disabilities</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>6.7% of low-income students with multiple disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: One dot is equal to one student