



RESEARCH BRIEF

for the Houston Independent School District

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Variation Across Schools in Disability Classifications Process, 2006-07 to 2011-12

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BACKGROUND

This study used longitudinal data on students in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) between 2006-07 and 2011-12 to investigate whether otherwise similar students' risk of classification with a disability varies depending on the qualities of their schools. If there are differences between schools, this could mean that some students are inappropriately placed in special education, while other students, who might benefit from these services, are excluded from special education. In contrast to perceptions of disabilities as objective individually and biologically rooted differences, this study's findings suggest classification processes are at least partially dependent on the school environment.

In HISD, during the time period specified, similar students have different risks of classification depending on their schools' student bodies or their enrollment in a school or program of choice – and, to a smaller extent, depending on their schools' funding and teacher resources. Similar patterns are found in analyses of other school districts, states, and national data, indicating that inconsistencies like these are not unique to HISD; rather, this is an artifact of how our nation defines and diagnoses educational disabilities. These inconsistencies may even reflect alignment with Response to Intervention (RTI), the federal framework HISD uses for pre-intervention processes. RTI specifically emphasizes flexibility and consideration of students' unique contexts. While classification processes may not be readily amenable to reform, inconsistencies in qualification processes

highlight the importance of inclusive special education programming and universal accommodations that can support all struggling students. Further, possible negative effects of disability labels might be reduced by communicating the social rootedness of educational disabilities, such that disability classifications are not the sole determinants of peoples' perceptions of students or of students' educational trajectories.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do disability classifications occur consistently across schools?
2. Do disability classifications depend on the qualities of their peers?

RESULTS

The first set of findings show disability classifications occur somewhat inconsistently, or partially depend on school environment. Students enrolled in non-zoned schools, academically intensive magnet programs, as well as HISD students who live outside of the district, are more likely than similar peers to be classified with disabilities, while students attending charter schools and arts-related magnet schools are less likely than similar peers to be classified with disabilities. This may reflect differences in the schools and programs parents choose based on the services they foresee their child needing, as well as differences in norm and climate across schools and programs.

The second set of findings show more specifically that disability classifications partially depend on peers' qualities. **1)** The risk of classification is higher for low achieving students in higher achieving schools than for similarly achieving students in lower achieving schools. **2)** The risk of classification is also higher for non-linguistic minorities when they attend schools with more linguistic minorities than when they attend schools with fewer linguistic minorities. **3)** The risk of classification with disabilities decreases for all students, regardless of their race, when they attend schools with more black students, with the exception of the Speech Impairment and Autism categories.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Inconsistent classification processes are not unique to HISD but rather an artifact of how our nation defines and diagnoses educational disabilities. While notions of educational disabilities as medical conditions are propagated, RTI actually emphasizes a subjective approach in which educators are expected to account for interpersonal or institutional factors related to students' learning struggles. Despite intentions that disability classifications be reserved for students with biological differences, the definitions of and diagnostic criteria for educational disabilities do not facilitate consistent and objective classifications of students. Diagnoses of other cognitive conditions external to schools (e.g., mental illness) are similarly criticized as being partially socially rooted and variable across contexts. It is possible classification processes could occur more consistently across schools if **intervention assistance teams operated across as well as within schools**. Educators can also **explicitly acknowledge and communicate the socially rooted nature of educational disabilities to students and their parents**, which may reduce the stigma of special education. It is important to note these findings may not be applicable to district classification rates post 2012.

This study has important implications not only for how we understand disabilities, but also for how services are provided. Because some students will qualify in one context but not in another, it is crucial to provide services that support all students, regardless of whether they have been officially classified with disability. Inclusive special education services and universal accommodations are essential for facilitating all students' access to the general education curriculum.

This is an abbreviated version of a much longer research study written for peer review. For additional information on the findings presented here, or to obtain the full peer-review version of this research brief, contact the Houston Education Research Consortium at 713-348-2802 or email herc@rice.edu.