



Executive Summary

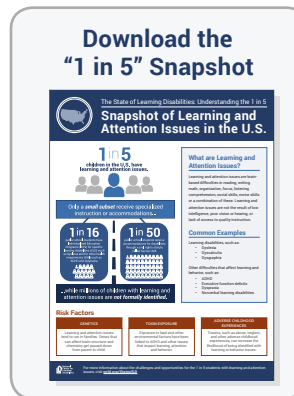
Chapter 1: Understanding Learning and Attention Issues

Learning and attention issues are more common than many people think, affecting 1 in 5 children. With supportive policies and increased awareness among parents, educators and communities, these students can thrive academically, socially and emotionally.

SNAPSHOT

Children with learning and attention issues are as smart as their peers and, with the right support, can achieve at high levels. This chapter features a snapshot of learning and attention issues that includes:

- Risk factors
- Barriers to success
- Ways to help



NEUROSCIENCE

New research is deepening our understanding of the differences in brain structure and function in children with learning and attention issues. Brain scans and other tools are also helping researchers measure the biological impact that instructional interventions have on children who learn differently, including those with dyslexia, ADHD and other issues.

STIGMA

Recent surveys indicate widespread confusion and stigma:

- 33% of educators say that sometimes what people call a learning or attention issue is really just laziness.
- 43% of parents say that they wouldn't want others to know if their child had a learning disability.
- Doctors who recommend evaluating a child for learning and attention issues say parents follow their recommendation only 54% of the time.

FEDERAL LAWS AND FUNDING

Several laws, including some that were recently enacted, protect the rights of children and adults with disabilities and guarantee supports and services that can help improve outcomes for the 1 in 5. But these laws have never been adequately funded. In 2016, the federal government covered 16% of the extra cost of special education—far below the 40% that Congress promised to fund—leaving states to grapple with this multibillion-dollar shortfall.

DEFINITION

Learning and attention issues are brain-based difficulties in reading, writing, math, organization, focus, listening comprehension, social skills, motor skills or a combination of these. Learning and attention issues are not the result of low intelligence, poor vision or hearing, or lack of access to quality instruction.

Examples include:

- ADHD
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Executive function deficits
- Nonverbal learning disabilities

PREVALENCE

1 in 5

children in the U.S. have learning and attention issues, but only a small subset are formally identified with a disability in school

1 in 16

public school students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for specific learning disabilities (SLD) such as dyslexia and for other health impairments (OHI), the disability category that covers ADHD and dyspraxia

1 in 50

public school students receive accommodations for disabilities through a civil rights statute called Section 504

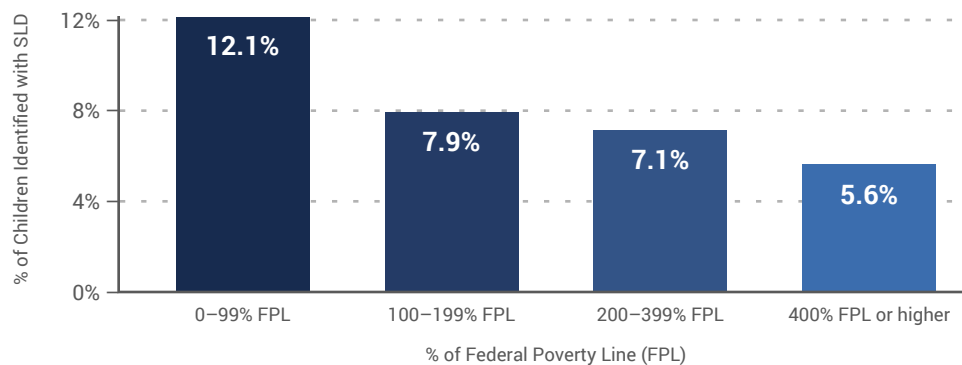
Chapter 2: Identifying Struggling Students

Early and accurate identification of learning disabilities and ADHD in schools can set struggling students on a path for success. But identification can be influenced by many factors—and too often is not happening early enough.

DISPARITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION IDENTIFICATION

Learning and attention issues affect children from all income levels and across all races and ethnicities. Yet low-income children, students of color and English language learners are more likely to be identified as having specific learning disabilities (SLD). Bias plays a key role in over- and underrepresentation.

SLD Identification by Income Level



DELAYS IN SLD IDENTIFICATION

Learning disabilities don't suddenly appear in third grade. Researchers have noted that the achievement gap between typical readers and those with dyslexia is evident as early as first grade. But many students struggle for years before they are identified with SLD and receive needed support.

IDENTIFYING ADHD IN SCHOOLS

Though many children have ADHD, it's hard to tell how many have been identified in school as having a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Federal guidance has made clear to states that when ADHD is the main reason students qualify for special education, they should be classified under Other Health Impairments (OHI). That category accounted for 15% of students receiving special education in 2015–2016, up from 11% in 2008–2009. (SLD remains the largest disability category, accounting for nearly 39% of students receiving special education in 2015–2016.)

Some students with ADHD may be receiving accommodations under Section 504 rather than IDEA, but Section 504 doesn't require schools to classify students by disability type. The percentage of students with 504 plans has nearly doubled since 2009.

OPPORTUNITIES

A multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) can help schools with early intervention and accurate identification. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers funding to develop this type of decision-making framework, which uses data from frequent progress monitoring to help educators quickly respond to students' needs and provide targeted instruction and support. One key component of MTSS—universal screening—aids teachers' observations by assessing all students, not just the ones showing outward signs of struggle.

Signed into law in 2016, the **Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia (READ) Act** directs funding for research that may lead to:

- Identifying dyslexia earlier
- Training educators to better understand and instruct students with SLD or dyslexia
- Developing curriculum and tools for students with SLD and dyslexia
- Implementing and scaling successful models of dyslexia intervention

A majority of states have passed laws that focus on **third-grade reading proficiency** and/or early identification of dyslexia. These laws are expanding the use of early intervention in many states.

Many states are using **kindergarten entry assessments** to identify students who may need further testing. A few states have started identifying students with SLD before age 6.

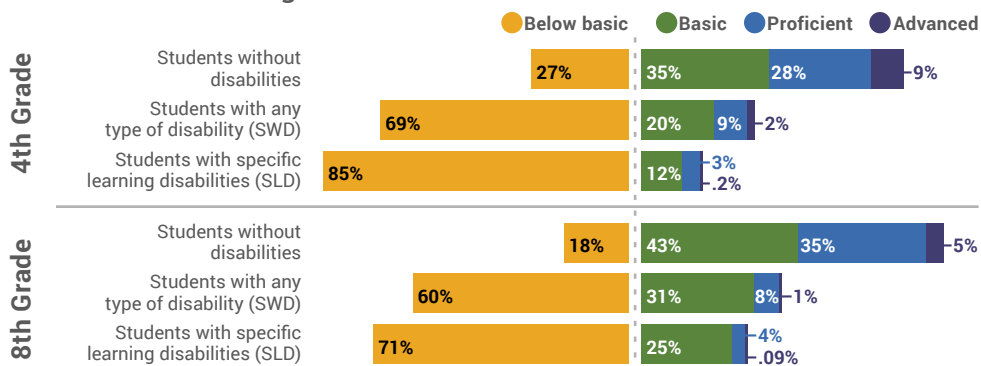
Chapter 3: Supporting Academic Success

Lack of effective instruction can limit opportunities and lead to poor outcomes for students with learning and attention issues, who are often misunderstood as not trying hard or not being capable of more. With the right support, these students can achieve at high levels. But schools that lower expectations or standards can make it harder for students with learning disabilities and ADHD to graduate with the skills needed to succeed in college or the workforce.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) have average or above-average intelligence, but the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) points to a wide achievement gap between students with SLD and without disabilities.

2013 NAEP Reading Scores



INCLUSION

7 out of 10 students with SLD and other health impairments (OHI) spent 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms in 2015–2016. Inclusion can improve outcomes—but only if teachers can meet the needs of diverse learners.

RETENTION

Students with IEPs were 85% more likely—and students with 504 plans were 110% more likely—to repeat a grade than their peers without disabilities in 2013–2014. Retention increases the risk of dropping out.

GRADUATION

70.8% of students with SLD—and 72.1% of students with OHI—left school in 2013–2014 with a regular diploma, lagging behind the national average by about 10 percentage points. The graduation gap for students with disabilities is even worse among some racial and ethnic groups. Approximately 35% of African American, Hispanic and Native American students with disabilities left high school without a regular diploma in 2014–2015, compared to less than 25% of Asian and white students.

OPPORTUNITIES

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes **accountability requirements** that disaggregate outcome data by subgroups including disability status and provides funding to increase the use of evidence-based interventions at schools with large learning gaps. The law also includes new initiatives that focus on struggling readers, including a **Comprehensive Literacy Center** to help educators and parents recognize early signs of dyslexia and to offer training on effective instructional strategies.

Recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education **clarifies how to use IEPs to set high standards and provide appropriate supports:**

- IEPs can include terms like dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia
- IEP goals must be tied to grade-level standards

Amid the growing movement to embrace neurodiversity, **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** and other best practices can help educators design curricula that meet the needs of all students. **Personalized learning** builds on UDL in ways that enable students to master a standard set of rigorous competencies while working at their own pace, with choices in how they access information and demonstrate their learning—with support in areas of need such as executive function and self-advocacy.

Chapter 4: Social, Emotional and Behavioral Challenges

When schools fail to provide enough support for students, the social, emotional and behavioral challenges that often come along with learning and attention issues can lead to serious consequences. These include social isolation, disproportionate disciplinary rates and an increased likelihood of skipping school, dropping out and becoming involved with the criminal justice system.

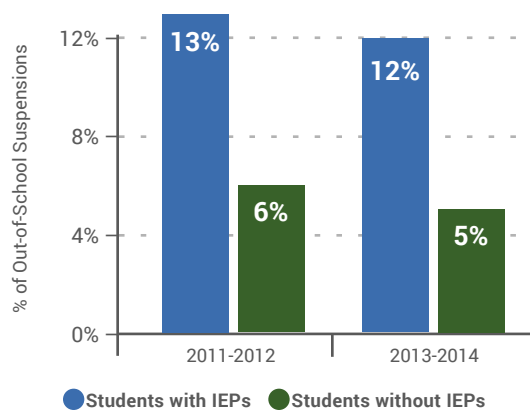
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Nearly 1 in 5 students (19%) with IEPs miss three or more weeks of school each year, compared to about 1 in 8 students (13%) without IEPs. School aversion and chronic absenteeism can be a sign of unidentified or inadequately addressed learning and attention issues.

DISCIPLINE

Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities, and the loss of instructional time increases the risk of repeating a grade and dropping out. In 2013–2014, 65% of all special education disciplinary removals involved students with SLD or OHI. Many removals are made at the discretion of school officials.

% of Students Who Received One or More Out-of-School Suspensions



DROPPING OUT

In 2013–2014, 18.1% of students with SLD and 17.6% of students with OHI dropped out, nearly three times the rate of all students (6.5%). In a national longitudinal survey, the most common reason students with SLD gave for dropping out was that they disliked school.

JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Failure to address learning and attention issues too often leads to students being incarcerated, which further disrupts their education and contributes to high dropout and recidivism rates. Some studies indicate a third or more of incarcerated youth have learning disabilities, and an even greater proportion may show signs of ADHD. Inadequate instruction while incarcerated or inadequate support upon reentering school helps explain why more than a quarter of reentering students drop out within six months, and nearly half return to confinement within three years.

OPPORTUNITIES

More schools and mentoring programs are incorporating **social and emotional learning (SEL)** into their curricula. SEL may be especially beneficial for students with learning and attention issues because it helps them understand their strengths and needs. But schools should be prepared to provide targeted SEL supports to help students who struggle with self-reflection and self-regulation.

Equity in IDEA regulations issued in 2016 aim to reduce disproportionate identification and disciplinary rates among students of color with disabilities by requiring states to use a standard approach to compare racial and ethnic groups. The regulations also provide funding that districts can use to address disproportionality.

Early warning systems use data on attendance, disciplinary incidents, and coursework to identify students at risk of dropping out, provide more effective interventions and keep students on track to graduate.

Collaboration among schools, healthcare professionals, and judges is critical to preventing juvenile justice involvement and addressing the factors that may lead to delinquency.

Diversion programs—which offer screening, services, and family supports—may be particularly helpful to students with learning and attention issues who are already struggling academically, socially and emotionally.

Chapter 5: Transitioning to Life After High School

After 12th grade, individuals with learning and attention issues will only receive accommodations in college or the workplace if they disclose their disabilities. But many students leave high school without the self-awareness, self-advocacy skills or self-confidence to successfully navigate their new independence and seek out support when needed.

COLLEGE ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION

Success in college and the workplace is heavily influenced by internal resilience factors such as temperament and self-perception. Low self-esteem and stigma help explain why young adults with learning disabilities—who are as smart as their peers—enroll in four-year colleges at half the rate of all young adults. Lack of self-advocacy and self-regulation skills may explain why students with learning disabilities who attend any type of postsecondary school are less likely to graduate than students without disabilities.

LACK OF DISCLOSURE

Stigma and other factors deter many undergraduates from accessing key resources in college, where only one-fourth of students with learning disabilities disclose that they have a disability. Reasons for low disclosure rates may include:

- Wanting to establish an identity independent of disability status
- Shame or fear of being perceived as lazy or unintelligent
- Underestimating how important accommodations are to their academic success
- Not knowing what kinds of disability services are available in college or not having the paperwork needed to access them

24% of students with learning disabilities informed their college they have a learning disability

7% did not inform their college even though they still considered themselves to have a learning disability

69% did not inform their college because they no longer considered themselves to have a learning disability (even though people don't "grow out" of learning disabilities)

EMPLOYMENT

Working-age adults with learning disabilities are twice as likely to be jobless as their peers who do not have disabilities. Stigma, low rates of college completion, and lack of awareness about workplace accommodations may all contribute to difficulty attaining employment and succeeding in the workplace. Research shows:

- 19% of young adults with learning disabilities reported that their employers were aware of their disability
- 5% of young adults with learning disabilities reported that they were receiving accommodations in the workplace

OPPORTUNITIES

Self-advocacy and other factors that help students stay in college can be taught, practiced and supported. To ask for and receive accommodations in college and the workplace, young adults must not only understand their needs but also be able to explain them to others. Developing K–12 and community-based programs that provide more opportunities to work on self-advocacy skills—and the confidence to use them—will contribute greatly to social and emotional well-being, academic success and career readiness.

Transition planning is critical to preparing students with disabilities for life after high school. New research shows that when transition plans specify the accommodations students will need in college, the odds of students seeking and using postsecondary supports increase significantly.

Recent changes in standardized testing like the SAT and legislative proposals like the RISE Act, which was introduced in December 2016, may **remove barriers to receiving accommodations** and increase college and workforce opportunities for students with disabilities.

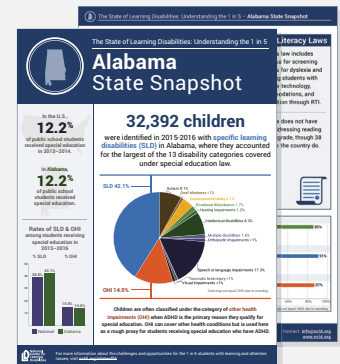
The **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**, which became law in 2014, provides pre-employment transition planning, job training and employment services for students with disabilities, including those with 504 plans.

Chapter 6: Recommended Policy Changes

To help the 1 in 5 thrive in school, in the workplace and in life, targeted policy change is needed in several areas to create a more open, supportive and inclusive society that recognizes the potential of all individuals.

MAJOR POLICY AREA	KEY ASPECTS
Expand Early Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in early screening Build expertise of educators and healthcare providers to recognize early signs
Empower Students and Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare students for a successful transition to postsecondary education and employment Focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) Increase access and build capacity of institutions of higher education to meet student needs Invest in research on outcomes after young adulthood
Cultivate Creative, Informed Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create more supportive classrooms by rethinking educator preparation programs and professional development Partner to erase discipline disparities Expand research on ways to prevent youth involvement in the justice system
Drive Innovation for Effective Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transform teaching by investing in research on the science of learning Expand evidence-based literacy and math instruction Promote personalized learning Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) to reach every student Invest in integrated student supports
Strengthen and Enforce Civil Rights Laws and Invest in Public Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen and enforce civil rights laws Invest in public schools (including programs funded through IDEA and ESSA as well as related programs like Head Start and Medicaid) and reject private school voucher proposals

STATE SNAPSHOTS



The State of Learning Disabilities includes two-page snapshots for each state and for the District of Columbia, highlighting key data points and comparisons to national averages in several areas:

- Identification rates for specific learning disabilities (SLD) and other health impairments (OHI)
- Inclusion in general education classrooms
- Discipline
- Graduation and dropout rates
- State literacy laws

[Go to State Snapshots](#)

HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

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MEDIA INQUIRIES

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