

# CROSSING

## PART 3

# THE LINE



**Exploring Equity  
in Special Education  
Across the United States**

---

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
District Supports/Remedial Services.....	4
Perceptions of Supports & Services.....	5
Moving the Needle with a Multi-Tiered Approach .....	7
Professional Learning - A Unique Contributing Factor .....	11
Strong Voice of Teachers on Professional Learning .....	12
Exploring the Four Contributing Factors .....	16
Equity Roadmap.....	18
Putting Data into Action .....	20
About the Authors .....	21

# Introduction

The goal of this research series is to provoke questions and provide actionable insights that encourage discussion about how states and local school districts equitably address the needs of students with disabilities. This brief, the third in our series, further investigates contributing factors of over- and under-classification of special education students. **The key finding of this investigation is that educators in different roles view discrepancies in classification rates differently. Common ground exists within same roles across the highest and lowest classifications states.**

Examining these factors empowers educators to identify and consider what equitable practices need to be in place to deliver meaningful support and services for students.

In Brief 2, we explored educators' perceptions of how and why policy and resources contribute to over- and under-classification of special education students. The *Equity Roadmap* focused on policy and resources as a tool to

engage states and local districts in assessing and initiating discussions of how special education equity reflects decision-making and practices related to contributing factors of over- and under-classification.

Brief 3 explores educators' perceptions of two other contributing factors of over- and under-classification – district supports/services along with teacher professional development. In addition, we provide a summary of our exploration into these contributing factors, highlighting a few noteworthy data points and insights. The *Equity Roadmap* has been enhanced to include reflective prompts aligned to the four contributing factors discussed, offering state and local leaders a starting point for surfacing inequities based on these contributing factors within their state or local context.

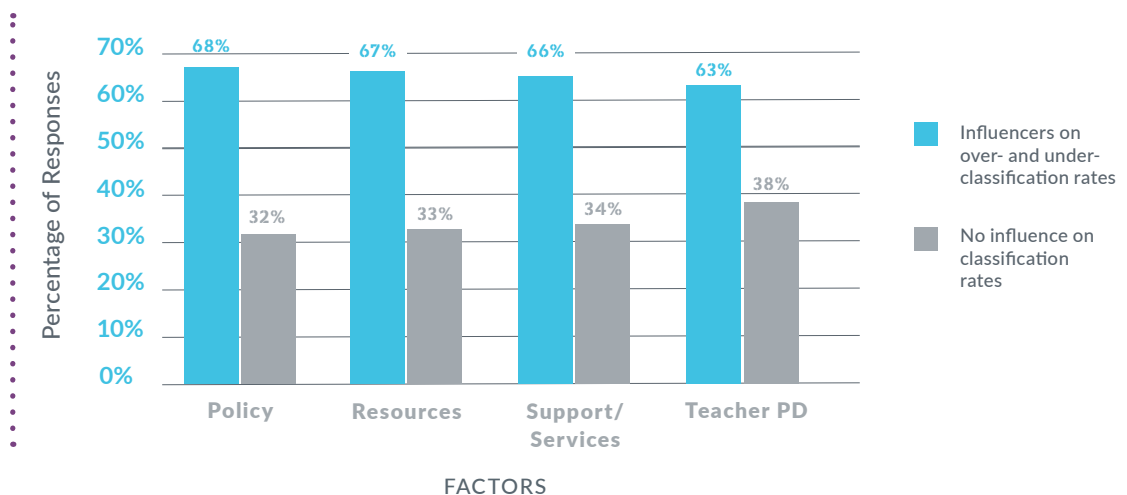


# District Supports/ Remedial Services a Strong Contributing Factor

Based on survey results, educators perceived policy (68%) and resources (67%) as greater influencers of over- and under-classification rates in comparison to the other factors of district support/services (66%) and teacher professional development (63%). One could argue that policy and resources are drivers of the supports and services, as well as teacher professional development, delivered by states and districts. For example, limited or diminishing resources often result in fewer services offered or fewer teacher professional learning opportunities. Therefore, policy and resources may be perceived as more significant influencers on over- and under-classification rates given their ripple effect on other factors.

**Table 1:**

Educator Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Over- and Under-Classification Rates



---

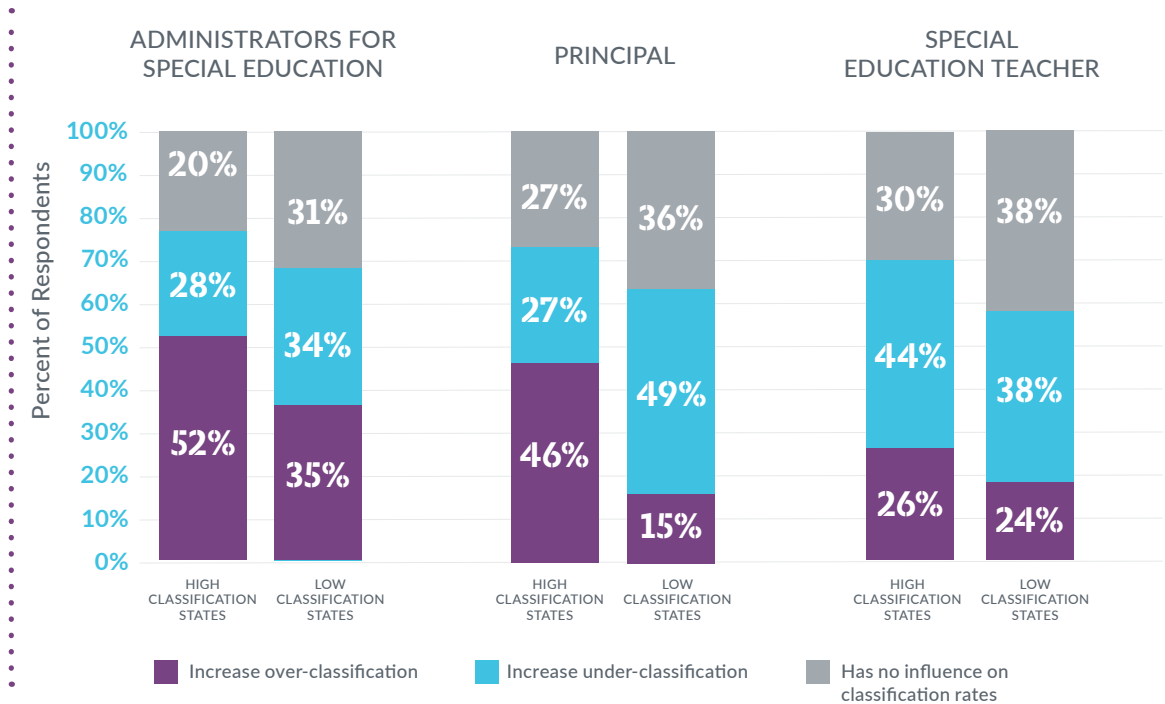
While special education support and service models vary across the nation, educators perceived support and services (66%) as an influential factor in over- and under-classification rates close behind policy (68%) and resources (67%). The support and service approaches implemented by schools and districts, while often driven by policy and resources, define the degree to which special education students and their non-classified peers have access to educational opportunities, allowing them to reach their full learning potential beyond minimum standards and compliance requirements.

## Perceptions of Supports & Services Vary by Role and States

Some perceptions of supports and services varied by role across the highest (New York, Massachusetts, Maine, and Pennsylvania) and lowest (Texas, Idaho, Colorado, and Hawaii) classification states, while others stayed consistent. Administrators of special education (52%) and principals (46%) in the highest classification states perceived supports and services as a greater contributing factor to over-classification rates than those in lowest classification states. However, principals in the lowest classification states (49%) perceived the inverse; they saw a greater influence of supports and services on under-classification. While administrators of special education in the lowest classification states were almost equally divided in their perceptions.

**Table 2:**

Perceptions of Supports/Services by Role



Special education teachers across the highest and lowest classification states shared similar perceptions of the influence of supports and services on classification rates, with greater agreement in comparison to the other roles that perceived supports and services have no influence on classification. However, special education teachers perceived a greater influence of supports and services on over-classification in both the highest and lowest classification states. Given the similar distribution of responses by special education teachers, it is likely perceptions transcend the variability of state special education classification rates.

The common ground of special education teachers may reside in the fact that they often serve on the front line, providing supports and services directly to students within their districts. Ideally, a district's supports

and services should not influence over- or under-classification rates if they reflect a continuum of services that is data-driven and focused on meeting student needs.

In addition, special education teachers, service providers, and general education teachers together often provide supports and services within multi-tiered support systems. They see first-hand how the school's or district's approach may or may not be impacting special education classifications.

## Moving the Needle with a Multi-Tiered Approach

Based on the Frontline Research & Learning Institute summer 2017 special education survey, educators perceived Response to Intervention (RTI) as a reason fewer students are classified for special education services.<sup>1</sup> Educators recognized that fidelity of RTI implementation and data are key components of successful programs. The key benefit of RTI is that it streamlines data across several different areas such as screening, progress monitoring, and outcomes, which allows district to analyze individual, group, and/or school progress.



*"RTI process is crucial in remediation for students and often prevents the need for classification. Keeping students "on track" as long as possible in the general education class"*

– Principal, TX

---

<sup>1</sup> Frontline Research and Learning Institute. (2017). Crossing the line: Exploring equity in special education across the United States, Part I.



*“It comes down to first a solid foundation at Level I Universal and a solid support and resources set up at Level II [within a] solid RTI system”*

– Special Education Teacher, NY

In 2004, IDEA strongly promoted Response to Intervention (RTI) as a multi-tiered approach to provide support for students with learning and behavior needs in response to a growing number of students being over-classified as learning disabled. This prompted many states to move away from the IQ-discrepancy method as the sole-source for Specific Learning Disability (SLD) classifications and adopt Response to Intervention (RTI) as a multi-tiered approach.

Since 2004, RTI has been adopted in a number of districts across the nation, becoming almost ubiquitous. Different research studies have identified Response to Intervention as a likely factor in fewer students identified with specific learning disabilities.<sup>2</sup>


Renewed focus on special education equity through a multi-tiered approach was embedded in the authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. ESSA does not require States to adopt a specific model of support nor does it dictate accountability measures. However, ESSA does require schools and districts to develop a “multi-tier system of support.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> RTI Action Network. What is RTI? Retrieved from <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>.

<sup>3</sup> Knoff, H. (2017). ESEA/ESSA Tells Schools and Districts: Build Your Own Multi-Tier System of Supports for Your Students' Needs. Retrieved from <https://www.creativeleadership.net/blog/2017/1/23/eseaessa-tells-schools-and-districts-build-your-own-multi-tier-system-of-supports-for-your-students-needs>.





This multi-tiered system is defined within ESSA as “a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making.”<sup>4</sup>

Each school or district in this country receiving ESSA federal funds is responsible for creating and implementing their own multi-tier system, which will continue to make special education equity highly localized, but should in no way leave equity or bias unexplored or unaddressed. Districts within and across states should engage in ongoing reflection and discussion to identify and address potential inequities within and between local systems. The impact of ESSA could result in highly differentiated systems between districts, which could widen equity gaps across states and/or districts. Special education equity should be an ongoing focus for districts across the nation to ensure students, regardless of disability or zip code, are afforded educational opportunities that advance their learning potential.

Along with adopting a multi-tier system of support, ESSA also promotes the use of federal funds to address the following areas: <sup>5</sup>

- Develop programs and activities that increase teachers’ ability to effectively teach children with disabilities.
- Provide a multi-tier system of support for literacy services.
- Offer professional development opportunities to teachers of children with disabilities or children with development delays, and other teachers and instructional staff.

ESSA does not require States to adopt a specific model of support nor does it dictate accountability measures. However, ESSA does require schools and districts to develop a “multi-tier system of support.”

---

<sup>4</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act. (2015). Title IX, Sec. 8002(33).

<sup>5</sup> Knoff, H. (2017). ESEA/ESSA Tells Schools and Districts: Build Your Own Multi-Tier System of Supports for Your Students’ Needs. Retrieved from <https://www.creativeleadership.net/blog/2017/1/23/eseaessa-tells-schools-and-districts-build-your-own-multi-tier-system-of-supports-for-your-students-needs>.

---

The focus of special education has long been on “Are we following required process?” versus “Are students making progress?” Meeting compliance requirements based on minimum standards for special education students’ progress does not, nor should not, reflect equitable practices in supports and services provided.

A multi-tiered approach provides an opportunity to put students’ progress at the forefront of decision-making prior to and following a special education classification. In the absence of evidence of student growth, how do we know if the right interventions, supports, and services are provided?



*“Teacher conversations must quickly move beyond ‘what are we expected to teach?’ to ‘How will we know when each student has learned?’”*

– DuFour, R. (2004)

According to research done by the American Institutes for Research (2014), educational achievement rates for students with disabilities have lagged behind those of their peers without disabilities and have remained flat during the last 15 years.<sup>6</sup> As states and districts identify student progress aligned to state academic standards, data on student progress must guide instructional decision-making to ensure special education student performance is more in line with that of their non-classified peers. Both states and districts should continually address this equity measure.

# Professional Learning - A Unique Contributing Factor

A systemic professional learning strategy must be rooted in what we know about our students' needs and progress – not just once or twice a year, but through the use of ongoing data that highlights what's working and what's not in terms of student learning and instructional practice.

Learning Forward influenced the creation of a definition of professional learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act.<sup>7</sup> Learning Forward calls out the importance of “providing educators (including teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, and, as applicable, early childhood educators)” with professional learning activities that are “sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused” which may “improve and increase teachers' knowledge of the academic subjects the teachers teach; understanding of how students learn; and ability to analyze student work and achievement from multiple sources, including how to adjust instructional strategies, assessments, and materials based on such analysis.”<sup>8</sup>

In the absence of data highlighting strides or gaps in student progress, opportunities for professional learning are either lost or misplaced. Resources must be aligned to a data-driven growth model to support the educators and staff serving special education students.

*Implementing a multi-tiered, data-driven support model must go hand-in-hand with professional learning for teachers and other staff to ensure implementation fidelity and ongoing learning to promote continuous improvement. Professional learning not only supports the fidelity of implementation, but also its sustainability.*

<sup>6</sup> American Institutes for Research (AIR). (2014). Long Story Short: Why Is Intensive Intervention Critical for Students with Disabilities? Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/resource/long-story-short-why-intensive-intervention-critical-students-disabilities>.

<sup>7</sup> Learning Forward. ESSA and professional learning. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/get-involved/essa>.

<sup>8</sup> Learning Forward. Definition of professional development. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/who-we-are/professional-learning-definition>.

---

Implementing a multi-tiered, data-driven support model must go hand-in-hand with professional learning for teachers and other staff to ensure implementation fidelity and ongoing learning to promote continuous improvement. Professional learning not only supports the fidelity of implementation, but also its sustainability.

## Strong Voice of Teachers on Professional Learning

Special education teachers had the most consistent perceptions of teacher professional development across the highest and lowest classification states. Not only do special education teachers advocate for their own professional learning, but also for greater exposure across the board in understanding special education issues and how to effectively meet the needs of special education students. Special education teachers voice the need for learning at all levels including classroom teachers, specialists, service providers, support staff, administrators, and parents/guardians.

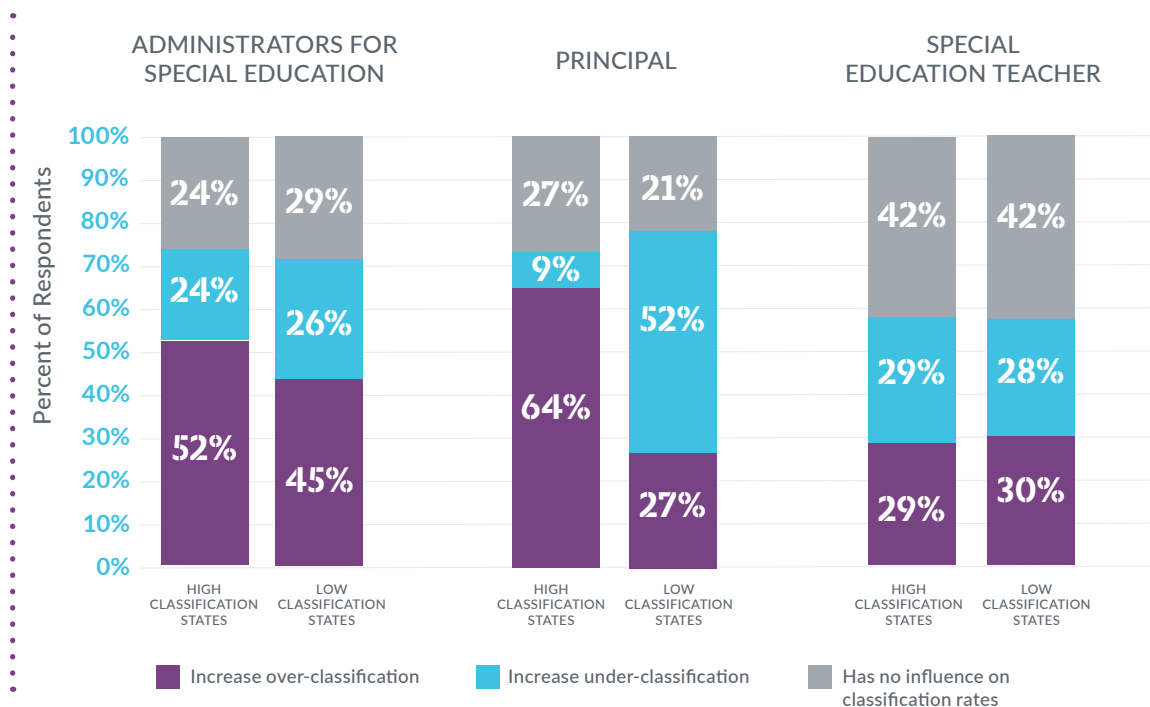


*“Our district does a great job of training special education teacher how to adjust to discover students need versus what they use to keep them from reaching their full potential. General education teachers would benefit from similar training”*

– Special Education Teacher, TX

**Table 3:**

### Perceptions of Teacher Professional Development by Role



Conversely, administrators of special education and principals diverge in their perspectives. Principals in the highest classification states viewed teacher professional development as greater influence on increasing under-classification rates, while principals in the lowest classification states perceived teacher professional development as a greater factor in over-classification rates.

A large percentage of administrators of special education across the highest and lowest classification states perceived the influence of teacher professional development as a greater influence on over-classification. Administrators may perceive that the more teachers know about special education, the more likely they are to over-advocate for special education classifications, perhaps signaling an area of bias existing at local levels that should be further explored.

---

Professional learning is critical to understanding instructional practices along with appropriate modifications and accommodations that meet the unique needs of learners. In addition, educators must recognize how characteristics of learners may overlap between special needs and other needs and how to distinguish between such characteristics to avoid misclassifications.

Characteristics of specific learning disabilities and English language acquisition may, at the surface, look identical. However, the root causes manifesting these characteristics are completely different.

One group of students often misclassified for special education services is English Learners. Characteristics of specific learning disabilities and English language acquisition may, at the surface, look identical. However, the root causes manifesting these characteristics are completely different. For example, both English Learners and students with a specific learning disability may exhibit trouble following directions. A student with a learning disability may have memory issues, while an English Learner, with limited English proficiency, may not comprehend the complexity of the academic language used in directions. Educators and administrators trained in understanding how these characteristics differ based on the background of students are less likely to misclassify English Learners for unwarranted special education services. The urge to formally and quickly categorize an English Learner into a special education placement must be repressed.

Another example of the need for professional development stems from a recent report by Novoa and Malik entitled, *Suspensions are Not Support: The Disciplining of Preschoolers with Disabilities* (2018). Novoa and Malik

*“The keys to improving the system are providing better instruction to diverse learners in general education settings, having a robust remedial program and ensuring a professional development program which addresses intervention, classification and RTI”*

– Administrator of Special Education, NY

highlighted special education inequities in early childhood education programs with the prevalence of suspensions among children ages 3 to 5. While this age group of children with any disability or socio-emotional challenge comprises 13% of the preschool population, they account for 75% of all early suspensions and expulsions.<sup>9</sup>

The report recommended that suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings be prohibited, prompting Maryland and Texas to pass laws in the summer of 2017 prohibiting suspension from preschool through grade 2.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the report recommended further teacher training and professional development to advance teachers' knowledge and skills. Novoa and Malik (2018) cite gaps in teacher training as the more likely cause of these suspensions rather than children's behavior.<sup>11</sup>

In 2012, only 20 percent of early childhood teachers and providers reported receiving training on children's social and emotional development.<sup>12</sup> Such training is critical in identifying appropriate evaluation and intervention services that may be needed. Early childhood teachers frequently report a pressing need for further professional development on evidence-based practices for addressing challenging behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

Retaining special education teachers, service providers, general education teachers, and support staff must be a high priority given current and historical shortages. Professional development is critical to ensuring educators have the knowledge, skills, resources, and support to succeed in their unique daily challenges. As we seek an equitable model of support and services for special education students and non-special education students, it is both a state and local responsibility to ensure educators have the tools to successfully implement and sustain these efforts.

IN 2012,

**only  
20%**

of early childhood  
teachers and  
providers reported  
receiving training  
on children's social  
and emotional  
development.

<sup>9</sup> Novoa, C. & Malik, R. (2018). Suspensions are not support: The disciplining of preschoolers with disabilities. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2018/01/17/445041/suspensions-not-support/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

---

# Exploring the Four Contributing Factors

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute has explored the perceptions of educators on four contributing factors of over- and under-classification: 1) policy, 2) resources, 3) support & services, and 4) teacher professional development. Surprisingly, most perceptions did not overwhelmingly point in any one direction. This research confirms educators perceive several factors as influencing equitable practices and classification rates within the context of their state and local environments. The varying perceptions do little to ensure equitable education across all states and districts, but they do present a call to action for further exploration at individual state and local levels.

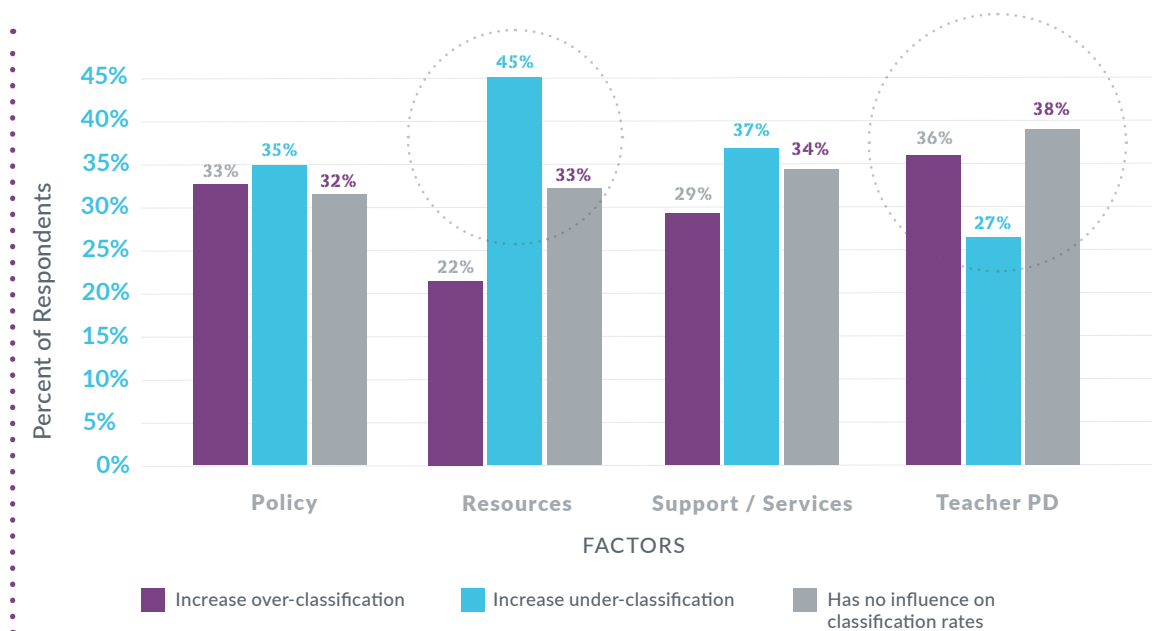
We acknowledge the combination of these factors at play as well as others that have not been explored. Educators must not only embrace the call to action to courageously engage in equity dialogue within their states and local districts, but also to commit to the use of data as part of the ongoing review process to identify and address gaps in practices as well as student progress.

Comparing the four contributing factors explored in this study, a few findings deserve attention. First, the close distribution of perceptions related to policy and district supports/services likely reflects the variances in how special education is enacted across states and local districts. Inequities are not limited to one state or group of states nor local districts. The potential for bias is likely within any given context



**Table 4:**

## Comparison of Four Contributing Factors Explored



which therefore calls education leaders to address special education equity systemically.

Second, a universal belief appears to exist within the highest and lowest classification states, as well as across all roles, that diminishing resources impact classification rates. Education funding in general, along with special education funding, is a distinct problem. Funding models are unique from state to state which likely perpetuates a resource disparity, resulting in a call for large-scale funding reform.

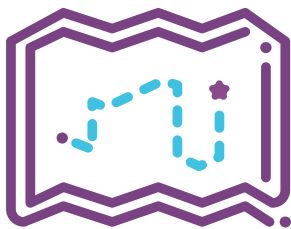
However, waiting for politicians to address variances in funding does not preclude a state or local district from taking on its own review of equitable practices. Using a data-driven, systemic process, states and local districts can use the Equity Roadmap to initiate conversations across the four contributing factors explored in this research series.

---

Furthermore, both quantitative and qualitative measures can be used to evaluate student access, progress, and outcomes between special education students and their non-classified peers.


Lastly, of the four factors explored, teacher professional development had the greatest number of respondents who voiced a perception of “no influence on classification rates” in comparison to influence on over- and under-classification rates. The importance of professional learning is empowering the educators who work with special education students. When professional learning is targeted and meaningful for teachers, all students benefit.

A recent study identified the growing rate of inclusion has outpaced the number of teachers trained to teach students with special education needs.<sup>14</sup> “Lack of support” was a top reason cited by special educators for why they leave the classroom. Professional learning opportunities that foster collaboration between special educators and general educators and provide collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven activities must be a high priority to effectively meet student needs and successfully retain top talent.



## Using the Equity Roadmap to Begin the Journey

In the second brief in this series, the Frontline Research & Learning Institute introduced the Equity Roadmap to support leaders in examining policy and resources that influence and contribute to the pursuit and ultimate achievement of special education equity.



The goal of the roadmap is to engage states and local districts in assessing and initiating discussions of how special education equity reflects decision-making and practices related to the implementation of policy and allocation of resources. We have expanded the Equity Roadmap to include additional contributing factors explored in this brief – support/services and teacher professional development.

\*Expand the Equity Roadmap with the following:

- What data is used to determine support/services provided to students?
- How do you know if the supports/services provided are furthering students' learning potential? What do you do if students are not making progress? What do you do when students are making progress?
- What evidence shows high standards are the target for all students?
- What evidence shows the impact of the multi-tiered system of support implemented in your state or district? What data is still needed? What gaps are evident and how will they be addressed?

## **Examining Support & Services**

- How does data support professional learning decision-making?
- What professional learning activities connect special educators and general educators in collaboration and conversation?
- What evidence is used to assess the application and impact of educator professional learning on student outcomes?
- How does the system professional learning strategy align the needs of students and the needs of educators? How do you know this alignment exists?
- How does the professional learning strategy align to district and building initiatives?

## **Examining Teacher Professional Development**

---

<sup>14</sup> Samuels, C. New data detail the effect of inclusion on teaching time. Education Week. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/11/15/new-data-details-effect-of-inclusion-on.html>.

---

# Putting Data into Action

Insights derived from dialogue and data allow us to pivot into action. The action steps outlined below take us from point A to point B on our equity journey. These 10 steps focus on the explorations of the four contributing factors influencing over- and under-classification rates explored in *Crossing the Line: Briefs 2 and 3*.

1. **Develop a common definition** and shared understanding of equity and equitable practices
2. **Examine data** of classification rates
3. **Review local policy** to identify intended and unintended consequences that may jeopardize equitable practices
4. **Revise policy** to prioritize equitable practices and address gaps identified
5. **Review allocation of resources** to ensure equitable alignment to the needs of students in all sub-groups
6. **Engage in redesigning a system of supports** that maximizes resources aligned to student needs
7. **Use ongoing data from multiple measures** to assess student learning progress.
8. **Target closing gaps** in achievement between special education students and their non-classified peers.
9. **Provide teachers voice and choice** in professional learning.
10. **Assess impact of professional learning** on student outcomes.

---

# About the Authors

## Dr. Thomas Reap

Dr. Thomas Reap began his career as a school psychologist in the North Rockland School District in New York, later became the Director of Special Education for the Eastchester School District in New York, and served as the president of the Lower Hudson Pupil Personnel Association.

Dr. Reap also built a successful consulting practice assisting other districts in administering special education programs. After 22 years of working in school districts, Dr. Reap founded Centris Group (now part of Frontline Education), the most successful software provider for administering special education programs in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Dr. Reap holds a Doctorate in Psychology and a Master of Science degree in Education. He is a licensed psychologist, school administrator, district superintendent and certified as a school psychologist.

## Jo Ann Hanrahan

Jo Ann Hanrahan has over 20 years of experience in K-12 education serving students, teachers, district and state education leaders. She started her career as a classroom teacher in Milwaukee Public Schools and then transitioned into administrative roles in the areas of professional learning, teacher alternative certification and educator effectiveness.

As a co-designer of Wisconsin's first equivalent research-based educator effectiveness system, she was instrumental in the statewide rollout, leading the implementation of innovative technology solutions to support communication, optimize data collection and analysis and promote networking. Subsequently, she served as a consultant for a number of national and international educator effectiveness initiatives and research projects.

Jo Ann leverages her passion for education, research and technology to improve teaching and learning for students of all ages. With a Master of Arts in Education and decades of diverse experiences, she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. and serves Frontline Education as the Director of Research & Data Analysis.

---

# Learn More

For more insights into K-12 education, visit

**FrontlineInstitute.com**

## About the Institute

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute ([www.FrontlineInstitute.com](http://www.FrontlineInstitute.com)) generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the education community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education data and analytics capabilities in partnership with over 12,000 education organizations and several million users nationwide. The Institute's research reports and analysis are designed to provide practical insights for teachers and leaders as well as benchmarks to inform strategic decision-making within their organizations.