



What is Significant Disproportionality?

Significant disproportionality happens when students from certain racial or ethnic groups are identified for special education, placed in specific educational settings, or disciplined at much higher rates than their peers. This means that some students may be over-identified for special education services, placed in more restrictive settings or face harsher discipline compared to others.

Why Does Significant Disproportionality Matter?

The goal of identifying significant disproportionality is to ensure that all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, receive the right support in the least restrictive environment. When students are over-identified for special education or placed in separate classrooms at higher rates than their peers, it can limit their educational opportunities and impact their long-term success.

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states to monitor disproportionality, it does not define exactly what is considered "significant." Each state must review its data annually to determine whether students of a certain race or ethnicity are more likely than others to:

- Be identified as having a disability.
- Be classified under specific disability categories (such as Autism, Emotional Disability, or Intellectual Disability).
- Be placed in more restrictive educational settings.
- Face harsher discipline, including suspension or expulsion.

These requirements exist because, historically, students of color with disabilities have been more frequently placed in special education and disciplined at higher rates. Former U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. (2016) noted ***“children with disabilities are often disproportionately and unfairly suspended and expelled from school and educated in classrooms separate from their peers. Children of color with disabilities are overrepresented within the special education population, and the contrast in how frequently they are disciplined is even starker”.***



Addressing significant disproportionality in special education helps ensure that students receive the right support based on their individual needs. It prevents misplacement in special education programs, improves accuracy in identifying students who need services, and ensures that decisions are made appropriately.



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Understanding Disproportionality in Special Education

Disproportionality happens when certain groups of students are placed in special education, assigned to specific programs, or disciplined at higher or lower rates than expected based on their overall numbers in the school.

For example, imagine a school with **1,000** students:

- **750** students are white
- **250** students are students of color

If 250 students in the school receive special education services, we would expect the numbers to reflect the overall student population. That means around 63 students of color and 187 white students would be in special education *if* everything were proportionate. However, if we look at the actual numbers and see that 100 of the 250 students (40%) are in special education are students of color, even though they make up only 25% of the total student population, that means they are overrepresented - they are being placed in special education at a higher rate than expected. On the other hand, if only 30 students of color were receiving special education instead of the expected 63, they would be underrepresented, meaning they may not be getting the support they need.

The goal is to make sure all students are identified and placed correctly based on their individual needs, not because of patterns that affect certain groups more than others.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires each state, including North Carolina, to check for disproportionality using specific data and calculations. Schools and districts must look at three key areas:

Identification - *Are students from certain racial/ethnic groups more likely to be identified for special education?*

Placement - *Are they more likely to be placed in restrictive learning environments?*

Discipline - *Are they disciplined more often or more severely than other students?*

What Happens if a District is Identified?

When a public school unit (PSU) in North Carolina is found to have significant disproportionality, it must take steps to identify the root causes and make improvements. PSUs that have been identified for three consecutive years, or, identified as having significant disproportionality without reasonable progress in reducing its risk ratio for the two prior consecutive years or have not made progress in reducing disproportionality are required to take action. This includes:

- Reviewing policies and practices to understand what is causing the disproportionality.
- Using 15% of their federal special education funds to provide additional early support for students at risk of being misidentified or disproportionately placed in special education.
- Creating a plan called Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) to provide extra help for students, including those who are not currently in special education but may need support.
- Working with educators, families, and communities to find solutions and ensure fair practices.

Public school units (PSU) that are placed on the warning list for three years will move to the mandatory list. All districts placed on the Mandatory CCEIS list receive a letter from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) explaining the areas where disproportionality was found. They are also given additional training and support to develop a strong CCEIS plan, which is required as part of their IDEA 611 grant application.

For more information on Significant Disproportionality in North Carolina, go to:


<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/exceptional-children/data-state-performance-plans>

North Carolina's FFY 2024 Significant Disproportionality Lists can be viewed here:


<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1dlnjhBNLZDdVKIUjFOGf4d1tV0ReQHaUbvBYSQpPqRw/edit?gid=0#gid=0>

Significant Disproportionality


Students of certain racial and ethnic groups being:



Identified for special education at higher rates.



Disciplined at markedly higher rates than peers.



Placed in more restricted educational settings.

