Comparative Rates of Autism and Intellectual Disability in Maryland Public Schools

Over the last two years, there has been a shift in the numbers of graduation-age students with diagnoses of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or intellectual disability (ID) enrolled in Maryland special education programs. In the years represented by the two bodies of census data, the total number of special education students of graduation age has remained constant (12,365 in 2009 compared to 12,378 in 2011). However, within this age group, the percentage represented by ID has consistently decreased, and the percentage represented by ASD has simultaneously increased.

These shifts in population pose important implications for the transition process from special education services. The overall number of students enrolled in special education in Maryland with an ID diagnosis decreased by 4.3% from 5,472 in 2009 to 5,237 in 2011. Meanwhile, the overall number of students with an ASD diagnosis increased by 12% from 8,186 in 2009 to 9,232 in 2011. Presently, 7,063 of those students with an ASD diagnosis are under the age of 14. As the overall enrollment of children with ASD continues to increase and those existing students with an ASD diagnosis enter the transition-age bracket, the burden on schools to prepare students with unique needs for postsecondary life will increase exponentially. This will place substantial strain on both financial and human resources. A proactive approach to streamlining the transition process for students with an ASD diagnosis will ease the burden considerably and is necessary to address the growing prevalence of ASD among transition-age students.

ASD and ID Graduation Rates

More students with ASD exit their special education programs by graduating with a diploma than for any other reason. This command is followed by dropping out of school and returning to general education, while only 15.8% of students with ASD exited due to alternate placement (continuing special education), almost twice that number of students with ID exited for that reason (31.4%). Lastly, although only 6.5% of students with ASD returned to general education in 2011 (35 students), only a single student with an ID diagnosis exited for that reason (0.07%).

An overwhelming majority of students with ASD progress through school to graduation, and of the 382 who did so in 2011, 235 received a diploma. Indeed, students with ASD had only a 3.7% dropout rate in 2011, and 6.5% actually returned to general education. This is in stark contrast to those students with an ID diagnosis. Only 68 students with an ID received a diploma in 2011, 197 moved to continuing special education, and one student with ID returned to general education. An individualized transition plan will need to incorporate substantially different services to address drastically different needs when dealing with children of either diagnosis.

The following table relates the change in number and percentage of students, between the ages of 14 and 21, exiting the public school system. The table further distinguishes between those graduating with a diploma and those graduating with a certificate. It also indicates the dropout rate, both in terms of the overall population, and within the specific diagnoses.