

Analyzing the Legal and Practical Implications of Appropriate Transition Planning for Children with an Autism Spectrum Diagnosis

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Comparative Rates of Autism and Intellectual Disability in Maryland Public Schools

Over at least 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.

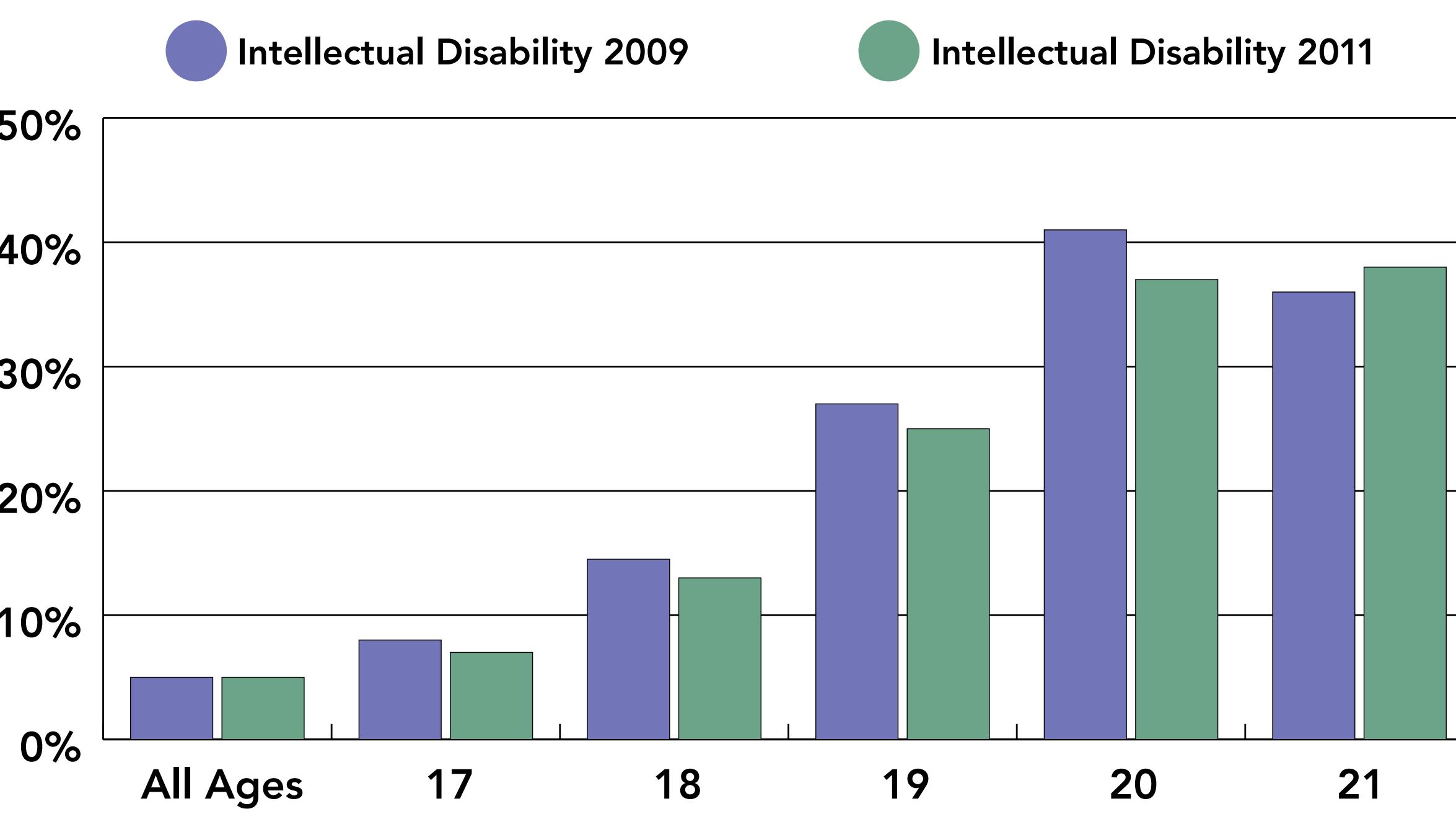


Table 1: This chart illustrates the general decrease in the percentage of the special education population represented by students with an ID. Between 2009 and 2011, the percentage of the special education student population with ID has decreased in every age bracket with the exception of 21-year-olds (which saw a 1.62% increase).

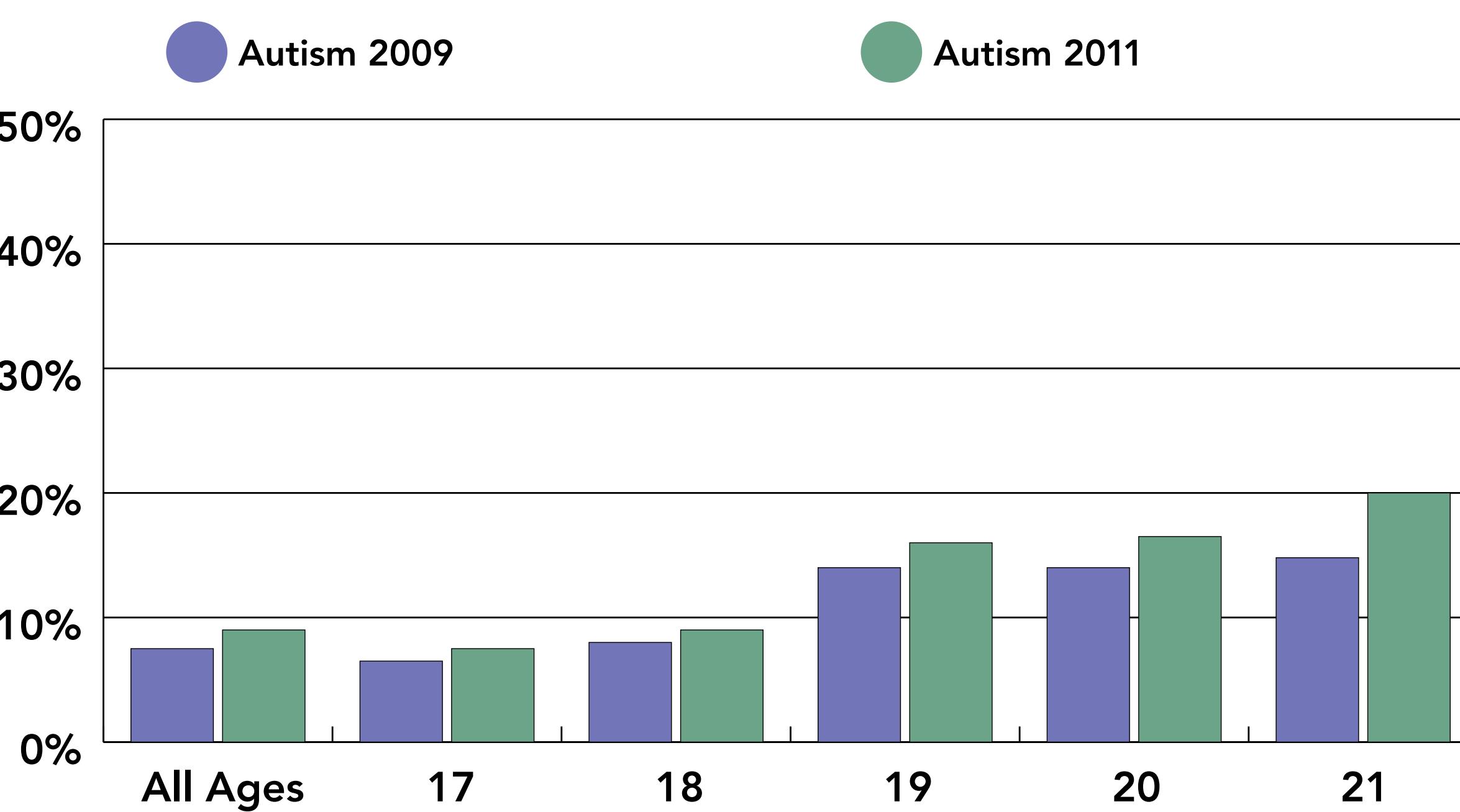


Table 2: This chart illustrates the consistent increase in the percentage of the special education population represented by students with an ASD. For each year, the percentage of the overall special education population represented by students with autism has increased, with a 5.57% increase in the 21-year-old bracket alone.

The following table represents changes in the number and percentage of students with ID and ASD from 2009 to 2011. Percentages are relative to the overall number of students with disabilities enrolled in special education.

Age of Student	Change from 2009 to 2011 Census	
	Intellectual Disability	Autism
All ages	-235 / (-0.24%) / (-4.3%)	+1046 / (+1%) / (+12%)
17	-72 / (-0.6%)	+38 / (+1.06%)
18	-67 / (-1.3%)	+29 / (+1.26%)
19	+27 / (-2.69%)	+77 / (+2.83%)
20	+64 / (-3.86%)	+69 / (+2.71%)
21	+17 / (+1.62%)	+15 / (+5.57%)

Note: Green font represents an increase in student population, and purple font represents a decrease in student population.

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 their 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. Furthermore, the second largest category of students with ASD exiting their program is by graduating with a certificate. Cumulatively, whether by diploma or certificate, graduation accounted for 71.27% of the exiting students with ASD in 2011.

For students with ID, the majority still exit by way of graduation (~55%). However, the commanding majority graduate with a certificate, as compared to a diploma. Moreover, 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 (28.47%). 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%).

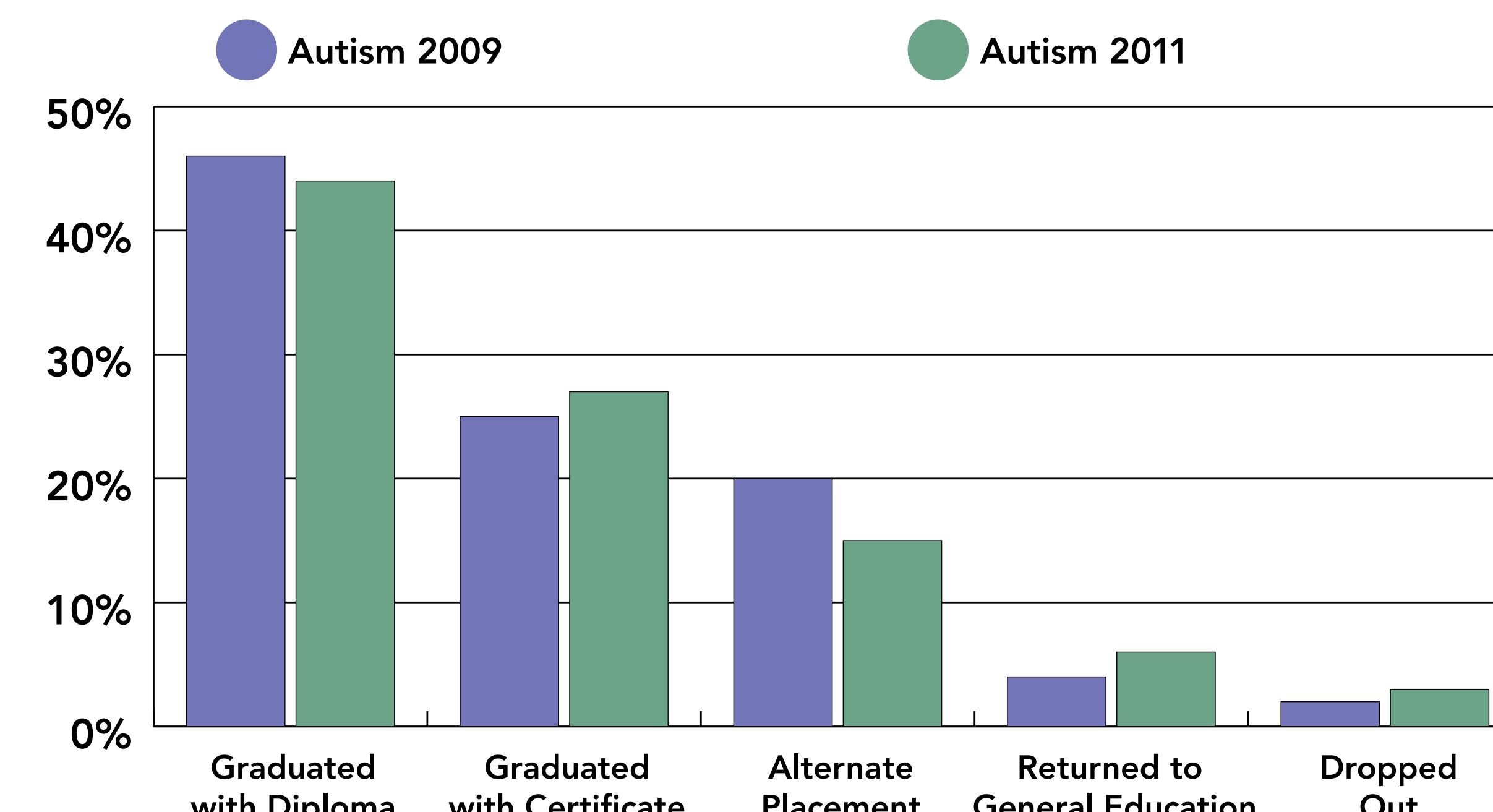


Table 3: This table illustrates the percentage of students with an ASD exiting within a given year for the reason indicated. The data is generally consistent between the two bodies of census data, with the overwhelming majority of students with ASD exiting by way of graduation, and almost twice as many exiting with a diploma as with a certificate. It is also worthy of mention that 6.5% of students with ASD in Maryland Special Education programs exited by returning to general education.

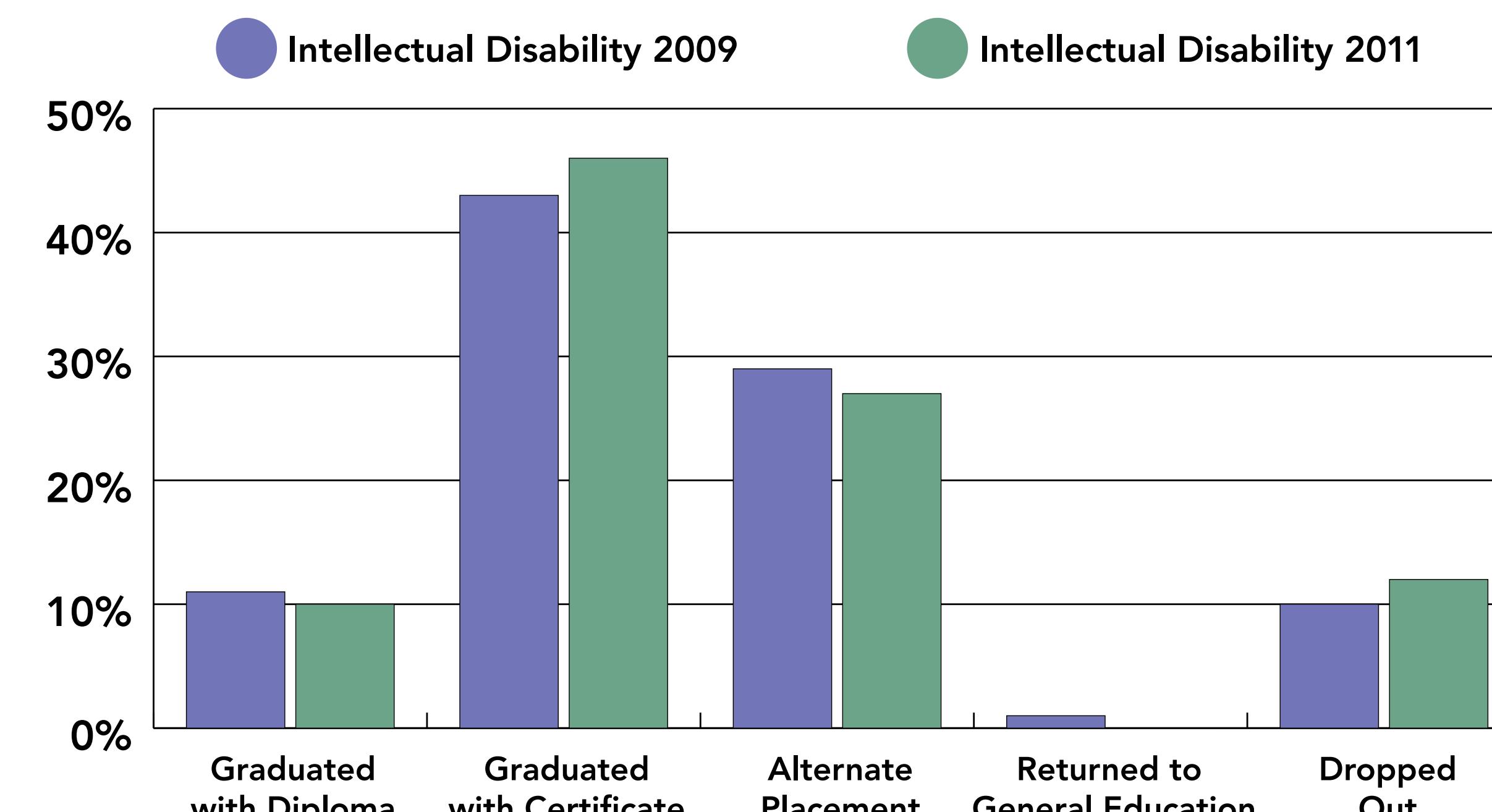


Table 4: This table illustrates the percentage of students with an ID diagnosis exiting within a given year for the reason indicated. The data highlights a number of areas of divergence from the exit percentages for students with ASD, specifically: (1) about 20% fewer students with ID exit by reason of graduation than those with ASD; (2) of those ID students who do graduate, approximately five times more graduate with a certificate than graduate with a diploma; (3) twice as many students with ID as students with ASD exit to an alternative special education program; and (4) four times as many students with ID drop out than students with ASD.

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.

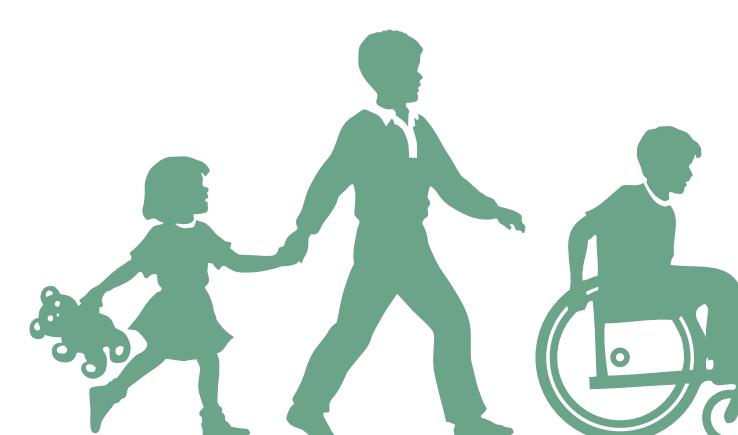
	Overall Total Exiting	Change from 2009-2011 Census:		
		Graduated Diploma	Graduated Certificate	Dropped Out
State Total	+356	+550 (+3.44%)	+49 (+0.23%)	+149 (+0.84%)
Intellectual Disability	-18	-9 (-1.02%)	+12 (+2.88%)	+11 (+1.85%)
Autism	+159	+63 (-1.78%)	+53 (+2.5%)	+11 (+1.34%)

Note: Green font represents an increase in student population, and purple font represents a decrease in student population.

Conclusion

While students with ASD and ID account for the largest diagnostic populations among students enrolled in Maryland special education programs, there has been a shift in the numbers of students within each diagnostic group. Additionally, there are important differences in how each diagnostic population exits from the public school system.

The high graduation rates for children with ASD will mean very little if they are not given the benefit of a thoroughly investigated, individually tailored, and properly implemented transition plan in order to address their unique challenge areas, as well as their strengths in making the move into a successful life after school. As ASD rises to a prominent position as the largest category of single diagnosis in children in special education, further research is needed to determine the specific needs of this population when transitioning from the public school system into employment and postsecondary independent living.



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