

# National Audit Finds Fewer Young Kids Accessing Early Intervention, Special Ed

by Michelle Diamant | June 9, 2023

The number of young children with disabilities receiving early intervention and special education dropped dramatically in recent years and access to these services varied significantly by state.

Between the fall of 2019 and 2020, enrollment in early intervention and special education services for preschool-age children decreased by 15% across the nation.

The findings come from a new report issued by the National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. It is the first to offer a national audit and a state-by-state look at access to early intervention services for children up to age 3 as well as special education for kids ages 3 to 5 who have not yet entered kindergarten.

For the report, researchers looked at data from the 2020-2021 school year and evaluated trends between the 2005-2006 and 2020-2021 academic years.

They found that 3.7% of children under age 3 received early intervention in the fall of 2020, but access was far from equitable. At the high end, 10% of Massachusetts youngsters were enrolled in the program, compared to a low of just 1% in Arkansas and Hawaii.

Meanwhile, 6% of kids ages 3 and 4 received special education services nationally, but that number ranged from 14% in Wyoming to under 3% in Alabama.

The report also found that Black, Hispanic and Asian children were less likely than white kids to be in early intervention or special education at young ages. The disparities were most pronounced among Black children, a discrepancy that the researchers noted made little sense given that school-age Black children are more likely than white children to be enrolled in special education.

“Early intervention, early childhood special education are vital supports for young children with special needs and their families,” said Steve Barnett, co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, which produced the report. “The disparities that are documented in this equity audit are not just unfair, they’re harmful.”

The researchers are recommending increased government funding, more intensive equity audits in individual states and bringing states together to discuss how to address the problems identified in the report.

Katherine Neas, deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the U.S. Department of Education, called the findings “disturbing and yet not shocking.” She said her agency is taking steps to educate officials at the state and local level about their responsibilities to identify and serve young children with disabilities.

“We know that when we help kids get the supports that they need at the earliest age, they have better life outcomes,” Neas said. “I think we need to think creatively about what the solutions are to these problems.”

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