



Educating Girls with Disabilities

The American Association of University Women, in accordance with its 2009-2011 Public Policy Program, is committed to ensuring “adequate and equitable funding for quality public educational opportunities for all students.”¹ For girls, and those with disabilities in particular, additional safeguards and precautions may be necessary to ensure that their unique needs are not overlooked. AAUW is concerned that, while Congress and the states have historically sought to provide adequate funds to meet the needs of children with disabilities, there may be an underlying issue that is not addressed by current legislation.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) gave public schools a high bar for accountability in order to demonstrate that they are serving all students equally. The underlying presumption, however, is that IDEA funds and standards adequately serve the right students. AAUW is concerned that many girls with disabilities may not qualify for IDEA services—not because they do not need special education, but because of potentially inadequate assessment of disability status.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the federal commitment to “a free appropriate public education” for students with disabilities, designed with their individualized educational needs in mind.² As of 2006, more than 6 million school-age children in the United States receive special education services.³ Almost half – some 2.8 million – are students identified with a specific learning disability.⁴ IDEA requires public schools to provide educational accommodations, such as learning aids and testing modifications. In 2004, IDEA was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. The measure included several provisions designed to bring IDEA into alignment with the No Child Left Behind Act, which governs the main federal programs assisting elementary and secondary schools.⁵

IDEA defines a child with a disability as “...a child . . . with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance . . ., orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities . . . who . . . [because of the condition] needs special education and related services.”⁶

Teachers are required to educate students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment.” To the greatest extent possible, students who have a disability should have the opportunity to be educated with their non-disabled peers. This includes being taught the general education curriculum and having access to extracurricular activities or any other programs their non-disabled peers enjoy. If a student’s disability prevents her from achieving educational goals in a regular setting, then the student would be moved to a more restrictive environment. The less opportunity a student has to interact and learn with non-disabled peers,

the more restricted the setting. To determine the appropriate setting for a student, a team will review the student's needs and interests. As a result, the types of educational settings for students with disabilities will vary.

The federal government continues to fall well short of its promise to fund 40 percent of the costs of educating students with disabilities, forcing local school districts to shoulder more of special education costs from their general budgets. From the initial passage of IDEA in 1975 through fiscal year 2008, the unfunded federal portion has cost local schools—and taxpayers that support them—more than \$300 billion.⁷

Special Education Needs of Boys and Girls

The reality is that there is very little research on gender and disability. We know that far fewer girls than boys receive special education services, making up about one-third of students served.⁸ For years, the assumption has been that girls simply do not have special education needs at the same level or rate as boys. It is not known, however, whether or not the difference in special education enrollment is truly due to different prevalence rates or to other eligibility and assessment factors. It is very possible, and highly probable, that there are girls who could benefit from special education services who are being left out because of assessment and identification problems. Further, boys may be over-represented. It is estimated that boys and young men are more likely to have a disability than girls and young women (11 percent as compared with 6 percent), yet even if these numbers are accurate, they do not account for why a 5 percentage point disparity in actual disability prevalence translates into a significant difference in special education enrollment.⁹

Three theories have been put forward to explain the gender differences in special education identification rates, referred to as the “three B’s:”

- biological differences between girls and boys
- behavioral differences between girls and boys
- bias in special education referral and assessment procedures.¹⁰

Assessment of Disability Status

In order for a student to qualify as “disabled” under IDEA, she must be identified with one or more of a specific list of disabilities.¹¹ Many of these disabilities have an obvious physical or behavioral manifestation (such as hearing impairment or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) and can be easy to identify. Other disabilities are diagnosed by more subjective assessments, such as teacher referral, professional judgment, test performance, or criteria set by states or local educational agencies, which vary a great deal—a student may be diagnosed as disabled in one local education agency (LEA) but not in another.¹² In fact, some data suggests that the gender ratio may vary from school district to school district.¹³

Under current diagnostic methods for determining disabled status, boys are much more likely to be identified as “disabled.” Male students constitute roughly 70 percent of students identified as learning disabled, about 60 percent of those identified as mentally retarded, and about 80 percent of those who are identified as emotionally disturbed.¹⁴ The key here is that

these are students *identified*. It is not known whether or not identification accurately reflects reality. What we do know is that:

- Boys are more likely than girls to exhibit problematic behavioral characteristics that may indicate the existence of a disability. By acting out, boys may be more likely to garner the attention of adults, making them more easily identifiable as learning challenged. Boys are most often referred to special education for behavioral problems, not for their underlying disabilities.¹⁵
- Girls who are identified as possessing emotional disabilities are typically processed through special education only after they exhibit behaviors that are typical of male students who already receive special education. This “one size fits all” approach to identification ignores the possibility that assessment instruments may be poorly designed and do not detect some emotional problems (i.e. depression) that are more prevalent in girls than boys.¹⁶

While there have been concerns about the misidentification of students in special education training, Congress has focused primarily on the over-identification of certain minority groups.¹⁷ Questions of disproportionality have concentrated almost entirely on race, and in particular, on the over-representation of African-American males.¹⁸ There has been very little attention given to the low and perhaps under-representation of girls and young women. While it is sound policy to spend IDEA dollars on students who have the greatest need, it is unclear whether boys’ needs are actually so much greater than girls’. There is reason for concern that girls may be underrepresented in special education.

Impact of Girls and Young Women Going Undiagnosed

The result of girls being denied special education services involves a host of problems associated with the failure to diagnose and address girls’ learning disabilities, including:

- high rates of academic failure
- teen pregnancy
- unemployment.

A study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services revealed that a significant number of women who received dependent-child services from the government did not have high school diplomas, due in large part to learning disabilities that went undiagnosed and therefore untreated.¹⁹

Girls actually fare better academically than boys in special education. However, they are less likely than their male counterparts to be employed after graduation, less likely to enroll in post-secondary training or education, and more likely to earn low wages.²⁰ It is unclear why, if girls can succeed in special education, they have problems doing so after graduation. Even if they can find employment, women with a work disability (33.8 percent) are more likely to live in

poverty than men with a work disability (24.2 percent).²¹ Clearly this warrants investigation as well.

Lack of Research on Girls with Disabilities

Government funding for research on girls with disabilities has been commissioned under the Women’s Educational Equity Act, which is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as No Child Left Behind. Unfortunately, the WEEA program has received less funding, and there was less interest on the part of previous administrations in investigating women with disabilities. Educational equity for the disabled is a priority for the United States, and AAUW believes this movement towards equity must take into consideration programs that satisfy the unique needs of students who have not been integrated into the educational system.

In its “27th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,” the U.S. Department of Education offered virtually no breakdown of numbers by gender.²² There is simply too little data that disaggregates the racial/ethnic or socioeconomic characteristics of girls and women with disabilities. Studies suggest girls who are impoverished or who survive with scant resources are particularly vulnerable to disabilities (resulting from a lack of food, clothing, quality shelter, health care, and workplace safety).²³ Further, for groups below the poverty line, the highest rates of disability are strongly correlated with race.²⁴

Policy and Research Recommendations

Given the gender disparity in special education identification rates, states should be required to report special education data by gender, in addition to race and ethnicity. AAUW does not believe that adding this requirement would be a substantial burden for many states. This additional data would provide critical national-level gender and special education data on disability, educational environment, discipline, and school completion, as well as gender differences within and across racial and ethnic subgroups. Also, AAUW supports full funding for IDEA; more than thirty years after its passage, it is time for the federal government to fulfill the promise made in the law and fund its share (40 percent) of the program.

There is a significant need for good, reliable research that analyzes not only the gender component of special education, but also focuses on equity and accuracy issues in the identification and placement processes. The following research questions must be answered:

- Are the tools used to assess disability status accurate, and do they capture true barriers to learning for girls and boys?
- Do diagnostic tools accommodate potential differences between boys and girls, and do they reflect potential subtleties in expression for girls with disabilities (as research argues might exist)?
- Why are boys twice as likely to be serviced by special education? If it is found that boys are more likely to have disabilities than girls, is the rate of difference proportional to the

disparity of those receiving special education services (two-thirds male and one-third female, according to U.S. Department of Education)?

- How would boys and girls, of all races and ethnicities, benefit from diagnostic and identification tools that are accurate and therefore allow special education to service those students most in need?

Resources for Advocates

It is AAUW advocates across the county who speak their minds on issues important to them that truly advance AAUW's mission. Stay informed with updates on special education policies and other issues by subscribing to AAUW's Action Network. Make your voice heard in Washington and at home by using AAUW's Two-Minute Activist to urge your members of Congress to support policies that ensure the education needs of girls with disabilities are met. Write a letter to the editor of your local paper to educate and motivate other members of your community. Attend town hall meetings for your members of Congress, or set up a meeting with your elected official's district office near you to discuss these policies. AAUW members can also subscribe to *Washington Update*, our free, weekly e-bulletin that offers an insider's view on the latest policy news, resources for advocates, and programming ideas. For details on these and other actions you can take, visit www.aauw.org/takeaction. For more information, read AAUW's related position papers on Title IX, elementary and secondary education, and higher education, and AAUW's research, including *Where the Girls Are: The Facts About Gender Equity in Education*. You can find these and other resources on our website at www.aauw.org.

For more information, call 202/785-7793 or e-mail VoterEd@aauw.org.

AAUW Public Policy and Government Relations Department
July 2009

¹ American Association of University Women. (June 2009). *2009-11 AAUW Public Policy Program*. Retrieved July 9, 2009, from http://www.aauw.org/advocacy/issue_advocacy/principles_priorities.cfm.

² Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446 (2004).

³ National Center for Learning Disabilities (2006). *IDEA Parent Guide*. Retrieved March 3, 2009, from <http://www.nclld.org/images/stories/Publications/AdvocacyBriefs/IDEA2004ParentGuide/Idea2004ParentGuide.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110 (2001).

⁶ Education of Individuals with Disabilities, 20 U.S.C. § 1401(3)(A) (2006).

⁷ National Education Association. *IDEA Funding Coalition Offers Proposal*. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from <http://www.nea.org/home/18750.htm>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, and Westat. (July 15, 2007). *Table 1-12: Children and students served under IDEA, Part B, in the U.S. and outlying areas, by gender and age group*. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from http://www.ideadata.org/tables30th/ar_1-12.htm.

- ⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (May 29, 2007). Americans with Disabilities Act: July 26. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/010102.html.
- ¹⁰ Coutinho, M.J., Oswald, D.P., & King, M. (2001). *Differences in the Special Education Identification Rates for Boys and Girls: Trends and Issues*, 27-30.
- ¹¹ According to Public Law 108-446, these disabilities are: mental retardation; hearing impairments; speech or language impairments; visual impairments; serious emotional disturbance; orthopedic impairments; autism; traumatic brain injury; other health impairments; or specific learning disabilities.
- ¹² Congressional Research Service. (2001). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Identification and Misidentification of Children with Disabilities* (No. RL31189). Washington, DC: Apling.
- ¹³ Vaishnav, A. and Dedman, B. (July 8, 2002). Special Ed Gender Gap Stirs Worry. *Boston Globe*.
- ¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. (2005). *25th Annual (2003) Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from <http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2003/index.html>.
- ¹⁵ Wehmeyer, M.L. and Schwartz, M. (2001). Research on Gender Bias in Special Education Services. In Rousso, H. and Wehmeyer, M. (Eds.), *Double Jeopardy: Addressing Gender Equity in Special Education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- ¹⁶ Congressional Research Service. (2001). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Identification and Misidentification of Children with Disabilities* (No. RL31189). Washington, DC: Apling.
- ¹⁷ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and the Workforce. (October 7, 2004). *Strengthening and Renewing Special Education: The Improving Education Results for Children with Disabilities Act (H.R. 1350)*. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from <http://republicans.edlabor.house.gov/archive/issues/108th/education/idea/billsummary.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Losen, Dan and Orfield, Gary (Eds.). (2002). *Racial Inequity in Special Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.
- ¹⁹ National Center for Family Literacy. (2000). Learning Disabilities and Gender Bias in an Employment Context. *Momentum*, 3-5.
- ²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (1998.)
- ²¹ Jans, L. and Stoddard, S. (1999). *Chartbook on Women and Disability in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from http://www.infouse.com/disabilitydata/womendisability/3_6.php.
- ²² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. (2007). *27th Annual (2005) Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Retrieved January 14, 2009, from <http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2005/parts-b-c/index.html>.
- ²³ Rousso, Harilyn. (2000). *Girls and Women With Disabilities: An International Overview and Summary of Research*. Oakland, CA: World Institute on Disability and New York: Rehabilitation International.
- ²⁴ LaPlante, M.P. and Carlson, D. (1996). Disability in the United States: Prevalence and Causes, 1992. *Disability Statistics Report (7)*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.