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An Analysis of Special Education Outplacement in Connecticut

Tobey Duble Moore **CEPARE Rapid Research Brief** **December 2025**

Inclusion of students with disabilities is a practice engrained in the U.S. modern education system. It is supported by law under both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) through its requirement that states establish consistent and challenging standards, assessment, and accountability systems to ensure performance of all students, and under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through its requirement of the provision of a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004; ESEA 2015). These laws work in concert, ensuring that students with disabilities are afforded the opportunity to access the general education curriculum whenever it is appropriate through the use of inclusive practices.

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) and Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) released recent guidance on Building and Sustaining Inclusive Educational Practices (OSERS & OESE, 2025). In this document, the Department of Education stresses the importance of inclusion of students with disabilities. Under IDEA, students with disabilities are afforded the right to FAPE (IDEA, 2004). The definition of "appropriate," has been legally debated since the law was first passed. Currently, it is taken to mean that the student's local education agency (LEA or district) is responsible for providing an education program including accommodations, modifications, and related services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" (Endrew F, 2017). Under IDEA, students with disabilities are also afforded a right to LRE, which means that they "are educated in the same classrooms as their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate" (IDEA, 2004). Balancing FAPE And LRE is a difficult task for districts, especially when applied to students with highly individualized and intensive educational needs. These two requirements of IDEA are reconciled through inclusive practices, which may include an array of supports such as related services, including modifications and accommodations that increase a student's ability to access the general education curriculum whenever possible (OSERS & OESE, 2025).

In some cases, districts place students in settings outside of the home district, a practice known as outplacement. This brief provides an overview of what outplacement looks like in Connecticut with a focus on the costs of educating students with intensive needs both within and outside of the LEA setting, the benefits of in-district placements and outplacements, and recommendations to help LEAs reduce costly out-of-district expenses.

What is Outplacement?

Despite the nationwide push for inclusion of all students in the general education setting, students with disabilities are sometimes excluded from the general education through the process of outplacement. Outplacement, a practice where school districts send students with disabilities with intensive needs to separate schools outside of the LEA is used relatively frequently in the state of Connecticut. In its 45th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA in 2023, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) reported that compared to all states, Connecticut educates the second highest percentage (6.3%) of its students in "separate schools," a term defined as "an educational environment that includes less than 50% children without disabilities," (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Outplacement is often seen as a way for districts to provide FAPE to students with intensive needs. When a student's behavioral, educational, or general overall needs cannot be met within an LEA, teams sometimes determine that a separate school setting is where the student can best access the appropriate education they are afforded by IDEA. Outplacement settings frequently have staff who specialize in supporting students with intensive needs (Lehr et al., 2009). They also often provide lower student-teacher ratios and other more individualized supports such as 1:1 aids, or teaching styles that may not be conducive to general education settings such as discrete trial training for students with autism. Unfortunately, oversight and monitoring of the quality of instruction and staffing in these programs is minimal (Lehr et al, 2009).

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Outplacement Background

Since the initial passage of IDEA, then named PL-94-142 in 1975, policy and practice have reflected an overall push for increased inclusion of students with disabilities (Zigmond et al., 2009). There are advocates on both sides of the inclusion argument, with one side pushing for full inclusion for all students and the other arguing that for certain students with severe disabilities and high needs of support, the least restrictive environment that is appropriate may mean a fully separate school (Kauffman, 2023). Despite the overall societal push for inclusion, many schools do not have the capacity to support students with severe disabilities. Especially in smaller or underfunded districts, the highly individualized nature of some of these supports makes it hard for LEAs to fund and effectively build programs that deliver an appropriate education. Under IDEA, students with disabilities are afforded the right to related services to support access to the general curriculum. The term "related services" is broad and can include common services such as transportation, which costs an average of $25,000 per student in CT, or speech-language pathology services, which require personnel costs, as well as intensive and highly individualized services such as specialized assistive technology. All of these individualized needs can be costly.

What Type of Student is Typically Outplaced?

Many of the students who are most likely to be excluded from the general education setting are those with intellectual or other disabilities, which often encompasses students with multiple or more severe disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). However, other disability categories also account for a large proportion of outplaced students. For example, in Connecticut, students with autism and emotional disability (ED), two of the disability categories most often associated with the exhibition of externalizing interfering behaviors, make up 21.2% of the population of students with disabilities. However, students with autism and ED spend limited time in inclusion settings, with only 46% and 43% respectively of the students in each of these categories spending 80% or more of their time with nondisabled peers (CSDE, 2025b). A study conducted in Connecticut in 2016 found that most students who were outplaced were those with autism and ED while students with orthopedic impairments, deaf-blindness, or visual impairments were more likely to remain in-district (RESC Alliance, 2016).

Negative Outcomes of Restrictive Setting Placements

While outplacement schools are sometimes able to provide supports that are unavailable in the student's LEA, such as specially trained staff, specialized environments, or physical modifications, research has shown that there are also negative consequences of educating students in more restrictive settings. One main concern with outplacement is that it severely limits any opportunities for inclusion, as these settings are typically only for students with disabilities, thus restricting LRE. Studies have shown that students educated in restrictive settings often have less rigorous IEP goals than those in general education settings and are less likely to be exposed to actively engaged learning and academic literacy content (Kurth, 2019). In fact, these placements can often exacerbate behavioral problems in students who are already at risk (Powers et al., 2016). On the other hand, students placed in inclusive settings demonstrated improved academic and social achievement, higher rates of self-determination, and increased perceptions of belonging (Wehmeyer et al., 2020). Another concern about restrictive settings like outplacements is disproportionality. Students of some racial backgrounds, particularly Black and brown males, are placed in restrictive settings at much higher and disproportionate rates than white students (Kaufman, 2023).

Recently, one study on outplacement schools in Connecticut revealed that some schools overrelied on restraint and seclusion (i.e. using time-out rooms instead of developing positive behavior supports), experienced staffing shortages, and provided inadequate individualized supports for students (Office of the Child Advocate & Disability Rights CT, 2024). The schools and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) have denied these allegations, but state oversight of these private placements remains a concern (Savitt, 2024). Also, while about 75% of these facilities are non-profits, about 25% are owned by private equity firms, which many worry will lead to decreased oversight and a focus on profits, not students (Morris, 2024)

Outplacement in Connecticut

The reasons behind Connecticut's high rates of outplacement are likely multifactorial, but the high number of small LEAs within the state, as well as inequities in funding each of those districts, may play a role. Students with intensive educational needs can require extensive services, the costs of which are often not feasible for a district to maintain to serve a very small percentage of their student population (Putterman, 2024). The needs of many of these students are not just intensive but also highly individualized. A small LEA with a relatively small budget and few staff may struggle to provide the individualized services needed by just a few students. Conversely, in some of the large, underfunded LEAs, the cost of implementing some of these intensive supports is too great (Putterman, 2024) Because of these barriers, districts often outplace these students in schools that are specifically designed to support students with intensive needs.

However, the cost of outplacing students can be very high, requiring both individual LEAs and the state to pay for outplacement costs; the overall tuition spent by Connecticut districts in 2022-2023 was $636,181,633 (School + State Finance Project, 2024). Connecticut districts requested over $250 million in excess cost grants from the state –funds typically used to reimburse LEAs for out-of-district costs that are deemed "excessive" (currently, this is defined as 4.5 times the average education cost per student; CSDE, 2024). Students who qualify for these excess cost reimbursements make up less than 1% of the total number of students enrolled in CT public schools (School + State Finance Project, 2024). That number has remained steady in recent years despite the increase in the overall number of students with disabilities in the state. This means that a small percentage of students account for a large percentage of district and state spending (School + State Finance Project, 2024).

Districts incur costs for both out-of-district placements and in-district investments. To outplace students, districts must fund each individual student's tuition, transportation to and from the school, related services and technology beyond what is included in tuition, administrative full-time equivalent (FTE) to manage outplacements, and legal fees and independent external evaluations (IEEs) for cases that involve the dispute resolution process. To develop effective in-district supports for students, districts have to pay for building space and fund FTE at the school and district level including special education teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and more. They must also ensure that staff are properly trained, and that access to services within the school and community is available for students with highly intensive needs. Beyond these investments, districts have similar types of costs related to those incurred by sending students out-of-district, including administrative FTE, legal fees and IEEs, and assistive technology. While some of the costs are similar, the main difference between sending a student out-of-district and keeping a student in-district is whether a school proactively invests in effective and relevant placements for the students or reactively pays tuition for students whom they cannot provide FAPE within their district setting.

The process of educating students with disabilities within the often contrasting legal requirements of LRE and FAPE is complex, and LEAs face challenges in both outplacing students and developing in-district supports. The following case studies of districts in Connecticut highlight some of the complexities of providing appropriate supports for students with intensive needs.

Case Studies

Cost of In-District Education

Educating students with disabilities in their local schools requires a large amount of school and district-level special education support. In Vernon Public Schools, for example, full and part-time special education employees such as a Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA), behavior technicians, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists are hired at the district level to support district-wide implementation of needed special education services and supports. Other district-level expenses include buildings to house special programs and physical items such as audiological services or assistive technology. At the school level, investments allow students with disabilities to access LRE within their neighborhood or at least an in-district school. Vernon, for example, has six different types of alternative education settings across grade levels with various foci such as an elementary program specifically designed for students with autism and a high school program that integrates academic and behavioral individualized support. The LEA also maintains a setting for providing services to students who have been expelled. (Vernon Public Schools, 2025). Staffing and maintaining these programs requires a large investment at the district level. In Meriden, staffing investments for students in specialized autism and behavioral programs cost 1.2 million in 2024-2025. While the investment in these programs can be costly, districts have already determined that providing intensive alternative education settings within the district is cost effective, with Meriden saving over $2 million by enrolling students in their Students and Teachers Achieving Remarkable Success (STARS) program instead of sending them to outplacements (Meriden Public Schools Data, 2025).

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Cost of Outplacement

Sending students to outplacements can be very burdensome to LEAs. Tuition, the main expense, varies greatly based on student need and program capacity. In one district, these costs ranged from $24,158 per school year for one student to $219,004 per school year for another (Vernon Public Schools, 2024). Transportation of these students, for which the school district is also responsible, is another large cost, averaging about $25,000 per student per year in one district. Total out-placement cost can vary greatly year to year based on fluctuating district populations as well, making it hard for LEAs to effectively budget for out-of-district placements. Meriden, for example, had nine previously outplaced students move to their district in 2023-2024, adding over $700,000 of unexpected costs to their overall budget (Meriden Public Schools Data, 2025). Temporary placements, often related to discipline or safety concerns often vary as well and are hard to budget for. LEAs also have to consider the legal fees and administrative FTE costs associated with both agreed upon outplacements and those that are decided through the dispute resolution process.

Recommendations

Overall, LEAs face a difficult challenge in providing both FAPE and LRE for students with disabilities. A small number of students with intensive and individualized care needs can overwhelm a district's ability to provide the services necessary to support the students' learning. Due to their individualized nature, these costs are highly variable and require expertise in different areas of educational support, which can cause staffing and programmatic planning difficulties for districts. On the other hand, outplacing students creates volatile costs, with LEAs having to pay for tuition at intensive settings, transportation, legal fees, and other administrative costs. In Connecticut, where excess costs funds are rarely fully funded (School + State Finance Project, 2024), the financial burden on districts to pay for out-of-district placements is large, and the educational benefit, while sometimes appropriate for certain students, is not always clear. Outplacement settings are more restrictive environments that limit opportunities for inclusion with non-disabled peers. While some students with highly intensive needs may require services in separate settings, evidence-based practices can help increase the ability of LEAs to provide FAPE for many high needs students within their home setting, allowing schools to proactively develop effective supports in more inclusive settings instead of reactively paying costly tuition for students whom they are unable to serve under FAPE. These recommendations for practice are included below.

Early Intervention

Many of the students who are excluded from general education settings are diagnosed with autism, even though autism is only the fourth most common disability category nation-wide, though its rates are continuously increasing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Investment in students with autism is critical to reducing out-of-district placements. For these students, early intervention has proven to be a highly effective way to set students up for success. Early intervention services are likely to have positive long-term outcomes on children diagnosed with autism. In fact, children who lose their diagnosis of autism later in life typically received earlier diagnosis and treatment (NIH, 2021) These services occur at or before children reach pre-school age, are based in the theory of applied behavior analysis, and target skills such as communication, social-emotional skills, and daily living skills. Students who receive effective early behavioral intervention services before the age of 5 demonstrate less severe developmental diagnoses, demonstrate improved functioning across domains, and many return to general education classrooms when they reach school-age (Cooper, 2022). While provision of these services requires an initial investment, the reduction in costs over the child's lifetime shows that an investment in early intervention services may be a beneficial way to reduce overall costs for a child's education while improving outcomes. One study conducted a cost-benefit analysis in terms of cost of educating a child and determined that providing effective early intervention services saved an average of $63,707 per child (Cooper, 2022). While early intervention services may not reduce costs for all children, there is evidence to support their use as an effective way to save money by providing early, up-front effective services to decrease the intensity and therefore cost of services required as a child ages within the school system.

Comprehensive Wraparound Supports

Many of the students who are sent out-of-district require a wide array of services, many of which are hard for LEAs to provide due to cost or staffing restraints (Bowden, 2020). An emerging holistic model used to support mental health, family, and other social needs that cannot necessarily be met with school staff is comprehensive student support. Other terms such as wraparound services, integrated student support, or community schools are used to describe this holistic approach. This model addresses a broad range of student needs including social services, physical and mental health, parent education, and academic support. While available to all students, these supports are often used for students with highly intensive and individualized Tier 3 needs. While specific models differ, typically a coordinator from the program (typically a social worker or school psychologist) organizes the systems needed to support students, including participating in student support teams, conducting school-wide screeners or reviews, building and maintaining relationships with community organizations, monitoring student progress, and collaborating with other tiered systems of support within the school or district (City Connects, 2025). One study found that providing City Connects, a comprehensive student support model, in schools in a major city demonstrated cost savings of $9550 per student (Bowden, 2020). While this applies to all students, not just those outplaced, a comprehensive student support model offers supports that could be instrumental in providing LEAs with the framework and structure needed to integrate community supports with effective in-school supports to ensure students with more complex social needs can access an array of services while remaining in their local school district.

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Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Many students who are removed from the general education setting are done so due to behaviors that interfere with the learning environment, as demonstrated by the low rates of full inclusion for students with autism or ED (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Inability to manage student behavior is one of the leading causes of teacher turnover (Kwok, 2022) and few teacher preparation programs sufficiently train future teachers to implement effective classroom management skills (Freeman et al., 2014). Many of the barriers to keeping students in their neighborhood schools likely stem from a lack of effective ways to address and support student behavior. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is one evidence-based multi-tiered framework that can be used to improve a school's overall provision of behavior management. PBIS has demonstrated a variety of positive outcomes for students and staff including improving social, emotional, and behavioral competencies, reducing disruptive behavior, improving student academic outcomes and attendance, improving school climate and safety, and increasing teacher's use of effective classroom management practices (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023).

In addition to the evidence-base supporting a number of overall positive outcomes for schools and students, including students with disabilities, there is research that demonstrates that PBIS, when implemented with fidelity, can be a cost-effective way to reduce out-of-district placement spending, by providing a framework to develop effective supports that help decrease student behaviors that interfere with learning (Bradshaw, et al., 2020; Putnam et al., 2002). Costs involved in developing and maintaining PBIS in a district vary but typically include initial expenses such training and PD for school staff, salary/FTE for PBIS team coaches and members at the school and district level, and investment in school-wide behavior data systems. Estimates of the cost of PBIS implementation vary but are predicted to be around $13,000 per year (Swain-Bradway et al., 2017). As many of the costs in implementation are fixed, there are cost savings to implementing district-wide, especially in larger LEAs. Investment in multi-tiered systems of support like PBIS is a cost-effective way to increase behavioral support at the school level that can lead to lower out-of-district placement costs.

Policy Recommendations

While investments at the district level can help reduce the number of students who require outplacement settings, there are also larger scale state-wide policy initiatives that can help address the high costs of outplacing students. While a full description of these policies is beyond the scope of this brief, it is important to note that state funding and policy can help alleviate some of the financial burden on LEAs and support the development of effective programming to keep students in district. Staffing shortages are a growing problem in the field of special education, with 78% of schools nationwide reporting difficulties in hiring special education staff (NCES, 2022). Building effective in-district programming to support students with intensive needs requires specific staffing expertise. Policies that address teacher shortages can help districts fill much-needed positions that can help support high-needs students and keep them within their home district. Other financial investments at the state level can help LEAs build programming that can successfully keep students from being outplaced, as evidenced by the successful programs in Meriden (Meriden Public Schools Data, 2025). The state could also address some of the high costs of transportation by incentivizing more efficient and cost-effective strategies for outplacement transportation. Finally, some states implement special education rate-setting, a practice where the state reviews budgets for approved private schools and determines an appropriate tuition rate, keeping costs across settings consistent and transparent (Donaldson et al., 2025; New York State Education Department, 2025; Wulfson, 2008).

Conclusion

Determining the best way to educate students with intensive, individualized needs is incredibly complex, especially in Connecticut, where there are many small, low-population rural districts and a few high needs urban districts, both of which struggle to provide in-district supports at the individualized level that is sometimes required under IDEA. Case studies in Connecticut show that investing in effective programming for students with intensive needs is less costly than outplacing students, and it allows special education students to have more opportunities for inclusion. While specialized placements may always be required for some students with highly intensive needs, it is critical that both LEAs and the state invest proactively in high quality programming within each district to ensure that students with disabilities can access an inclusive, least-restrictive environment as much as possible, in order to reduce the need for unnecessary costly and unpredictable restrictive outplacements.

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CEPARE produces high-quality research, evaluation, and policy analysis that informs leaders and policymakers on a range of pressing issues, with a particular focus on enhancing social justice and equity across p-20 educational settings in Connecticut and beyond. CEPARE produced this Rapid Research Brief as part of the SETER Alliance, which aims to strengthen and support learning opportunities in Connecticut's Alliance districts. Learn more about CEPARE cepare.uconn.edu. Access the PDF VERSION (including all references and appendices).

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