

PRE-ELEMENTARY EDUCATION LONGITUDINAL STUDY  
**PEELS PROGRESS**

# Notes

NCSEER 2010-3004

## FINDINGS

From 2003–04 to 2004–05, 23 percent of children who remained in special education changed primary disability categories.

From 2003–04 to 2004–05, 14 percent of children moved from the developmental delay to the speech or language impairment category, and 4 percent moved to the learning disability category.

Reclassification rates did not vary by gender or race/ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

## *Preschoolers with Disabilities: Reclassification Across Disability Categories*

The Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS) has been examining the preschool and early elementary school experiences of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children with disabilities. The study followed a nationally representative sample of more than 3,000 children who received preschool special education services until 2009, when they were ages 8 through 10.

This *PEELS Progress Notes* presents emerging findings related to reclassification across primary disabilities. The findings in this document are from Carlson et al. (2008).

### **Movement Across Primary Disability Categories**

Children may move from one primary disability category to another, a process referred to as reclassification. Previous research suggests that 5 to 6 percent of students with disabilities are reclassified each year (Halgren & Clarizio 1993; Walker et al. 1988), and that reclassification is most likely to occur in preschool (Halgren & Clarizio 1993). Children in one particular group—those identified as having a developmental delay<sup>2</sup>—must be reclassified into another disability group or declassified when they reach the age at which their state stops using the developmental delay category (see *IDEA* 2004, Section 1401). In addition, past research on preschoolers has reported that students with physical/multiple disabilities, speech or language impairments, or emotional disturbance are more likely than other students to be reclassified (Halgren & Clarizio 1993; Walker et al. 1988).

### **Data Sources**

Data in this document were obtained from two sources:

- **PEELS Wave 1 parent interviews.** A parent/guardian of each child in the sample was asked to complete a 1-hour computer-assisted telephone interview about his/her child's health and disability, behavior, school programs and services, special education and related services, child care, and out-of-school activities. Respondents also were asked a series of questions about their household, its resources, and their family background. The response rate for the 2003–04 parent interview was 96 percent.

<sup>1</sup> Chi-squares were performed to examine statistically significant differences across subgroups at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>2</sup> Developmental delay is an optional federal disability category for children from birth through age 9 (or a subset of that age group) used by 44 states in 2003 (Danaher, Kraus, Armijo, & Hipps 2003).

- PEELS Wave 1 and Wave 2 teacher questionnaires.**  
 Researchers used either the *Early Childhood Teacher Questionnaire*, *Kindergarten Teacher Questionnaire*, or *Elementary School Teacher Questionnaire* to ask teachers about each child’s experiences in the class or program. Questionnaire items addressed classroom staffing and materials, children’s interactions with nondisabled peers, and children’s transitions in and out of their current programs. They also included items about each child’s primary disability, which was used for analysis in this report. The response rate was 79 percent in 2003–04 and 84 percent in 2004–05.

*Note:* Data collection instruments can be found at [www.peels.org](http://www.peels.org).

**Overall Finding: 23 Percent of Preschoolers Changed Primary Disability Label in 1 Year**

From 2003–04 to 2004–05, 23 percent ( $N=546$ ) of children who remained in special education changed primary disability categories, and 77 percent stayed in the same category ( $S.E.=1.7$  and  $2.0$ , respectively).<sup>3</sup> Reclassification rates did not vary by gender or race/ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-three percent of males ( $S.E.=1.8$ ) and 22 percent of females ( $S.E.=2.0$ ) were reclassified; 20 percent of Blacks ( $S.E.=2.6$ ), 22 percent of Hispanics ( $S.E.=2.4$ ), and 23 percent of Whites ( $S.E.=1.7$ ) were reclassified.

The table shows the percentage of children in each of nine disability groups who received preschool special education services and whose disability label was stable, that is, it remained the same from 2003–04 to 2004–05.

In 2003–04, 27 percent of all preschoolers with disabilities were identified as having a developmental delay as their primary disability. From 2003–04 to 2004–05, 64 percent of children initially identified as having a developmental delay retained that label ( $S.E.=3.2$ ). Fourteen percent ( $S.E.=2.0$ ) moved from the developmental delay to the speech or language impairment category, and 4 percent ( $S.E.=0.7$ ) moved to the learning disability category.<sup>5</sup>

Some children also moved into the developmental delay category from other disability groups. For example, 13 percent of children identified as having an emotional

**Percentage of young children who received preschool special education services whose disability classification remained the same from 2003–04 to 2004–05**

Disability classification	%
<b>Total</b>	77.4
Autism	89.4
Developmental delay	64.1
Emotional disturbance	60.4
Learning disability	69.7
Mental retardation	71.4
Orthopedic impairment	66.7
Other health impairment	57.2
Speech or language impairment	88.3
Low-incidence disability	61.6

disturbance ( $S.E.=6.3$ ), 9 percent of children identified as having an orthopedic impairment or other health impairment ( $S.E.=6.4$  and  $6.6$ , respectively), and 10 percent of children identified as having a low-incidence disability (deafness, deaf-blindness, vision impairment, or traumatic brain injury) ( $S.E.=2.5$ ) in 2003–04 were identified as having a developmental delay in 2004–05.

**References Cited in This Report**

Carlson, E., Daley, T., Bitterman, A., Riley, J., Keller, B., Jenkins, E., & Markowitz, J. (2008). *Changes in the characteristics, services, and performance of preschoolers with disabilities from 2003–04 to 2004–05, Wave 2 overview report from the Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study*. Rockville, MD: Westat. Available at [www.peels.org](http://www.peels.org).

Danaher, J., Kraus, R., Armijo, C., & Hipps, C. (2003). *Section 619 Profile*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

Halgren, D. P., & Clarizio, H. F. (1993). Categorical and programming changes in special education services. *Exceptional Children*, 59(6), 547–555.

<sup>3</sup> S.E. = standard error.

<sup>4</sup> Chi-squares were performed to examine statistically significant differences across subgroups at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>5</sup> Because of small sample sizes, estimates for the remaining disability categories were imprecise.

Walker, D., Singer, J., Palfrey, J., Orza, M., Wenger, M., & Butler, J. (1988). Who leaves and who stays in special education: A 2-year follow-up study. *Exceptional Children*, 54(5), 393–402.



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