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DOES STRICT ADHERENCE TO AN APTITUDE-ACHIEVEMENT DISCREPANCY  
FORMULA EXCLUDE STUDENTS WHO ARE TRULY IN NEED  
OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?

by  
Lisa R. Vizthum

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Masters of Art Degree in the Graduate Division  
of Rowan College in  
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Approved by

Professor

Date Approved 4/14/97

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My husband, Ed, for his understanding, support, and confidence in me not only through this project but always.

## **ABSTRACT**

Lisa R. Vizthum

Does strict adherence to an aptitude-achievement discrepancy formula exclude students who truly need special education services?

1997

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Margaret M. Shuff

Learning Disabilities Graduate Program

The purpose of this study was to review current practices of Child Study Teams when classifying a student as perceptually impaired in order to determine if children are being misclassified, and also to determine if strict guidelines will really lower the numbers of children being classified as perceptually impaired. A second purpose was to survey districts as to what programs they currently have in place in order to discourage students from dropping out of high school.

A survey/questionnaire was sent to 22 Directors of Special Services in a given county. A total of 12 districts responded, representing a participation rate of 55%. The participating districts represented a variety of district factor groupings and included four

high schools. The survey form included questions on: demographic information; the district's policy to determine "severe discrepancy"; the use of functional override; prediction rates of classified students and high school dropouts if a strict adherence to a discrepancy formula were followed; and programs to address the resulting problems of such a situation as well as programs already offered to discourage students from dropping out.

This study proved that eligibility criteria do vary from district to district. However, it appears that many Child Study Teams do look for a statistical level of significance when classifying a child as perceptually impaired and do not employ the use of a functional override as often as may be implied by the Office of Special Education. The sample of high schools surveyed did offer a variety of programs to discourage dropping out of high school, yet some rates were as high as 13.7%, suggesting that perhaps our current approach to education needs some major reform.

## MINI-ABSTRACT

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The diagnosis of Learning Disabilities (LD) in school aged children is likely the most difficult to make accurately of all diagnoses provided under PL94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) (Reynolds, 1984-85). As published in the Federal Register, a determination of LD is made in part on the basis of "whether the child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of seven areas relating to communication skills and mathematical abilities" (Federal Register, 1977, 42, p. 65802). However, no specific guidelines established the magnitude of a "severe discrepancy," and no instruction delineated how to measure or demonstrate its existence.

Education is a state rather than federal responsibility. Each state is to assume the primary policymaking responsibilities regarding identification of LD students. This requirement has resulted in different identification criterion from state to state, which has resulted in a variance of students served in special education programs.

The growing numbers of identified LD youngsters have made our classification system and the costs associated with LD a major concern for policymakers. Based on a study of all 50 states, it was recommended that minimizing misclassification be a major target for policymakers, particularly if financial incentives are available (American

Association of School Administrators, 1983).

The New Jersey Office of Special Education has acknowledged that wide variability exists among districts in regard to the students classified as Perceptually Impaired (PI). A recommendation to the State Board of Education by Commissioner Klagholz was made to adopt criteria which will include a statistical analysis, as part of the assessment process, to determine which pupils exhibit a severe discrepancy between cognitive ability and achievement (Klagholz, 1996). It is anticipated, with this improved procedure, that there will be a lowering of rates of students classified as PI (Gantwerk, 1996).

#### Need for the Study

Currently, the state of New Jersey does not have an operational statement to define "severe discrepancy." Some districts have adopted policies requiring that a severe discrepancy exist between ability and achievement in order for a child to be classified PI. A standard deviation of 1.0 to 2.0 is used by most districts. However, many districts have declined to write a definition of severe discrepancy and may view functional assessment as an overriding factor if a severe discrepancy does not exist statistically. It becomes obvious that students who are classified as PI in one New Jersey district may not qualify as such in another. There needs to be a more objective measure in place that allows for as much consistency as humanly possible.

Recent research by the Office of Special Education in New Jersey concluded that 6.2 percent of the public school population is classified Perceptually Impaired. This represents over 75,000 students and 51 percent of all children classified by Child Study

Teams. The range among districts was from a low of 2 percent to a high of 22 percent. This wide variation within the category has prompted the Department of Special Education to provide statewide training and to disseminate a comprehensive technical assistance document. The overall goal will be to apply a consistent criteria, utilizing a statistical method as part of the assessment process, in order to see a decrease in the number of students classified as PI.

Guidelines need to be established for the definition of severe discrepancy, but studies must be initiated on how to deal with students who no longer qualify for classification. If students do not meet the eligibility criteria for classification, schools must learn to deal with these youngsters within the regular education program. Research needs to be conducted on programs that can be utilized to assist these students to be successful in elementary, high school, or post secondary programs.

#### Definition of Terms

Alternative Programs - Educational programs that may in part, or in full replace the traditional academic programs offered by both elementary and high schools.

Cohort Rates - A measure of what happens to a single group of students over a period of time.

Event Dropout Rates - A measure of the proportion of students who drop out of school in a single year without completing high school.

Functional Assessment - N.J.A.C. 6:28-3.4(d)6i-vi; requires a minimum of one structured observation by each child study team member in other than a testing session; interview with the pupil's parent(s); interview with the teacher(s)

identifying the potentially educationally disabled pupil; review of the pupil's developmental/educational history including records and interviews; review of interventions documented by the classroom teacher(s) and others who work with the pupil; and one or more informal measure(s) which may include, but not be limited to:

- (1) Surveys and inventories;
- (2) Analysis of work samples;
- (3) Trial teaching;
- (4) Self report;
- (5) Criterion referenced tests;
- (6) Curriculum based assessment; and
- (7) Informal Rating scales

Functional Override - A process in which a child study team supersedes the severe discrepancy formula of ability versus achievement with the functional assessment factor for classification as Perceptually Impaired.

High School Dropout - A student who has stopped attending high school prior to receiving a diploma.

Perceptually Impaired - is defined in N.J.A.C. 6:28-3.5(d)3ii as a specific learning disability manifested by a severe discrepancy between the pupil's current achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas:

1. Basic reading skills;
2. Reading comprehension;

3. Oral expression;
4. Listening comprehension;
5. Mathematics computation;
6. Mathematics reasoning; and
7. Written expression.

Standardized Assessment - According to N.J.A.C. 6:28-3.4(d)5i-iv, it is defined as test(s) which are individually administered; valid and reliable; normed on a representative population; and scored as either standard scores with a standard deviation or norm referenced scores.

Status Dropout Rate - A measure of the proportion of the population who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out.

### Research Question

Does strict adherence to an aptitude-achievement discrepancy formula exclude students who truly need special education services?

Hypothesis #1 - With strict adherence to a discrepancy formula, more students are not found eligible for services.

Hypothesis #2 - The drop out rate for those students who were referred but not classified, will exceed those of classified students.

Hypothesis #3 - Across the districts surveyed, there will be no appreciable difference in viable options/programs for non-classified students.

### Limitations of the Study

The intention of this graduate project is to review the current Child Study Team practices of a given set of districts when classifying children as Perceptually Impaired. The focus will be on the consistency of criteria used by the various districts in arriving at a classification of Perceptually Impaired. Consideration will be given to the relationship of program options for referred students who were classified as Perceptually Impaired using a severe discrepancy formula and program options for referred students who were not classified on the basis of eligibility criterion set forth by district policy.

Limitations of this study may include the inability to interpret the conciseness of a written policy regarding "severe discrepancy" or the total lack of a written policy for a given district. Further limitations would include poor participation in the questionnaire/survey distributed to the Child Study Team directors. Some respondents may omit certain portions of the requested data, which will in turn impact on the results of this study. It is essential that at least three high schools participate and that they have collected and recorded recent information regarding graduation vs. dropout rates.

### Overview

Chapter 2 will review literature on defining learning disability, determining severe discrepancy, distinguishing between low achievers vs. learning disabled students, high school drop out rates, and programs to lower these rates. Chapter 3 will include the methodology used to review the current practices of Child Study Teams in arriving at the classification of Perceptually Impaired. Chapter 4 will share the results of these practices, while Chapter 5 will include discussion and conclusions of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### Defining Learning Disability

Since the inception of the learning disability (LD) label in the 1960s, controversy has surrounded the definition and criteria for LD placement (Frankenberger & Harper, 1987). Originally, the term learning disability was conceptualized to describe a category of special education comprised of students who did not "fit" into other exceptionalities. These students were not achieving commensurate with their ability level, but did not qualify for placement in other special education categories (Mercer, King-Sears & Mercer, 1990).

In 1968, the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) was formed by the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) in order to develop an acceptable definition for learning disabilities. This committee submitted a definition that was incorporated into Public Law 91-230, the Specific Learning Disabilities Act of 1969:

Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual

handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or to environmental disadvantage. (USOE, 1968, p. 34)

This definition, known as the NACHC or USOE definition, was used extensively. A compilation of two surveys of state departments of education conducted in 1974 - 1975 revealed that 62 percent of the fifty states used the NACHC definition or some variation of it (Mercer, Forgnone & Wolking, 1976).

Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142), passed in November, 1975, included a request for the USOE to define LD more precisely. As a result, 1975 -1977 was a turbulent era in the field of LD and professionals were faced with making crucial decisions about selecting, eliminating, or integrating the various positions on definition (Mercer, Hughes & Mercer, 1985). In 1976, regulations were proposed which focused on determining the discrepancy between ability and achievement by using a specific formula (USOE, 1976). Because the reaction to this proposal was instant and overwhelmingly negative (Danielson & Bauer, 1978), the formula was dismissed.

After two years of efforts to improve the definition, the USOE released the 1977 Federal Register, which included the regulations for defining and identifying LD students under PL 94-142. These regulations endorsed a definition almost identical to NACHC's:

"Specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language,

spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (USOE, 1977, p. 65083)

PL 94-142 also specifies that a classification of specific learning disability should be applied only to children who have a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more expressive or receptive skills, such as written expression, listening and reading comprehension, or mathematics.

The results of a follow-up survey in 1985 showed that 72 percent of the 50 states used the USOE definition or a variation of it. It also revealed a trend toward an increased use of the academic, exclusion, and discrepancy components (Mercer et al., 1985). Increasing numbers of students found eligible for learning disability placement (U.S. Department of Education, 1984) has prompted professionals to continue searching for a definition of learning disabilities that could be used more clearly to determine eligibility for services. The criteria for the definition also warrant exploration because it is the criteria for LD placement that constitute operationalization of the definition (Hagerty & Abramson, 1987; Siegel, 1988; Vance, Bahr, Huberty, & Ewer-Jones, 1988).

The United States Office of Special Education Programs reports that about twelve

percent of elementary and secondary students receive special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The State of New Jersey reports that currently anywhere from 9 percent to 16 percent of children in the state receive special education services depending on the numerators and denominators in the ratio formula. The higher percentage would include pupils between the ages of three through twenty-one years, the lower percentage would include pupils between the ages of five through eighteen years. According to the New Jersey Statistical Report (1995), the state special education classification rate appears to have leveled off at just above 9.4 percent. The classification rate has remained in the 9 percent range since 1990 and is projected by the state to remain at this level through the year 2001.

The perceptually impaired classification accounts for the largest number of students with educational disabilities as well as the highest percentage as a proportion of public school enrollment (Statistical Report, 1995). This classification is the only category that has consistently increased each year since 1978. In public school enrollment figures, the perceptually impaired classification has increased from 2.2 percent of the student population in 1978 to 6.5 percent of the student population in 1993. This accounts for an increase of 295 percent for classification as perceptually impaired. When comparing the actual numbers of perceptually impaired students in New Jersey, there were 31,083 classified in this category in 1978 and 72,333 classified as perceptually impaired in 1993, with an increase of 233 percent over a fifteen year period.

It is this dramatic increase that has prompted the State of New Jersey to review its practices on classifying children with the current medical model. It is proposed by

Commissioner Klagholz that a new system with the designation, "Eligible for Special Education" with specific criteria be established. This proposal also recommends that there be one classification of "Eligible for Special Education" and that specific criteria for eligibility be based on current and revised categorical definitions. If this proposal is adopted, the definitions of perceptually impaired and neurologically impaired will be deleted and be replaced with definitions for specific learning disability and traumatic brain injury which are federal categories. Criteria for the definition of specific learning disability are also being proposed to provide assistance in determining which students are determined eligible in this category (1996).

It has been suggested by Chalfant (1989) and others that eligibility decisions may often be based on a student's need for special help rather than on whether or not a student meets eligibility criteria. It is suggestions like these, combined with recent statistics, that necessitate the need for a working definition and rational guidelines in order to classify a child as learning disabled.

### Discrepancy Factors

The importance of the severe discrepancy component of the PL 94-142 definition has been obvious since the definition was first introduced (Reynolds, 1992). As published in the Federal Register, a determination of learning disabilities is made in part on the basis of whether the child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of seven areas relating to communication skills and mathematical abilities (Federal Register, 1977, 42, p. 65082).

A Federal Work Group on Measurement Issues in the Assessment of Learning

Disabilities was formed in 1983. The Work Group was asked to evaluate four questions and to suggest "best practice," state-of-the-art measurement solutions where appropriate. The Work Group was given a free hand to enter into any discussion considered appropriate and to recommend whatever practices the Group felt most appropriate, independent of any concerns for costs, numbers of children to be served, or difficulties of implementation. The four questions posed to the Work Group were:

1. Has the use of different measurement models in different states contributed to the great disparities in the proportion of LD children served among the various states?
2. Given current measurement practices, what types of children are currently being served as LD who may not actually have a learning disability?
3. What constitutes a severe discrepancy, from a statistical perspective, between aptitude and achievement in the evaluation of a learning disability?
4. What is the state-of-the-art in evaluating children who may be learning disabled?

The Group evaluated a variety of formulas and procedures. As a result, formulas and variations involving the use of grade-equivalent or age-equivalent scores were uniformly rejected as grossly inadequate and misleading. It was felt that age and grade equivalents do not possess the mathematical properties to allow their use in discrepancy analysis. Further undesirable features of grade-equivalents included ease of misinterpretations, lack of relationship to curriculum markers (though appearing directly related), and general imprecision.

The Group was in agreement that only standard score models had any real potential for solving the question of severe discrepancy. Four basic models that appeared to provide some promise of solution were seriously considered and debated. They included:

Model One - the simple difference score distribution. This model defines as the appropriate discrepancy score the simple difference between the obtained aptitude score and the obtained achievement score when both measures are expressed on a common scale.

Model Two - the regression prediction discrepancy. A model similar to Model One but with an accounting for the regression of achievement.

Model Three - the frequency of regression prediction discrepancy. This model addresses the regression between IQ and achievement and assesses the magnitude or severity of this discrepancy by comparing it against the base rate in the population from which the correlations were derived.

Model Four - the regression estimates of true discrepancy score. This model is similar to number two and three in that it evaluates a regressed difference score; however, it evaluates the difference between regressed achievement and aptitude scores.

As a result of their investigation, the Work Group clearly recommended Model Three as the state-of-the-art or best current measurement practice.

Frankenberger and Harper (1987) conducted a survey to determine standards for classifying a student as LD by analyzing individual state guidelines and/or standards for

assessment of handicapped individuals. Guidelines were obtained from 49 of the 50 states (Hawaii did not participate). These authors determined if such standards corresponded to one of the four methods of quantifying a severe discrepancy. In comparing ability and achievement tests to determine LD eligibility, many states use one of four models - the years below model, the expectancy model, the standard score model, or the regression model. These models are different from those studied by the Federal Work Group. Results showed that by 1985-86, 28 states had implemented a state requirement to determine a severe discrepancy. Four of those states allowed or requested more than one method, while the remaining 22 had no preferred method of determining a severe discrepancy. All four methods were used by at least some states.

Finlan (1992) also researched individual states' methods of defining a severe discrepancy for determining learning disabilities eligibility, relying on their reports to the federal government as his source. He concluded that the use, or absence, of a method to determine a severe discrepancy seemed to make a difference. Specifically, a tendency away from using requirements was found in states with high identification rates, whereas a tendency towards requirements was noted in states with low identification rates, as evidenced in Table 1.

Finlan concluded that there are many reasons for the identification of differing numbers of LD students across states, including: (1) the degree to which states require practitioners to follow state guidelines; (2) how long ago the methods were adopted, (3) the prevailing attitudes in the various states regarding LD services; and (4) the use of discrepancy methods by practitioners in the states despite no legislative mandate. He

further concluded that if a state wanted to minimize the number of students misclassified as LD, adopting an operational definition of severe discrepancy may be beneficial. Mercer et al. (1990) surveyed 51 State Departments of Education (including Washington, DC) regarding their definitions of learning disabilities, identification criteria, and operationalization procedures when identifying LD students. The data obtained were examined according to the analytic framework previously used by Mercer (1985) and were analyzed in terms of definition and criteria since definitions and criteria are often not the same. Discrepancy is referred to as a "difference between a student's potential to achieve, usually measured by an intelligence quotient (IQ) test, and actual achievement, historically measured by a standard achievement test" (p. 142). Most professionals disagree on a method for determining discrepancy due to the fact that standards vary from state to state. The results of the study found that the discrepancy component was present in 27% of the states' definition of learning disabilities, 86 percent of the states' criteria for learning disabilities, and 88 percent of the states' criteria and/or definition. Because 86 percent of the states included discrepancy statements in their criteria (which was an increase from 76 percent in the 1985 survey), the way in which states operationalize discrepancy was explored. The results are shown in Table 2.

Based on their findings, Mercer et al. (1990) feel that a clear statement relative to the existence of a discrepancy needs to be included in the definition of learning disabilities. They further pointed out that most states' criteria include a clause (i.e., functional override) that allows a multidisciplinary team decision to take precedence if LD placement occurs without numerical support.

Mc Leskey (1992) conducted a study which provided descriptive information about 790 students with learning disabilities at primary (K-2), intermediate (3-5), and secondary (6-12) grade levels who were identified during the 1987-88 school year in Indiana. His research included the following findings:

1. Identification of students with learning disabilities peaked in the first grade. By the end of the elementary grades (K-5), 76 percent of all students with learning disabilities were identified, with only 24 percent being labeled at the secondary level.
2. Males outnumbered females by a ratio of approximately 3 to 1, which remained constant across grade levels.
3. Students identified with learning disabilities had a mean WISC-R Full Scale IQ of 94. Students at the high school level tended to have lower Full Scale IQ scores than pupils at earlier levels.
4. Students with more severe discrepancies tended to be identified at the primary level, while discrepancies became less severe at higher grades.
5. Students identified at the elementary level demonstrated lower mean reading scores and higher mathematics scores than students identified at the secondary level.
6. Before being identified with a learning disability, 58 percent of the total sample was retained. No significant differences emerged in the proportion of students who were retained at different grade levels.
7. The percentage of students with behavior problems (15 percent) remained

consistent across grade levels.

Additional data collected showed that 67 percent of the learning disabled population demonstrated a severe discrepancy between expected and actual achievement levels. This finding could not be compared to previous studies, since differing methods were used for determining a severe discrepancy.

It appears that the largest segment of children being served as LD may not be LD; rather, they are more aptly described as intellectually borderline or low average children (Reynolds, 1984-85). These children are difficult to instruct in regular education classrooms but may not be severely impaired educationally when their achievement is considered in relationship to their cognitive ability. These children might be considered mildly disabled under current legislation, but should be served in regular education programs.

#### Learning Disabled vs. Slow Learners and Low Achievers

According to the Eleventh Annual Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 1989), 1,917,935 students were classified as learning disabled in the 1987-88 reporting year. This number represents an increase of 140 percent since the passage of PL 94-142 in 1975 -- approximately 48 percent of all students in special education, and about 5 percent of all school-aged children. Kavale and Reese (1992) feel this increase stems from difficulties in answering two fundamental questions: "What is LD?" and "Who is LD?" Algozzine and Yssledyke (1983) feel the lack of consensus on defining learning disability has caused problems in differentiating LD students from students who are low achievers or slow learners. Algozzine, Yssledyke and Shinn (1980) have also stated that

"when we recognize that 'learning disabilities' is merely a sophisticated term for underachievement, the question of extent to which discrepant achievement is 'severe' becomes important."

In another study on the issue of achievement-potential discrepancy which applied a standard-score and regression-analysis procedure to data on new LD placements, Valus (1986) concluded that no severe discrepancy was evident in one third of the placements. The numbers of non-underachieving children placed in LD programs imply that those responsible for making identification and placement decisions may benefit from the guidance provided in the state guidelines (Kansas and Iowa) for determining a severe discrepancy. Further, Valus concluded that slow learners may have been over represented among students who did not demonstrate a severe discrepancy; and, that staffing teams need guidance in determining whether or not slow learning students are also learning disabled. Finally, if large numbers of these students are referred but found to be not eligible for special education, more attention should be given to ensuring that regular education provides realistic curricular alternatives for them.

Algozzine, Yssledyke and McGue (1995) compared the performance of low achieving (LA) to learning disabled (LD) students on standardized ability and achievement tests. The researchers concluded that "students with LD often represent the lowest of the low achievers in a classroom, school, district, state, or nation. [They] ... do not believe that these differences in overall achievement test performance are sufficient enough to suggest that many of these students have qualitatively different needs than many of their LA peers" (p. 144).

The Board of Trustees of the Council for Learning Disabilities took the following position on the inclusion of nonhandicapped low achievers and underachievers in learning disability programs on March 3, 1986:

1. The major reason for excessive incidence rates in learning disability programs is the inclusion of students whose low achievement or underachievement reflects factors other than a learning disability (e.g., depressed intellectual functioning, lack of motivation, inadequate or inappropriate instruction, environmental disadvantage, cultural differences);
2. Students with appropriately diagnosed learning disabilities may be denied needed services in programs with incidence rates that have been previously inflated due to the inclusion of nonhandicapped low achievers and underachievers;
3. Placement of nonhandicapped "slow learners" and other low achievers and underachievers in learning disability programs seriously compromises the quality of services provided to students who have appropriately diagnosed learning disabilities;
4. Placement of such nonhandicapped students in special education programs funded through PL 94-142 is a violation of the eligibility provisions of the law; and
5. Placement of nonhandicapped low achievers and underachievers in learning disability programs propagates the misperception that a learning disability is a relatively mild problem that can be addressed simply through remedial or

enrichment programs.

At the same time, the Board also made the following recommendations:

1. School personnel should not view learning disability as synonymous with "slow learner," "mild learning problem," or low achievement or underachievement. Multidisciplinary evaluation teams must ensure that all eligibility criteria, not only provisions pertaining to underachievement, are satisfied prior to providing a student with learning disability services;
2. Nonhandicapped low achievers and underachievers who have already been misdiagnosed and misplaced should be removed immediately from learning disability services;
3. Nonhandicapped low achievers and underachievers should generally be served within the domain of regular education. Building-level teacher assistance teams should be available to help classroom teachers serve the needs of underachievers who do not qualify for special education services;
4. "Slow learners" and other low achieving or underachieving students should not be denied special education services when the multidisciplinary evaluation team determines that a specific learning disability exists.

Although school failure, for whatever reason, is of grave concern, it has become increasingly important to differentiate those students who can benefit from regular educational services from those requiring special education. As a result, many states are revising their rules and regulations for LD eligibility in an attempt to reduce misclassification and serve more severely handicapped students. It is those students who

will no longer qualify for special educational services that should be of concern to educators and administrators. It is apparent that measures taken to the point of referral have not benefitted the students. The concern should now be what program(s) would most help these students in order to make the rest of their educational careers positive and culminate with a high school diploma.

### High School Dropout Rates

Students who drop out of high school face a more difficult road to success than their peers who finish college. Similarly, high school dropouts experience more unemployment during their work careers (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Young women who drop out of high school are more likely to become pregnant at young ages and more likely to become single parents (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). As a result of these factors, high school dropouts are more likely to end up on welfare (Catterall, 1987), or, unfortunately, in one of our nation's prisons which are heavily populated with high school dropouts (Riley, 1994).

Concerns over shortcomings in our educational system, including significant dropout rates, led to a national debate over education. Much attention was focused on setting National Education Goals. Congress passed, and President Clinton signed into law, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (PL 103-227). The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (PL 103-239) was also enacted. The National Education Goals call for, among other things, safer schools, a high school graduation rate of at least 90 percent, and adult literacy for all Americans. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (PL 103-239) is intended to help build systems that will prepare young people for high skill, high wage

jobs.

The primary source of information about dropouts is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education, which collects and conducts longitudinal studies. All statistical data referred to in this subsection is taken from the NCES 1993 publication, Dropout Rates in the United States. The monitoring of high school dropout and completion rates provides one measure of our nation's progress in improving the status of our nation's youth. However, calculating an accurate dropout rate is nearly impossible since some students return to school and schools differ in their definitions and counting methods. According to the NCES, national dropout rates have declined over the last 10 to 15 years. The event dropout rate (i.e., a measure of the proportion of students who drop out of school in a single year without completing high school) for persons 15- through 24 years old in grades 10 through 12 was 6.7 percent in 1978 and 4.5 percent in 1993, which represents approximately 381,000 students dropping out of school in 1993. The event dropout rate was highest among 15- through 24-year olds living in families at the low income level, intermediate at middle income levels, and lowest at high income levels. The status dropout rate (i.e., a measure of the proportion of the population who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out) for persons 16 through 24 years old was 14.2 percent in 1978 and 11.0 percent in 1993. The status dropout rate among young adults who were retained at least one time in grades kindergarten through 12 was two times the rate for those who were not retained. The status dropout rate for young adults retained in grades 7 through 9 was two times the rate for those retained in grades kindergarten

through 6.

Some 6.8 percent of the eighth-grade cohort of 1988 dropped out of school between 1988 and 1990; and 7.6 percent dropped out of school between 1990 and 1992. Over this four year period, some of those dropped out between 1988 and 1990 returned to school by 1992. By the spring of 1992, 11.6 percent of the students who were eighth graders in 1988 had left high school without finishing. The high school completion rate, defined as the percentage of all persons ages 21 and 22 who have completed high school by receiving a high school diploma or equivalency certificate, was 86 percent in 1993. This rate had gradually increased over the last 20 years from approximately 82 percent in 1972 to 86 percent in 1993.

Dropouts cited the following school factors as a cause for dropping out:

1. Didn't like school in general or a particular school transfer.
2. Was failing, getting poor grades, or couldn't keep up with school work. (Only 18 percent reported having passed their last year of school.
3. Didn't get along with teachers and/or students.
4. Had disciplinary problems, was suspended, or expelled.
5. Didn't fit in.
6. Didn't feel safe.

The most frequent intervention by school personnel was trying to talk a student into staying, but even this effort was cited by only 39 percent of dropouts surveyed. The students may not have realized that some long term interventions, such as remedial education, were actually dropout prevention measures. Other offers made to the students

included help with making up missed work; tutoring, and/or placement in a special program; transfer to another school; help with personal problems; and calls or visits home.

Since completing a high school education without interruption is the best foundation for realizing the dreams of youth, it is crucial that both educators and families find ways to make it possible for all students to stay in school.

### Programs to Keep Potential Dropouts in School

The premature loss of our students from the public schools due to "dropping out" has been, and continues to be, an issue of grave importance to educational researchers, practitioners, and to the general public. In a comprehensive review, Rumberger (1987) feels a crucial problem is identifying students who are "at risk" through an initial screening and subsequent evaluation so that appropriate remediation strategies may be applied. Cage (1984) reports that some evaluation instruments that have been used in identifying potential dropouts include the Elementary School Pupil Adjustment Scale for identifying poorly adjusted students in grades K-3, the Dropout Alert Scale for grades 4-12, and the Student Sensitivity Index for grades 7-12. Research reviewed by Donnelly (1987) concludes that at-risk students need to be identified as early as possible, and regularly reevaluated, because their family status and living situations can change. She also stated that the roots of at-risk behavior begin in the elementary grades with low achievement patterns, high absenteeism, and low self-esteem. Further research indicated that programs identifying and working with at-risk student behavior are needed at every level, as are teachers who are trained and alert to the symptoms of at-risk behavior, with administrative staff being responsive to their needs.

The Massachusetts Advocacy Center feels that a student's decision to drop out of high school is often the end result of a long series of negative school experiences -- academic failure, grade retention, or frequent suspensions -- that begin before the ninth grade. The Center feels that dropout prevention strategies must be targeted at the middle school grades when the stress of schooling as related to a more complex curriculum, a less personal environment, and the growing need for peer acceptance pose grave danger to already disadvantaged students. Wells (1989) demonstrates the importance of middle schools in retaining at-risk students; however, the organization and curriculum of most do not meet the needs of young adolescents who are going through a tumultuous period of rapid physical development and emotional turmoil.

According to Donnelly (1987), successful programs for at-risk students: separate them from other students; relate work to education; are small; have low student-teacher ratios; and provide counseling and supportive services. Most programs emphasize flexibility, tailoring curriculum to the learning needs of the individual students. They are often innovative, providing alternatives to traditional promotion policies, structuring curriculum in nontraditional ways, offering early childhood education programs, and including vocational education in alternative settings. Effective programs are involved in a broad range of special services to help at-risk students improve their low self-esteem while providing a supportive system in which they can begin to have positive experiences. These include remediation programs, tutoring, child care services, medical care, substance abuse awareness programs, bilingual instruction, employment training, and close follow-up procedures on truancy and absenteeism. Successful programs are service-intensive and

require giving students personal contact from a qualified, caring staff.

In his review, Nelson (1985) concluded that schools dedicated to dropout prevention tend to cite four main activities as central to any formula for prevention. First, seek funding for dropout prevention programs and secondly, develop links with community agencies that can help schools in guiding teachers and students to appropriate services. The third activity involves identifying and working with organizations that can help students improve their academic environment. Lastly, prepare research and information on how schools, homes, and the community can combat the dropout problem. He cites the following additional methods for preventing dropping out :

1. Emphasizing support programs operating in schools;
2. Encouraging co-curricular activities for as many students as possible;
3. Increasing the information supplied to students about dealing with the school system;
4. Increasing structured group meetings for high-risk students within the school setting;
5. Increasing alternative classes, work programs, and correspondence classes;
6. Allowing students who could realistically function better elsewhere to transfer to a different school;
7. Encouraging families of troubled students to seek family support and counseling from professional agencies;
8. Maintaining a night school program; and

9. Contacting students a week after they have dropped out and presenting them with an opportunity to change their mind.

A program found to be effective in identifying potential dropouts early, and keeping them in school, is the Experimental Program for Orientation (EXPO) at the Gateway High School in Aurora, Colorado (Nelson, 1985). Teachers discovered, through trial and error, that they must identify potential dropouts as eighth graders. Two key procedural rules were stressed: students would be invited to volunteer for the program (no one was to be coerced into participating), and students enrolled in special education programs were excluded (because they were already receiving special attention). The invitations to students stressed that EXPO was designed to assist students in their orientation to high school life. The results, after only one year, showed that EXPO students earned grade point averages nearly a full point higher than potential dropouts not enrolled in the program. EXPO students were truant an average of 17 class hours compared with the 96.5 hours for students not enrolled in EXPO, and only one EXPO student dropped out of school.

In 1987, the U.S. Department of Education published a book entitled Schools That Work. The book contained 16 recommendations for ways to educate disadvantaged children: some directed to the schools; others for parents, guardians, and communities; and the rest directed at local, state, and federal government (See Appendix A). The book goes on to say that some past trends in educational practice led to a general decline in performance and were particularly harmful to disadvantaged children. Practices like replacing basic academic courses with excessive electives led to a weakening in core

subjects. Many schools abandoned the requirement that students master basic academic skills and often provided "social" promotions for children who were unprepared to move on to the next level of learning. The Department feels that perhaps the most damaging of all was the loss of a consensus that the schools should teach standards of right and wrong, individual responsibility, and the requirements of good citizenship. As a result, they feel the authority of school administrators and teachers has diminished.

The Department did, however, describe programs in various schools around the country that they feel are noteworthy. One such school is the George Washington Preparatory High School in Los Angeles, California. When this school was known as Washington High, its reputation included gang violence, drug use, vandalism, and low academic standards. The name of the school was changed to symbolize a new academic excellence. Parents and students were required to sign a contract where the students had to agree to abide to school rules, adhere to a dress code, and complete all assignments. Parents agreed to attend workshops on how to help their children achieve in school and to visit the school at specified times. The school held training in nonviolence and parents, and their children, signed a Contract for a Nonviolent Home, promising they would not physically or verbally abuse one another. Compliance to these agreements was mandatory in order to attend this school. Teachers were required to assign homework and to make daily calls to the homes of students absent from class. A strict discipline code was enforced and 85 percent of the faculty was replaced. A remedial and tutoring program was established in all subject areas, and any student receiving a D or F was required to come in for tutoring on Saturday. Magnet centers in mathematics, science, and

communication arts, with small classes and extra resources were established. These centers were open only to students who agreed to take college-preparatory courses. Frequent testing was required in all subjects. The rewards of these efforts included: 70 percent of the students go on to college; absenteeism dropped from 33 percent in 1979-80 to less than 10 percent in 1985-86; and, there is a waiting list of students who wish to enroll.

Prior to 1981, Carrizozo High School in New Mexico suffered from severe absenteeism, vandalism, disciplinary problems, low test scores, and teacher apathy. The school of 101 students is located in an isolated community with chronically high unemployment rates. Actions taken to improve this school included: adopting a new attendance policy, along with a well-defined code of student conduct; allowing teachers to assist in making decisions concerning staff hiring and evaluation, curriculum planning, and student discipline; reducing class sizes to a pupil-teacher ratio of 14:1; motivating students to excel by offering eligible juniors and seniors the option to enroll in freshman level courses at the nearest college; recognizing achievements of students and faculty in local newspapers; local retail businesses engaging students in a work-study program; and by community members contributing to a college-vocational scholarship program which provides more than 30 scholarships. The rewards of this program were that 97 percent of the students graduated from Carrizozo; 40 percent of the graduating seniors went on to some form of higher education; and achievement was up, with all grades scoring at or above grade level in reading and math.

In the Houston Independent School District (HISD), more than 83 percent of the

students are disadvantaged. HISD has established successful partnerships with businesses, volunteer organizations, parent groups, and individuals as part of the city's commitment to provide all children with a high-quality education. Volunteers in Public Schools (VIPS), created in 1970, is a department of the school district. VIPS identifies groups interested in participating and matches their resources with the needs of individual schools. VIPS reaches out to each segment of the community with projects such as:

Business partnerships. Tenneco, for example is paired with Jefferson Davis High School. The company provides 130 tutors in the basic skills and 107 who serve as student mentors. Tenneco paid for 100 summer jobs for students, sent 100 students to a leadership training workshop, and gave eight college scholarships.

VIPS Seniors. This program, which began in 1976, recruits retired persons to help in the schools by working individually with a child who needs encouragement or tutoring.

VIPS Kindergarten Screening. This district wide effort includes 2,000 volunteers who screen the approximate 14,000 incoming kindergartners in hearing, vision, language learning, and motor performance.

VIPS Community Resource Bank. This program includes more than 100 businesses; 1,000 individuals; and 30 speakers bureaus to engage in classroom speaking at the request of teachers.

One benefit of this program is that it attracts professionals from all local community agencies. The volunteers' contribution of time, money, and energy provides the schools

with the support that tax dollars cannot buy.

While the programs described above are successful, they may be the exception to the rule. It is evident that students today are facing tougher standards to exit high school as many states are administering a High School Proficiency Test similar to that administered to New Jersey eleventh grade students. This test may prove to be a stumbling block to receiving a high school diploma for at-risk or those newly declassified students. If this proves to be true, there are implications that the entire educational system in the United States needs to be reformed.

Based on this limited review, it appears that there is little consistency throughout the United States in determining a student eligible for the classification of learning disabled. Because the state of New Jersey does not currently have an operational statement to define "severe discrepancy," it is possible for a student to be classified in one district and not qualify as such in a neighboring district. Recent research by the Office of Special Education in New Jersey reported the range for students classified as Perceptually Impaired was as low as 2 percent in some districts to a high of 22 percent in others. There appears to be a need for a more objective measure to be in place to allow for as much consistency as humanly possible. This review of literature also indicated that there are students who are classified as LD and should not be if a discrepancy formula were followed. This implies that the practices of Child Study Teams when determining eligibility for LD need to be reviewed.

Therefore, the thrust of this study was directed at Child Study Team directors in the form of a mailed survey. The survey contained questions regarding the composition of

the school district in terms of students both classified and nonclassified, Child Study Team personnel, and programs offered to all students. The questionnaire also asked for the district's rationale when determining a student eligible for special education services with the classification of Perceptually Impaired. Questions were also directed to the high school level regarding drop out rates and what a high school does in order to discourage this from happening.

It is hypothesized that many students in the school districts surveyed, will be seen as candidates for declassification with stricter adherence to an aptitude-achievement discrepancy formula. Further, it is likely that the data from districts participating in this study will predict an increase in the dropout rate, possibly due to lack of programs offered as an alternative to a traditional high school education.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Comparison with Previous Studies

This study is not a duplication of a previously done study. It does contain the element of collecting information from Directors of Special Education in the form of a mailed survey/questionnaire as in the study performed by Mercer, Hughes and Mercer (1985). This present study is restricted to a given county only while the former was directed to each director at the State level. Questions in both studies centered around identification criteria and operationalization procedures when determining eligibility as Learning Disabled. Both studies sent a second letter to directors who had not responded within a given time frame requesting the necessary data.

#### Research Design

The present study is of a cross-sectional design. It involves the collection of data in the form of a survey/questionnaire from Child Study Team Directors in a given geographical area. The responses to the questions posed will be compared and contrasted to reflect current practices in determining eligibility for special education services and programs to service those at risk but not classifiable.

#### Participants

Participants in this study were all Child Study Team Directors in a given

geographical area. These directors represented 22 districts who were all responsible to the same County Supervisor of Child Study. Surveys/questionnaires were mailed to each of the 22 districts on November 20, 1996. Seven responses were received from the first mailing. A follow-up phone call was made to districts who had not completed the survey/questionnaire requesting their participation. Five additional responses were received from that request, bringing the total participation to 12 districts. Eight of the districts had only elementary school programs, while three of the districts had both elementary and high school programs. There was just one school that was a high school district only. The school districts are described with demographic data which includes the grade plan (e.g., K - 8, K - 12), total enrollment, total classified, percentage classified, dropout rates for those with high schools, and District Factor Groupings in Table 3.

### Materials

A data collection form (see Appendix B) was utilized in this research study. This form requested demographic information about each district surveyed. It also contained questions about the district's policy or policies (if one existed) to determine "severe discrepancy" when classifying a child Perceptually Impaired. The use of Functional Override was questioned, as were the types of tests and scores used by the various Child Study Team members when determining "severe discrepancy." The last portion of the data collection form consisted of questions that required predictions of rates of classified students and high school dropouts if a strict adherence to a discrepancy formula was followed, as well as programs to address the resulting problems of such a situation, e.g., programs to meet the needs of those students not determined eligible for special

educational services and programs designed to discourage dropping out from high school.

#### Procedure

A data collection form (See Appendix B) as described in the Materials section and a cover letter (See Appendix C) of introduction and intent of the study were developed. The initial mailing was to all 22 districts in a given geographical area. This mailing included the data collection form, cover letter and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. Each page of the survey/questionnaire and the return envelope was assigned a three digit code in order to ensure confidentiality in the study. Due to the fact that only 7 responses were received after a three week period, a follow-up phone call was made in anticipation of maximum participation. With this prompt, responses increased bringing the total participants to 12 which represented a 55% participation rate.

Data received was reviewed and organized into tables for questions numbered one through eight. Questions nine through eighteen were open ended questions and required that responses be clustered together before being presented in Tables 4 through 9. A copy of the results of this research study was offered to all cooperating districts.

#### Interpretation: Thematic Focus

The results will be interpreted by clustering survey items according to the following themes: Grades served and programs offered; amount of classified vs. non-classified students; and number of Perceptually Impaired classified students vs. the total classified population. Further interpretations will be made by comparing criteria used by individual districts in arriving at a classification of Perceptually Impaired including the use of Functional Override. Final interpretations will include the comparison of dropout rates

and programs offered to encourage at risk students to finish high school.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Description of Respondent Districts

Out of the 22 surveys sent to the Child Study Team Directors, 12 responses were received, representing a rate of 55% rate of return. Questions one through five requested the following demographic information about the district: grade plan; district factor grouping; total student population; and total classified population. See Table 3 for exact figures regarding these categories. Table 3 also shows the percentage of classified students per district using the figures supplied by the surveyed districts. High school dropout rates for the participating high schools are included, based on the figures for the 1995-96 school year. The surveyed sample depicts a representative cross section of the geographical area surveyed. District Factor Groupings (DFG) ranged from a low of 1 to a high of 5, based on an 8 point system. The percentages of students classified in a district ranged from a low of 8.9% to a high of 20.2%. There was great variability in the high school dropout rate as well, with a range of 3.5% to 13.7% in the 4 schools that were surveyed. It is interesting to note that District J, which has a DFG of 1, ranks 6th out of the 12 districts surveyed for the amount of students classified (13.4%). District A on the other hand, which has a DFG of 4, has the highest percentage of students classified

(20.2%). There is no pattern suggested in Table 3 between the wealth of a district (DFG) and the percentage of children classified as eligible for special education services. There is also no pattern shown between DFG's and the high school dropout rate. District J ranks third out of the four districts surveyed (13.4%) in this category. It is a point of interest that both Districts B and H have a DFG of 2, yet District B has a dropout rate of 13.7% while District H has the lowest rate for the sample (3.5%).

#### Classification/Severe Discrepancy

Question six asked the responding districts to single out the numbers of students classified as Perceptually Impaired. District F was unable to respond to this question due to the fact they are a Plan to Revise (P2R) district and use a noncategorical system to classify children. As shown in Figure 1, the classification of Perceptually Impaired accounts for between 54% and 72% of the classified children in the responding districts. Districts B and C were the exceptions, with only 44% of their classified population carrying the label of Perceptually Impaired.

Question seven polled the respondents in order to see if their districts had a policy in place to determine severe discrepancy. Table 4 indicates that 75% of the surveyed districts do not have a policy to guide their decision making. Question nine asked the Child Study Teams if they ever use Functional Override as one of their considerations when classifying a student as Perceptually Impaired. Table 4 shows that 8 out of the 12 polled districts do, at some point, use Functional Override. Question 13 asked the directors to predict if they would see a decline in the amount of students classified as Perceptually Impaired if strict guidelines were imposed by the State. Responses varied,

but Table 4 overwhelmingly shows that most districts (66%) feel there would be declines. District F felt they would not be affected because they are a P2R district and District H was not sure. It is interesting to note that 7 districts who use Functional Override also feel their rates would decline if strict guidelines were imposed.

Question 12 asked the teams what type of scores they use in order to determine severe discrepancy. All but one district, (or 91%) surveyed, used standard scores. The other district used age and grade based scores (See Table 9). Question 9 requested the criteria used to arrive at a classification of Perceptually Impaired. Responses were varied, but 7 districts (58%) had specific standard deviations or statistical significance levels between aptitude and achievement that they adhered to. Districts A and B cited N.J.A.C. 6:28-3.5 which states that there must be a severe discrepancy between the pupil's current achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following seven areas: basic reading skills; reading comprehension; oral comprehension; listening comprehension; mathematics computation; mathematics reasoning; and written expression. They did not give any numerical guidelines as did Districts C, D, F, G, H, I, and J. District E looked for a one year lag or delay in learning, and Districts K and L examined all test data and made a decision based on the results and the needs of the student (See Table 9).

#### Personnel and Assessment

Question 8 asked for a description of the makeup of the districts' Child Study Teams. Various combinations of the members can be seen in Table 7. Districts with 50 or less classified students tended to have part-time teams, while larger districts had more members but not necessarily complete teams. It should be noted there was very little, at

this time, in the way of contracted services. District B contracted occupational and physical therapy services for one day a week and District L contracted the services of a LDT-C for three days a week.

Directors were asked to list the tests of choice used for cognitive and achievement assessment in their district. Table 8 shows that 100% of the districts use the WISC-III for psychological testing. The Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement Revised appear to be used more widely for achievement testing (75%), with the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (50%) and Weschler Individual Achievement Test (58%) closely following. Table 8 also shows other tests used by various districts. The number of districts using these tests is listed; however, this list may not be an accurate representation as some districts may use these tests but only in cases where it is felt that information gleaned from the test would be useful. It should be noted that districts listed anywhere from one to three achievement tests that may be used, not indicating a preference for one over another.

#### Dropouts and Alternative Programs

Question 14 of the survey asked the directors to predict how lower classification rates would effect their district should stricter guidelines be enforced. Results varied from district to district (See Table 6). It was felt by 50% of the districts that there would be more retentions and 66% felt that more 504 plans would be written. Curriculum changes (75%) and program changes (66%) were also seen as a way to cope with possible lower classification rates. One school district (F) felt that parents would be requesting more re-evaluations as students became declassified due to more stringent guidelines. Three of the

four high school districts felt there would be higher dropout rates.

Only one high school could respond to Question 15 regarding the number of special education students who dropped out during the 1995-96 school year. Due to incomplete information, only total numbers of dropouts, given as percentage of the total population will be used in Table 5. Question 16 asked districts to describe any programs that are offered that would encourage a potential dropout to finish high school and Question 17 asked which of those programs offered were the most instrumental in assisting students to finish high school. The results of these questions can be seen in Table 3. The surveyed districts did offer a continuum of options to students which included: Alternative Schools; Vocational School; Pregnancy programs; Work Readiness/CIE programs; and counseling or mentoring. It is interesting to note that while District H did offer some options, they offered the least but had the lowest dropout rate of the four districts. District B had the most complete list of options but, yet, also had the highest dropout rate. Two of the four districts felt that counseling and Work Readiness/CIE Programs were the most helpful in keeping students in school until graduation. Pregnancy programs were seen as important by District J; District H felt vocational programs were important; and District B saw alternative schools as a viable source to help the dropout rate.

The last question (18) in the survey asked districts to identify possible changes in the educational system that could ensure high school graduation. Three elementary schools chose to respond to that question by answering: flexible program options; CIE programs; Work Readiness programs; School to Work Programs; and vocational awareness programs. The high school districts offered the following options with no two districts

repeating any choices: more vocational electives in the high schools; School to Work programs; more CIE programs; parental involvement; more Vocational Schools; Life Skills programs; Career programs; and a variety of diplomas with varying amounts of accountability.

### Conclusions

Information from the respondent districts seems to support the conjecture made in Hypothesis 1, which was "With strict adherence to a discrepancy formula, more students are not found eligible for services." Two-thirds, or 66%, of the districts feel they will see a drop in the amount of students they classify as Perceptually Impaired if the State would impose strict guidelines. One district was not sure and two districts definitely feel their rates of classification would not change.

Hypothesis 2, "The drop out rate for those students who were referred but not classified, will exceed those of classified students," also received support from three of the four, or 75%, of the responding high schools. The high school with the highest dropout rate (13.70%) did not respond to the question either way.

All high school districts surveyed offered their students a vocational program, whether in-house or at a county-run school, as well as some form of Work Readiness or CIE Program. Alternative Schools and counseling were options offered at 75% of the high schools, while only 50% of the schools offered programs for pregnant students. These findings support Hypothesis 3, "Across the districts surveyed, there will be no appreciable difference in viable options/programs for non-classified students." in that no district offered programs that were unique or out of the ordinary.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to gather data from public school districts in order to determine if strict adherence to an aptitude-achievement discrepancy formula would exclude students who truly need special education services.

There is concern in the state of New Jersey regarding the increase in the numbers of children classified as perceptually impaired. This classification is the only category that has consistently increased each year since 1978. Public school enrollment figures from 1978 show that 2.2 percent of the student population was classified as perceptually impaired; and that, by 1993, that figure had risen to 6.5 percent. This represents an increase of 233 percent over a 15 year period.

In the state of New Jersey, as defined in N.J.A.C. 6:28-3.5 (c) 8 ii, perceptually impaired refers to a specific learning disability manifested by a severe discrepancy between the pupil's current achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas: basic reading, reading comprehension, oral expression, listening comprehension, mathematic computation, mathematic reasoning, and written expression. Currently, the

state of New Jersey does not have an operational statement to define "severe discrepancy." Some districts have established guidelines to determine severe discrepancy, requiring at least 1.0 to 2.0 standard deviations between measured full scale intelligence quotients and current achievement levels in order to be considered for the classification of perceptually impaired. Many districts have declined to write a definition of severe discrepancy and may view functional assessment as an overriding factor if a severe discrepancy does not exist statistically. It appears that a more objective measure needs to be in place to allow for consistency when classifying a youngster as perceptually impaired.

The New Jersey Office of Special Education has acknowledged that wide variability exists among districts regarding the approach used to classify a student as perceptually impaired. Commissioner Klagholz has made a recommendation to the State Board of Education to adopt criteria that will include a statistical analysis, as part of the assessment process, to determine which pupils exhibit a severe discrepancy between cognitive ability and achievement. Barbara Gantwerk, Director of Special Education for the state of New Jersey, anticipates that there will be a lowering of rates of students classified as perceptually impaired with this new improved procedure. Implementation of this improved procedure, as well as other changes to N.J.A.C. 6:28, are expected to occur in the summer of 1997.

In anticipation of these upcoming changes, data was request of school districts in the current study regarding their current practices when classifying a student as perceptually impaired; anticipated effects of proposed code changes; and programs available to address the needs of all students in their district.

### Conclusion

It is assumed by the New Jersey Office of Special Education that if New Jersey adopts criteria which will include a statistical analysis, a drop will be seen in the numbers of students classified as perceptually impaired. Finlan (1992) researched individual states' methods of defining a severe discrepancy for determining learning disability eligibility. He concluded that the use, or absence, of a method to determine severe discrepancy seemed to make a difference. Lower identification rates were evidenced in states abiding by requirements, and New Jersey was the second highest state with students classified as learning disabled or perceptually impaired. In the sample surveyed for this project, only 3 out of 12 districts had an established policy regarding severe discrepancy. Furthermore, those 3 districts ranked fourth, sixth, and ninth in having the most students classified out of the 12 surveyed districts when percentages were arranged from lowest to highest. This may indicate that Child Study Teams are not misclassifying children as perceptually impaired or that the method used to determine severe discrepancy is not stringent enough. It does seem to validate the position of the New Jersey Office of Special Education in that there is no consistency as to how students become classified as perceptually impaired. Three districts with no policy had lower rates of classification than the 3 districts who had an established policy. It is interesting to note that 8 out of the 12 surveyed districts, at times, employ the use of functional override. If these children did not meet a statistical difference before changes to N.J.A.C. 6:28, they most certainly should not after more stringent guidelines are adopted. This should lead to a lower number of classified children.

The obvious question that should arise amid these code changes is "What is going to happen to the students who may not qualify for services due to a change in criteria for eligibility?" If appropriate interventions were exhausted before a referral to the Child Study Team was made and these interventions were not successful, what will happen to these students if criteria for eligibility is not met? If special education services are not available to these children, it would seem logical that the children would continue to receive more of the same services (e.g. basic skills instruction, ESL services, etc.) which have not proven successful.

Districts in this study were asked to anticipate possible effects of code changes. Only 2 of the 12 surveyed districts felt they would not see a drop in the numbers of children they classify as perceptually impaired. These 2 districts do not currently have a policy in place regarding determination of severe discrepancy. District F is a P2R district and could not respond because they do not use the current medical model, while District H was not sure if a drop in the number of students classified as perceptually impaired would be seen. The rest of the surveyed group, or 75% of the districts, felt they would see a drop in the numbers of students classified as perceptually impaired. Of that 75%, or 8 districts, 2 had a policy in place to determine severe discrepancy. This seems to indicate that, perhaps, the policies of those 2 districts may not be as stringent as what the State may impose or that possibly they are not consistently enforced. At any rate, it confirms the need for a more consistent system to determine if children are eligible for special education services.

Table 6 further illustrates anticipated effects from impending code changes to N.J.A.C. 6:28. The results from this section of the survey indicates that Child Study Teams predict

major upheaval in the way the education system currently operates. It was felt by 50% of the districts that retentions will increase. Three out of the 4 high schools surveyed predict higher dropout rates. There is documented research that supports the fact that a student who is retained is more likely to drop out in high school. More 504 plans and program changes in the future are seen by 66 2/3% of the districts. Changes in curriculum are expected to occur by 75% of the participants. One district expects to see parental requests for re-evaluations as their newly declassified or ineligible students struggle in the regular education program.

It needs to be said that Table 5 indicates that the four participating high schools do offer alternatives to their students. Ironically, the one high school that provided the most options also had the highest dropout rate (13.70%). The high school that offered the least amount of alternatives had the lowest surveyed dropout rate (3.5%). This cannot be attributed to demographics as both districts have a DFG of 2. This seems to imply that the current approach to education is not consistently working. Table 6 implies that changes are imminent in the field of education. What remains to be seen is what changes will be made and how districts will react. It is apparent that what is in place is not meeting the needs of all students. It can be assumed that all students do not have the same needs or interests. It may be time to totally revamp the American approach to education and borrow ideas from our international peers. The European educational systems realize that not all students are geared to academia and provide alternatives to higher education at a younger age which may include training for a vocation or trade. This should be a preferred option as opposed to our high incidence of high school dropouts with weak

academic backgrounds and no training to live as productive members of society.

Academic proficiency testing, at a state or national level, is an admirable goal. However, it does not allow success for the student who is not proficient in a college preparatory course of study. Perhaps a short term remedy, until major reform can occur, would be to issue diplomas which indicate levels of proficiency (e.g. college preparatory, general, vocational, etc). Changes to the educational system are imminent and the final outcome will be one of creativity and controversy.

#### Recommendations

1. The proposed revisions to N.J.A.C. 6:28 would warrant a follow-up study to compare the percentage rates of children classified as perceptually impaired before and after the changes occur. The follow-up study should not occur until the revisions have been in place for at least 3 years. This would allow for 3 year re-evaluations to occur, which may result in declassification.
2. If a follow-up study is conducted in the future, it may be beneficial to compare classification rates between schools which are traditional in nature as opposed to schools that may try an alternative approach. This type of study can only be conducted if there are enough schools that operate with a nontraditional approach to make a valid study.
3. The validity of the study would increase if it was to include a wider geographical area to allow for participation of more districts.
4. Changes to the survey form could be made to make the data more objective and allow for consistency in reporting results. Checklists of the more commonly

used achievement and cognitive ability tests for Question 11 could be supplied. This would allow easier participation for the respondent and more accurate results for comparisons. The checklist could be further defined by asking which tests are used for initial evaluations and which are used for re-evaluations, if a distinction is made by a particular team.

Question 16 could be improved by listing types of programs for participants to check off, leaving some lines open to describe programs/services not included in the checklist.

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Table 1

States With the Highest and Lowest Identification Rates

<u>Lowest</u> State	LD%	Discrepancy Requirement
Georgia	2.19	Standard Score
Wisconsin	2.79	Expectancy Formula
Louisiana	2.96	Expectancy Formula
Kentucky	3.21	Standard Score
Kansas	3.71	Standard Score/Regression Equation
Indiana	3.8	None
Hawaii	3.81	None
Alabama	3.9	Expectancy Formula
Michigan	3.9	None
Ohio	3.94	Standard Score
 <u>Highest</u>		
State	LD%	Discrepancy Requirement
Illinois	5.52	None
Tennessee	5.69	None
New Hampshire	5.78	None
Maryland	5.79	None
New York	5.81	Expectancy Formula
Connecticut	6.35	Standard Score
Alaska	6.36	Standard Score
Delaware	6.82	None
New Jersey	7.03	None
Rhode Island	8.66	None

Table 2

Operationalization of Discrepancy

Operationalization of Discrepancy	Definition	Criteria	Criteria and/or Definition
Standard Score		18	18
Standard Deviation		23	23
Regression Formula		13	13
WISC-R Verbal vs. Performance		1	1
40-50% or more Discrepancy	1	2	3
Grade-Level Discrepancy		2	2
No Statement about Operationalization	1	10	11

Table 3  
Description of Surveyed Districts

District	Grade Plan	District Factor Grouping	Total Student Population	Total Classified Population	Percentage of Population Classified	High School Dropout Rates
A	K-8	4	991	201	20.2%	NA
B	K-12	2	2472	456	18.4%	13.7%
C	K-8	2	649	89	13.7%	NA
D	K-8	4	252	25	9.9%	NA
E	K-8	3	250	35	14.0%	NA
F	K-8	4	3200	388	12.1%	NA
G	9-12	3	2500	445	17.8%	7.4%
H	PK-12	2	2046	256	12.5%	3.5%
I	K-8	5	970	111	11.4%	NA
J	PK-12	1	3400	456	13.4%	11.50%
K	PK-8	3	963	86	8.9%	NA
L	K-8	3	253	50	19.7%	NA

Table 4

Comparison of Districts Regarding Policies to Determine Severe Discrepancy, Use of Functional Override, and the Effects of State Imposed Guidelines to Determine Severe Discrepancy

District	Does your district have a policy regarding determining severe discrepancy?	Does your district ever use Functional Override when classifying a student?	Do you feel your district would see a drop in the amounts of PI classifications if strict guidelines were imposed by the State?
A	No	No	Yes
B	No	Yes	No
C	No	No	Yes
D	No	Yes	Yes
E	No	Yes	Yes
F	Yes	No	NA (P2R District)
G	Yes	Yes	Yes
H	No	Yes	Not Sure
I	No	Yes	Yes
J	Yes	Yes	Yes
K	No	No	No
L	No	Yes	Yes

Table 5

Description of High Schools Surveyed and Programs Offered to Lower Dropout Rates

Descriptions and Programs Offered	District E	District G	District H	District J
District Factor Grouping	2	3	2	1
Dropout Rates	13.70%	7.4%	3.5%	11.50%
Alternative School	Yes*	Yes	No	Yes
Vocational School	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes
Pregnancy Programs	Yes	No	No	Yes*
Work Readiness/CIE Programs	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes*
Mentoring/Counseling	Yes*	Yes*	Yes	No

\*Indicates the program(s) that the districts felt were most instrumental in assisting students to finish high school requirements.

Table 6

Predicted Effects If Fewer Students Are Classified

District	More Retentions	More 504 Plans	Curriculum Changes	Program Changes	Higher Dropout Rate	Re-evals At Parent Request
A	Yes	Yes	Yes			
B		Yes	Yes	Yes		
C	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
D	NA	NA	NA	NA		
E			Yes	Yes		
F			Yes	Yes		Yes
G	Yes	Yes			*Yes	
H	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*Yes	
I		Yes	Yes	Yes		
J	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*Yes	
K	Not Sure	Not Sure	Not Sure	Not Sure	Not Sure	
L	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		

\*Denotes a high school district

Table 7

Composition of Surveyed Child Study Teams

District	Total Classified	School Psychologist	LDT-C	Social Worker	Speech Therapist	Physical Therapist	OT
A	20.2%	1	1	1	1		
B	18.4%	2	2.5	1	3	.2	.2
C	13.7%	.4	1	.8	1		
D	9.9%	.2	.2	.8	.8		
E	14.0%	.2	1	.5	.6		
F	12.1%	3	3	4	4.5		
G	17.8%	2	2	3	1		
H	12.5%	2	2	2	2		
I	11.4%	1	1	1	1		
J	13.4%	3	3	3	4.5		
K	8.9%	1	1	1	1.5		
L	19.7%	.2	.4	.5	.6		

Table 8

Tests of Choice Used for Cognitive and Achievement Assessment

Name of Test	Number of Districts Using This Test for Assessment	% of Districts Reporting Using Test for Assessment
WISC-III	12	100%
WAIS	1	8%
WPPSI	2	16%
Stanford Binet	3	25%
Slosson	2	16%
KABC	2	16%
KTEA	6	50%
WLAT	7	58%
WJR	9	75%
Vineland Behavior Scales	1	8%
Keymath	2	16%
WJ Reading Mastery	2	16%
Test Nonverbal Intelligence	1	8%
Achenbach Scales	1	8%
Sentence Completion	1	8%
Bailey	1	8%
PPVT-R	1	8%
DTLA-3	1	8%
DTLA-2:P	1	8%
Jerry Johns	1	8%
VMI/Bender	2	16%
Batelle	1	8%

Table 9

Criteria Used to Arrive at a Classification of Perceptually Impaired

District	Type of Score Used to Determine Severe Discrepancy	Citing of N.J.A.C. 6:28-3.5	Team Decision	Difference of 1 SD* between Aptitude / Achievement	Difference of 1.5 SD* between Aptitude/ Achievement	WIAT WISC .01 level SS**	1 yr. lag
A	Standard	X					
B	Standard	X					
C	Standard					X	
D	Standard					X	
E	Standard						X
F	Age/Grade				X		
G	Standard			X			
H	Standard			X			
I	Standard				X		
J	Standard				X		
K	Standard		X				
L	Standard		X				

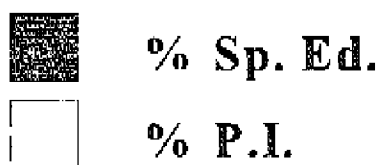
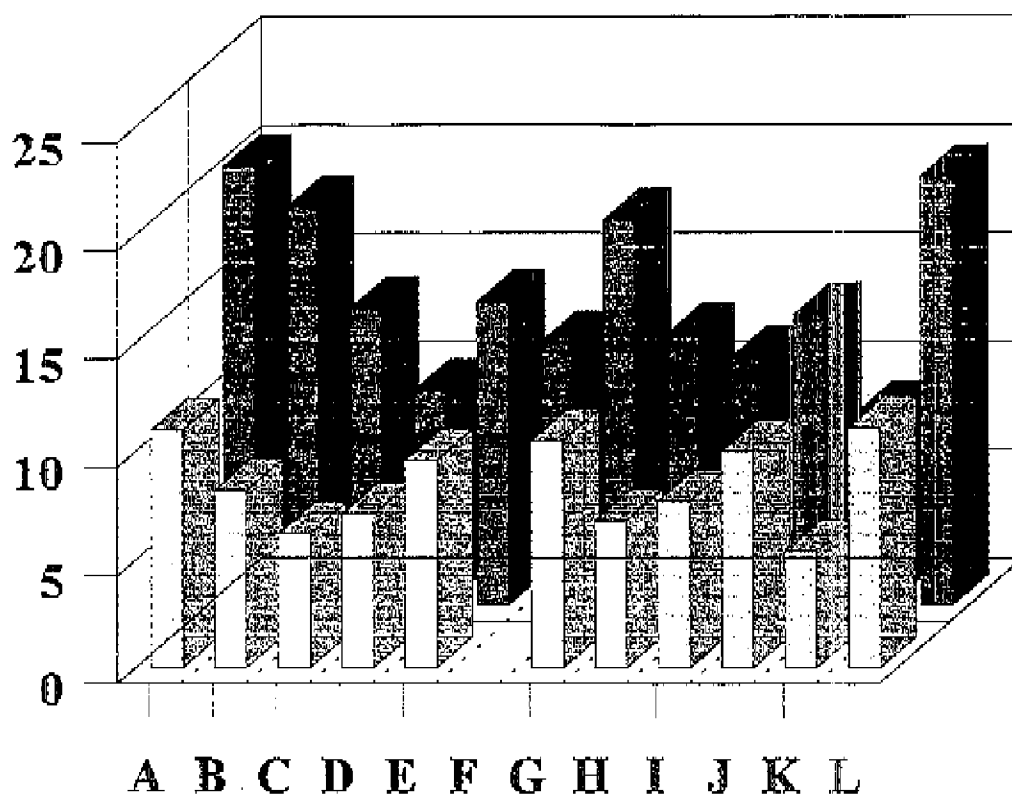
\*SD indicates Standard Deviation

\*\*SS indicates Statistical Significance

### List of Figures

- Figure 1. District Comparison of Total Students, Classified, and Perceptually Impaired

## Special Education Students



**APPENDIX A**

## U.S. Department of Education Recommendations on Educating Disadvantaged Children

### Recommendations for Schools:

1. Mobilize students, staff, and parents around a vision of a school in which all students can achieve
2. Create an orderly and safe environment by setting high standards for discipline and attendance.
3. Help students acquire the habits and attitudes necessary for progress in school and later in life.
4. Provide a challenging academic curriculum.
5. Tailor instructional strategies to the needs of disadvantaged children.
6. Help students with limited English proficiency become more proficient and comfortable in the English language — speaking, reading, and writing — as soon as possible.
7. Focus on early childhood programs for disadvantaged children to increase their chances for success.
8. Reach out to help parents take part in educating their children.

### Recommendations for Parents, Guardians, and Communities:

9. Instill in children the values they need to progress in school and throughout life.
10. Demand the best from children and show concern by supervising children's progress.
11. Get involved with the schools and with children's education outside school.
12. Invest in the education and future success of disadvantaged children.

### Recommendations for Local, State and Federal Government:

13. Ensure that education reforms make a difference for disadvantaged students.
14. Give local school officials sufficient authority to act quickly, decisively and creatively to improve schools, and hold them accountable for results.
15. Assess the results of school practices, paying special attention to the impact of reform on disadvantaged students.
16. Support improved education for disadvantaged students through supplementary and compensatory programs.

**APPENDIX B**

## District Survey/Questionnaire

Please print or type your responses.

1. Please circle your district factor grouping.

A      B      CD      DE      FG      GH      I      J

2. What grade levels does your district serve (e.g. K-6)\_\_\_\_\_

3. Please check all programs that apply to your district.

Preschool (Regular Education)\_\_\_\_\_

Preschool Handicapped\_\_\_\_\_

Alternative Program\_\_\_\_\_

Vocational Program\_\_\_\_\_

School to Work Program\_\_\_\_\_

Other (Please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

4. What is the total number of students in your district?\_\_\_\_\_

5. Of those students, how many are classified as eligible for special services?\_\_\_\_\_

6. Of those classified, how many are classified as Perceptually Impaired?\_\_\_\_\_

- 7.\* Does your district have a policy in place to determine severe discrepancy when classifying a child as Perceptually Impaired?      Yes\_\_\_\_\_      No\_\_\_\_\_

8. Please describe the composition of your Child Study Team(s).

	Number on Staff	Full Time	Part Time	Contracted Services	Average Years Experience
Psychologist	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
LDT-C	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Social Worker	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Speech Therapist	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

\*If possible, please attach a copy of this policy.

9. Please describe the criteria used to arrive at a classification of Perceptually Impaired in your district.

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10. As one of its considerations, does your district use Functional Override (i.e. the process in which a child study team supersedes the severe discrepancy formula of ability versus achievement with the functional assessment factor) for classification as Perceptually Impaired?

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_

11. Please list the tests of choice used by your Child Study Team for cognitive and achievement assessment.

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12. When determining severe discrepancy, what type scores (e.g. scaled scores, standard scores, etc.) are used?\_\_\_\_\_

13. If strict guidelines were imposed by the State regarding a severe discrepancy formula, do you think your district would see a drop in the number of students classified as Perceptually Impaired (including initials and re-evaluations)?

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Not Sure\_\_\_\_\_

14. If fewer students are classified, how might this affect your district?

More retentions\_\_\_\_\_

More 504 plans\_\_\_\_\_

Restructuring of curriculum\_\_\_\_\_

Restructuring of programs\_\_\_\_\_

Increase in drop out rates\_\_\_\_\_

Other\_\_\_\_\_

15. If applicable to your district, please list the student drop out figures including non-attendees for the 1995-96 school year in terms of actual student numbers not percentages.

	Total Population	Regular Education	Special Education
Elementary School Level	_____	_____	_____
High School Level	_____	_____	_____

16. Please list and if possible describe briefly any programs your district currently offers/provides for students who are at risk of dropping out that would encourage them to stay in school?

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17. Of the programs listed above, which ones have been most instrumental in ensuring that students graduate from high school?

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16. What changes could be instituted in the educational system to ensure high school graduation?

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## APPENDIX C