

REPORT TO THE OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES



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BACKGROUND

During the 2025 General Assembly Session, Item 269 of the *Appropriation Act* directed the Virginia Department of Education, in coordination with the Office of Children’s Services (OCS), to conduct a review of private day placement decisions in localities with higher-than-average placements of students with disabilities. This report summarizes the results of the 2024-2025 review, provides an update on recommendations and progress made by local educational agencies (LEAs), identifies barriers to serving students in public schools, and describes trends in disability identification and services. The findings build on those reported in 2023-2024 and are intended to inform the annual OCS report to the General Assembly.

REVIEW ACTIVITIES

The VDOE, in collaboration with the Virginia Commonwealth University’s Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC), conducted a comprehensive review of private day placement data and decision-making processes. The review included secondary data analysis, a survey of administrators and special education directors disseminated across all eight superintendents’ regions, and a workgroup of LEA leaders and private day partners. Virginia Department of Education staff also presented portions of these data and findings to the State Executive Council during their meeting on September 11, 2025.

KEY FINDINGS

LEA Recommendations and Progress

The 2024-2025 review supports that progress has been made in implementing recommendations from the first review conducted in 2023-2024 to improve LEAs’ ability to serve students. Based on the analysis of private day placement data and insights gathered through information-gathering sessions, LEAs were encouraged to strengthen individualized education program (IEP) Team processes for documenting placement decisions and expand administrator training on inclusive practices and behavior support. LEAs were supported in these activities through the development of a workgroup comprised of LEA representatives and private day partners to discuss current IEP decision-making processes and barriers to effective collaboration. During their discussions, workgroup members emphasized the need to strengthen the IEP development process before determining that a change of placement to a private day setting is necessary. Specifically, discussions highlighted the need for training to support IEP Teams to provide a more detailed justification for why the services and supports identified in the IEP are required by the student for a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and where they are best able to be provided. Additionally, administrator-specific training has been provided and attended by administrators in identified divisions to enhance special education and behavior knowledge and practice.

Fifty-eight percent of LEAs identified above the statewide average based on 2024 December 1 Child Count data engaged in regional partnerships with local universities during the 2024-2025 school year to expand staff training and increase placement continuum options within their divisions and 23 new intensive support classrooms in 29% of identified school divisions were established across Superintendent’s Regions 1, 3, 5, 6, and 8. These classrooms provide

increased placement continuum options for students with more intensive academic and behavioral support needs and transitional services for students returning from private day school placement.

Assessment of Barriers

LEAs consistently reported complexity in accessing funding for students with intensive support needs, with smaller divisions citing challenges due to composite index calculations and restrictive eligibility criteria. LEAs also reported complexity in accessing funding for transitional services through the *Children's Services Act* (CSA), with many LEAs indicating limited understanding of how to access these funds and how funds could be used to support student transition beyond providing additional adult support, which may not be required by the student. LEAs also identified a lack of sufficient continuum options both within and outside of special education services, particularly in rural divisions where neighboring placements are at capacity and in-division programs are limited. In addition, fewer than half of special education directors reported adequate access to trained mental health professionals.

Misalignment between the instructional programming in the private day placement and the LEA's standards-based instructional expectations was also identified as a factor in placement decision-making. Students in private day placements were reported to often not be able to successfully transition back to a public day school and access the general education curriculum and credit-bearing coursework due to the increased focus on intensive behavioral support services and a clinical-based model by private day schools compared to the commonwealth's expectations for student learning and achievement. The impact on overall student academic achievement and graduation outcomes is supported by graduation data from 2023, indicating that students who exited special education by graduating from a private day school were overall 3.4 times more likely to graduate with an Applied Studies Diploma compared to students served in a public day school. Risk ratio analysis showed that students with autism spectrum disorder were 4.1 times more likely to graduate with an Applied Studies Diploma if served in a private day school compared to students with autism spectrum disorder served in a public day school. Students identified with other health impairment were 4 times more likely, and students with an emotional disability (identified by the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, or IDEA, as emotional disturbance) were 3.6 times more likely.

These factors combined were reported to limit the ability of divisions to return students from private day school placements in a timely manner.

Transition Services

Special education directors from 21 LEAs reported the use of funding from CSA for transitional services to help students transition from a private day school placement to their home school division. Intensive support classrooms were reported as effective transitional options that enabled students to gradually reintegrate into comprehensive public schools, especially when coupled with targeted coaching and technical assistance.

Across informational sessions and workgroup discussions, stakeholders noted that the educational environments of private day schools and LEAs differ in important ways. While private day schools are required to meet certain standards, students in these settings often have limited opportunities to participate in non-academic activities that are typical in public schools, such as eating lunch in a cafeteria, walking independently in hallways, following a bell schedule, attending assemblies, or using lockers. These experiences are important for students to learn and practice essential school routines and social skills that support a successful return to a public day school setting when the least restrictive environment is determined by the IEP Team to provide FAPE.

LEAs reported greater success with student transitions when private day schools and public schools are in close proximity, allowing for gradual transitions and opportunities to practice these skills. However, factors such as transportation and distance between schools can present barriers to providing adequate transition opportunities. Expanded use of CSA funds for transitional services was identified by LEAs as a potential strategy to help address these barriers and to support students in preparing for a return to public schools.

Successful transitions were also linked to strong IEP Team decision-making at the point when a change in placement is first considered. When IEPs are developed to fully reflect the unique needs of the student with a disability, the Team is better able to determine what services and supports the LEA can provide and when a change of placement may be necessary to meet the student's needs. Revisiting each IEP with this level of specificity helps ensure that students are placed in the most appropriate private day school to meet their needs, receive an individualized program rather than only the standard offerings of the school, and continue working toward academic rigor while also developing the skills needed for a successful transition back to the public day school environment. This process also helps LEAs identify needs and build capacity to support students, strengthens collaboration among the family, LEA, and private day school, and maintains a decision-making focus on the student's individual needs.

The use of evidence-based practices, such as video self-modeling, may provide an additional strategy to help students learn, rehearse, and generalize essential school-based skills that support effective transitions.

Trends in Disability Identification and Placement

Evaluation teams in schools do not provide medical diagnoses; rather, they determine whether a child is eligible for special education and related services. Under IDEA and Virginia regulations, a child is found eligible if they meet the criteria for 1 of 14 disability categories and require special education and related services as a result. While all disability categories may involve behavioral or emotional impacts, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Emotional Disability, Other Health Impairment, and Developmental Delay are most frequently associated with characteristics that contribute to behavioral and social-emotional needs.

Although only 42% of students with disabilities in Virginia public schools were identified with autism, an emotional disability, or another health impairment in the 2024-2025 school year, these three identification categories account for 85% of students served in private day school placements. Risk ratio analysis showed that students with an emotional disability were 6.7 times

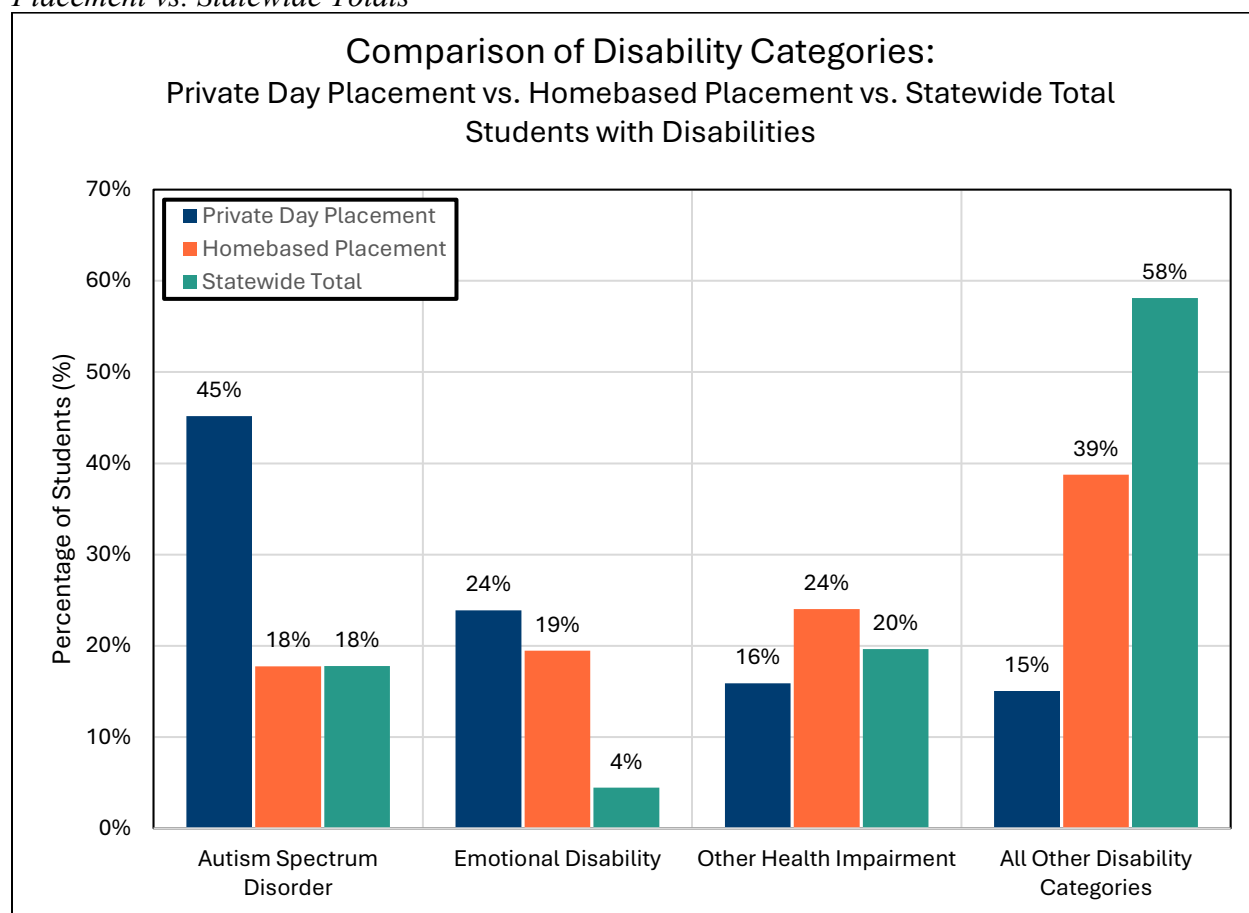
more likely to be served in a private day placement compared with students with other disabilities. Students with autism were 3.8 times more likely, and students with multiple disabilities were 3.5 times more likely.

Less than one percent of students with disabilities statewide were served in a home-based placement as of December 1, 2024. Of these students, 61% were identified with autism, emotional disability, or other health impairment, and 25.5% were identified with multiple disabilities or a specific learning disability.

The comparisons in Figure A demonstrate that students identified with autism or an emotional disability are disproportionately represented in private day placements relative to their share of the total student population with disabilities. Students with other health impairment are more evenly represented across all placement types, while students in all other disability categories are significantly underrepresented in private day placements compared to their statewide prevalence.

- Students with autism account for 18% of the statewide population of students with disabilities. However, they make up 45% of students in private day placements and 18% of students in home-based placements.
- Students with an emotional disability represent 4% of the statewide population, but 24% of students in private day placements and 19% of students in home-based placements.
- Students with other health impairment represent 20% of the statewide population. They account for 16% of private day placements and 24% of home-based placements.
- All other disability categories combined represent 58% of the statewide population of students with disabilities, but only 15% of private day placements and 39% of home-based placements.

Figure A. Comparison of Disability Categories: Private Day Placement vs. Homebased Placement vs. Statewide Totals



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEAS

Based on findings from the 2024-2025 review, the following recommendations are provided to support LEAs in strengthening placement decision-making processes and improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

1. **Evaluation of IEP Development:** Strengthen IEP Team processes to ensure placement decisions are individualized, clearly documented, and focused on the student's least restrictive environment based on the services and supports identified in their IEP.
2. **Expand Training and Technical Assistance:** Provide targeted training for IEP Teams and administrators to build knowledge of special education services and IEP development, behavior supports, and alignment with standards-based instruction.
3. **Leverage Transitional Services and Continuum Options:** Develop and expand structured transition plans, including the use of CSA funding for transition services, to support students returning from private day school placements.

4. **Promote Collaboration Across LEAs and with Private Day School Partners:**

Strengthen partnerships to improve instructional alignment, share effective practices, and enhance transition planning.

CONCLUSION

The findings and recommendations from this review highlight continued progress by LEAs in strengthening placement decision-making and expanding their capacity to support students with disabilities within the public day school setting. Divisions have established new intensive support classrooms, engaged in regional partnerships, and increased administrator training to align practices with inclusive instruction and behavior supports. At the same time, analysis of placement patterns and outcomes demonstrates that students with autism spectrum disorder, emotional disability, and other health impairment identifications remain disproportionately represented in private day placements and face a greater likelihood of graduating with an alternate diploma when compared with peers served in public schools.

To address these challenges, the review emphasizes the importance of strengthening IEP development prior to placement changes, expanding targeted training for IEP Teams and administrators, and increasing the use of transitional classrooms and structured plans to support students returning from private day placements. Strategic use of *Children's Services Act* funds and ongoing collaboration across LEAs and with private day partners will further enhance the continuum of services and improve transition outcomes. Together, these efforts will help ensure that placement decisions remain individualized, aligned with the least restrictive environment, and focused on promoting both academic and postsecondary success for students with disabilities across the Commonwealth.