Office of Children's Services
Empowering communities to serve youth

Office of Children's Services

Report to the General Assembly on School Divisions' Capacity, Transition Barriers, and Behavioral Trends Related to Students in Private Day School Placements

Submitted in Response to:

Item 272. B. 2. of the
2026 Appropriation Act (Chapter 1)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been prepared and submitted to fulfill the requirements of Chapter 1, Item 272(B)(2) of the 2026 Appropriation Act that states:

> The Office of Children's Services, in coordination with the Virginia Department of Education's Office of Special Education, shall report to the General Assembly by October 1 of each year: (i) recommendations made to each LEA and progress made in improving the LEA's ability to serve students; (ii) an assessment of barriers to students returning to a LEA from a private day placement including instances when the LEA refuses or is unable to provide a less restrictive environment due to a lack of available transition services and recommendations for returning students to public school who are deemed eligible; and (iii) trends in behavioral and emotional diagnoses including students on home-based instruction that may require private day placements.

The information contained in this report was provided to the Office of Children's Services by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and includes data collected during the 2025-2026 school year. OCS thanks VDOE for its ongoing partnership and collaboration in serving children and families throughout the Commonwealth.

Report to the Office of Children's Services



BACKGROUND

This report has been prepared and submitted to fulfill the requirements of Chapter 26, Item 272.B.2 of the 2026 Appropriation Act. The Virginia General Assembly requires the Office of Children's Services, in coordination with the Virginia Department of Education, to report to the General Assembly by October 1 of each year: (i) recommendations made to each Local Educational Authority (LEA) and progress made in improving the LEA's ability to serve students; (ii) an assessment of barriers to students returning to a LEA from a private day placement including instances when the LEA refuses or is unable to provide a less restrictive environment due to a lack of available transition services and recommendations for returning students to public school who are deemed eligible; and (iii) trends in behavioral and emotional diagnoses including students on home-based instruction that may require private day placements.

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides the following information to the Office of Children's Services to support this reporting requirement.

REPORT COMPONENTS

LEA Recommendations and Progress

Local school divisions have made progress implementing recommendations from previous reviews to improve LEAs' ability to serve students and have incorporated feedback from workgroup sessions across the Commonwealth, composed of LEA representatives and private day partners, to discuss processes and barriers to effective collaboration. LEAs' ability to serve students is supported through multiple areas of professional development, technical assistance, and support.

The VDOE has supported training and technical assistance for Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams and administrators to build knowledge of special education services and IEP development, behavior supports, and alignment with standards-based instruction. The VDOE has also leveraged partners across the network of Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTAC) and other partners in Institutions of Higher Education to provide support and build capacity in local school divisions aligned to data-based needs.

The Cooperative for Effective Behavior Interventions and Supports (CEBIS) at Old Dominion University promotes systematic, research-based practices to ensure high-quality behavior interventions and supports for educators across Virginia. The center works alongside the VDOE

to disseminate resources designed to promote effective instruction of prosocial behavior skills and address interfering behavior in school settings through supports for division- and school-based teams, including completion of Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) and development of Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP).

Virginia Commonwealth University's Regional Autism and Behavior Technical Assistance Network (RABTAN) strengthens Virginia public schools' capacity to meet the individual educational and behavioral needs of students with autism and other intensive support needs. RABTAN provides 45 school divisions with targeted on-the-job coaching, consultation, and frequent technical assistance to help educators implement effective positive behavioral practices and maintain safe and supportive learning environments.

Across five Virginia superintendents' regions (Regions 1, 3, 5, 6, and 8), RABTAN provides direct training, technical assistance, resource development, and contextualized implementation support to targeted administrators, special education coordinators, and educators. These activities build school and division capacity to implement and sustain evidence-based practices, strengthen educational services and the continuum of support options, and improve outcomes for students with intensive support needs. Through this regional model, RABTAN works with school division leadership to identify local needs, strengthen staff expertise, and develop sustainable school-based supports. This work enhances Virginia's broader efforts to expand the continuum of services available within public schools, strengthen transitions from private day placements, and increase local capacity to provide appropriate services and supports in students' least restrictive environments.

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 report 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 the student may not require.

The VDOE is consulting with local school divisions currently utilizing Children's Services Act (CSA) funds for transitional services, as defined in § 2.2-5211 of the Code of Virginia, and will issue guidance regarding how local school divisions can utilize CSA funds for transition services no later than July 1, 2027, as directed by the Virginia General Assembly.

The VDOE has also updated guidance and support regarding the 2026-2027 Students with Intensive Support Needs Application (SISNA). This application provides school divisions with funds to offset the high cost of providing instructional and other direct services for students

identified in low-incidence disability categories who meet the criteria as Students with Intensive Support Needs. School divisions are required to partner with one or more other school divisions to access these funds. As directed by the Appropriation Act, the VDOE has expanded the disability categories eligible for support to better serve students with complex behavioral needs who IEP Teams might otherwise consider for more restrictive placements. Aligned with this directive and informed by feedback from school divisions, SISNA has expanded its eligibility criteria to include

Other Health Impairment. This change is intended to ensure divisions have greater flexibility and access to appropriate resources when addressing significant behavioral challenges.

Trends in Disability Identification and Placement

School evaluation teams do not provide medical diagnoses; instead, 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 3.6 times more likely.

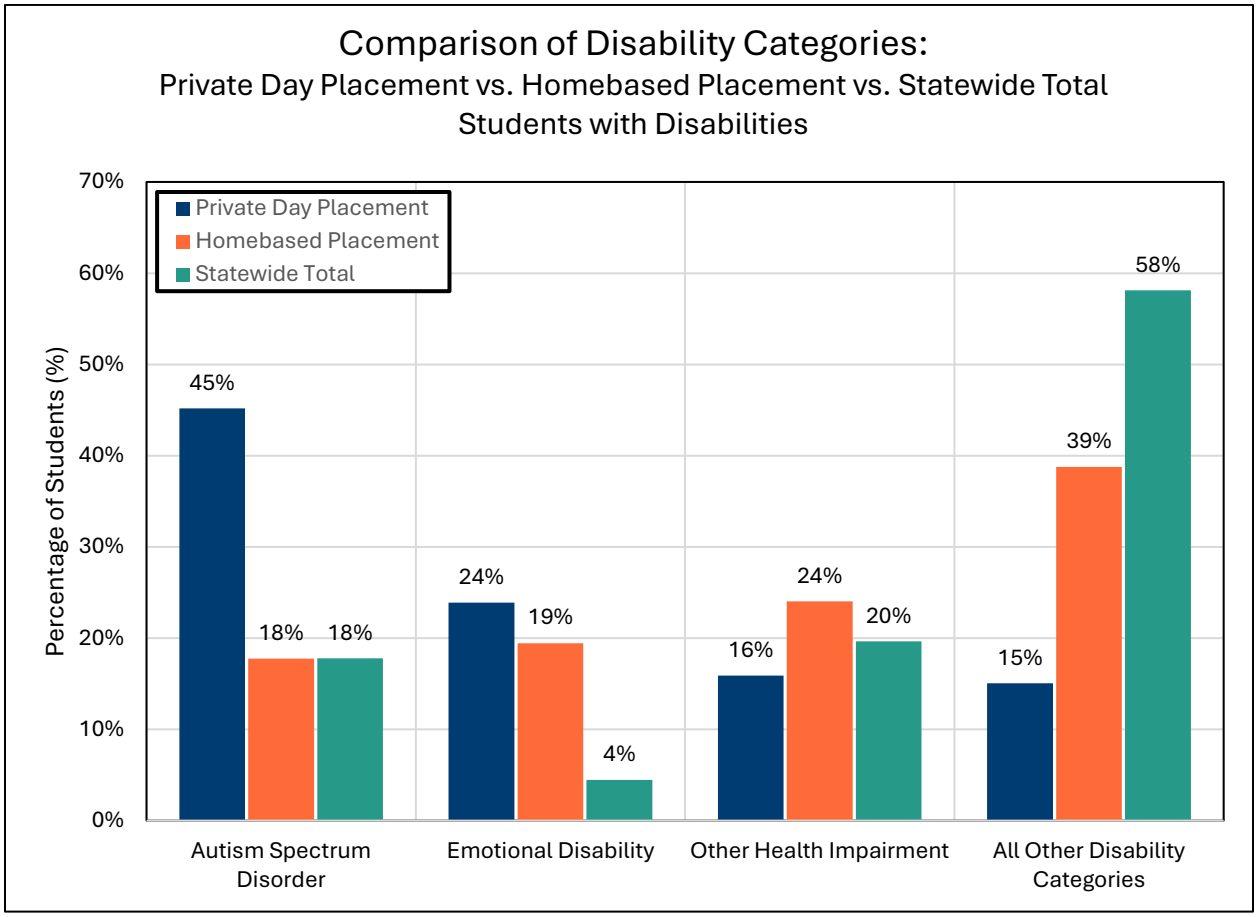
As of December 1, 2025, less than one percent of students with disabilities statewide were served in a home-based placement. Of these students, 61% were identified with autism, emotional disability, or other health impairment, and 25.5% were identified with multiple disabilities or a specific learning 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 impairments 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 impairments 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. Home-Based Placement vs. Statewide Totals



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 strengthening IEP development before 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.