

1. *As Time Goes By: Short-term Changes in the Experiences of Elementary and Middle School Students with Disabilities* By Jose Blackorby and Mary Wagner

Rapid change has become a fact of life in American society. Technological developments have created a continuous evolution in such aspects of our lives as communication, recreation and entertainment, access to information, and requirements for job skills. Economic fluctuations in recent years also have caused changes in the employment status of many adults and, consequently, in the financial well-being of their households. Dramatic events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, can change the social and political landscape almost overnight, changes that are felt by individuals in many ways.

In addition to changes resulting from factors such as these, school-age children experience changes that do not affect adults. For example, the far-reaching education reforms embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) have changed many students' school experiences. For example, an increased emphasis on accountability for improving students' educational performance has led some schools to change instructional priorities and activities to focus more directly on content and skills required for success on standardized tests. The expectation in the law that students with disabilities will participate in standardized testing to the maximum extent possible may lead to some students' taking part in such tests for the first time.

Beyond these changes in their school environments, the growth and development that children experience with each passing year creates changes that can affect children physically, emotionally, and cognitively, with repercussions in all aspects of their lives, particularly in such volatile periods as early adolescence.

Since 2002, a series of reports¹ have documented the characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of elementary and middle school students with disabilities by using data from the first wave of data collection for the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), which is sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education and is being conducted by SRI International (SRI). SEELS includes a sample of more than 11,000 students who were ages 6 through 12 and receiving special education in the first or higher grades on September 1, 1999. When their parents were first interviewed in the summer of 2000, students were ages 6 through 13.

¹ These reports include Wagner, Marder, et al., 2002; Wagner & Blackorby, 2002; Blackorby, Wagner, Cadwallader, et al., 2002; Wagner, Cadwallader, et al., 2002; Blackorby, Wagner, Cameto, Marder, et al., 2004; Blackorby, Wagner, Cameto, Davies, et al., 2004). Reports can be found at www.seels.net.

Information about them was first obtained from staff in the schools they attended in the spring of the 2000-01 school years, when students were ages 7 through 14 and in first through ninth grades or in ungraded programs. Also that year, direct assessments of students' reading and mathematics abilities and in-person interviews were conducted with SEELS students.²

The second wave of data collection for SEELS was conducted in the spring of the 2001-02 school year, when parents were interviewed again, surveys were conducted again with school staff, and students participated in assessments and in-person interviews for the second time. Students were ages 8 through 15 in Wave 2.

The time period between Waves 1 and 2 (2 years in the case of parent interviews and 1 year for school surveys and direct assessments) provides an opportunity to examine short-term changes in many aspects of the lives of students with disabilities that first were described in Wave 1. This report describes these changes over time by comparing information reported in Wave 2 with the "baseline" information reported in Wave 1 for students for whom information is available for both waves. The report addresses the following questions:

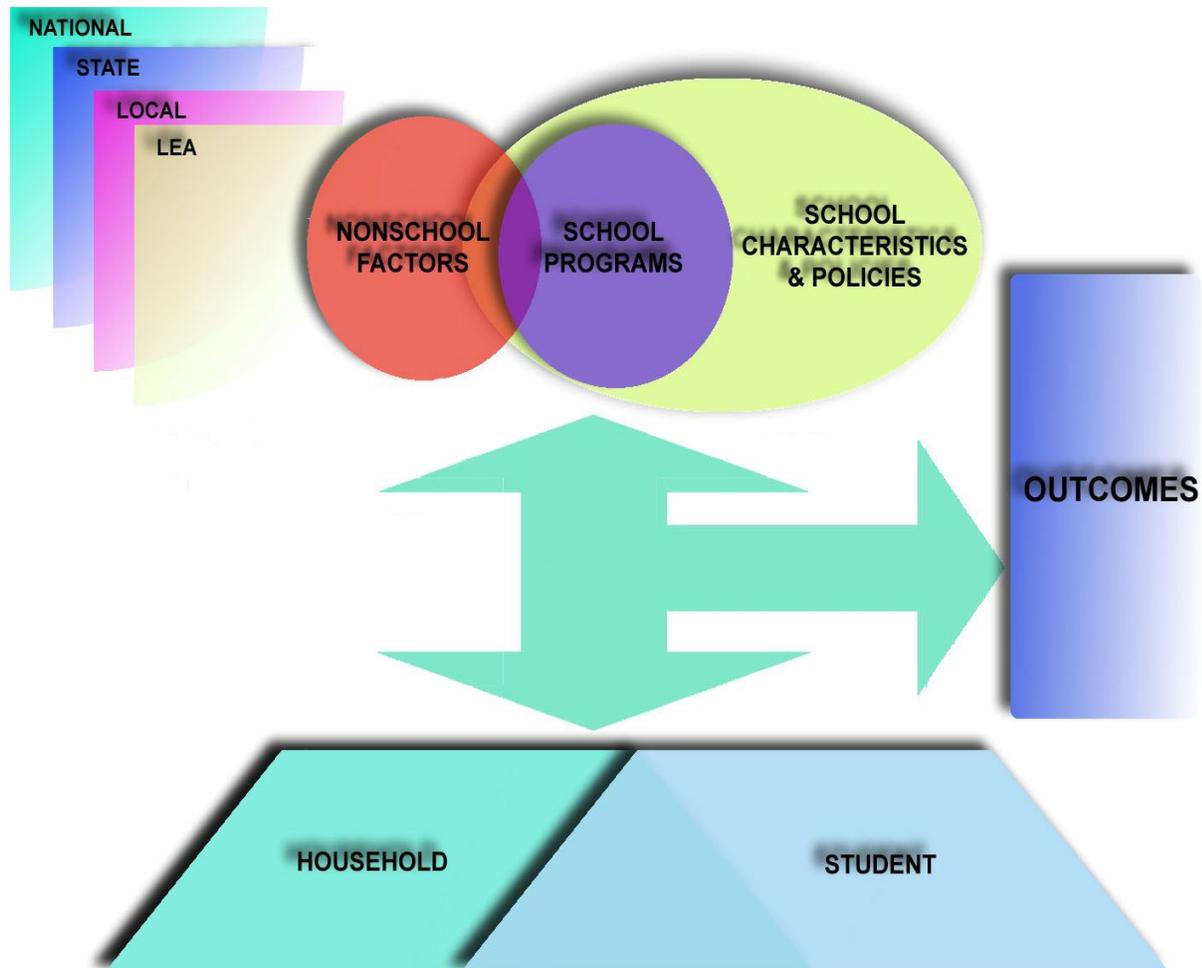
- In what ways have students with disabilities and their family contexts, their experiences in and out of school, and their outcomes on multiple dimensions changed over a 1- or 2-year period?
- To what extent have changes been experienced differently for students with disabilities who differ in their primary disability category, age, and other demographic characteristics?

These questions are applied to the several of the domains of students and their experiences featured in the SEELS conceptual framework (Exhibit 1-1):

- Individual and household characteristics (Chapter 2)
- Social and extracurricular activities (Chapter 3)
- Family support for education at home (Chapter 4)
- School enrollment, services, and supports (Chapter 5)
- An overview of students' school programs (Chapter 6)
- Parents' perceptions of schools and programs (Chapter 7)
- School engagement and academic performance (Chapter 8).

² If assessors determined from a teacher that a particular student was not able to participate in the direct assessment, even with accommodations usually provided to the student in the classroom, an alternate assessment was completed by the teacher; no student interview was conducted.

Exhibit 1-1
SEELS Conceptual Framework



Technical Notes

An effort has been made to present the wealth of information in this report in an accessible format. Readers of the report should keep the following in mind.

- **Results are weighted.** All the descriptive statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special education in the SEELS age range, as well as of each disability category individually.
- **Standard errors.** Means and percentages are accompanied by a standard error (presented in parentheses) which describes the precision of the estimate. For example, a weighted estimated value of 50% and a standard error of 2 for a variable means that the value for the total population, if it had been

measured, would lie between 48% and 52% (plus or minus 2 percentage points of 50%), with a 95% confidence level. In general, estimates based on small samples have larger standard errors and should be viewed cautiously. Standard errors in this report are shown in data tables; those for charts can be found in Appendix B.

- **Cross tabulation variables.** This descriptive look short-term changes in students' experiences examines those changes as they vary for students who differ in their primary disability category, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, and grade level. However, exhibits include these cross tabulations only when statistically significant differences are evident and only statistically significant changes or differences across categories are noted in the text.