

Executive Summary

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To better understand the needs of Georgia families who have school-age children with disabilities and the providers who care for these children, we examined the results from 2,193 parent surveys across four Georgia counties and conducted focus groups and interviews with 37 parents and 43 providers. The results indicated that school-age children with disabilities are in the same types of settings as typically-developing children although there was some evidence that children with more severe disabilities are more likely than typically-developing children to be home with siblings and to attend after-school programs.

Although school-age youth with disabilities are in settings similar to those used by typically-developing children, families of youth with disabilities are less satisfied and reported more problems with these arrangements. The top problems experienced—affordability, finding care when school is not in session, and not knowing what options are available in the community—are the same for families of typically-developing children and children with disabilities, although the prevalence of these problems is higher for families who have children with disabilities.

Access to inclusive settings for youth with disabilities was especially limited in rural areas and for older youth, who may need supervision longer than typically-developing children. Families who have children with disabilities are no more likely than families with typically-developing children to worry about their safety, although they have a broader range of concerns, including fear that their child may run away from the setting or be hurt trying to get on and off buses, may hurt other children, and may not be able to tell adults about problems due to an inability to communicate.

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Providers who offer care and activities to school-age youth with disabilities value the opportunity to involve the children in their programs. Providers enjoy watching the children develop and are rewarded by the love and affection they receive from the children. They also report that typically-developing children benefit from inclusion of children with disabilities in the program.

Providers also experience some problems, however. They are frustrated by not having enough staff with training in disabilities and the equipment needed to fully include children with certain disabilities. Providers also need help learning how to adapt their curriculum and activities to meet the needs of children with specific disabilities and funding to cover the cost of accommodations to vans, buildings, and equipment.

Parents and providers agree that parents of typically-developing children are not always supportive of including children with disabilities in the program. Providers also wanted to strengthen relationships with the parents of children with disabilities. In some cases, providers need more information from parents to know how best to meet the needs of children. In other cases, they feel that parents need to have more reasonable expectations for what is possible in an after-school setting and to recognize that over-protecting children can be damaging to the child.

Parents who have children with disabilities want the same types of programs and supports for their children as parents of typically-developing children, but they want them to a somewhat greater degree. Providers want enough staff with specialized training and the materials and equipment needed to fully accommodate children with disabilities into their settings. Both parents and providers want more interaction between all individuals who support these children—parents, school personnel, and therapists—and a greater understanding of and sensitivity to diversity issues on the part of the larger community.

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Fully supporting school-age youth with disabilities, as well as the school-age providers who care for and educate them, will require:

- Making families and providers more aware of existing resources;
- Increasing access through improved accommodations;
- Improving collaboration at the state, community, and program levels to address the issues identified by parents and providers;
- Increasing provider training opportunities by:
 - Adding workshops on working with children having specific disabilities;
 - Developing video-based training on specific disabilities for use in workshops or as self-studies;
 - Engaging parents who have children with disabilities as trainers; and
 - Expanding access to training scholarships to the full range of school-age providers, including providers of short-term recreation and enrichment activities, youth club leaders, and informal caregivers who receive subsidies to care for low-income children;
- Increasing the availability of school-age options, especially for times when school is not in session (e.g., summer, holidays), in rural communities, and for older youth who have disabilities; and
- Providing diversity training to the larger population via mass media and workshops to support full inclusion of school-age children with disabilities in out-of-school settings.