

## Executive Summary

A series of federal laws have laid the groundwork for integrating individuals with disabilities into schools and communities; these laws include the Education of the Handicapped Act (P.L. 94-142, later amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-112), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (P.L. 101-336). Furthermore, the New Freedom Initiative of 2001 was designed to improve access to community life for individuals with disabilities through enhanced use of technology, high-quality education, and rigorous enforcement of existing laws. Community integration or community access can mean different things at different ages. For adults, it may include transportation, employment, and access to higher education and appropriate social supports. For children, it may include involvement in extracurricular activities, participation in family life, and access to an appropriate education.

This report uses data from the Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS) to describe access for young children with disabilities in two specific domains: community activities, including extracurricular activities and family recreation, and kindergarten classroom experiences. While research has been conducted on children's access to and participation in community activities and kindergarten experiences, those studies primarily focused on describing experiences for *all* children (Afterschool Alliance 2008; Fredericks and Eccles 2006; Guarino, Hamilton, Lockwood, and Rathbun 2006; Harrison and Narayan 2003; National Institute on Out-of-School Time 2003; Princiotta, Flanagan, and Germino-Hausken 2006; Rathbun, West, and Germino-Hausken 2004; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, and Bovaird 2007; West, Denton, and Germino-Hausken 2000; West, Denton, and Reaney 2001). This report adds to the literature by focusing on access to and participation in community activities and kindergarten experiences for *young children with disabilities* and how access and participation may vary by child, family, and school district characteristics.

PEELS, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, is examining the characteristics of children receiving preschool special education, the services they receive, their transitions across

educational levels, and their performance over time on assessments of academic and adaptive skills. PEELS includes a nationally representative sample of 3,104 children with disabilities who were ages 3 through 5 when the study began in 2003-04. The children were followed through 2009. PEELS data were collected through several different instruments and activities, including a direct one-on-one assessment of the children, a telephone interview with their parents/guardians, and mail questionnaires to the teacher or service provider of each child. This report provides selected findings from the first four waves of data collection—school years 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07. Any reported differences have been tested for statistical significance at the  $p < .05$  level.

While PEELS is a broad, descriptive study, the analyses presented in this report are designed to address four questions related to children's access to community and educational activities:

- In what types of community activities are children with disabilities ages 5 through 7 engaged?
- How do specific attributes, such as gender, disability, and household income, and potential barriers, such as access to adequate transportation and safety of neighborhoods, relate to involvement in those activities?
- What are the kindergarten experiences of young children with disabilities in terms of access to the general curriculum, enrollment in classes with peers without disabilities, instructional strategies, and full-day/part-day programs?
- How do these kindergarten experiences vary by district size, district wealth, and metropolitan status?

### **Access to Community Activities for Young Children with Disabilities**

- Parents of children participating in PEELS were asked if their child participated in extracurricular activities outside of school, such as dance lessons, organized athletic activities, organized clubs or recreational programs, music lessons, drama classes, art or craft classes or lessons, or performing arts programs. According to their parent's report, children's

level of participation in the activities ranged from 50 percent for organized athletic activities to 3 percent for drama classes.

- Parents were asked if their child participated at least once a month in play groups, story hours, Sunday school or church child care, lessons, athletic teams, children's organizations, or other monthly group activities. Fifty-seven percent of parents reported that their children had participated in a monthly children's group activity. The most common group activity in which the children participated was Sunday school or church child care (80%).
- Parents of PEELS children were asked whether they had taken their child various places in the past month. More than 90 percent of parents reported that their child went to restaurants (95%), grocery stores (95%), and shopping malls (94%) in the past month, and more than 50 percent of parents reported that their child went to places of worship (72%), parks (72%), movies (58%), or libraries (52%). The percentage of parents who reported taking their child to the park in the previous month varied significantly by disability. For example, fewer children (53%) with other health impairments had gone to the park with their family compared to children with autism (75%,  $t = -3.53$ ,  $p = .001$ ), a learning disability (75%,  $t = -2.39$ ,  $p = .02$ ), a speech or language impairment (75%,  $t = -3.42$ ,  $p = .001$ ), or a developmental delay (74%,  $t = -2.9$ ,  $p = .005$ ).

### **Access to Educational Activities for Young Children with Disabilities**

- By spring of their kindergarten year, the mean age of PEELS children was 73.4 months.
- For those PEELS children still receiving special education services in kindergarten (78 percent of the original PEELS sample), 73 percent of teachers indicated that the regular education classroom was considered the main education setting during the kindergarten year.
- Children's main education setting differed significantly by district factors, including district size, metropolitan status, and district wealth. A larger proportion of children in very large districts were in the regular education classroom as their main setting (91%) compared to

children in large districts (72%,  $t = 3.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), medium districts (69%,  $t = 5.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ), or small districts (62%,  $t = 5.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ). More children in rural districts (86%) were in the regular education classroom as their main setting compared to children in suburban districts (73%,  $t = 2.57$ ,  $p = .012$ ) or urban districts (64%,  $t = 4.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Children in very low-wealth districts (59%) were less likely to have regular education classrooms as their main education setting compared to children in high-wealth districts (72%,  $t = -2.78$ ,  $p = .007$ ), medium-wealth districts (81%,  $t = -3.24$ ,  $p = .002$ ), or low-wealth districts (76%,  $t = -3.52$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

- Kindergarteners in PEELS still receiving special education services received an average of 17.1 hours per week of education in regular education classrooms and 7.1 hours per week in special education classrooms. The mean number of hours per week in a regular education classroom setting differed significantly by district size ( $F = 3.438$ ,  $p = .022$ ) and metropolitan status ( $F = 10.289$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Children in very large districts ( $M = 19.8$ ) spent significantly more hours per week in the regular education classroom than children in medium districts ( $M = 14.8$ ) or children in small districts ( $M = 14.5$ ). Children in large districts ( $M = 18.2$ ) also received significantly more hours per week in the regular education classroom than children in small districts ( $M = 14.5$ ). In addition, children living in rural areas spent more hours in regular education classrooms ( $M = 22.0$ ) than children living in urban areas ( $M = 15.7$ ) or children living in suburban areas ( $M = 15.9$ ).
- Sixty-nine percent of all PEELS parents, regardless of whether their children were still receiving special education services in kindergarten, reported that their child attended full-day kindergarten programs, and 31 percent of parents reported that their child attended half-day kindergarten programs. Among PEELS children, the type of program attended varied by metropolitan status and district wealth; children in suburban areas were less likely to attend a full-day program (57%), compared to children in urban areas (80%,  $t = -3.54$ ,  $p = .001$ ) or children in rural areas (83%,  $t = 3.23$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Children in high-wealth districts were less

likely to attend full-day kindergarten programs (44%) compared to children from medium-wealth (79%,  $t = 3.59$ ,  $p = .001$ ), children from low-wealth (84%,  $t = 3.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ), or children from very low-wealth (77%,  $t = 3.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ) districts.

- Among PEELS kindergarteners still receiving special education services, 44 percent of teachers reported that there were no modifications to the child's curriculum materials; 29 percent of teachers reported making some modifications; and 27 percent of teachers reported making either substantial modifications or using specialized curriculum materials. The most common modifications or accommodations provided to kindergarteners receiving special education services were additional time to complete assignments (39%), slower paced instruction or modified instruction (36%), and modified assignments (36%).
- Children in PEELS, regardless of whether they were still receiving special education services in kindergarten, spent most of their time in adult-directed whole-class activities and adult-directed small-group activities (39% and 23%, respectively).
- Children who were still receiving special education services in kindergarten and who were served mainly in regular education classrooms were in classrooms with an average of 3.3 special education students and 16.7 regular education students. The number of children with individualized education programs (IEPs) served in regular education classrooms differed significantly by district wealth ( $F = 2.774$ ,  $p = .049$ ). The number of children with IEPs served in regular education classrooms was significantly smaller for children from high-wealth districts ( $M = 2.9$ ) than for children from medium-wealth districts ( $M = 3.6$ ).