



# More Students Are Getting Special Help in Grades K-12

Number of students receiving accommodations from 504 plans more than doubled, with more getting help in wealthier districts

## EDUCATION

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More students are getting extra help for a range of issues including ADHD and anxiety, data show, with a disproportionate amount of those receiving support attending schools in wealthier districts.

From the 2009-10 school year to 2015-16,



More public school students are receiving special accommodations in class from 504 plans, designed to help students who face a variety of physical and emotional challenges.

the number of public school students in kindergarten through 12th

grade granted accommodations known as 504 plans more than dou-

bled, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of federal data.

504 plans are designed to level the academic playing field for K-12 students who face a variety of physical and emotional challenges by providing services such as extended time for tests, including college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT.

The data show high rates of students receiving accommodations in wealthier districts and lower rates in poorer



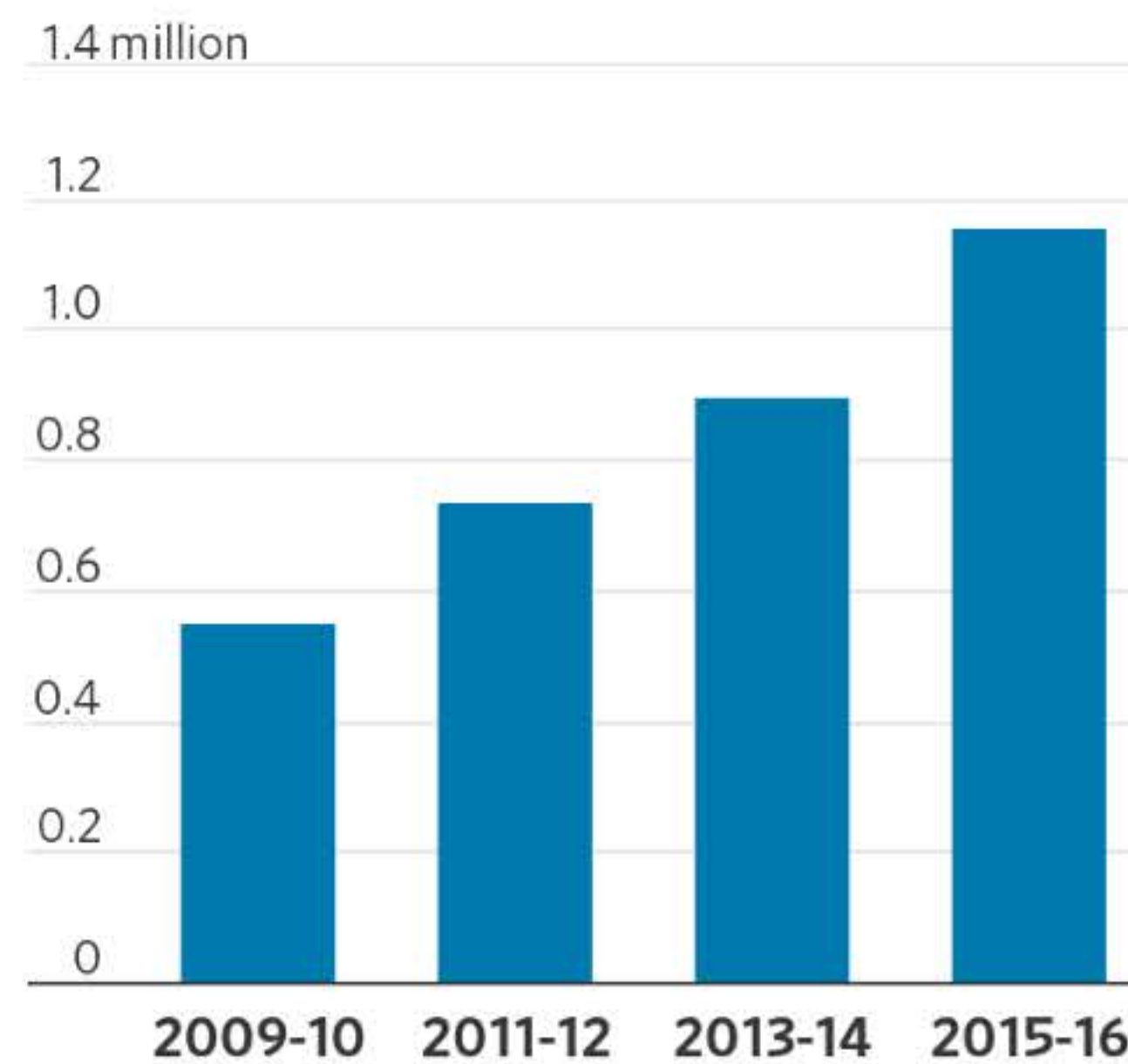
ones. In some wealthy schools, as many as one in five students receive this type of accommodation.

Awareness and diagnoses of mental-health issues have been rising in recent years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Factors in the lopsided growth include gaps in both resources at schools and information among parents about the plans, advocates say.

“I think that we are to a great extent seeing eligibility numbers that are heavily impacted by parental knowledge,”

### Getting Help

Number of 504 disability accommodations issued to U.S. public school students



Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, Education Department

said Candace Cortiella, director of the Advocacy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based organization focused on improving the lives of disabled people.

The disproportionate use of accommodations “unfortunately increases the gap between the

haves and the have-nots in our schools,” said Perry Zirkel, a professor emeritus of education and law at Lehigh University, who has studied the subject for years.

The rise in 504 accommodations in grades K-12 correlates with the increase in the number of accommodations given by the College Board for high-stakes exams like the SAT and the [rise in accommodations given by colleges and universities](#).

William S. McKersie is the superintendent of schools in Weston, Conn., a New York City bedroom community

where nearly one in five students has such a plan—nearly 10 times the national average. He and other school officials say that every student should be provided with the accommodations they need to succeed in school.

“We are uniquely positioned to have the resources to respond to students’ needs,” he said.

The federal government created 504 plans—named after a section of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973—for students with learning disabilities and expanded the conditions they cover over the



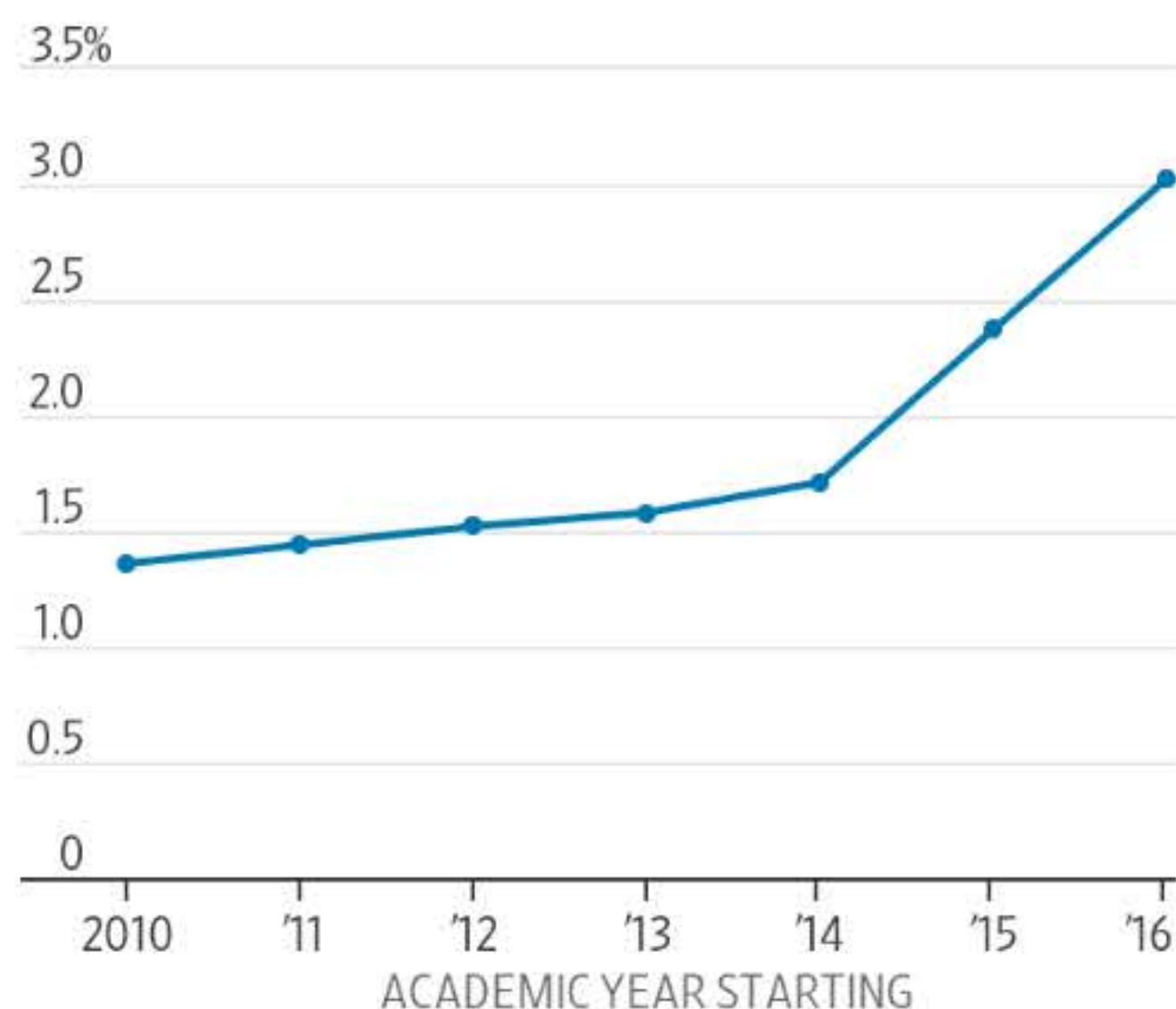
years. To be eligible, students are required by the law to show a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity such as reading or learning.

The rate of 504s rose from 1% of students in the 2009-10 school year to 2.3% in 2015-16, when more than 1.2 million students had one.

Nationally, white students received 63% of accommodation plans, while making up about 49% of the student population. Black students received 14% and make up about 15% of the student population,

**Extra Time**

Percentage of test takers requesting accommodations on high school exams\*



\*Includes AP, PSAT/NMSQT, PSAT 10, SAT, or subject tests

Source: The College Board

while Hispanic students received 21% and make up about 26% of students.

The rate at which students get a different, typically more intensive type of accommodation, called an Individual Education Plan, has remained relatively

constant at 12% of K-12 students, over the past decade.

Even informed parents can sometimes have trouble securing a 504. Jazz Bayliss, whose 5-year-old daughter attends Lindbergh Elementary School in Tulsa, Okla., said she was denied a 504 last year, despite a private physical therapist attesting to a variety of challenges for the girl. The school has a high-poverty student body and granted no 504s in 2015-16.

“They didn’t feel that her disabilities were affecting her in the

classroom,” Ms. Bayliss said.

She said that her daughter ended up receiving accommodations unofficially at school, including being provided with sensory breaks in class, for which she said she was grateful, though she said she would prefer to have the official protections of a 504.

The district declined to comment on the specifics of Ms. Bayliss’s case. When a 504 is turned down, “the student may be considered for additional site-based interventions,” said Christy Spears, coordina-





tor of student support and crisis response for Tulsa Public Schools, in an email.

At Frances Richmond Middle School near Hanover, N.H., more than 16% of students have a 504—about seven times the national average. Many are students who use them if they are hurt playing sports—particularly concussions, said Principal Michael LePene. But the broader driver is the culture: “This is a highly educated community, parents are aware of things like 504s and in this district we have the resources to support

those plans,” he said.

Billy Cuchens, who has three children with accommodations in a Dallas area school where twice as many students have 504s than the national average, said the school had a terrific system in place to help his kids once they were diagnosed with ADHD, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

“We took the initiative to get the diagnosis,” he said. “Every time we have a meeting there is a really good panel with a counselor, a teacher and an administrator. Nobody is telling anybody else what to do;

it’s a real collaborative effort.”

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