

Aug. 1, 2024



30  
MINUTE  
WEBINAR

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*Note: Presentation is on-the-record but Q&A after is off-the-record unless otherwise noted*

# A Fresh Look at Sp Ed Spending

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# Our tendency is to look the other way on Sp Ed spending



Are schools identifying enough students?

Is Sp Ed becoming a dumping ground for struggling students?

Could more money ensure kids with disabilities get what they need?

Are Sp Ed budgets a runaway train, straining the rest of the budget?

Do we know which Sp Ed investments work?

Are we investing in the right things?

Are we measuring any outcomes from Sp Ed?



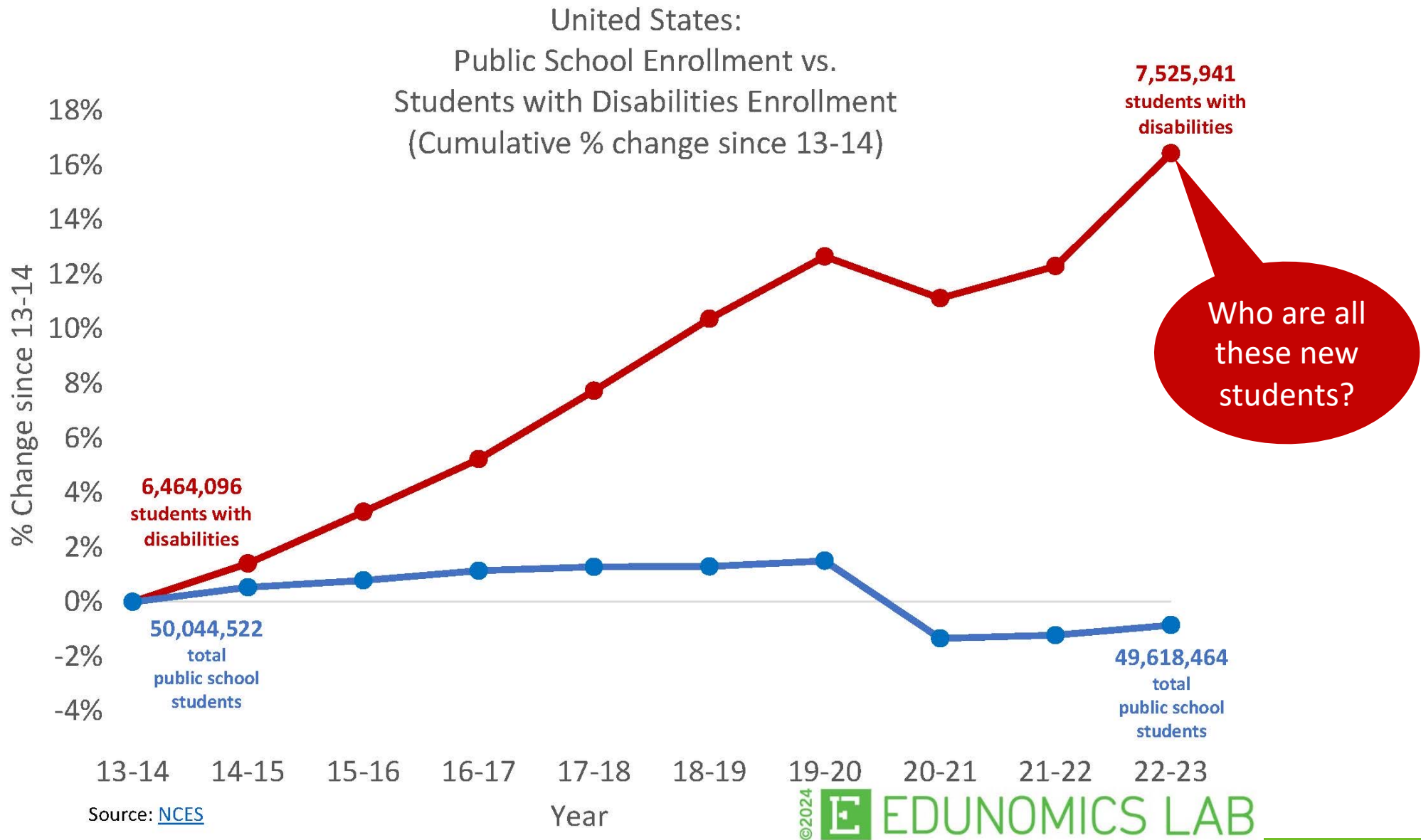
# Sp Ed spending deserves attention

- Identification is up, but how is it that some schools are identifying many more/less students than peers?
- What's happening to the Sp Ed cost structure (and what's driving it)?
- Are your Sp Ed investments delivering top value for students?
- Are changes warranted in how budgets are done for Sp Ed services?
- Are changes warranted in our current approach to staffing Sp Ed services?
- Is Sp Ed spending guided by what's working?



Sp Ed enrollment trending up, even as total enrollment falls.

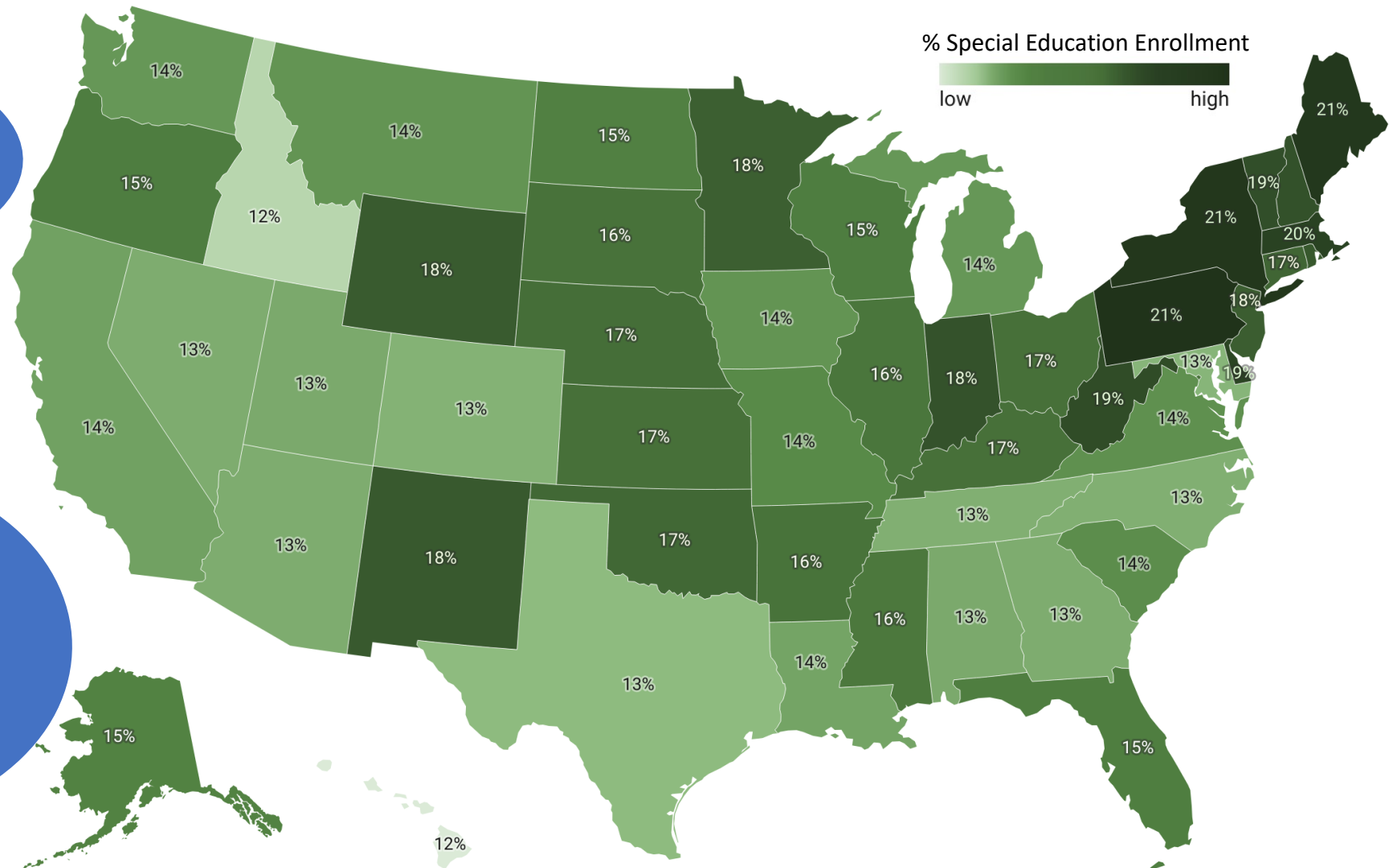
On average, schools are identifying more students as disabled.



# Sp Ed identification rates vary by state

Costs rise with more identification.

Are students better/worse off when more are classified as Sp Ed?



Analysis by Edunomics Lab using: [NCES 2022-23 School Year](#)

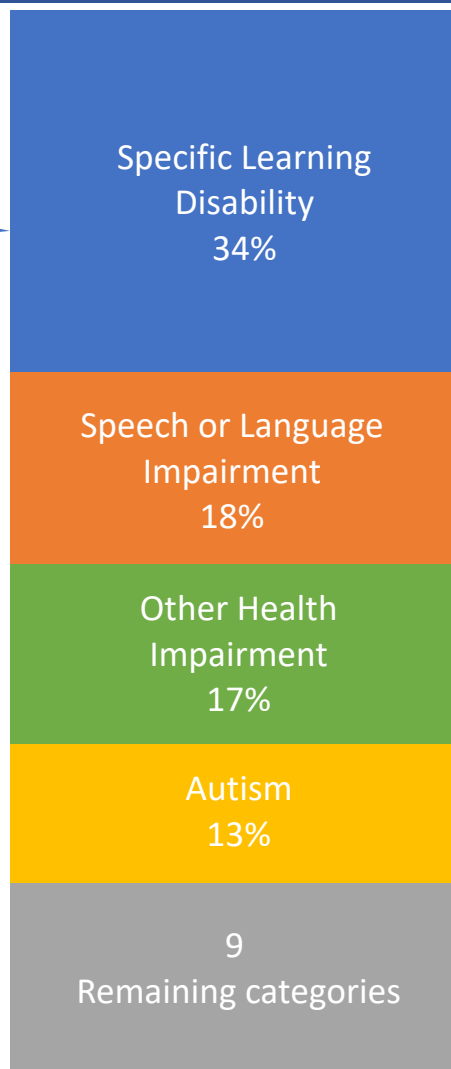


# How subjective is a disability diagnosis?

Specific learning disability is and remains most common disability type (includes dyslexia).

This category includes ADD, ADHD.

Autism diagnoses have grown in recent years.



NM diagnoses 8% of all students as having a learning disability.

In KY and ID, fewer than 3% have a learning disability.

NY refers ~3X as many students for speech as do VT & MD.

Kids in ME are over 3X as likely to be diagnosed with a health impairment vs kids in MT, NV or UT.

True or False

Students with disabilities have a federal right to a free appropriate public education

True or False

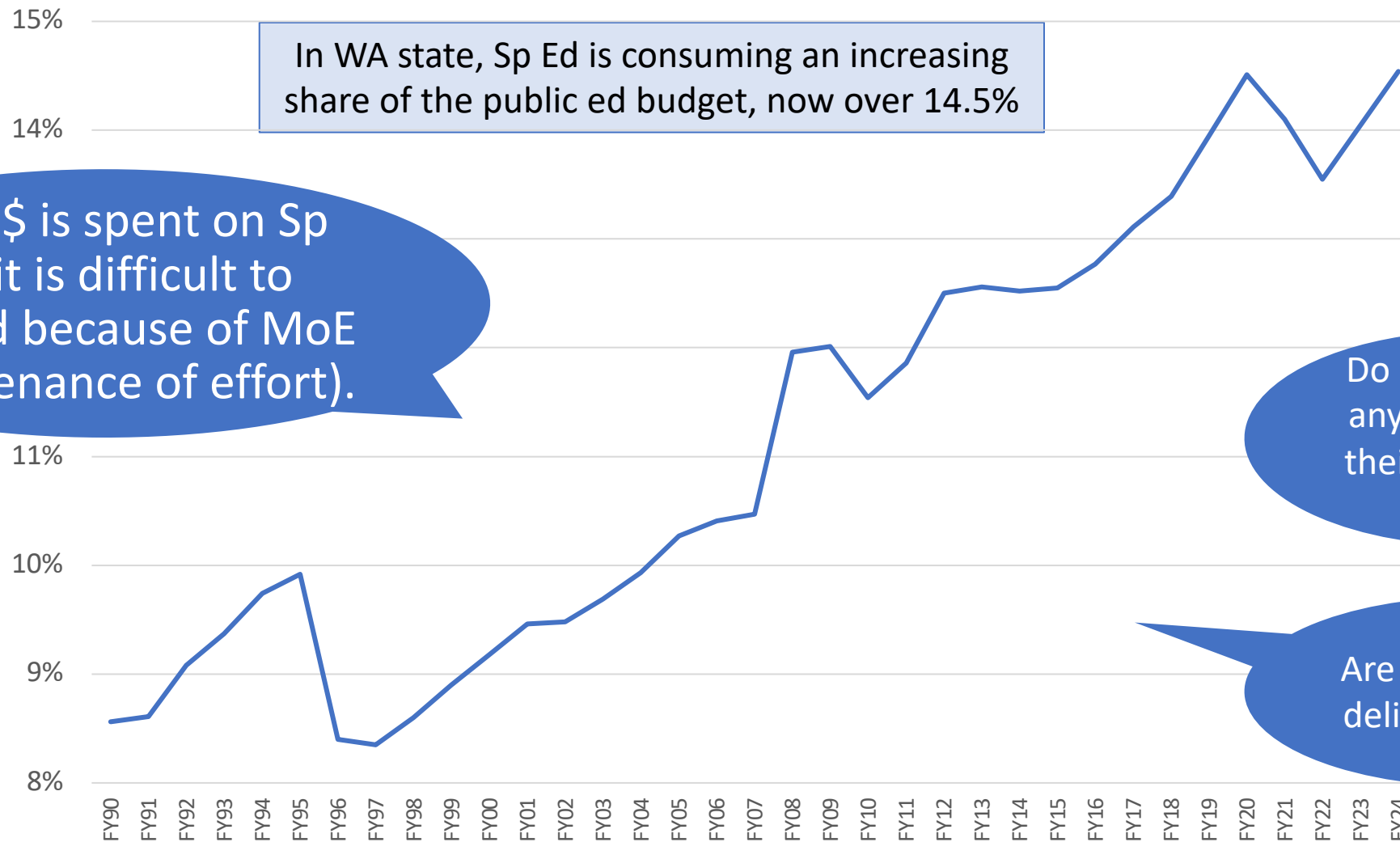
Students without disabilities have a federal right to a free appropriate public education

Legally, a disability diagnosis changes everything.

Sp Ed is a hotly litigated area.

Too many SEAs and districts seek “compliance” by strictly hewing to Sp Ed staffing ratios.

# Sp Ed is consuming a larger share of the budget, forcing cuts elsewhere



Once \$ is spent on Sp Ed, it is difficult to unwind because of MoE (maintenance of effort).

Do districts have any control over their rising Sp Ed costs?

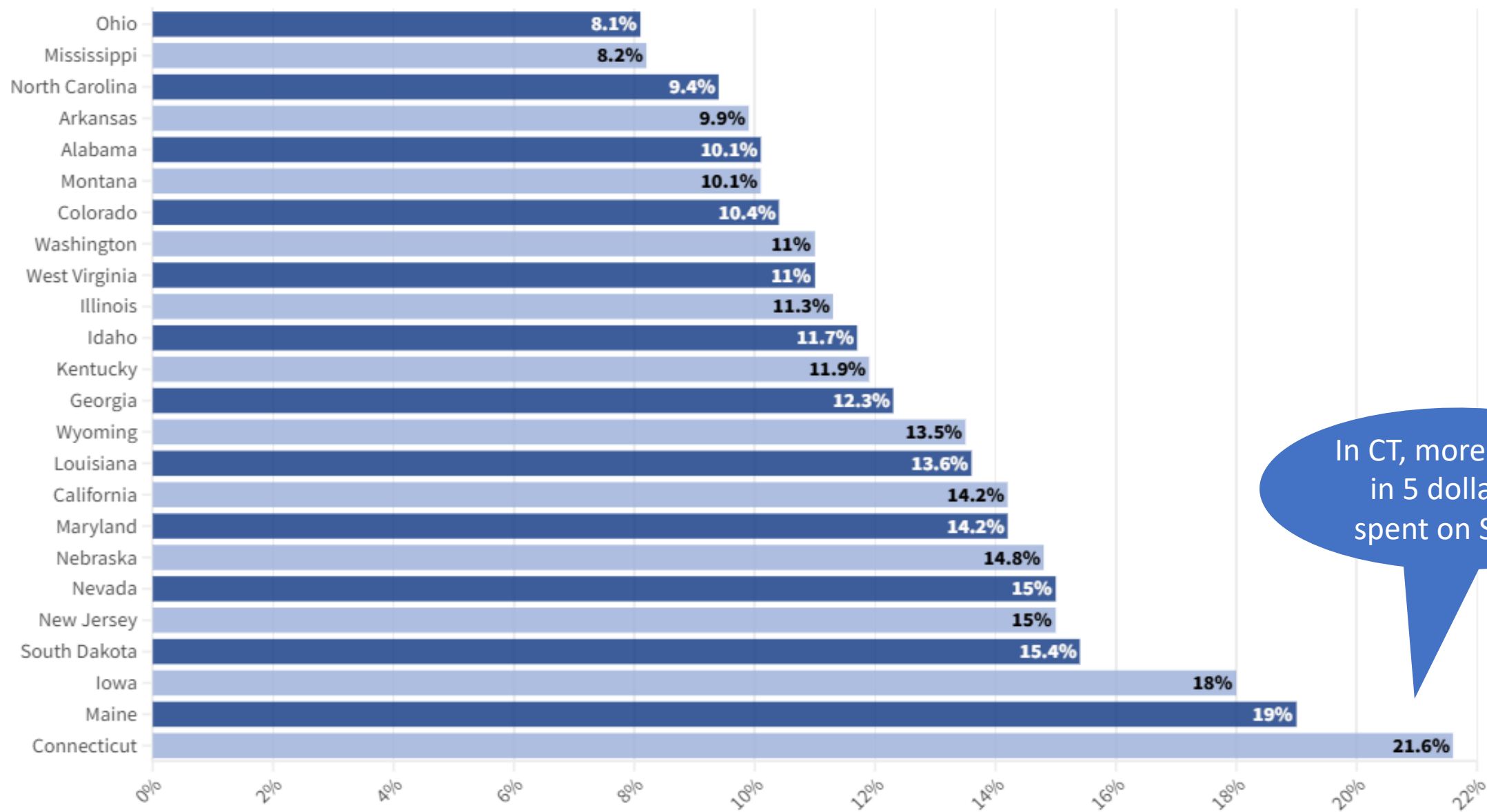
Are the increases delivering value?

Analysis by Edunomics Lab using: [Washington State Fiscal Information Office](#), F195 and 196 reports from SAFS



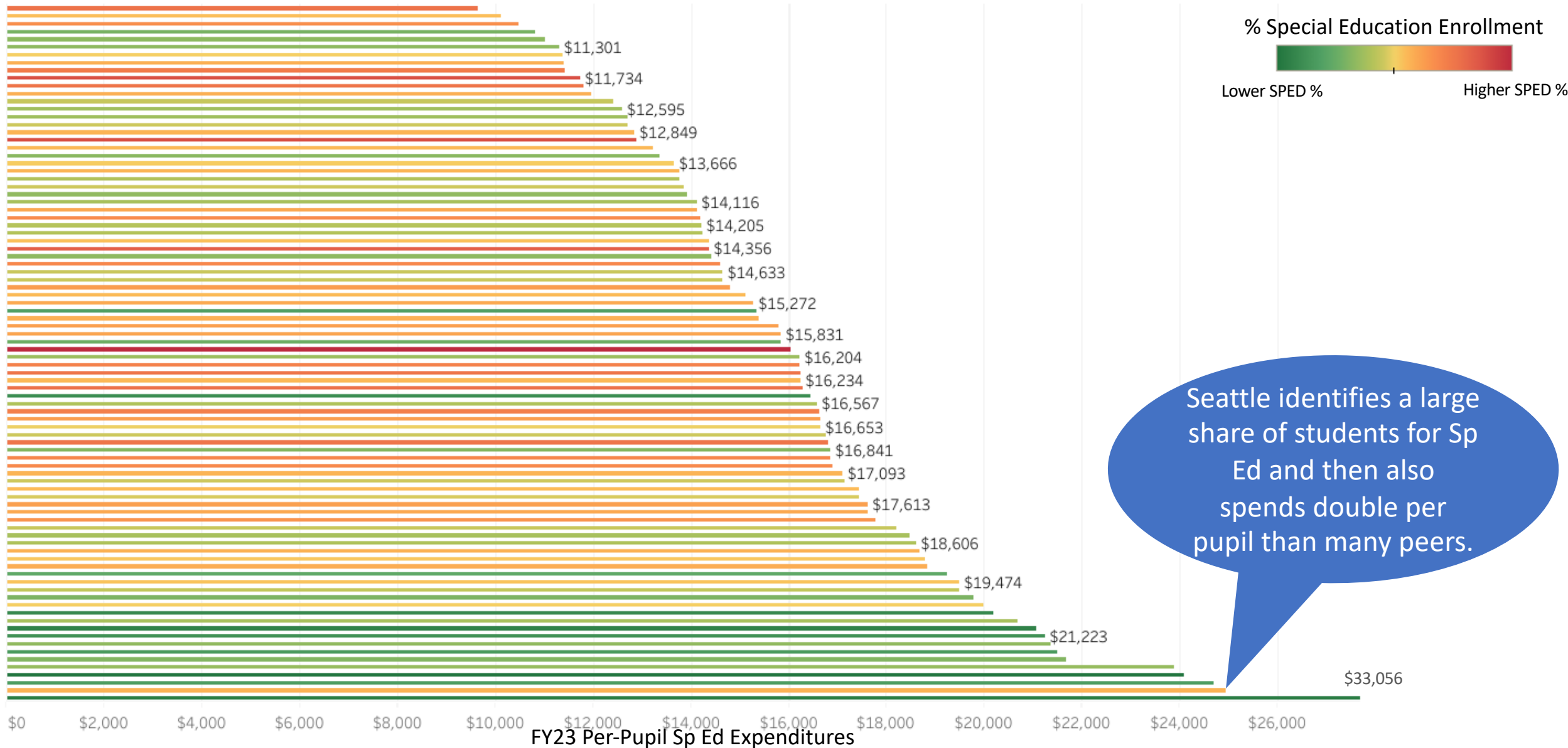


# Some states spend a much larger share of their education dollars on Sp Ed



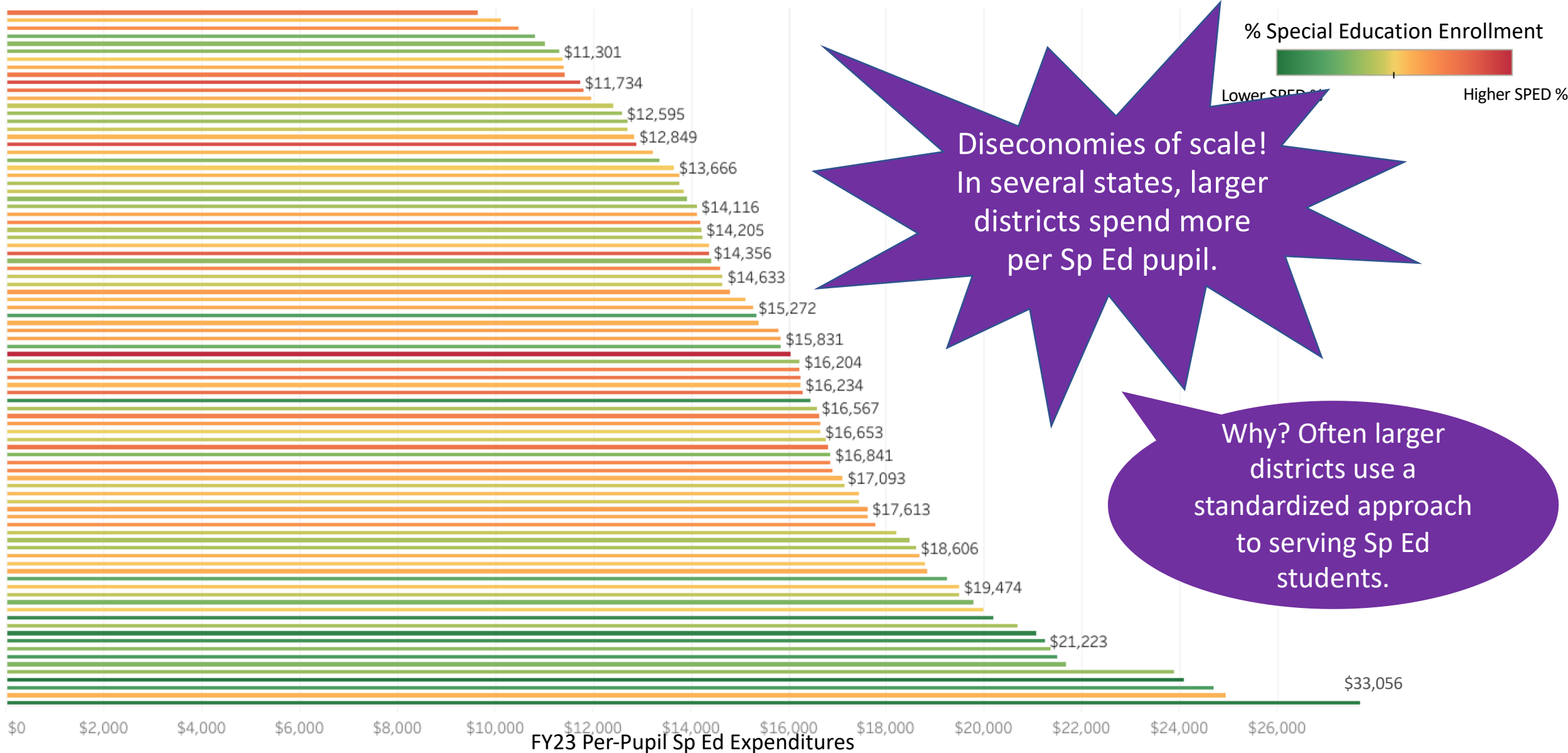
In CT, more than 1 in 5 dollars is spent on Sp Ed.

# Spending per student on Sp Ed varies enormously by district (e.g., WA state)



Seattle identifies a large share of students for Sp Ed and then also spends double per pupil than many peers.

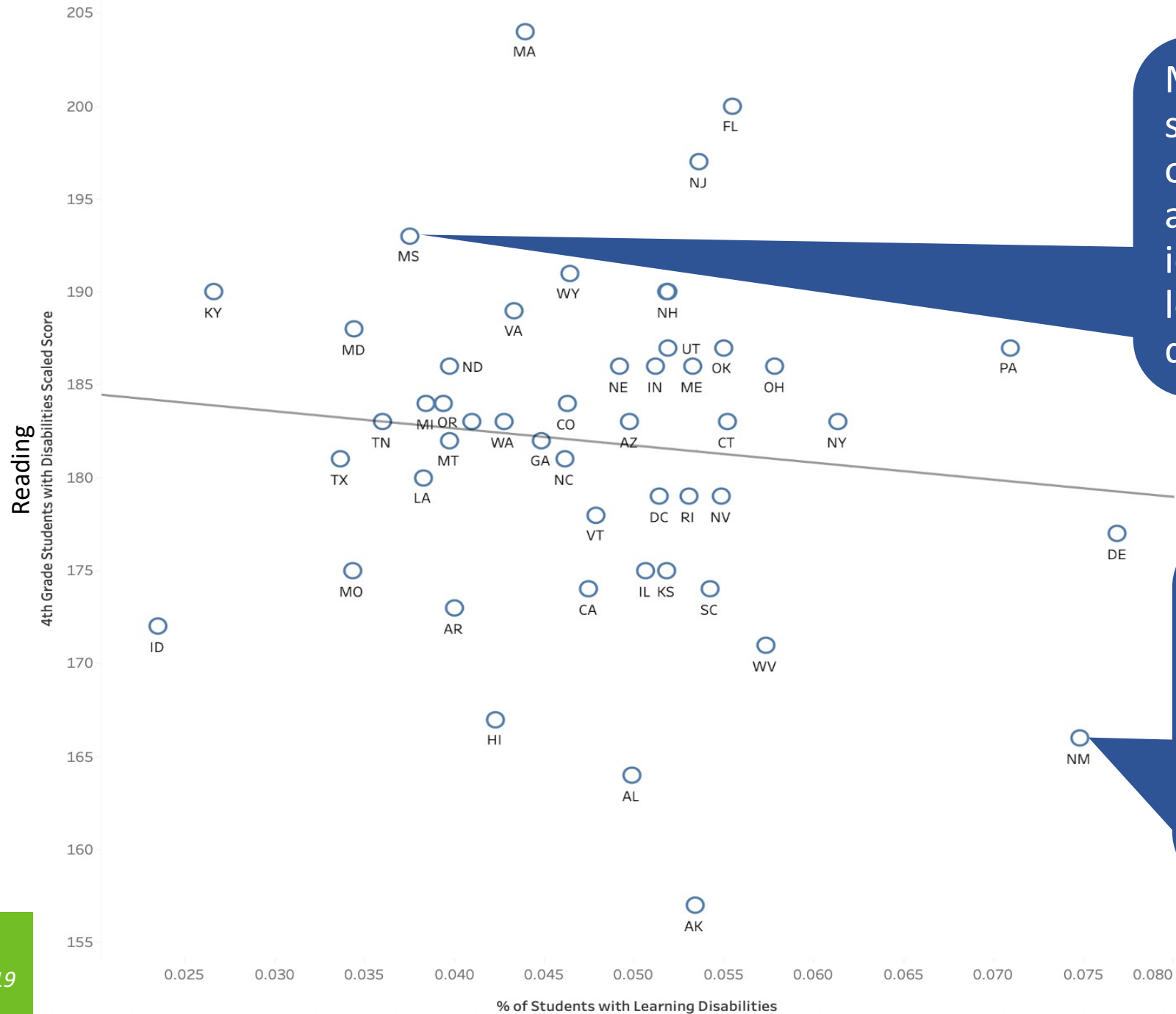
# Spending per student on Sp Ed varies enormously by district (e.g., WA state)



Does identifying MORE students as having a learning disability ensure these students get better outcomes?

No.

NAEP's 2019 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores allow for comparisons.



MS Sp Ed students outperform even at low rates of identification for learning disabilities.

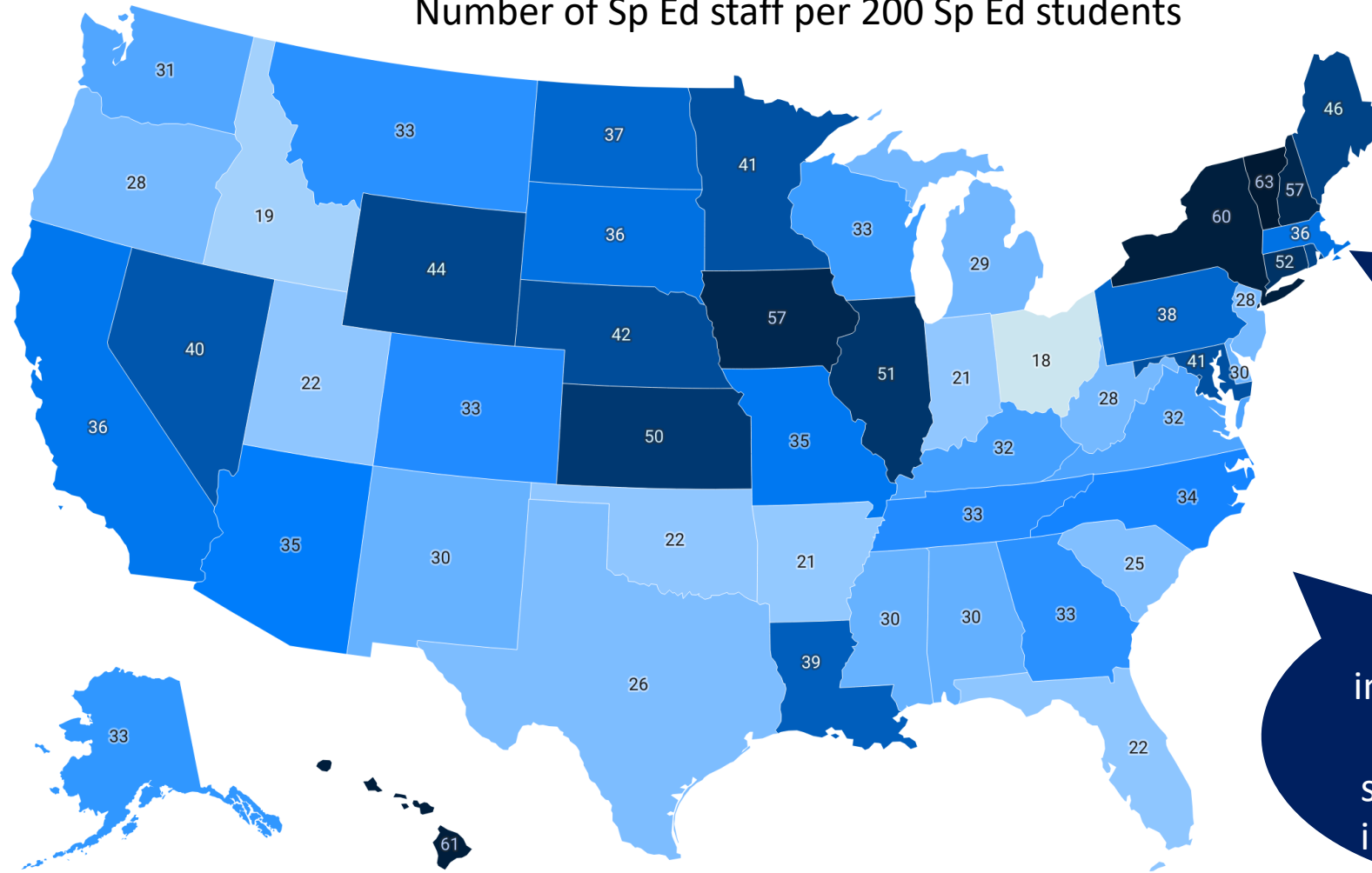
NM districts diagnose 7.5% of students with a learning disability, but scores are low for Sp Ed students.



# What drives cost structure?

Some states have much more staff-intensive services than others.

Number of Sp Ed staff per 200 Sp Ed students



In OH & ID there are < 20 Sp Ed staff for every 200 Sp Ed students.

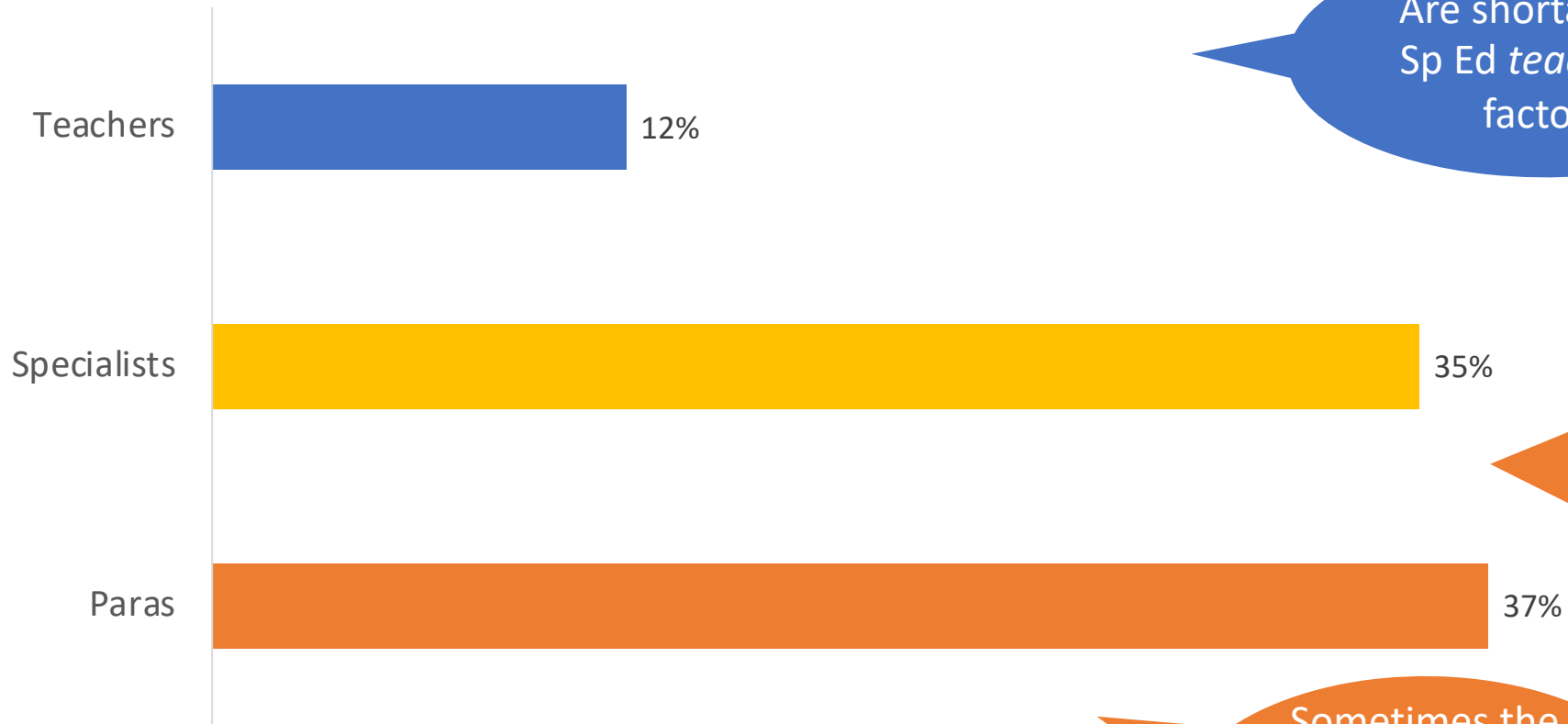
In HI, NY & NH there are over 60 Sp Ed staff for every 200 Sp Ed students.

NY's SEA has interpreted IDEA as requiring strict staffing minimums in Sp Ed programs.



# Growth in staffing driven by increases in paras/specialists (not Sp Ed teachers)

Percentage growth in SP Ed Staff since 2007, US



Are shortages of Sp Ed *teachers* a factor?

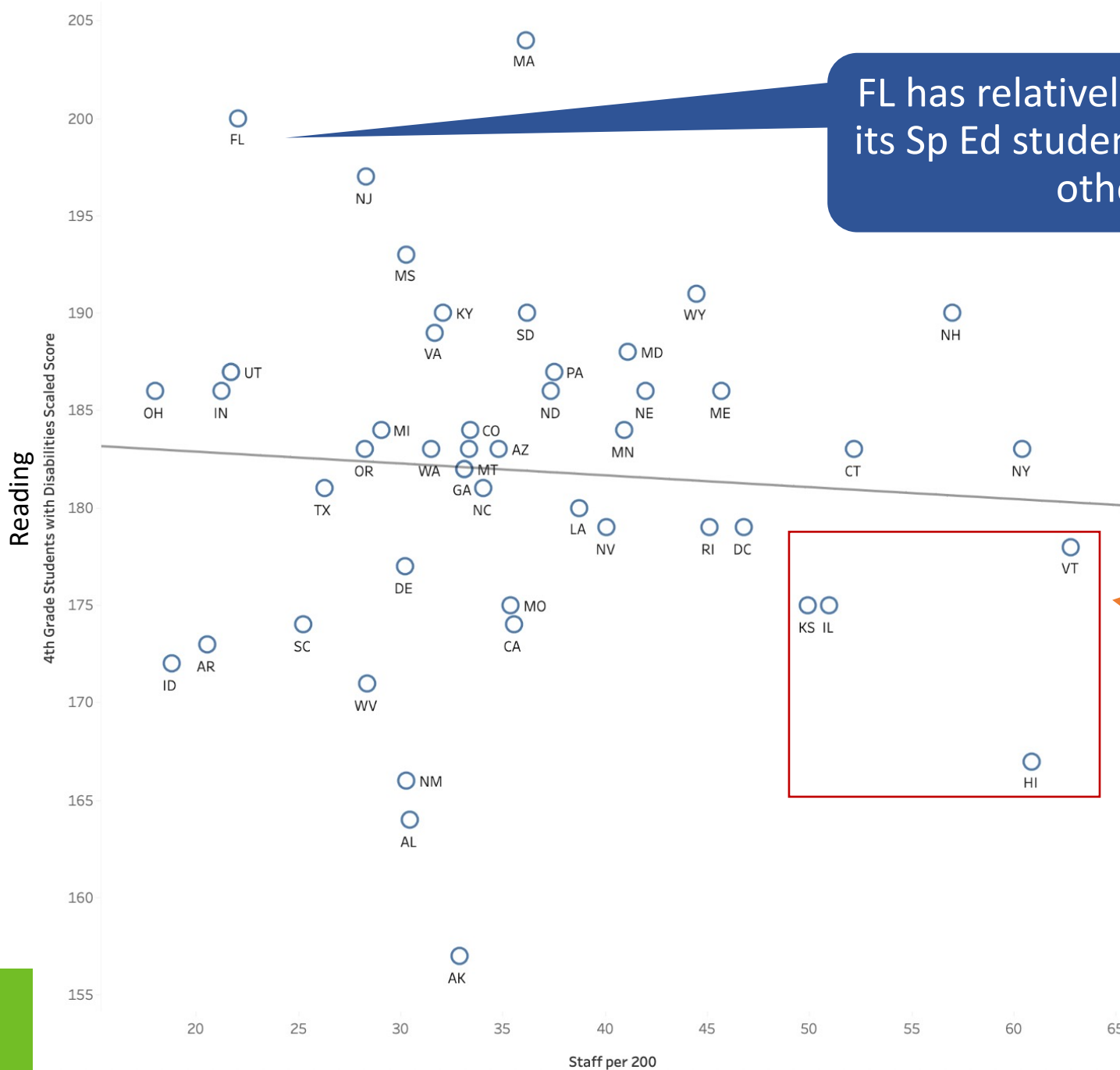
One concern is whether specialists and paras own the day-to-day responsibility for learning.

Sometimes the inputs (e.g., staffing counts) are treated as the "outcome."

Does having more staff or more paras ensure better outcomes for Sp Ed students?

No.

Staff-heavy programs aren't correlated with higher reading outcomes.



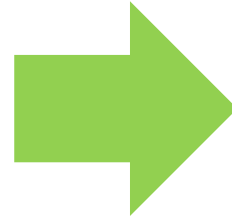
FL has relatively few Sp Ed staff but its Sp Ed students outperform most other states.

These states have more staff-heavy Sp Ed programs and yet scores are lower than average.



# Sp Ed hiring has been (and continues to be) a challenge

Sp Ed teachers make up **12%**  
of the teaching workforce



But amount to **24%**  
of all teacher job postings.

With ESSER ending, the  
teacher shortage is over...  
but not for Sp Ed.

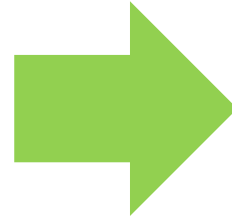
ESSER hiring spree  
may have brought in  
lower-qualified Sp Ed  
teachers and aides in  
classrooms.



# Difficulty hiring can disproportionately affect higher needs schools

In MA in 2023-24:

Schools with **0-50% poverty**,  
the average number of Sp Ed  
teachers per 1000 students is



Schools with **75-100% poverty**,  
the average number of Sp Ed  
teachers per 1000 students is

7

+ 27 Paras

6

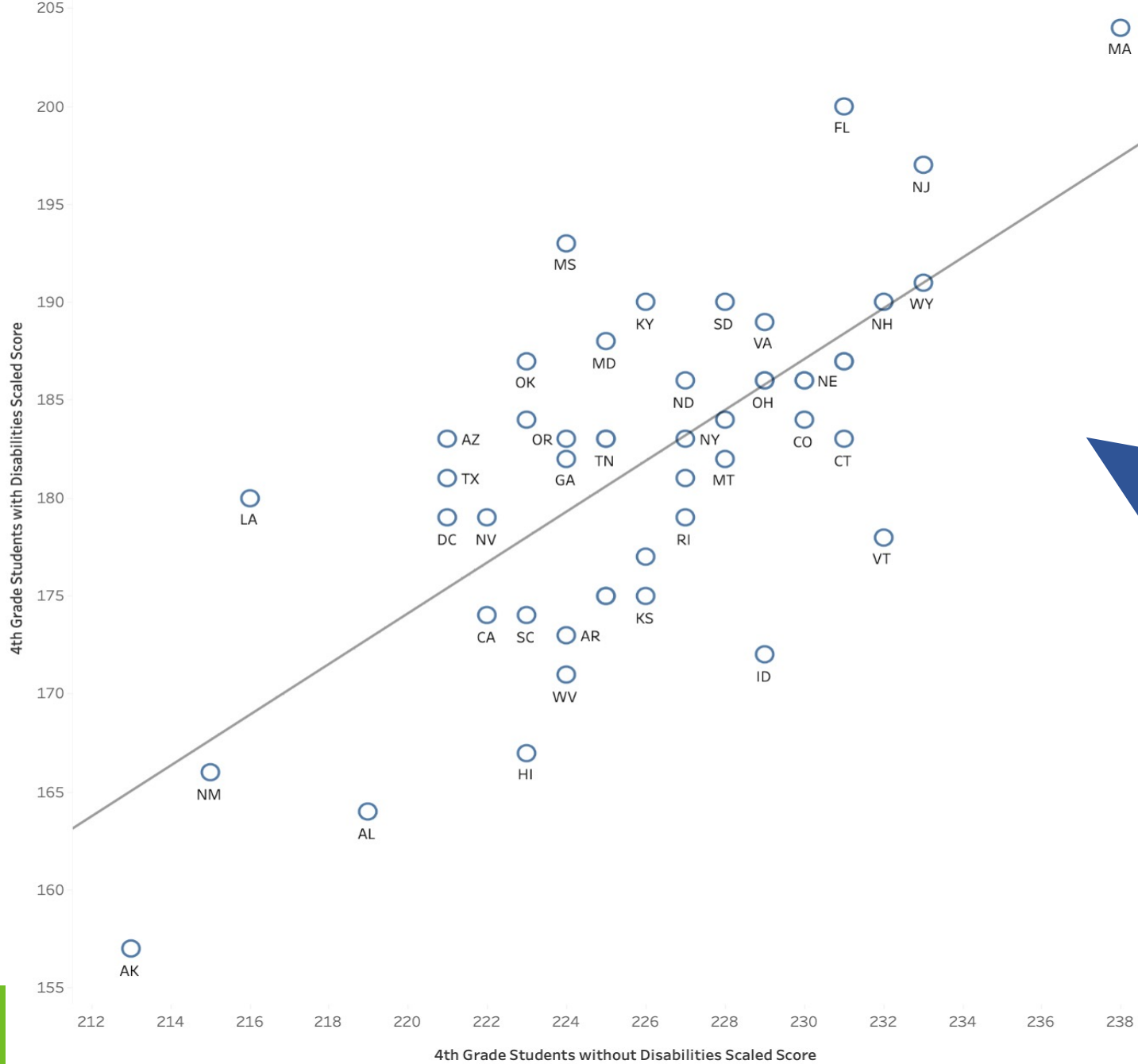
+ 44 Paras

Districts appear to be staffing Sp Ed  
programs in wealthiest schools  
first, then filling gaps in higher-pov  
schools with paras.



## What *does* matter?

Better reading instruction for all students yields better reading scores for Sp Ed students.



Improving reading instruction is a strategy that benefits all students.

Analysis by Edunomics Lab using:  
The Nation's Report Card (NAEP) 2019



# Getting more from your Sp Ed dollar:

- ✓ Stop looking away. Scrutinize Sp Ed budget.
- ✓ Compare the costs and the outcomes to peers.



Ask: What outcomes are expected. Is it working?

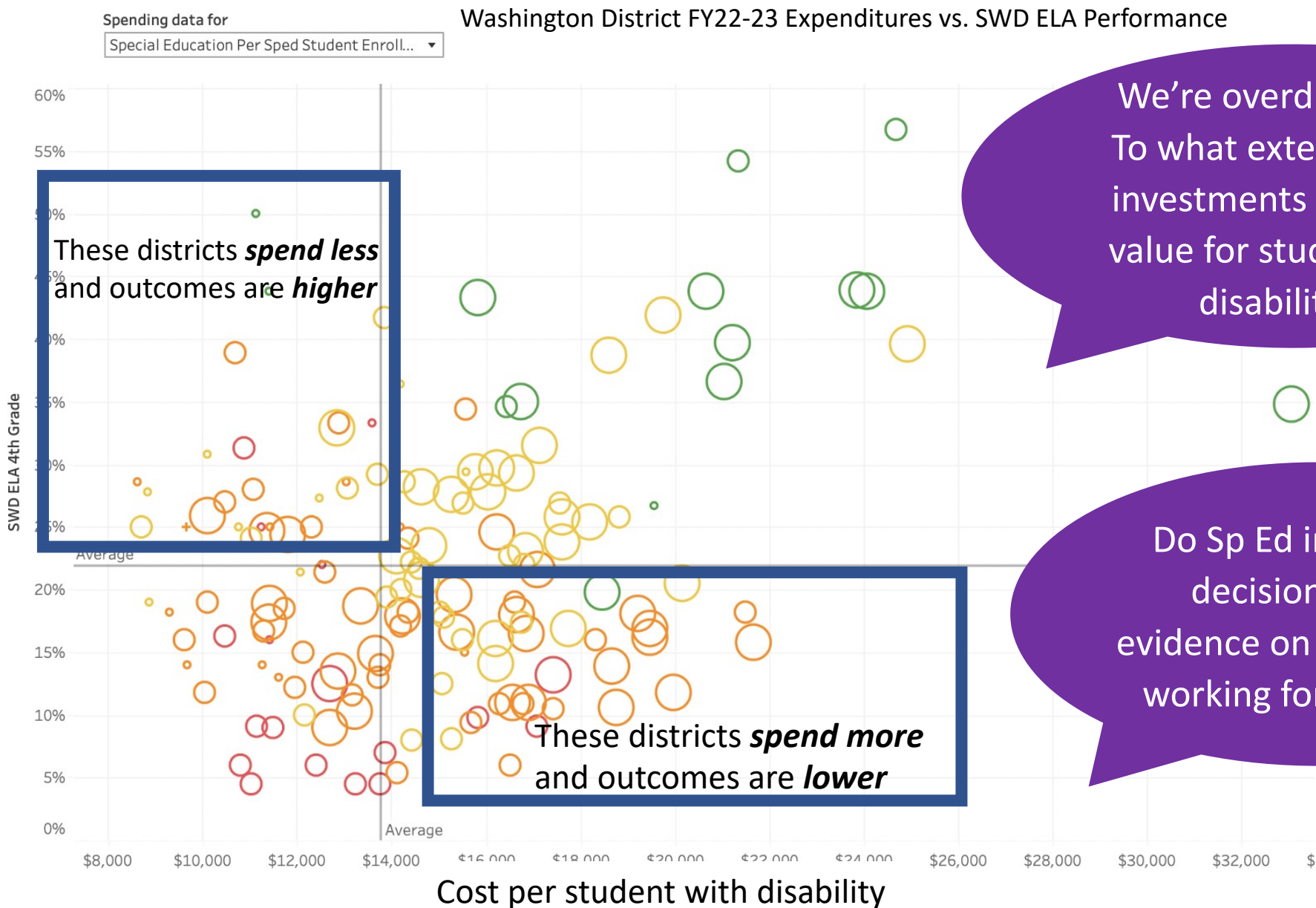
E.g., are Sp Ed programs seeing improvement in attendance rates for their students?

How are Sp Ed students scoring on assessments (compared to peers)?

SEAs and districts need to assemble Sp Ed data (NCES is just starting). WA and CA are exemplars.

As enrollment fell, one district noticed that Speech IEPs called for more hours of support to ensure speech therapy staff stayed fully employed.

# Rarely are we measuring whether Sp Ed investments are delivering value for kids



We're overdue to ask:  
To what extent are our investments delivering value for students with disabilities?

Do Sp Ed investment decisions weigh evidence on what is/isn't working for students?

## Getting more from your Sp Ed dollar:

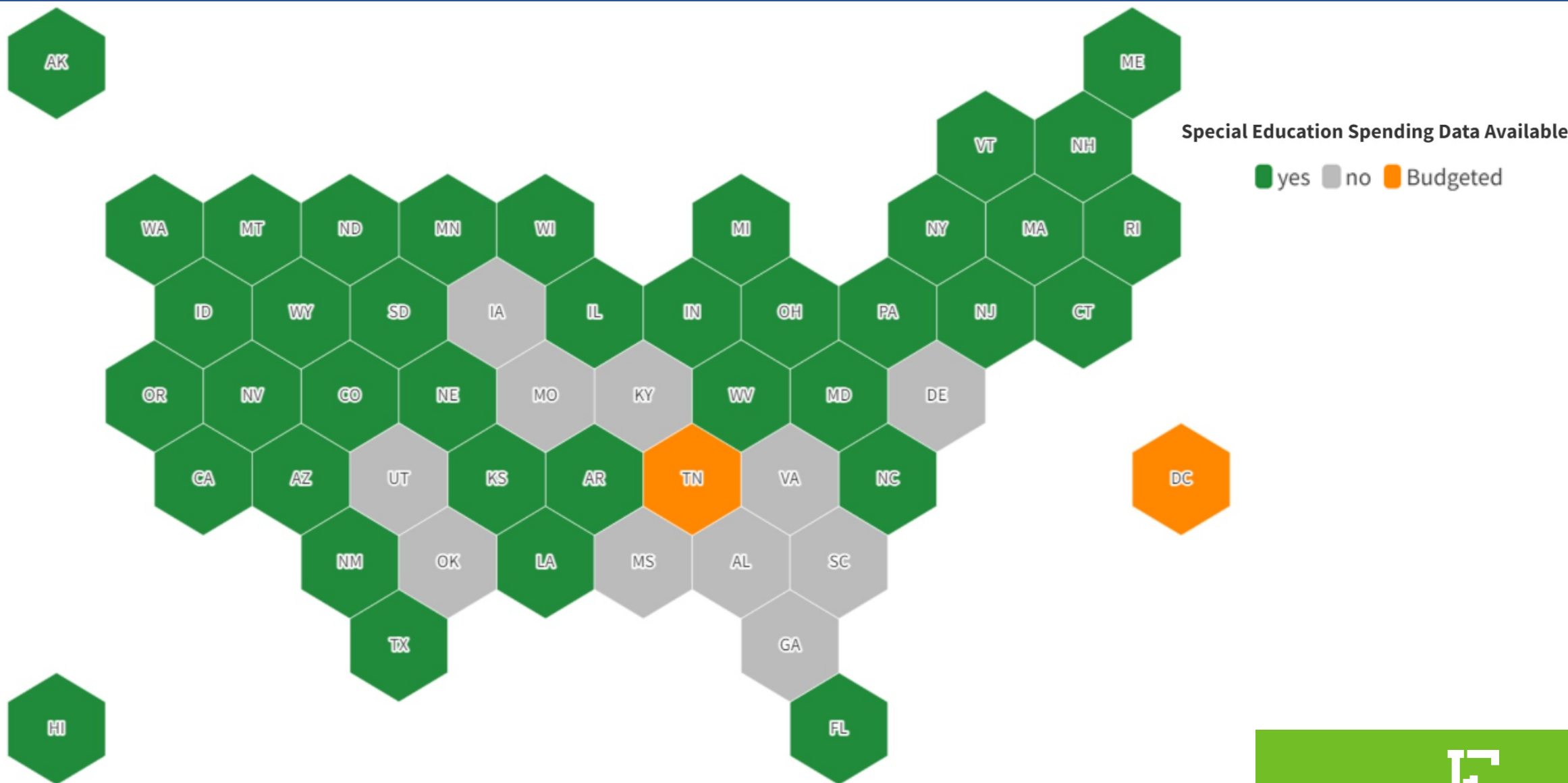
- ✓ Stop looking away. Scrutinize Sp Ed budget.
- ✓ Compare the costs and the outcomes to peers.
- ✓ When it comes to staffing: Quality over quantity.
- ✓ Improve Tier I reading instruction to reduce referrals for reading-related disabilities.
- ✓ Avoid the compliance mindset (ratios, etc.). Leverage available flexibility. Tackle misaligned incentives.
- ✓ Where can tech tools help?

HI will now provide \$10K extra per Sp Ed teacher and \$8K to work in hard-to-staff schools.

MoE allows for reduced spending with staff attrition.



# Sp Ed spending data isn't available everywhere yet, but it's getting better



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