CRPE
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

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How has the pandemic affected students with disabilities? An update on the evidence: Fall 2022

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Key Findings

Outcomes

- We know little about how the pandemic has impacted academic, behavioral, social-emotional and post-graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. When their outcomes are explored, students with disabilities are often treated as a monolith, which likely masks critical variation in outcomes depending on students' intensity of special education services, race, socioeconomic status, and English learner status.
- Almost all students declined academically, but students with disabilities were especially impacted.

Experiences

- Even as many students returned to in-person learning, educators noted intensified mental health concerns for all students. Families of students with medical conditions or more significant support needs grappled with tradeoffs between in-person learning and their children's health.
- More students who need special education services may not be getting identified, particularly young children from birth to age two.
- An untold number of families are still waiting for compensatory services to make up for what students lost earlier in the pandemic. Many are not even aware they qualify.
- The pandemic disrupted students' transition services and progress toward traditional graduation requirements, but the implications of these disruptions for students' post-school experiences are not yet known.
- Reliance on underqualified teachers – particularly for special education positions – may be increasing from pre-pandemic levels.
- Early analyses of how states and districts spent their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding raises concerns for how well-positioned schools will be to make long-term and systemic improvements to benefit students with disabilities.

Background

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, emerging evidence provides a deeper understanding of the pandemic's impact on the more than 8 million young people with disabilities. This includes youth who receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or who qualify under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) in the U.S.

Even before the pandemic, students with disabilities[1] did not consistently receive the specialized instruction or accommodations they needed. Early research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education's (CRPE) first consensus panel report in 2021 sounded a warning that the pandemic could increase inequities in access to services, learning opportunities, and outcomes for students with disabilities. In the early part of the pandemic, these students experienced higher rates of absenteeism, incomplete assignments, and failing course grades compared to their peers. Experts agreed on two urgent needs: First, education leaders and policymakers needed research to understand the scope of the pandemic's impact on academics and behavior for students with disabilities – particularly research that addressed the diversity among them (including their disability category). Second, school systems could not return to business as usual. Leaders needed creative and thoughtful solutions to accelerate student learning and make up for learning delays. These recommendations remain relevant as the effects of the pandemic continue.

The federal government provided funding and specific guidance to help schools navigate the disparate impacts of the pandemic on students with disabilities. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 allocated $130 billion for K-12 education. But only about 2% of funding was allocated to specifically support the approximately 14% of U.S. students who qualify for services under IDEA. As part of the Back to School Roadmap in 2021, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) sought to help stakeholders interpret the requirements of IDEA as schools increasingly returned to in-person learning. The guidance addressed questions from state and local education agencies (LEAs) and parents related to navigating evaluation and eligibility requirements in the wake of interrupted instruction, providing a free and appropriate public education, determining the need for compensatory education services, and supporting students' behavioral and mental health needs.

In summer 2022, CRPE and the Center for Learner Equity (CLE) convened a second panel of school leaders and research experts in educating students with disabilities to assess and reflect on the latest research about the pandemic's impact on students with disabilities. The review and subsequent report serve as an update to the August 2021 paper that the two organizations published on the same topic. The information gathered has helped inform aspects of CRPE's inaugural State of the American Student report, published in fall 2022.

For this latest special-education paper, we reviewed more than 100 research reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, news stories, and summaries of legal cases. We also reviewed the U.S. Department of Education's website and state websites. The evidence collected includes quantitative and qualitative research findings, themes from news stories, outcomes of lawsuits, and policy guidance. Together, this evidence shows that the ongoing challenges of the pandemic compounded and further complicated the educational experiences of students with disabilities. The findings provide a foundation for the panel to discuss and identify critical next steps.

We know that both special education and the research related to it are rooted in a history of segregation based on learning differences and systemic racism. Thus, understanding students' experiences based on the factors for which they have been historically marginalized – disability status, race, socioeconomic status, and language of origin – is essential for equitable recovery.

1 In this paper, we use the phrase "students with disabilities" to refer to all students with disabilities inclusively, including those that qualify under IDEA and/or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, unless otherwise specified.

What the latest evidence shows

How the pandemic affected the **outcomes** of students with disabilities

We know very little about how the pandemic has impacted academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Similar to findings in our first review, very little research has examined the pandemic's impact on the outcomes of students with disabilities. In a review of the most rigorous research since summer 2021 of the pandemic's academic impact, only 6 of 23 research analyses reviewed disaggregated outcomes for students with disabilities. A review of the impact on students' social and emotional learning in the first year of the pandemic found that little research had focused specifically on students with disabilities. Although states are required to report post-high school outcomes, including enrollment in post-secondary education and employment one year after graduation, data collected after the start of the pandemic are not yet available. Overall, there remains an urgent need for more research.

From what we do know, all students declined academically, but students with disabilities were especially impacted. Students with disabilities generally score far lower than their peers on academic standardized assessments, and new research shows that this trend generally worsened during the pandemic. We found seven analyses of the pandemic's academic impact that disaggregated scores for students with disabilities. Six compared students' performance on standardized assessments taken during the pandemic to the performance levels of comparable students in that grade level and content area before the pandemic. Across all analyses, academic performance on standardized English language arts (ELA) and math assessments for students with disabilities was lower than that of comparable students when tested pre-pandemic. While all students have lost ground since 2020, scores for students with disabilities declined more sharply. For example, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported scores for 9-year-old students across the country declined sharply during the pandemic – representing the only decline in math scores since testing started in 1973 and the largest drop in reading scores since 1990. Average scores for students with disabilities were already substantially lower than those of non-disabled students in 2020. On average, scores for students with disabilities dropped by 8 points in math between 2020 and 2022, compared to 7 points for non-disabled students, and by 7 points in reading, compared to 5 points for non-disabled students.

> ***"Kids with IEPs were already off benchmark really far [before the pandemic]. And now the other kids are coming to meet that below benchmark. So that's not really encouraging. It's not a comment that kids with disabilities fared well [during the pandemic]."***
>
> **– Jessica Tunney**, Principal of TLC Public Charter School

In some states, however, academic scores for students with disabilities declined at similar or smaller rates compared to non-disabled students. In Arizona, for example, 15% of students with disabilities were proficient on standardized math assessments in 2019, compared to 12% in 2021. Comparatively, scores for students without disabilities dropped by a greater magnitude –12 percentage points – but their proficiency rate was still almost three times that of students with disabilities. In one report of K-8 students from most school districts in Michigan, gaps in benchmark assessment scores between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers were similar in magnitude to gaps before the pandemic and remained consistent from fall 2020 to fall 2021. An analysis of Rhode Island students' performance on the third- through eighth-grade annual state assessment showed a similar trend. In Ohio, third-grade ELA assessment scores for students with disabilities were similar to their pre-pandemic levels as of fall 2021, while scores for non-disabled students still lingered below pre-pandemic levels. One study of 17 districts across Illinois found larger gaps in performance between students with disabilities and non-disabled students before the pandemic than after, but only for certain grade levels. Students with disabilities in grades 4-6 performed closer to their pre-pandemic levels in math than their non-disabled peers, but the opposite was true in grades 7 and 8.

While the new research provides some insight, the samples studied in most of the analyses were small and not representative of all students with disabilities in U.S. schools. Additionally, most analyses excluded students in grades PreK-2 and 9-12. Another substantial limitation is that studies generally estimate typical pre-pandemic performance rates based on students with similar characteristics. For students with disabilities, particularly younger students, these estimates may be less accurate, as the pandemic affected referrals and identification for special education.

The current research often treats students with disabilities as a monolith. This likely masks critical variation in outcomes. Overall, students' experiences during the pandemic varied greatly depending on their race, socioeconomic status, school operational status, and English learner status. However, studies that disaggregated findings did not explore how these factors may have impacted students with disabilities. Examining only one aspect of students' identities can mask important nuances and does not reflect the changing demographics of K-12 public school enrollment. Extrapolating from the impact on historically marginalized groups, the pandemic has likely exacerbated gaps in learning opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities who are also students of color, English learners, and/or living in poverty.

How the pandemic affected the **experiences** of students with disabilities

In the absence of sufficient evidence on the pandemic's effect on outcomes for students with disabilities, we also examined students with disabilities' experiences during the pandemic. Students' experiences shape their learning opportunities and potentially provide insights into anticipated outcomes.

As many students returned to in-person learning, students with disabilities appear to be experiencing increasing and intensified mental health concerns. While schooling in the 2021-2022 school year returned to a greater sense of normalcy for many, the mental health needs

of students with disabilities may have intensified. Despite a lack of generalizable evidence in this area, experiences shared by educators, parents, and students with disabilities themselves (through interviews for this report and media reporting) were alarming. For example, according to interviews with four middle school students with disabilities, remote learning caused feelings of isolation, stress, anxiousness, depression, and lack of engagement. Countless students saw loved ones become sick or even die from Covid-19, dealt with financial hardship as their family members lost jobs, and became more isolated without in-person opportunities for socialization. For schools, this meant that the mental health crises were magnified.

> ***"...Last year was a complete mental health crisis. Kids were back on campus, but they were not OK. They were not available for learning in the ways the benchmarks expect them to be. Signs of childhood depression, I hadn't seen [among children so] young. ... Like hoodie up, not talking, not eating at school. ... We were seeing a lot of early signs of deep concern."***
>
> **– Jessica Tunney**, Principal of TLC Public Charter School

> ***"[Across the city] we saw a significantly higher rate of hospitalizations [and] that's usually one of the indicators of a crisis. As educators, we were all very aware of making sure that the reporting is happening, so that we can call the team in and do the evaluations that are needed quickly to get kids the services they need. It was hard for us as an institution, because we were kind of set up pre-pandemic to support students in those situations, but in smaller numbers. ... What used to be tier three kind of became tier two. And we don't know if we have the capacity to really do this well."***
>
> **– Geoffrey Walker**, Principal of Fenway High School

Families of many students with medical conditions or disabilities with more significant support needs faced a difficult tradeoff between health and safety and in-person special education services. The return to in-person learning has not been equitable or inclusive for students with disabilities. Journalists spoke with parents of children with disabilities from across the country with medical conditions and/or who required more significant support. Many wished for their children to continue virtual learning, as they faced a risk of more severe complications from Covid-19. When their schools and districts scaled back virtual programming to put more resources toward in-person learning, some parents were told special education services were no longer available virtually. Parents reported that their children were denied access to their district's virtual programming due to the complexity of their child's needs, or that their child's virtual programming failed to provide the services in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). Furthermore, some state and local policies (e.g., universal masking) were inconsistent with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines for Covid-19 during the 2021-22

school year, putting students' health at greater risk – particularly students with disabilities who have underlying medical conditions.

> ***"I am just so lost right now, because she needs the help. Whether you're virtual or you're in class, you should be offered the same education."***
>
> **– Parent of a child with a disability quoted by Chalkbeat**

> ***"I was pretty stunned. … This is not inclusive."***
>
> **– Parent of a child with a disability quoted by Chalkbeat**

In some instances, families or advocates initiated legal action. As of June 2022, 20 court cases had been filed across the country regarding masking in schools for students with disabilities.[2] Albeit a relatively small number, the cases provide insight into the issues emerging for families. In most cases, parents raised concerns that policies around masking – namely when universal masking was optional or banned – failed to provide reasonable accommodations so that all students with disabilities could be provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Rulings varied, creating confusion for school districts and families. Thus, challenges for students with disabilities to receive FAPE during the pandemic became more complex.

Families of students with disabilities sought alternatives to traditional schooling during the pandemic at higher rates than other families. Parents of children with disabilities were more likely than parents of children without disabilities to report participating in learning pods or tutoring during the pandemic as of fall 2021 – reported by nearly a third of the parents of children with disabilities surveyed from across the country. These alternative strategies have not been widely studied, but a study of 152 families participating in learning pods across the country showed that families of students with disabilities had mixed experiences. While some believed the smaller group and more personalized attention helped their child(ren) to thrive, teachers raised concerns about their lack of knowledge for effectively educating students with disabilities. It is important to note that this evidence does not reflect the experiences of students with disabilities nationally, and based on other research regarding micro-schools, families of color, low-income families and families speaking a language other than English may be under-represented. Thus, while some families sought these alternatives to traditional schooling during the pandemic, it remains unclear whether all families had equitable access, and the nuances of students' experiences are largely unknown.

More students who need special education services may not be getting identified– particularly young children from birth to age 2. With disruptions to in-person instruction, processes for referring students to be evaluated for special education services have been upended.

2 In nearly all of these cases, parents alleged discrimination based on disability, and on Section 504, which forbids organizations and employers from excluding or denying individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services.

In the New York City Department of Education's annual report for the Division of Specialized Instruction and Student Support, referrals dropped by 57% since the pandemic started as of fall 2021.

While we have not found national data about trends in referral rates and eligibility processes, state reporting of children eligible for special education services under IDEA provides some insight into the pandemic's impact. While the number of IDEA-eligible children ages 3-21 has not changed substantially from pre-pandemic, the number of IDEA-eligible children from birth to age 2 declined by approximately 15% from 2019 to 2021. Experts have warned that this decline may reflect young children forgoing regular checkups during the pandemic and could result in delayed or missed services for an unknown number of children. The pandemic may further complicate eligibility decisions. With in-person learning disruptions and other inequities from the pandemic, parsing whether students have a disability that requires specialized educational supports may be particularly challenging. For some students, being infected with COVID-19 has introduced lingering health concerns and mental health concerns that may qualify for services under Section 504.

> ***"This is our seventh day of school [and] I've had at least four parents come to me thinking their child needs a full assessment for learning disability due to their lack of progress along benchmarks. I'm trying to educate parents on the distinction between identifying your child as disabled, and that's the barrier between them making progress and the impacts of the pandemic. I do see on the horizon issues with over-identification or mis-identification, in particular, of language-based learning disabilities for English language learners in this community and students who are in a mental health crisis."***
>
> **– Jessica Tunney**, Principal of TLC Public Charter School

An untold number of families are still waiting for compensatory services to make up for what students lost earlier in the pandemic. Many are not even aware they qualify. Across the country, families saw their children lose previously mastered skills or halt their progress when their special education services were disrupted by the pandemic. When students with disabilities have not received FAPE over a given period of time, they are eligible to receive "compensatory services" from their local education agency (LEA) as a remedy. Compensatory services are critical for remedying missed services for many students with disabilities during the pandemic. The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPPA) surveyed 254 parents of children with disabilities from 36 states in fall 2021 about their experiences accessing compensatory services. While 86% of parents reported that their child experienced learning loss or skill regression during the pandemic, only about 25% had received information from their child's school about the availability of compensatory services and only 18% had received compensatory services.

> *"He needs these services again as soon as possible. I have no other options."*
>
> **– Parent of a child with a disability quoted in The 74**

> *"I didn't ask for compensatory services because I was not made aware that this was an option, or at least, not without legal counsel. I did inquire how the other time that was missed would be made up. I was not given a concrete answer. No, the school did not volunteer any extra time, other than to reduce the spring break, but this wasn't enough to make up for the hours missed for education in all related services."*
>
> **– Parent of a child with a disability presenting in a "Lessons from the Field" webinar sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education**

The urge to regain a sense of normalcy and the extra time required to schedule compensatory services may be deterring some families from seeking them out, even if their children might otherwise qualify.

> *"[In our school,] the [compensatory services] have been less of a prominent concern for parents as opposed to the integration, socially, student mental health behavior, and just kind of general getting back to a sense of wellness. That's been prioritized from the family perspective. … The extra makeup time [can] introduce a layer of stress and tension [for parents]."*
>
> **– Jessica Tunney**, Principal of TLC Public Charter School

COPPA analyzed state guidance on awarding compensatory services related to Covid-19 and found that some states had not yet issued formal guidance, while guidance from other states was inconsistent with federal guidelines. For instance, Michigan guidance initially implied that compensatory services would be provided only in the event of a formal complaint. The Los Angeles Unified School District initially advised that the district was not responsible for providing compensatory services because school closures from the pandemic were not the fault of the district. While both instances of incorrect guidance have since been corrected, compensatory services for children were initially delayed or denied as a result. There is no comprehensive evidence on how many eligible students with disabilities are receiving compensatory services, and an untold number of children may still be awaiting necessary services – particularly those from families without advocates or legal representation.

Students with disabilities may have experienced exclusionary discipline practices with even greater disproportionality than they did pre-pandemic. According to an analysis of student suspension rates and discipline practices in a large urban district, the disproportionality of suspensions for students with disabilities – particularly Black children with disabilities– became even starker as students returned to in-person learning in the 2021 school year. Historically, students with disabilities have been suspended at a rate two to three times higher than their non-disabled peers, and disparities in discipline practices are greatest for students at the secondary level, students of color, and boys. We have limited information about how disproportionate disciplinary practices played out during the pandemic. Absent data from other parts of the country and the 2022 school year, it is not possible to know whether the urban study cited above could signal emerging and widespread or isolated challenges. Given the troubling history of disproportionate exclusionary discipline for students with disabilities and particularly Black students with disabilities, tracking future disaggregated discipline trends will be critical.

The pandemic disrupted students' transition services and progress toward traditional graduation requirements, but the implications for students' post-school experiences are not yet known. A report on educators' experiences in Mississippi highlighted that transition services were particularly challenging to deliver effectively when instruction was virtual. Graduation requirements also shifted. According to a data-tracking tool on state graduation criteria by Education Week, more than 40 states offered flexibility to the graduating class of 2020 by relaxing requirements for course credits, testing, graduation exam, or attendance. While the evidence makes clear that students' experiences preparing for college or career were disrupted, we know little about students' preparedness and outcomes after high school. A longitudinal analysis found that high school graduation rates for all students increased slightly during 2020 and returned to pre-pandemic rates in 2021. This temporary increase was especially acute for students with disabilities, English learners, and Black students. In contrast to higher graduation rates, post-pandemic college entry rates were lower in 2021. Specifically, two-year college entry rates were 16% lower than in any of the previous years. In these analyses, college-entry outcomes were not disaggregated by student disability status.

Reliance on underqualified teachers – particularly for special education positions – may be increasing. When faced with unfilled teaching positions, schools may need to hire staff who are not fully certified by their state, or assign teachers to an area outside of their certification (referred to as an "underqualified teacher"). Among the 53% of U.S. public schools that reported feeling understaffed at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, special education teachers were the most understaffed positions, according to a nationally representative government survey. While shortages of qualified teachers raise concerns for all students, it is particularly troublesome for special education students because their teachers need specific pedagogical training. While comparisons of the underqualified teaching force from before the pandemic are not available in each state, evidence suggests their numbers have grown during the pandemic in some states. According to an analysis of Pennsylvania Department of Education data on educator preparation and certification, for example, the number of emergency certified special education teachers nearly doubled from 2018 to fall 2020, from approximately 850 to nearly 1,600 teachers. Reliance on underqualified educators could be even worse in other states. According to estimates of state-level qualified school staff differences for the 2021-22 school year, Pennsylvania had among the lowest rates of underqualified hires per 10,000 students – at

about 6 per 10,000, compared to 349 in New Hampshire and 148 in Louisiana. Together, these findings raise concerns that teachers who educate students with disabilities may have few qualifications or specialized expertise – compounding challenges to attracting and retaining special educators that persisted before the pandemic.

Early analyses of how states and districts spent their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding raises concerns for how well-positioned schools will be to make long-term and systemic improvements to benefit students with disabilities. Most states gave districts or nonprofits discretion in how to direct investments for students with disabilities, according to an Edunomics Lab review of state plans for allocating ESSER funding. While Local Education Agency (LEA) spending plans have not been analyzed on a national level, a review from a sample of 45 districts found that 35 included details about specific investments for students with disabilities. The most common district spending strategy for supporting students with disabilities was adding instructional time, followed by investments in intervention, tutoring and transition supports as well as curriculum, learning software, and assistive technology. Similarly, another review of initial ESSER spending plans from 100 large urban districts found that investments commonly focused on instructional interventions and technology. What is known about district ESSER spending so far raises concerns about the missed opportunity to catalyze innovation and whether investments will position districts to make the long-term and systemic improvements needed to help students with disabilities recover from pandemic-related disruptions. Furthermore, high levels of teacher stress and staffing vacancies may threaten the successful implementation of some spending plans.

> ***"California passed legislation last year that calls for schools to offer extended learning daily for nine hours daily, plus 30 additional days on the school calendar. And so the funds are not totally sufficient for that. So we have extra money, but it doesn't actually cover what we need to do. And so we're competing [with larger districts] for the same staff to run these programs. [It's] essentially 30% more demand for school staff and maybe like 15% more funding."***
>
> **– Jessica Tunney**, Principal of TLC Public Charter School

> ***"There has been some money for some additional programs, things like summer school, April break, February break, but it is really hard to recruit teachers. People are like, 'I don't want the money. I just want a break from teaching.' That just speaks to the stress on educators. I couldn't run a February session. I had the money. I would have had the kids. I just didn't have the staff."***
>
> **– Geoffrey Walker**, Principal of Fenway High School

Many questions remain unanswered

The disconnect between the urgent concerns raised by families and the limited evidence about the pandemic's impact on students with disabilities is jarring. Families saw their children with disabilities lose access to services and support, decline academically, and suffer from mental and social-emotional challenges. All the while, support from schools was slow and disrupted by health concerns and teacher vacancies. Families had different levels of access to resources for helping their children get what they needed. Some sought alternative options to traditional schooling, and others initiated legal action. Because legal action requires significant time and resources that many families lack, the cases filed thus far may only show the tip of the iceberg in terms of family dissatisfaction. New research provided some insights, but ultimately the findings reinforced questions from our first brief and raised additional ones we still cannot answer. A recurring theme is the need for more data on the pandemic's impact on students with disabilities – particularly data that are disaggregated by race, English learner status, socioeconomic status, and intensity of special education services. Notably, little is known about the outcomes of the approximately 1.4 million students with disabilities who qualify under Section 504 only. Understanding these questions will be critical for researchers, policymakers, and philanthropists to more fully understand the pandemic's unique impacts on students with disabilities and craft effective solutions. Key questions include:

- How has the pandemic impacted the instructional experiences and outcomes – including academic, mental health, behavior/discipline, and post-school outcomes – of students with disabilities? And to what extent do outcomes differ based on socioeconomic status, intensity of special education services, race, English learner status, and Section 504-only status?
- What is the supply of teachers who are qualified and have expertise in teaching students with disabilities nationally? Which regions and student groups are most impacted by teacher vacancies and reliance on underqualified teachers?
- How did referral rates for special education during the pandemic vary by students' race and language of origin? How will the backlog of referrals – along with the potential increased need generated by disrupted learning and the long-term health consequences of the pandemic – shape interventions, special education programming and budgeting?
- To what extent are compensatory services being provided to students with disabilities in an equitable, timely, and effective manner? Which students are being disproportionately impacted by delays in access to compensatory services?
- How effectively have LEAs invested ESSER funds to support students with disabilities – both in the short and long term?

Implications for future research and investments

As the pandemic continued in 2021-22, new evidence on the experiences of students with disabilities has raised more challenges and provided few concrete answers. Effective special education programming, both to recover from the pandemic and move forward, hinges upon LEA and IEP team capacity to 1) make individualized decisions and plans for students and 2) use funding for systemic and long-term improvements. Future research and investments should prioritize the following:

1. **Build better data systems to inform policy and practice for students with disabilities (e.g., academic and behavioral outcomes and labor market trends).** An overarching theme of this review is the need for better data. First, we need data that provide more real-time feedback about students' experiences and outcomes, including academic, social-emotional and behavioral, and post-school. Such data are limited right now, as the pandemic has disrupted typical data collection and many efforts still do not disaggregate for students with disabilities. Second, data systems must be built so that users can easily disaggregate findings based on multiple student identities, including disability status, intensity of special education services received (e.g., percentage of time spent in the general education classroom), race, English learner status and socio-economic status. Data will be more reflective of students' lived experiences if it captures this intersectionality. As a first step, schools and LEAs must be willing to track and share disaggregated data. Funders and/or policymakers could incentivize them to do so by including this as a reporting requirement or as a prerequisite for funding. Beyond school and LEA efforts, federal investments need to bolster SEA and LEA capacity for improved data collection and disaggregation. These data will be critical for understanding which students have been most impacted by pandemic disruptions, delays in referrals to special education, and the receipt of compensatory services. With a more accurate understanding of impact, policymakers and leaders can craft more effective interventions. Beyond student-level data, we also need national data about the teacher labor market. Current data limitations are undermining clarity around the causes, severity, and localization of teacher shortages. Bolstering state capacity to collect and report these data are critical first steps, requiring a federal investment. Without more targeted solutions to teacher labor market issues – particularly for special educators – students with disabilities may suffer the most.

2. **Study and invest in the capacity of LEAs and IEP teams.** Some of the most critical decisions affecting students with disabilities are made by IEP teams. Delivering quality special education services was already challenging before the pandemic. Now, IEP teams must have connections to staff with expertise who can interpret federal, SEA and LEA guidelines that may be continually evolving and technical. IEP teams have been left to determine how special education services will be delivered with shifts between in-person and remote learning; determine when students require compensatory services; calculate the amount of services required; and then devise a plan to deliver those services in ways

that prioritize families' priorities and students' mental health. And they must do so for a diverse student population, the majority of whom are members of marginalized racial/ethnic groups. Thus, it is important that teams are equipped to elevate the voices of families and students when making decisions. More research is needed to understand the extent to which IEP teams in different school types and regions have this capacity and how it can be built. Future research is needed to identify the resources, expertise or training that can build effective IEP teams and where this capacity is most lacking. Funders could use this targeted research to inform their investments.

3. **Identify and disseminate examples of innovative and effective strategies and models.** Policymakers and school leaders need examples of school models and strategies that are enhancing learning opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities amid the pandemic. We need examples of how districts used ESSER funding for students with disabilities to proactively provide compensatory services and navigate educator shortages. Qualitative research, illustrative case studies, and accessible guides may help LEA and school leaders understand what is possible and begin thinking critically about how innovations could be adapted for their unique contexts. Disseminating examples of innovative and effective models will help prevent decision makers from reverting to business as usual for educating students with disabilities.

Conclusion

As the pandemic continued in 2021-22, new evidence on the experiences of students with disabilities has raised more challenges and provided few concrete answers. impact for students with disabilities. We still know very little about how the pandemic has impacted academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Less than a third of rigorous analyses on the pandemic's academic impacts disaggregated outcomes for students with disabilities. When their outcomes are explored, students with disabilities are often treated as a monolith, which likely masks critical variation in outcomes depending on students' intensity of special education services, race, socioeconomic status, and English learner status. What we know about students' experiences during the pandemic suggests that the pandemic will exacerbate existing inequities. Questions around compensatory services, delays in and questions surrounding eligibility for special education services, disrupted transition planning, and reliance on underqualified educators are complicating efforts to accelerate support for students with disabilities.

About the Center for Learner Equity

The Center for Learner Equity works to ensure that public schools are designed for inclusivity and equity. When we improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, all students benefit. We are committed to ensuring that students with disabilities, particularly those in underresourced communities, have the quality educational opportunities and choices they need to thrive and learn. We pursue research, advocacy, coalition formation, and capacity building with national, state, and local partners to make sure students with disabilities have the same opportunities for success as their peers.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.