

Special Education at a Crossroads: Ensuring Equity and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the delivery of educational and therapeutic services for students with disabilities across the world, creating new obstacles for students, parents, teachers, and administrators navigating the impact of sudden halts in services and supports. Although all students were affected by the challenges of education delivery via remote options during the 2020–21 school year, for students with disabilities, the impact was all the more pronounced.

Now that we are gradually moving out of crisis mode, it is vital that policymakers consider how to improve special education for the long haul and not just return to a “normal” that left too many students with disabilities behind—the current system where Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is not the norm, where general and special education is too siloed, where accessibility is considered on an individual basis but not for all students, and where parents do not feel like equal members of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams.

Based on CRPE’s most recent study of special education in charter and traditional public schools, we outline the ongoing challenges and offer recommendations to reshape how America’s schools serve students with disabilities.

Denied services, decreased quality of life for students and families

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the systemic problems in special education became more pronounced. Students with disabilities were often unable to access meaningful supports to which they were legally obligated. They struggled to engage with remote learning, requiring constant assistance from parents and family members to access their education. For those with significant support needs, access to remote education was nearly impossible due to the prerequisite skills needed to not just attend to a screen for virtual education but also to navigate the vast number of steps required just to log into remote learning.

Students with disabilities were again and again denied services and supports throughout the pandemic that would allow them to access and engage in their education. This resulted in decreased learning, decreased social interactions with peers, and increased levels of challenging behavior.

Research suggests that the quality of life of families of students with disabilities **decreased during the pandemic**, and much of this can be attributed to the lack of services and supports and the increase in challenging behaviors at home. Families of students with disabilities had to take on more education-related responsibilities. They also had to strongly advocate for accessibility, accommodations, and services—because their children weren't getting them.

The gap that has always existed between special education and general education got wider during the pandemic, and the silos grew more pronounced. Special and general educators did what they could to collaborate to make the experience better for all students, but there simply wasn't enough time to do everything, especially without dedicated collaboration and planning time built into the day. Teachers were working long hours trying to meet the needs of their students while having to adapt as they went along, especially since special education wasn't a key focus of the pre-planning in summer 2020 or 2021. This meant that—just like before the pandemic—most of the work to ensure that students with disabilities had access to the curriculum and the accommodations and modifications they needed fell on special educators.

Despite creative solutions, the pandemic often exacerbated existing inequities and prevented wider re-envisioning of education

While a small population of students—those with and without disabilities—thived during remote learning, the majority of students with disabilities were left behind. The switch to remote learning occurred quickly, with few opportunities for thoughtful consideration of the implications of this model on students with disabilities. Limited options existed when COVID-19 lockdowns began. However, the story of instruction being designed without students with disabilities in mind is not new. Prior to the pandemic, education systems across the country taught to the general education population, supplementing as they could for students with disabilities. This population was treated as an afterthought prior to the pandemic, and the pandemic exacerbated these inequities.

As part of CRPE's most recent study of special education in charter and traditional public schools, we talked with over 60 administrators, teachers, and parents in 15 schools across the country. Though we saw creative solutions to issues that arose while providing remote instruction, more often than not we saw existing challenges exacerbated and inequities that halted a broader reimagining of what educational services could look like for students with and without disabilities.

Obstacles to inclusion, inequitable efforts to address learning loss

Although examples of inclusionary practices were few and far between in school systems prior to the pandemic, even schools that were focused on implementation struggled to provide individualized supports in a remote group setting. We found that schools had trouble adapting remote education to meet the needs of students who benefitted from different modalities of delivery of education—in other words, remote instruction worked for a small population of students but was not set up to accommodate accessibility. Students who found engagement in online forums challenging were often left to do their best with what was provided in this group setting.

To address accommodations and modifications, instruction was often provided in a more restrictive setting, such as 1:1 breakout groups. The use of segregated learning environments largely increased during the pandemic. In many instances across the last 17 months, students with disabilities were denied access to inclusive educational practices as a result.

As a result of the complexity of providing remote education to students of differing abilities, many students with disabilities went without provision of their legally obligated services and supports. For students with the most significant support needs, the impact of this loss of services was detrimental. Accessing remote instruction using technology was a significant barrier for many students in this population, halting education services that these students were legally owed. To make matters worse, for students with significant support needs who could access remote instruction, essential accommodations and modifications to instruction and curriculum were nonexistent, leaving students without the services and supports necessary to successfully engage in their own education.

To help accommodate this population of students navigating remote instruction, parents and caregivers took on the roles of teacher, interventionist, and behavioral support. For many families, this was a significant burden as they worked to support their children, manage their own jobs, and continue the roles and responsibilities of just being a parent. Quality of life decreased significantly for families of children with disabilities for these reasons, as [reported in a variety of research](#). Ultimately, the lack of planning and attention to provision of equitable educational services to all students resulted in further inequities, as families of children with and without disabilities engaged differently in their child's education during the pandemic.

Addressing learning loss presented additional challenges for students with disabilities. The common approach we encountered focused on additional offerings of service minutes during evenings, weekends, and over summer break. At the same time, students without disabilities who struggled during the academic school year saw their evenings, weekends, and summer breaks remain untouched. By asking students with disabilities to give up their precious time to account for the missteps of our education system further reinforces the inequities present between students with and without disabilities.

Growing recognition and support for meaningful change

The impact of the pandemic on issues of inequities and social justice are overwhelmingly grim for students with disabilities. But the awareness of the lack of inclusivity of services and supports for this population of students was highlighted in our research. As a result, increased attention to effectively serving students with disabilities in settings where they are active members of their community is moving forward in encouraging ways.

Teachers, school staff, and administrators reported new views on the provision of educational services, acknowledging that students all learn differently and that presentation of instructional materials must be done in a way that universally meets the needs of all students. Next steps for schools across the country involve continuing this conversation to gain momentum for meaningful changes that create educational services that meet the needs of all students at all times.

The path forward: Policy considerations

The grim outcomes of the pandemic for students with disabilities are well documented. Inequities were reinforced, students were denied legally obligated services, and families struggled to get by. We owe it to students with disabilities and their families to address the systemic issues that continue to plague special education as schools resume normal operations. We offer the following policy considerations to address the persistent inequities for students with disabilities.

Track outcomes for students with disabilities—and report them transparently.

Students with disabilities are often missing in reports on student well-being and academic performance coming out of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, few states and districts used data on their postgraduation outcomes (such as postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary success, and employment) to inform practice. Students with disabilities are often reported as a single broad category, which ignores significant variation in needs and outcomes.

Policymakers should design systems that transparently report on outcomes for students with disabilities: Are they recovering from the pandemic? Are they on track for successful transitions out of K-12? How do they fare after transitions?

ESSA has reporting requirements built in, and while this is a good first step, it is not enough. States publish per-student school spending data, but policymakers need to validate the data to make sure it is accessible, complete, and provides appropriate context—which will allow lawmakers to make decisions around school funding and resource equity for students with disabilities.

Ensure schools embrace universal design in remote and in-person learning.

The shift to remote learning created a need for some students to receive new accommodations (for example, captioning that allowed students who are deaf or hard of hearing to follow along in virtual discussions). But schools quickly discovered that these changes wound up helping other students, such as those with attention challenges or those whose headphones weren't working.

States should make accessibility a top priority by identifying accessibility best practices, such as universal design principles, and require that both in-person and remote instruction programs follow them. States should also create incentives tied to funding similar to what Louisiana did with its general education curriculum. This will eliminate the need for schools and parents to negotiate one-off accommodations on a piecemeal basis, and it will also yield benefits for all students.

Look closely at teacher workforce issues.

These past few years have been difficult for general and special educators. The silos that have always existed became even greater, and too much fell into the hands of special educators. School administrators told us that they are doing everything they can to keep special educators from leaving the field, offering additional money and incentives to stay. But without changes to the special education system that address these silos, these strategies will most likely not be enough. States must examine the state of the special education teaching workforce, including challenges in recruitment, retention, and attrition. In doing so, states should consider ways to build the teacher pipeline in sustainable ways—for example, by thinking of teaming in different ways such as described in [ASU's The Next Education workforce](#).

Preparation programs and licensure standards should ensure that every teacher can serve every student.

We must not allow all special education to fall only to the special educators. We need to rethink the roles of general and special educators as they relate to students with disabilities and create teacher preparation programs that prepare all teachers to serve all students. A [survey from the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood.org](#) that found that fewer than one in five general education teachers feel “very well prepared” to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, including ADHD and dyslexia.

Teacher preparation programs have failed to include students with disabilities in their general education teacher curriculum, which has led to [general education teachers not feeling prepared to serve all students](#). They must ensure that all teaching candidates know how to read and understand IEPs and require coursework dedicated to supporting students with disabilities.

States should review funded teacher preparation programs and evaluate their general and special education standards to ensure general education teacher licensure standards include special education.

Conclusion

Moving forward, policymakers must continue to wrestle with the outcomes of our education offerings for students with disabilities. They must acknowledge the shortcomings and overall effects of years of lack of attention, care, and reinforced inequities for students with disabilities navigating the education system. Too often, students with disabilities are not incorporated in the planning and implementation of education offerings, yet these students are part of each individual school community.

Prior to the pandemic, educators, administrators, and researchers were well aware of the shortcomings in education for students with disabilities, as they are well documented throughout practice and research. Yet systemic changes have not historically occurred to offer this population the education it deserves. As students return to school at the tail end of a global health crisis, this has become all the more evident.

The field of education is at a crossroads. Do education systems return to the status quo in place before COVID-19, or do they rise to the occasion and act on the many lessons of these past two years? Policymakers have a chance to advance educational offerings for students with disabilities, building on what they've learned about this population over the past few decades. Without doing so, we risk too much.

As a field, we know too much to continue providing the status quo offerings to students with disabilities. We owe these students more.

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