Unprecedented and Unmasked: An analysis of how district policy documents frame special education during the COVID–19 crisis

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COVID-19 school closures disrupted special education in numerous ways. During the summer of 2020, district leaders across the U.S. developed reopening plans; these plans addressed special education and a constellation of other elements of schooling, such as remote learning schedules and health protocols.

By fall 2020, educational leaders sought to reopen schools and continue serving students with disabilities. These leaders published reopening documents that contained messages on priorities for special education policy and practice. Taking seriously issues at the nexus of special education and district leadership, we analyzed reopening documents from the 25 largest U.S. public school districts to understand district-level messaging in the 2020-21 school year.

Our analysis highlights how districts strategically communicate problems and solutions associated with special education.

- District documents rarely acknowledged problems in implementation. That is, districts rarely mentioned the ways that intervention services were disrupted during spring 2020 nor obstacles to communicating with families.

- In contrast, district documents advanced numerous solutions for "fixing" special education—or, at the minimum, troubleshooting problems that surfaced during the pandemic pivot.

- Moreover, districts' communication tended to emphasize technical details on how they would comply with special education laws and provide intervention services to students with disabilities. Their communication, however, rarely mentioned how they would ensure equitable educational opportunities for students with disabilities.

As policymakers, reformers, and educational leaders refine and reimagine schooling, it is crucial to understand policies and practices for educating students with disabilities, who represent approximately 14 percent of public school enrollment and who might become further marginalized as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

In total, the 25 districts we analyzed serve approximately 800,000 students with disabilities across 12 states. We systematically reviewed 71 documents (such as district reopening plans submitted to state departments of education and memos from district special education department websites). We identified and analyzed 520 messages on special education from this set of documents. This included considering districts' tactics for complying with the Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), adapting special-education-related services to remote or hybrid learning arrangements, and including students with disabilities. These analyses also considered how district communication tied to three major models of special education (summarized in Table 1): compliance, intervention, and equity.

Table 1. Models of special education

Characteristic	Intervention	Compliance	Equity
Goal	Follow legal guidelines	Treat the disability	Further equity-oriented goals
Theory of change	If schools comply, children with disabilities will be properly served	If interventions are delivered, the outcomes of children with disabilities will improve	If schools address disability from the equity stance, they dismantle ableist structures and prioritize equitable outcomes for children with disabilities
Role of district/school administrator	Monitor planning, meetings, and data	Design systems and logistics so interventions are delivered	Promote the value of equity-oriented special education
Role of special education teacher	Follow IEP, collect and analyze evidence on student needs	Plan and deliver interventions for disabled students	Support disabled students' inclusion in schools and society

Across districts, 35 percent of messages communicating districts' intended policies and practices for special education tied to issues of compliance. The messages described solutions, such as new protocols for online IEP meetings, how to revise services to align with the remote learning format, and declarations regarding how the district would remain compliant with IDEA during the pandemic. For instance, Prince George's County stated, "IEP meetings will be scheduled and held virtually with parent permission in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) timelines and procedures."

A smaller proportion of policy frames, however, reflected an equity orientation toward special education. One sample equity frame from San Diego Unified's reopening plan declared, "We recognize the needs of our students and will prioritize services for communities with the highest level of need."

In this manner, they characterized in-person schooling as a solution that would meet the specialized needs of students with disabilities. Additionally, this hints that remote learning, while necessary for reducing virus spread, did not adequately meet these students' educational needs.

Our analyses also revealed there was variability among districts in the proportion of policy frames aligning to the equity model in our analytic framework (see table above). Strikingly, in six of the sampled districts, fewer than 15 percent of frames aligned to the equity model of special education.
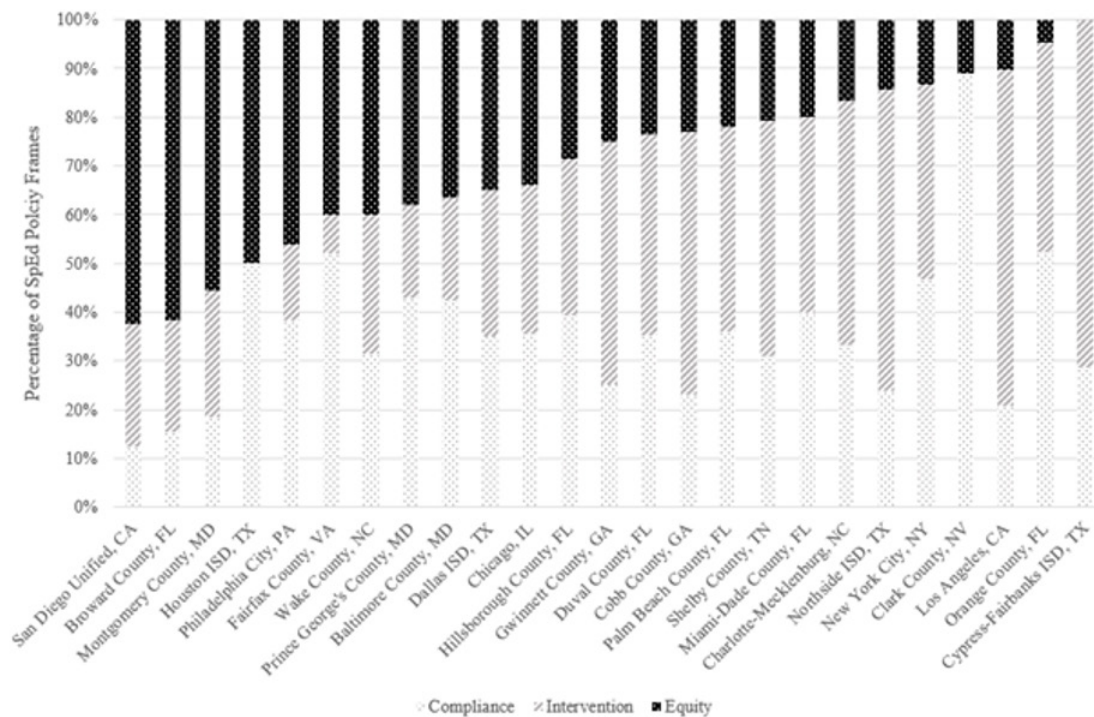
The paper discusses potential consequences of these patterns in district-level messaging on how to serve students with disabilities. We share recommendations for research and practice on special education implementation throughout phases of the pandemic.

First, state-level administrators should offer clear guidance and ongoing support to district leaders as they create—and implement—plans addressing multiple components of special education and aiming to foster healthy learning and working conditions for all children and educators.

Second, to address stark inequalities, district administrators should shift resources, planning, and framing to increase attention toward the equity model. The American Rescue Plan Act provides significant funds for retooling special education; we urge administrators to deploy these funds to promote change that doesn't focus on complying with special education laws or delivering interventions to students with disabilities but, instead, focuses on ensuring students

with disabilities have equitable opportunities to learn. This could involve designing compensatory systems to strengthen learning opportunities in engaging, holistic ways (McKinney de Royston et al., 2020). For example, educators could design programs and services that link to the assets of communities and interests of children and strengthen targeted skills—whether academic or social—for students with a range of disabilities and complex needs.

Finally, structural changes are needed to move beyond complying with regulations and delivering interventions to equitably serve SWDs. These changes might entail restructuring central offices to more closely connect special education and curriculum and instruction, providing additional resources for collaborative, job-embedded professional development for general and special education teachers, and streamlining routines to decrease the administrative burden placed on special education teachers.

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