

All Together Now: Getting Students with Disabilities What They Need During the Pandemic

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Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic pivot to remote learning made school harder for students with disabilities and their teachers. Students who had relied on in-person support from teachers struggled with written materials on their own. Teachers scrambled to adapt curricula to an online context while seeking new ways to support students stuck studying at home.

The experience was frustrating for students and teachers alike. Meanwhile, national data suggest that many parents did not feel their children were receiving the services to which they were entitled.

Our research has shown the benefits of teaming and collaboration between general and special education teachers. When general and special education share responsibility for educating students with disabilities—planning lessons together, co-designing modifications and accommodations, and jointly communicating with families—teachers feel more supported and their students experience more inclusive and productive learning environments.

Yet, teaming and collaboration between general and special education is unusual even in normal times. The shift to remote learning made collaboration even rarer. Confined to their homes or classrooms, general and special educators were unlikely to encounter each other during the day.

“I don’t think that we have great teacher collaboration for a couple of different reasons. One is we don’t really have common preps for teachers. So, the only time that they all can really get together is before school or after school, unless they fortunately have a common prep with somebody.” – Special education administrator

During the 2020-21 school year, we learned through a series of interviews that most teachers missed out on the power of collaborative interactions between general and special educators. General educators felt they were not responsible for creating adaptations for students with disabilities or communicating with families of these students, while special educators continued to take on these responsibilities. Both types of educators said they had been largely left on their own, rather than working in teams to support students.

“All of this stuff that I’m explaining to you I’m doing by myself. I’ve not gotten a chance to collaborate with other teachers. Like, ‘Oh, hey, what are you doing?’ We’re just in our own little bubbles because it’s one [special education inclusion teacher] per grade.” – Special educator

General educators also reported that they have not received training on how to best work with students with disabilities in remote settings.

When millions of students with disabilities return to the classroom this fall, teachers of students with disabilities will have an opportunity to “build back better.”

Data collection

Data was collected in three phases during the 2020–21 school year: winter, early spring, and late spring. Special education administrators, school administrators, special educators, general educators, parents, and teachers participated in one-hour interviews. We spoke with and surveyed more than 60 teachers, administrators, and parents of children with disabilities in fifteen schools across the country about their experiences during the pandemic.

In these interviews, we sought to learn more about each individual’s experience in special education during the pandemic. We asked questions about current practices, changes in roles and job responsibilities, data collection, compliance, and overall satisfaction. Quotes in this brief are from the first wave of data collection, conducted from December 2020 to February 2021.

In addition to our interviews with schools across the country, CRPE developed a set of questions that were included in RAND’s American Teacher Panel fall 2020 survey. In that survey, we asked about the frequency of general and special educator collaboration, whether teachers received special education-specific professional development, and whether special or general educators were primarily responsible for modifications and accommodations and family communication. Teachers who indicated that they do not teach any students with IEPs and/or 504 plans were excluded from the analysis.

Our analysis reports on the overall sample and also breaks down results by grade and subject levels. All statistics are weighted using a set of nationally representative weights described in further detail in the Survey Technical Documentation for the American Instructional Resources Survey.

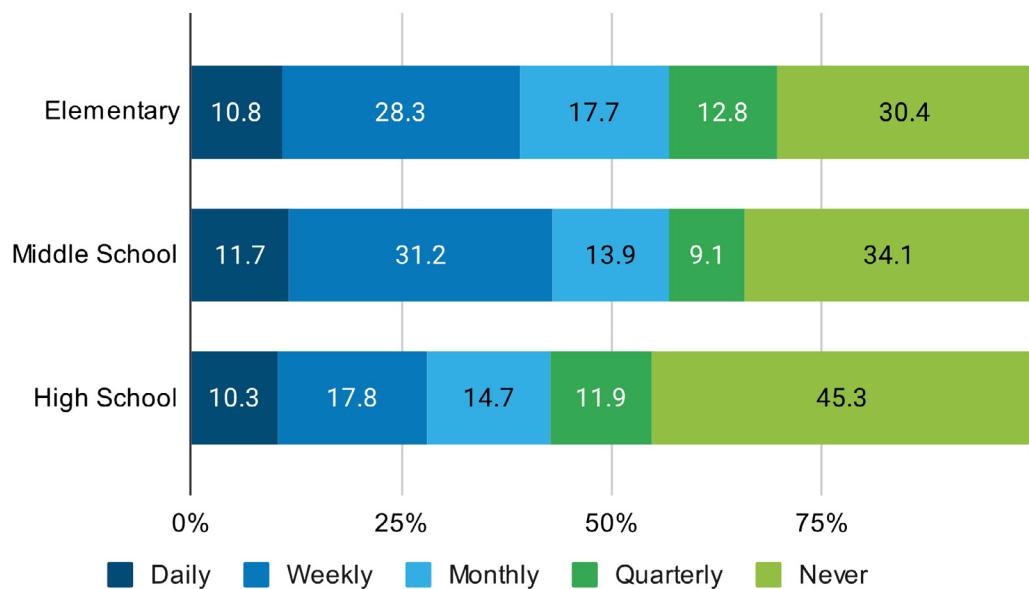
General and special education teachers rarely collaborated on lesson plans.

General and special educators gain crucial information about students and strategies on how to best meet their needs when they collaborate. This collaboration could have been particularly helpful during the pandemic when many students with disabilities struggled with remote learning. Yet our data indicated that collaboration between general and special education teachers occurred less during the pandemic than before the pandemic, when schools were open.

Our survey asked teachers how often collaboration between general and special educators occurs for the purpose of lesson planning. Fewer than half of teachers reported that they met

as a team of general and special educators at least once a week. Between 30 and 45 percent (figure 1) of general and special education teachers said they never collaborated on lesson planning. High school teachers were far less likely than elementary or middle school teachers to meet weekly.

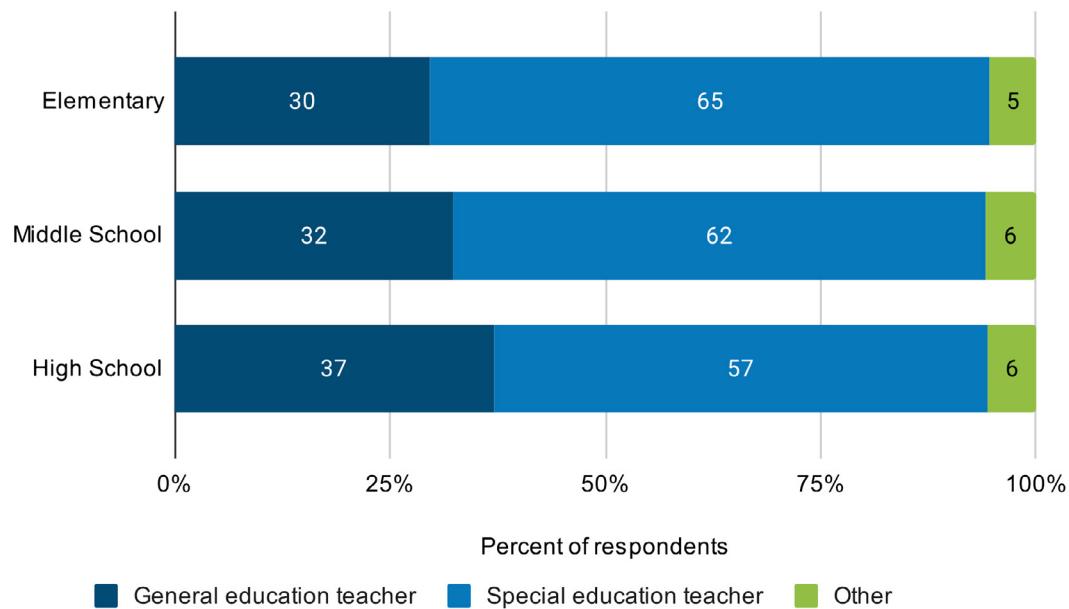
Figure 1. Most General and Special Education Teachers Rarely Plan Lessons Together



Special educators were largely responsible for providing instructional support and communication with families, even in inclusive settings where students with and without disabilities are educated together.

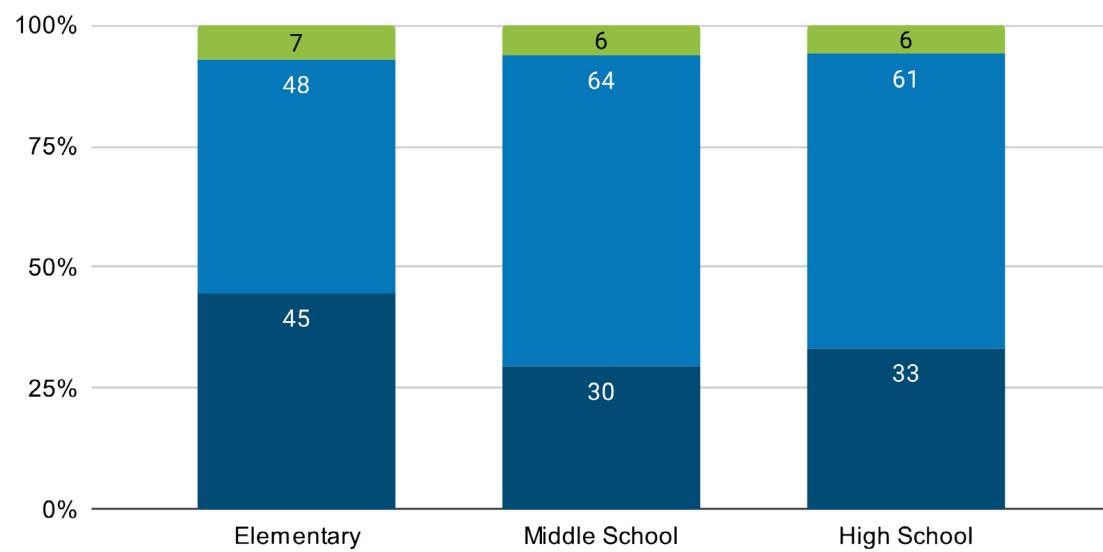
Though students with disabilities are typically educated alongside their peers, only about a third of general classroom teachers said they see themselves as primarily responsible for accommodating them (figure 2). This was true even in high schools, where students may not have any additional instructional support in some courses, or may only have the support of a specialist teacher in select classes, like language arts and math. Though teachers voiced similar perspectives before the pandemic, the delivery of remote instruction last year seems to have reinforced such beliefs.

Figure 2. Special Education Teachers Are Typically Responsible for Providing Accommodations and Modifications to Students with Disabilities



Communication with families with students with disabilities proved vital during remote learning as parents stepped in to monitor their children's work and progress. Here again, we found that special education teachers bore the primary responsibility for communicating with these families (figure 3), despite the fact that students typically spend most of their day with general education teachers.

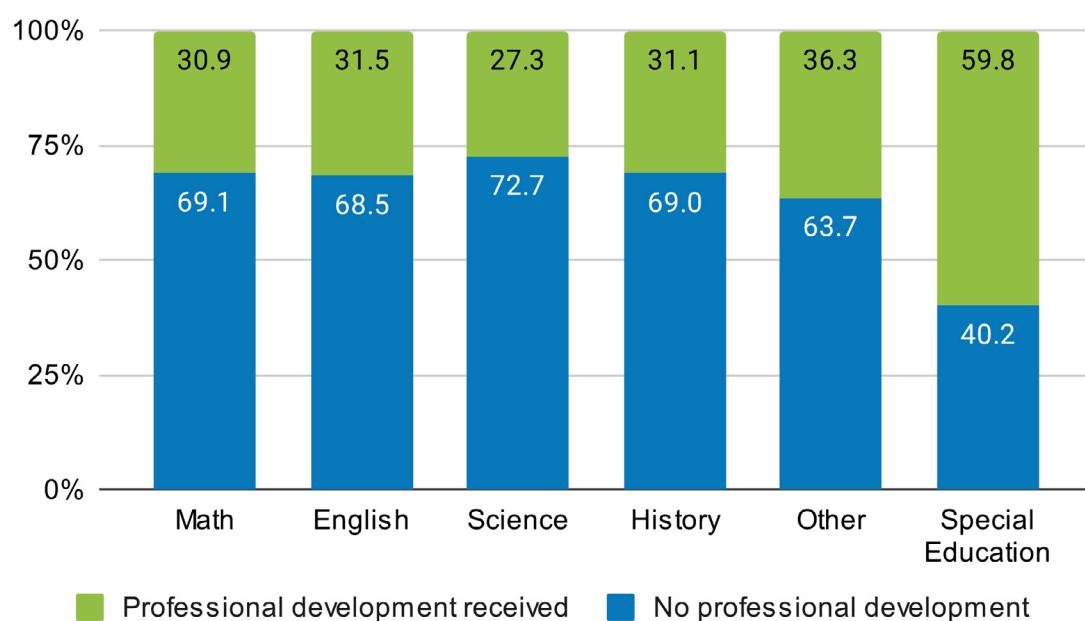
Figure 3. Special Educators Are More Likely to Be Primary Communicators in Middle and High School



Few general educators received the training they needed to support students with disabilities in remote settings.

In the past year, few general education teachers received the professional development support that would have helped them to better support the students with disabilities in their classes (figure 4). Though more than 60 percent of special education teachers reported receiving training to address students' remote learning needs, fewer than one-third of general education teachers across all subjects did.

Figure 4. Few General Education Teachers Received Professional Development on Supporting Students with Disabilities in Remote Learning



In a separate survey of teachers from our sample of fifteen schools, 66 percent of teachers reported feeling that they were somewhat less, much less, or not at all able to meet the requirements of their students' individualized education plans (IEPs) when teaching remotely, compared to when teaching in-person.

Toward more and sustained shared responsibility.

Unfortunately, the lack of shared responsibility is not unique to the pandemic year. As schools begin to bring students back in person, students with disabilities will need everyone to deliver education to their highest capacity, and neither general education nor special classroom teachers can do that alone.

Yet in order to bridge the silos of general and special education, a culture shift must occur. The traditional concept that special education teachers have ownership of students with disabilities, and general education teachers' commonly focus on typical developing students, must be

challenged. Doing so requires all educators to identify all students as their students. This entails a change in teaching philosophy and school culture. School and system leaders must make clear that general and special education teachers are jointly responsible for students with disabilities. They must describe what shared responsibility looks like for lesson planning, classroom instruction, family communication, and supporting students outside the classroom. These expectations must be accompanied by opportunities for educators to live out these new standards through dedicated time for collaboration. Regularly scheduling collaborative time would give teachers opportunities to build capacity and routines for how to educate students with disabilities.

At the same time, general educators must receive ongoing training and support on how to design and deliver instruction with modifications and accommodations for diverse learners across a range of learning environments. Federal relief funding will be applied to a range of professional development support and should be allocated toward targeted training and support in this area. Providing general educators with training on how to best educate struggling learners and communicate learning and progress to families with students with disabilities could be a powerful lever for distributing responsibility for the education of students with disabilities.

Teachers—general and special education alike—want to deliver the best education possible for their students with disabilities and work in collaboration with their peers to do so. Doing this work is difficult, and it requires continuous learning and growth by all teachers. It is up to school leaders to cultivate the mindset that special education students are everyone's students.

Acknowledgments

We could not have written this brief without the principals, teachers, staff, parents, and students we interviewed for this study. Thank you for everything you do on behalf of students with disabilities. We would also like to thank the Center for Learner Equity for their partnership and hard work on this project. While this brief draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.

This analysis is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

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