POLICY BRIEF

U.S. School Districts' Special Education Adaptation Plans during the COVID-19 Pandemic

SUMMARY

- This study carried out a detailed analysis of how 24 school districts approached meeting the needs of students with disabilities (SWDs) for the first six months of the 2020-2021 school year. Districts included the largest and smallest in the country, those with the highest per pupil spending and amongst the lowest per pupil spending as well as high and low COVID areas.
- There were marked disparities in the extent to which the needs of students with disabilities were addressed, even among similarly situated districts, and a clear need for federal guidance on strategies to meet the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements for quality education of SWDs during pandemics and other prolonged periods of disruption.
- Specifically, guidelines should address: 1) when should in-person services be continued as essential services; 2) prioritizing SWDs for in-person services when districts are using hybrid models; 3) the most effective modalities for providing remote services to SWDs when in-person is not possible; and 4) the best way to ensure SWDs receive compensatory services after disruptions.

BACKGROUND

Spring 2020 school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic created immense practical challenges for delivering special education and related services to the nation's 7.1 million SWDs.1 Despite these challenges, school districts' obligations under the IDEA remained in place.2 Thus, in the 2020-21 school year many school districts adopted plans to adapt special education and related services to remote and in-person and remote (hybrid) instruction models. This brief highlights lessons from a survey of adaptation plans in 24 demographically and geographically diverse districts.

METHODS

U.S. Census Bureau data were used to select 5 school districts each of those with the highest and lowest enrollment, 5 districts each of those with the highest and lowest per pupil spending, and 2 districts each from states with the highest and lowest COVID-19 transmission rates. Districts within these categories represented a range of U.S. regions. Also, the funder's local district was included. Data were collected in February and March 2021 from districts' publicly available electronically published adaptation plans for the 2020-2021 school year through February 2021.

FINDINGS

Districts utilized limited adaptation strategies

6 of 11 districts (55%) providing remote-only instruction for ≥1 month adopted only 1 of the following 4 strategies:

1. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for remote or hybrid models;
2. Distance Learning Plans (DLPs) for how to implement the IEP remotely;
3. Compensatory or "recovery" services to address learning loss; or
4. Prioritized SWDs to receive in-person instruction and/or services within hybrid models.

Larger, higher-spending districts used more remote and hybrid instruction

11 districts relied on remote-only instruction for at least part of the study period, while 12 districts utilized a combination of hybrid instruction. The amount of time students received remote-only educational services ranged from 0 to ≥6 months. In all, 6 districts served SWDs exclusively remotely for ≥5 months, while 2 did so for between 2 and 5 months, and 3 for <2 months. High enrollment (HE) and high per pupil spending (HPPS) districts used remote-only instruction longer (4.4 and 4.2 months, respectively) than low enrollment (LE) and low per pupil spending (LPPS) districts (0 and 0.2 months, respectively).

Similar districts used different strategies

Of the 17 districts that adopted at least one of these 4 strategies, no 2 districts used them in the same way.

Compensatory services

Only two of the six districts (33%) that were exclusively remote for ≥5 months included compensatory services in their published plans.

IEP and DLP modifications

Nine of 11 districts that at some point offered remote-only services modified IEPs or adopted DLPs. Six of 7 districts (86%) that were remote for ≥3 months

implemented a DLP or modified IEPs, while only 8 of the 17 districts (47%) that were remote for ≤2 months did so.

Districts not prioritizing SWDs for in-person services within hybrid models
Although all LPPS districts offered hybrid instruction, none prioritized SWDs for in-person learning.

Districts not providing in-person related services within remote or hybrid models
8 of 11 districts (73%) utilizing remote-only educational models offered remote-only physical, occupational, and speech therapy services. Only 5 of 12 districts provided in-person and remote related services in hybrid models.

Evaluations
Only 9 districts provided information for how evaluations would be conducted during remote only or hybrid instructional models.

COVID-19 case rates and adaptive measures
School adaptations were unrelated to COVID community case rates. Despite high community case rates, COVID High 1 and COVID High 2 districts did not use remote learning. They also did not provide information regarding adaptations to support remote-only educational programs. In contrast, COVID Low 1 district went fully remote for 1.5 months and provided information regarding all 4 adaptation measures to support remote education.

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References
1. U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2021. *Distance Learning: Challenges Providing Services to K-12 English Learners and SWDs during COVID-19*.
2. U.S. Department of Education. 2020. *Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Need for guidelines to promote uniformity
The extent to which districts adapted to ensure that SWDs' needs were met during the pandemic varied greatly. Some districts adapted SWDs' IEPs during remote learning, provided for in-person visits with specialists, and offered compensatory services when students returned. Other districts made very few adaptations to meet SWDs' needs during remote-only learning periods. Adaptations were not solely linked to available resources. There were LPPS districts that made adaptions, provided compensatory services, or remained open the entire study period, as well as HPPS districts with few accommodations for SWDs. These findings underscore the need for minimum standards. That all 17 districts used unique combinations of adaptation strategies demonstrates a need for guidelines to promote similar educational experiences for SWDs in similarly situated districts.

Minimum areas of need for federal guidelines
There is a pressing need for federal guidelines so each school district does not have to develop its own approach with limited resources and to ensure the goals of the IDEA are met for all students across the country. In particular, guidelines should address:
1) When should in-person services be continued as essential services;
2) Prioritizing SWDs for in-person services when districts are using hybrid models;
3) The most effective modalities for providing remote services to SWDs when in-person is not possible; and
4) The best way to ensure SWDs receive compensatory services after disruptions.

Devise strategies for in-person related services
Guidelines should disseminate the approaches of the minority of districts that ensured access to in-person related services within remote-only educational models.

Research should assess adaptations' efficacy
Additional research is needed to:
- Understand how to minimize the disruption of in-person education
- Assess the comparative efficacy of various educational approaches to meeting the needs of students with disabilities when educational disruptions are unavoidable and
- Evaluate the most effective approach to compensatory services post-disruption.

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