

POLICY BRIEF

Trends in Special Education Identification During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence From Michigan

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Trends in Special Education Identification During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence From Michigan

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Introduction

While there is increasing evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected most students' learning,¹ policymakers and educators have been particularly worried about students with disabilities.² As the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted typical schooling and moved all students into learning contexts that limited in-person interactions between educators and students, the process for referring students for initial special education eligibility determination may have been disrupted. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that reduced in-person instruction for students with disabilities may have hampered their full participation and ability to access content, thus affecting their learning growth and achievement—key factors in the determination to discontinue services.³

In [this study](#), we use administrative data from Michigan to investigate how the classification of new students with disabilities, and the discontinuation of services for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in place prior to the initial school building closures in spring 2020, progressed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis sample includes nearly 1.8 million Michigan students enrolled in kindergarten through 5th grade between 2012-13 and 2021-22.⁴ To understand how special education classification and discontinuation rates in Michigan changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we use an Interrupted Time Series (ITS) model to identify changes in classification and discontinuation patterns specific to each school year directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ITS model allows us to predict classification or discontinuation rates based on two or more explanatory variables (e.g., a specific student characteristic or the instructional modality offered by a district), focusing on the ways in which these outcomes shifted during the pandemic-affected school years relative to existing trends pre-pandemic.

We identify three types of relevant transitions in our data:

- **Newly classified students with disabilities** are identified by the first year they received special education services (i.e., “newly classified”).
- **Students with disabilities who are reclassified to general education** are students who had received special education services but were later discontinued and remained in Michigan public schools. We identify this group of students by the last year they received special education services.
- **Students with disabilities who stopped receiving services because they exited the Michigan public school system** are those who had received special education services but for whom we no longer have records as their unique identifiers are absent in the time series.

It is important to separate out the latter two groups to avoid conflating students who exited special education services because they left public schooling in Michigan and students who exited from special education services because it was determined they no longer needed an IEP. We rely on 2021-22 data to assess whether the student retained their IEP after the 2020-21 school year, thus we are only able to estimate changes in discontinuation and exit through the 2020-21 school year.

We examine overall differences in classification, discontinuation, and exit rates during pandemic-affected school years and we assess how these rates vary by student race and ethnicity, economic disadvantage status, and instructional modality offered by the district in the 2020-21 school year. Since districts were able to offer students multiple modalities during the 2020-21 school year, we assign students to each modality type based on the “most in-person” instructional modality most commonly offered by the student’s district throughout the entire 2020-21 school year (i.e., fully in-person is the “most in-person” option, followed by hybrid, and then fully remote instruction).

FINDINGS

Our results summarize estimates from models examining changes in classification, discontinuation, and exit rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 summarizes baseline results for all three outcome measures, while Figure 2 shows how classification, discontinuation, and exit trends differed across student characteristics and instructional modality policies during the COVID-19

pandemic. In the latter figure, we show bar graphs that provide the magnitude and confidence intervals of the estimates from the two pandemic-affected years (2019-20 and 2020-21) and, for new classifications, the first post-pandemic year (2021-22).

Michigan Students Were Less Likely to be Classified With a Disability During the COVID-19 Pandemic, and Many Students Still Have Not Received Necessary Special Education Services

Significantly fewer students were classified for special education services during the pandemic. This is shown by the green line in Figure 1. While the classification rate decreased by only 0.77 and 0.49 percentage points in 2019-20 and 2020-21, respectively, this translates to a large decline of 19% and 12% below the 2018-19 classification rate of 4.1%.

By 2021-22, the difference between expected classification rates in the absence of the pandemic (shown by the dashed trend line) was quite small and not statistically significant. This indicates that overall classifications simply returned to trend rather than exhibiting a “catch up” of additional classifications. Assuming the long-term trend would have continued, the total COVID-19 pandemic drop in classifications is 1.26 percentage points — roughly 30% of the combined predicted classification rate over those two

years based on the trend. These findings suggest that many students still had not been identified — and therefore had not received necessary special education services — by the end of the 2021-22 school year.

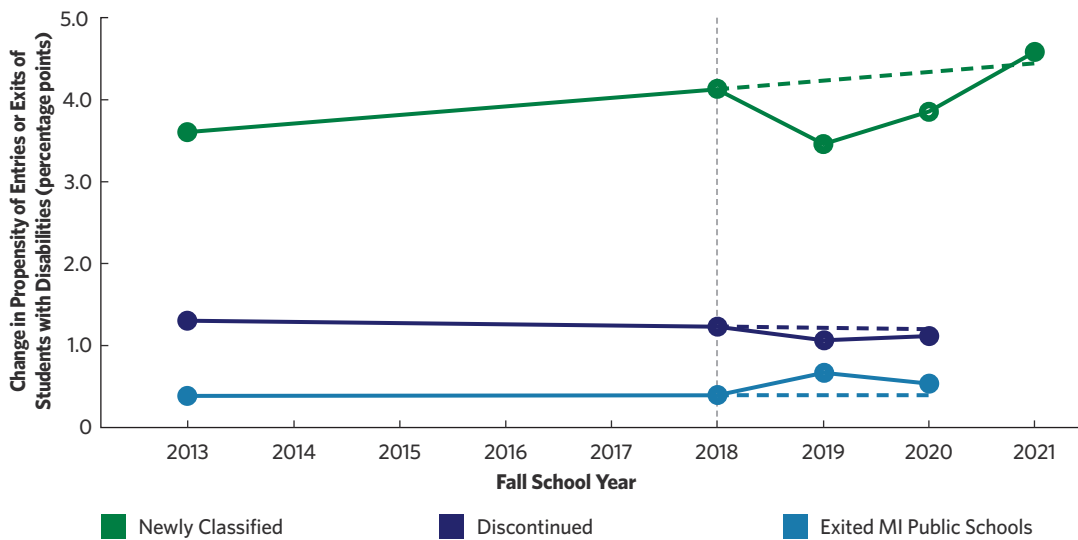
Many students still had not been identified by the end of the 2021-22 school year.

Students With Disabilities Were Less Likely to be Discontinued From Special Education Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Were More Likely to Leave Michigan Public Schools

Similarly, fewer students with disabilities discontinued special education services during the COVID-19 pandemic (shown by the purple line in Figure 1). Discontinuation rates dropped by 0.15 and 0.10 percentage points in 2019-20 and 2020-21, respectively, which translates to services being discontinued for 13% and 8% fewer students relative to 2018-19 (with a discontinuation rate of 1.2%). Given that we cannot yet assess discontinuations after the 2021-22 school year, we do not yet know if discontinuations have recovered to the point that they offset these values. Nonetheless, it is clear that many students were continuing to receive services longer than they would have before the COVID-19 pandemic. This may suggest that students with disabilities were unable to attend and engage in enough instruction during pandemic-affected years to be able to discontinue special education services.

Finally, students with disabilities exited the Michigan public school system at much higher rates during the COVID-19 pandemic than in pre-pandemic school years (shown by the blue line in Figure 1). In 2019-20 and 2020-21, students with disabilities were 0.26 and 0.14 percentage points more likely to leave public schools, respectively, relative to pre-pandemic trends. These are meaningful differences: in 2019-20, students with disabilities were 65% more likely to exit Michigan public schools than in 2018-19 (when the exit rate was 0.4%), and 35% more likely in 2020-21.

FIGURE 1. Classification, Discontinuation, and Exit Trends of Students With Disabilities Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Notes: The figure includes ITS estimates that include all controls and school fixed effects. "Newly classified" students are identified by the first year they received special education services. Students who were "discontinued" remained in the Michigan public school system but were no longer classified as special education. Students who "exited MI public schools" were classified as special education in the last school year they attended a Michigan public school.

Black and Low-Income Students Were Even Less Likely to be Identified for or Discontinued From Special Education Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

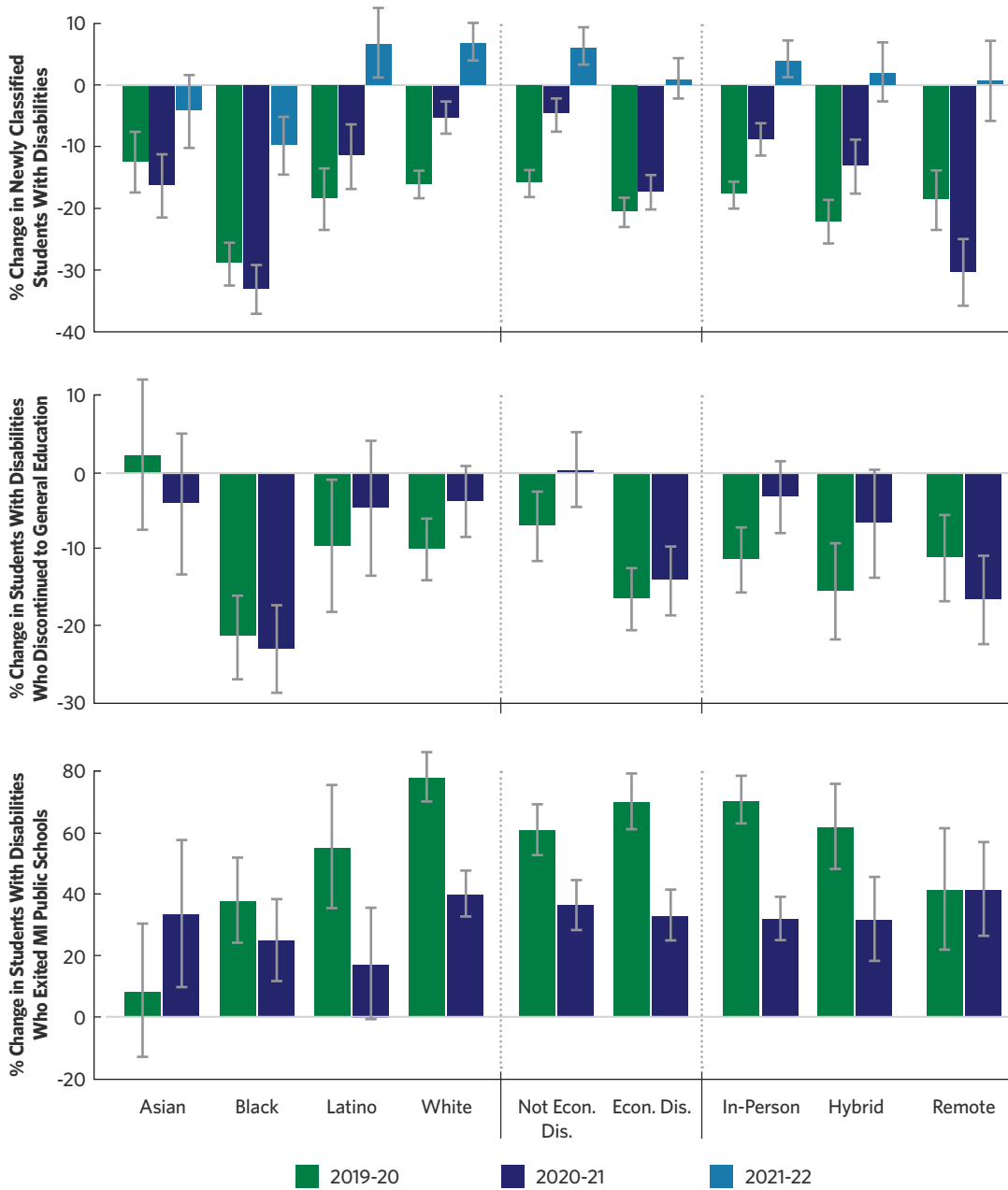
Black and Latino students both experienced larger declines in classification rates than did White students in 2019-20 and 2020-21. As shown in the top panel of Figure 2, these differences are particularly stark for Black students, who experienced 29% and 33% reductions in new classifications in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, respectively, relative to 2018-19. By comparison, White students experienced 16% and 5% declines in classification rates in those same years relative to 2018-19, while Latino student classification rates decreased by 19% and 12% and Asian student classification rates by 12% and 16%, respectively.⁵

Economically disadvantaged students also experienced far greater decreases in classification rates than did their wealthier peers. Non-economically disadvantaged students experienced a 16% decline in classifications in 2019-20 and a 5% decrease in 2020-21 relative to the 2018-19 baseline rate. By contrast, classification rates for economically disadvantaged students were 21% and 17% lower in 2019-20 and 2020-21 relative to the baseline rate.⁶

The middle panel of Figure 2 looks at differences in discontinuation rates during the COVID-19 pandemic by race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, and instructional modality. We again find that Black and economically disadvantaged students experienced the largest declines in discontinuation rates relative to their respective peers. Additionally, Black and economically disadvantaged students were the only two sociodemographic subgroups to experience statistically significant declines in discontinuations in both 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Finally, the bottom panel of Figure 2 shows that Black and Latino students with disabilities were less likely than White students with disabilities to exit public schools in both 2019-20 and 2020-21. Exit trends for economically disadvantaged students and their wealthier peers were generally similar across years.

FIGURE 2. Classification, Discontinuation and Exit Trends of Students With Disabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic by Race/Ethnicity, Economically Disadvantaged Status, and Instructional Modality



Notes: The figure includes ITS estimates that include all controls and school fixed effects. "Newly classified" students are identified by the first year they received special education services. Students who were "discontinued" remained in the Michigan public school system but were no longer classified as special education. Students who "exited MI public schools" were classified as special education in the last school year they attended a Michigan public school.

Students Enrolled in Districts That Operated Remotely During the 2020-21 School Year Were Less Likely Than Their Peers to be Identified for or Discontinued From Special Education Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

While, on average, classification rates decreased in districts of all pandemic-year modalities, the declines in new students with disabilities identification rates were far greater in districts that primarily operated remotely for the majority of that year. In 2020-21, new classifications were 9% below 2018-19 levels in districts that offered in-person instruction for the majority of the same year, with only slightly lower rates in districts that mostly offered hybrid instruction. However, the reduction in new classifications was more than two times larger for districts that operated remotely for the majority of the year, reflecting a negative deviation from trend of 21% off the 2018-19 average classification rate. Districts on average returned to trend by 2021-22 regardless of modality. Thus, it appears that students in schools that were mostly remote had substantially more delayed classifications, and, given we do not see a disproportionate increase the following year, some of these delays may become permanent mis-classifications.

Students in districts that offered in-person instruction for a majority of the 2020-21 school year saw the smallest reductions in the propensity to be discontinued from special education services, followed by those students in mostly hybrid and then remote districts. Lastly, students with a disability in remote districts were significantly more likely to leave Michigan public schools than those in districts that offered in-person instruction during 2020-21.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, our results indicate that Michigan students were less likely to be classified with a disability and less likely to discontinue services during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. With this in mind, we make the following three policy recommendations:

1. **Policymakers and school and district personnel must ensure that students receive the services they need to address their disabilities.** Districts will need resources and training to expand their screening efforts and identification practices to make sure that students are accurately identified for special education services. Moreover, Michigan schools and districts will need resources to help newly identified students with disabilities account for the time lost from the delayed classifications.
2. **School districts and state agencies need to pay particular attention to students who were more at risk for delayed or missed identification.** Since late identification can lead to academic and behavioral challenges in schooling, educators and policymakers should consider additional interventions that target students who were more likely to be misclassified during the COVID-19 pandemic — in particular low-income and Black students and students in districts that operated remotely for more of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, educators and policymakers may wish to consider changes to discipline policies and to programs that aid with socioemotional learning to address potentially increased behavioral challenges among groups of students who were inadequately served during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 3. School districts and state agencies should ensure that students with disabilities are receiving appropriate instruction and interventions to enable them to discontinue receiving services in a timely manner.** While some students who need special education services appear not to be receiving them in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, other students may be staying in special education classrooms or with special services for longer than is appropriate. Given the evidence that suggests that returning to general education as quickly as feasible is better for students for both their short- and longer-term success, educators and policymakers will need to work to ensure that students with disabilities receive sufficient services and instruction to enable them to discontinue services in a timely fashion. Particular attention should be paid to Black and economically disadvantaged students, who were the least likely to have discontinued services during the pandemic-affected school years.

NOTES

1. Goldhaber, D., Kane, T. J., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2022). *The consequences of remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic* (Working Paper No. w30010). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w30010>; Halloran, C., Jack, R., Okun, J. C., & Oster, E. (2021). *Pandemic schooling mode and student test scores: Evidence from US states* (Working Paper No. 29497). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w29497>; Kilbride, T., Hopkins, B., Strunk, K. O., & Yu, D. (2022, April). *Michigan's fall 2021 benchmark assessments*. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. https://epicpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Benchmark_Report_April2022.pdf; Kogan, V., & Lavertu, S. (2021, January 27). *The COVID-19 pandemic and student achievement on Ohio's third-grade English language arts assessment*. Ohio State University John Glenn College of Public Affairs. <https://glenn.osu.edu/covid-19-pandemic-and-student-achievement-ohios-third-grade-english-language-arts-assessment>; Kuhfeld, M., & Lewis, K. (2022). *Student achievement in 2021-2022: Cause for hope and continued urgency*. NWEA. <https://www.nwea.org/uploads/2022/07/Student-Achievement-in-2021-22-Cause-for-hope-and-concern.researchbrief-1.pdf>; *The Nation's Report Card*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 2, 2022, from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>; Sass, T., & Ali, S. M. (2022). *Student achievement growth during the COVID-19 pandemic: Spring 2022 update*. Georgia Policy Labs. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=gpl_reports
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4. We limit our sample to these students to avoid conflating effects of classification and discontinuation associated with structural school and district switches that students experience when transitioning from elementary to middle school.
5. The total decrease in Black student classifications was 1.19 and 1.36 percentage points, respectively, in the first two pandemic-affected years. This is compared to just -0.66 and -0.22 percentage points for White students, -0.51 and -0.67 percentage points for Asian students, and 0.76 and -0.48 percentage points for Latino students.
6. Non-disadvantaged students experienced a 0.67 percentage point decline in classifications in 2019-20. This shrunk to -0.20 and then turned positive at 0.26 percentage points in 2020-21 and 2021-22, respectively. Economically disadvantaged students experienced considerably greater decreases in classification rates during the pandemic than did their wealthier peers (-0.85, -0.71, and 0.43 percentage points in these three years, respectively).



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