



**AUTISM ALLIANCE**  
OF MICHIGAN

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

## Report to the Community

Elevating lived experience,  
identifying system barriers, and  
amplifying voices of parents &  
students with disabilities

By Heather Eckner, M.A.Ed.  
and Kara Shawbitz, PhD

October 2024



## About the Autism Alliance

The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) was founded on the vision that people with autism will lead lives that meet their greatest potential by leading efforts to raise expectations and expand opportunities across the lifespan.

## AAoM Education pillar

AAoM's Education pillar drives initiatives that address root causes of systemic barriers to access, opportunity, and outcomes in education while supporting increasing acceptance that leads toward the preparation of a safe, successful, and inclusive life.

We are advancing an equitable education agenda for children and youth with special education needs by centering a Whole Child vision as we work to make Michigan a top 10 state in preparing students with disabilities for the most independent life possible, through an accessible, high-quality, and inclusive education.

The Autism Alliance Education pillar serves as a resource hub for families, partner organizations, and state leaders in cultivating an understanding of core barriers related to equity and access in the education system. Disability is part of the intersection of other factors that lead to poorer outcomes for marginalized groups.

AAoM Education pillar aims to catalyze stakeholders to drive systems-level transformation in these key areas:

- Building Community Engagement & Advocacy
- Transforming Learning Environments
- Investing Resources Equitably & Effectively
- Redefining Accountability Systems

<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/>

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# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey: *Report to the Community*

*elevating lived experience, identifying system barriers, and amplifying voices of parents & students with disabilities*

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*We value your insight!*

Share your thoughts on the Special Education Experience Survey by visiting our SEE Survey feedback form: <https://tinyurl.com/SEE-survey-feedback>





## Notes about language

### Identity-First vs Person-First Language Statement

*Many prefer using identity-first language (autistic person) to show the importance of autism being integral to their personhood, while others prefer person-first language (person with autism). To honor the lived experience of those we serve and diverse perspectives on language, AAoM primarily uses identity-first language, while also incorporating person-first language as a supplement.<sup>1</sup>*

### Referring to Students with Disabilities Eligible for Special Education

*The Autism Alliance of Michigan uses the term “special education” to align with and describe the system governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Special education is a system of services, support, and instruction that addresses the learning and access needs of individual students. Special education is not a term to be used as an adjective to describe a specific curriculum, a place, or a type of student. Therefore, when referring to students who are IDEA-eligible, AAoM uses terms such as “students receiving special education services,” “students with IEPs,” “students with disabilities,” or “disabled students.” When referring to the location where a student receives special education support and services, AAoM references time spent with non-disabled peers or describes an “alternative placement” outlined in [section 300.115\(a\)](#) of IDEA including “instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions.”<sup>2</sup>*

### Why we don’t use the term ‘special needs’

*While the term ‘special needs’ is used by many to refer to disabled individuals, this term has ableist undertones. Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities. Referring to children and youth as ‘special needs’ communicates that an individual is somehow “other” or different from the norm. Every human being has varying needs and requires various types of support. Additionally, the support needs of any individual can, and usually does, change over time – for all of us. For this reason, we do not use this term to refer to students with disabilities in the education system.*

### References to ‘Parents’

*We recognize the many types of family structures that exist and view them all as valid. However, the IDEA, which is a federal statute, specifically refers and extends rights to parents – those with legal rights to make educational decisions on behalf of a child. For the sake of clarity, we refer to parents throughout this report in this context.*

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<sup>1</sup> START LANGUAGE MATTERS: A Reflection on the Critical Use of Language, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/13qAaIMdEqLzveJkf\\_261kUhCY6kdr\\_AB/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/13qAaIMdEqLzveJkf_261kUhCY6kdr_AB/view).

<sup>2</sup> NYC Schools: Inclusive & Interdependent Language Initiative Guide, [https://cdn-blob-prd.azureedge.net/prd-pws/docs/default-source/default-document-library/special-education/nycps-illi-glossary.pdf?sfvrsn=59fe3b08\\_8](https://cdn-blob-prd.azureedge.net/prd-pws/docs/default-source/default-document-library/special-education/nycps-illi-glossary.pdf?sfvrsn=59fe3b08_8).

## Executive Summary and Key Findings

The experiences of students with disabilities and their families in the education system is one of the least studied areas. Disability is often ignored altogether or simply thrown on to the end of a sentence that references marginalized populations. Or even worse, trotted out as a performative measure when it serves a political aim. Performative nods to disability under an umbrella of equity are doing a disservice to the movement of change that is taking shape in Michigan.

We must listen to and consider the experiences of our most marginalized students in order to fully understand the current barriers that are keeping them from opportunities and achievement on par with their nondisabled peers.

In 2023, AAoM fielded an unprecedented online survey to inform collective advocacy efforts to improve access and grow opportunities for students with disabilities across the state. The Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey was the first in-depth study connected to special education experiences in Michigan following the work of the Special Education Reform Task Force in 2015.<sup>3</sup>

### *Education as a pathway to prosperity*

Education is a top policy focus in Michigan, receiving cross-sector attention in our statewide efforts to grow the population and compete on an international level with a skilled workforce. It is well established that education is a core social determinant of health as well as a critical factor in social and economic mobility. The public education system plays a critical role in whether or not our state is successful in creating a future of prosperity for its residents.<sup>4</sup>

Recommendations from the Governor's 2023 Growing Michigan Together Council<sup>5</sup> include building a lifelong learning system focused on future-ready skills and competencies with an overall goal of improving Michigan's postsecondary attainment from a 33rd to top ten ranking.

This aim will include a commitment to a 'Michigan Education Guarantee' that all students will develop future-ready skills and competencies to thrive in work and life. The Council included a call to make postsecondary education attainment more accessible and affordable by providing all students with access to up to two years of free postsecondary education and creating a seamless lifelong learning system.

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<sup>3</sup> Key Findings of Lt. Governor Brian Calley's Special Education Listening Tour and Survey (2015), [https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIGOV/2015/09/08/file\\_attachments/423198/CalleyPresentationToStateBoardofEducation\\_Sept82015.pdf](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIGOV/2015/09/08/file_attachments/423198/CalleyPresentationToStateBoardofEducation_Sept82015.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Why Education Matters to Health (2015), Virginia Commonwealth University: Center on Society and Health, <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/why-education-matters-to-health-exploring-the-causes.html#gsc.tab=0>

<sup>5</sup> Growing Michigan Together Council, <https://growingmichigan.org/>.

## *Broken promises for students with disabilities*

And yet, this is currently a broken promise for hundreds of thousands of students with disabilities in Michigan. When we say we're committed to providing opportunities to improve postsecondary attainment for all students, do we really mean ALL students?

**Michigan systematically fails students with disabilities.** Students and families know this unfortunate truth. The SEE Survey indicates that 60 percent reported dissatisfaction with the services provided by their district.

Two-thirds of respondents with autistic children did not believe they received the support and services necessary to be successful in school.

The insufficiency of Michigan's special education system is made plain by the fact that the longer a student receives services, the more dissatisfied they and their families become with the level and quality of those services. In other words, the educational experiences of students with disabilities in Michigan worsen year-over-year. With schools failing to meet children's needs, many families hire private support. Of those, 60 percent reported spending at least \$5,000 annually while 34 percent spent more than \$10,000.

## *Barriers facing students with disabilities*

According to the most recent Kids Count® Data Book, Michigan ranks 22nd in health, 28th in family and community, 31st in economic well-being, and **41st in education**. The education ranking is one of the most concerning findings. It puts Michigan in the bottom ten states for the second year in a row when it comes to educational outcomes, based primarily on the performance of nondisabled students.<sup>6</sup>

Outcomes for Michigan students with disabilities, who are eligible for specialized services and supports (special education), are even more dismal—yet rarely discussed or reported.

The U.S. Department of Education's annual state determinations have rated Michigan as "needs assistance" or "needs intervention" every year from 2014 to 2024. Michigan has never met the requirements under IDEA and the Department of Education's Results Driven Accountability Matrix.<sup>7</sup>

***Other than in 2018, when Michigan dropped to the "Needs Intervention" rating, the state determination for Michigan has never moved out of the "Needs Assistance" rating since the Results Driven Accountability system was implemented in 2014.***

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<sup>6</sup> 2024 National Data Book (2024), Michigan League for Public Policy, <https://mlpp.org/2024nationaldatabook/>.

<sup>7</sup> Results-driven accountability (RDA) (2024, September 23), U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/rda/index.html>.

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For states categorized as “needs assistance” for two or more consecutive years under the RDA framework, the Education Department must take one or more enforcement actions. Those include requiring the state to access technical assistance, designating the state as a high-risk grantee, and directing the state to set aside funds to improve in lower-performing areas.<sup>8</sup>

## Key Findings: Top Concerns About Special Education in Michigan

The SEE Survey asked respondents to prioritize their top concerns about special education in Michigan, they ranked these eleven issue areas by order of importance (1 = most important, 11 = least important). (See Figure 1)

### Top five concerns include:

1. Adequate and equitable school funding / resources
2. Special Education workforce shortage
3. Placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment
4. Identification / special education eligibility
5. Parent / student engagement

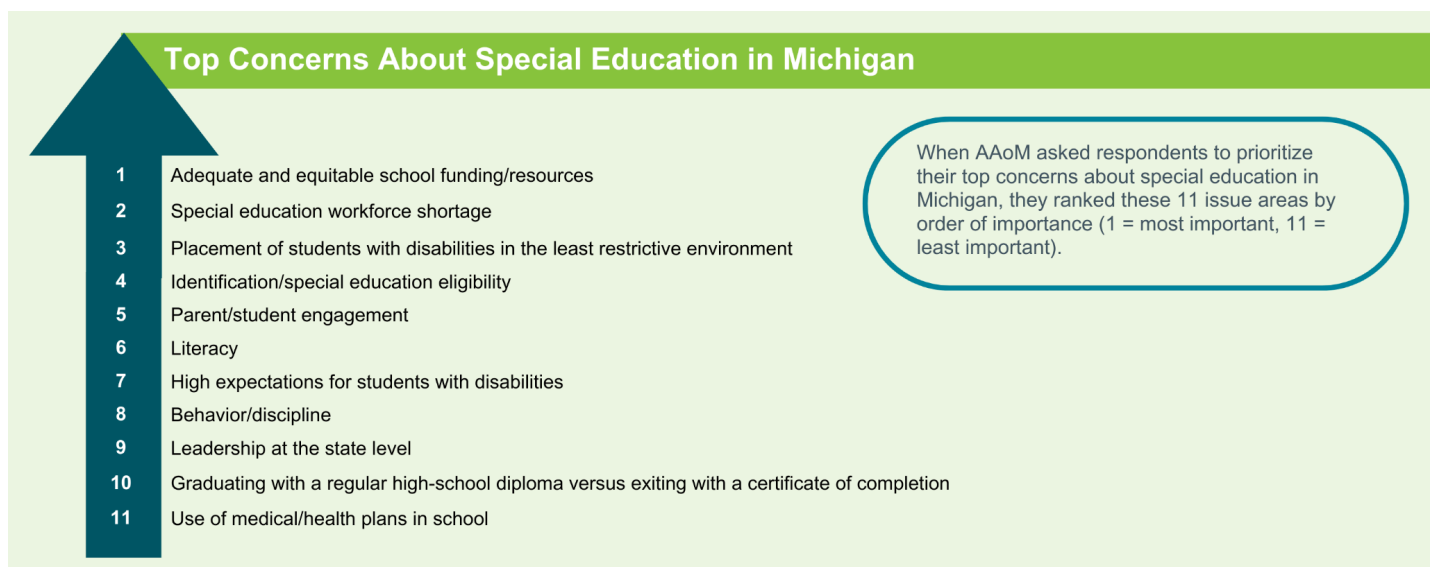


Figure 1.

<sup>8</sup> How the States Stack Up: 2024 IDEA State Determinations, <https://www.advocacyinstitute.org/blog/?p=1344>.



## Key Findings: By the Numbers

- 51% of parents of K-12 students with disabilities responded that their child ***should have been identified sooner***
- 28% of parents of K-12 students with disabilities said their child ***does not spend enough time with non-disabled peers***
- 15% of parents of K-12 students with disabilities said their child ***spends NO time with non-disabled peers***
- 41% of parents of K-12 students with disabilities ***wanted to be more involved in the development of their child's individualized education program (IEP)***
- 51% of parents of K-12 students with disabilities ***disagreed that the school has the proper resources to support their child's needs***, with 21% saying they “strongly disagree”

## Advocacy for the path forward

As policymakers, system leaders, and the advocacy community look to what it will take to confront difficult truths for the current state of education in Michigan and what it will take to fix the deeply entrenched barriers, we need to keep equity at the center. This means *starting* with a universal design approach to meet the needs of the most marginalized children and youth in our schools.

*Why do we need to consider the experiences of students with disabilities and their families?*

*Why do we need to identify barriers that hold students with disabilities back from accessing educational opportunity, receiving educational benefit, and realizing educational success?*

Because Michigan will not succeed as a state in transforming its education system and ultimately improving its population growth and economic prosperity if disability is ignored.

## Setting our North Star goals

Our ‘North Star’ goals include high expectations for students and educator excellence alongside meaningful student & family engagement.

***We call for Michigan Public schools to fulfill the spirit and intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).***

- High expectations and the presumption of competence will be applied to ALL students, including those with disabilities, for each child to learn and progress—both functionally and academically—which includes academic goals designed to result in achievement of grade level state curriculum standards.
- Highly trained educators using evidence-based methods leading to academic achievement, graduation, employment, and independent living for students with disabilities.
- Students and parents are meaningfully engaged in the planning and development of education programs that reflect their input and the system supports their empowerment to ensure civil rights are protected.

## *Call to action*

Based on the findings of the SEE Survey, our call to action includes the following advocacy priorities:

- Invest resources more equitably and effectively by redesigning the special education finance system.
- Allow community-based professionals to provide behavioral supports and medically necessary interventions in schools.
- Decrease the overuse of alternate assessments for students with disabilities.
- Improve identification of student needs.
- Enhance system accountability for state complaint reporting.
- Decrease discipline disparities among students with disabilities.
- Disaggregate reported state disciplinary data by district, race, income, and disability.

***“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river.  
We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”***

- Desmond Tutu

*South African Theologian, Human Rights Activist*

## Introduction

As a statewide professional organization, the Autism Alliance connects with thousands of disabled individuals and their family members annually. Through our MiNavigator program, we hear of the challenges experienced by parents trying to do their best to advocate for appropriate services and supports that their children need in the school environment.

We set out to determine the current state of special education in Michigan from the perspective of self-advocates and their parents.

Our aim was to explore whether there had been recognizable change or improvement since the Special Education Reform Task Force made its recommendations public eight years prior.<sup>9</sup>

In 2023, the Autism Alliance of Michigan conducted the Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey. This innovative online survey uniquely enhances our collective understanding of the state of special education in Michigan by elevating the lived experiences of parents and students.

The SEE Survey represents the Autism Alliance of Michigan’s first in-depth study connected to special education experiences statewide.

The purpose of the Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey was twofold:

- First, to gain perspective on the collective experiences and core issues for students with disabilities in public schools across Michigan.
- Second, to identify barriers and disparities within the public education system that impact student success.

Our *Report to the Community* highlighting the SEE Survey findings aligns with our broader mission: building and bridging power toward systemic change and improvement in Michigan’s education system for students with disabilities.

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<sup>9</sup> Special Education Reform Task Force: Final Report to the Governor (2016),

[https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/2018/12/12/FINAL\\_report\\_Special\\_Ed\\_Reform\\_TF\\_2016\\_514019\\_7.pdf?rev=0d30d8b883be4aad9edf176d121cdeb2f](https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/2018/12/12/FINAL_report_Special_Ed_Reform_TF_2016_514019_7.pdf?rev=0d30d8b883be4aad9edf176d121cdeb2f).

We aim to inform in order to empower by using these findings to guide advocacy efforts and influence special education policy, practice, and system-level transformation. By sharing these insights, we strive to build a shared advocacy agenda that promotes increased opportunities and improved outcomes for students with disabilities across Michigan.

Our intent with this report is to share perspectives of families connected to special education to further collective understanding. This is critical information that will inform policy development which will promote increased educational opportunity and *significantly* improved outcomes for students with disabilities in Michigan.

## Grassroots advocacy movement

Relevant to discussing the response and results of the SEE Survey is our collective impact vehicle - MiPAAC. AAoM serves as the backbone agency for the Michigan Parent, Advocate & Attorney Coalition (MiPAAC).<sup>10</sup> Formed in 2020, MiPAAC has grown over the past four years into a robust statewide network dedicated to ensuring that students with disabilities receive the education and support they deserve. Since its inception, MiPAAC has been a driving force in Michigan, bringing together parents, advocates, and attorneys to create a unified voice for special education advocacy. Through a variety of community engagement efforts, MiPAAC has educated and empowered families to navigate the complexities of the special education system. Our members have collaborated to influence policy changes, raise awareness, and build a stronger community of support for students across the state.

## What is special education?

The system we refer to as “special education” is governed by the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, which is a federal law that entitles children with disabilities to special education services if their disability impacts access to education and a specially designed program is needed.<sup>11</sup>

## Congressional Findings

*“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.” 34 CFR §300.39<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Michigan Parent, Advocate & Attorney Coalition (MiPAAC), <https://mipaac.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> IDEA history (2024, February 16), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History>.

<sup>12</sup> Regulations: 300.39(b)(3) (2017, May 2), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.39/b/3>.



**Special education** includes instruction that is *specially designed* to meet the *unique needs* of a child with a disability. This means education that is individually developed to address a *specific* child's needs that result from his or her disability; and to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards...that apply to all children. 34 CFR §300.39<sup>13</sup>

**Special education** is at the core of how schools address the needs of students with disabilities and support them in achieving annual goals aligned with the state's academic content standards.<sup>14</sup>

## What is Special Education?

All students are general education students. Some general education students with disabilities may require specialized services and support to access and benefit from their education. This is known as "special education." The special education system is governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted in 1975 and last revised by Congress in 2004. Under IDEA, schools are obligated to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), in the least restrictive environment (LRE), to eligible students through an individualized family service plan (IFSP) or individualized education program (IEP). IEPs and IFSPs are legal documents outlining the services and supports that address a student's unique needs. With tools like these, IDEA helps prepare eligible children with disabilities for further education, employment, and independent living.

## A goal of the IDEA is to enhance parent and student participation

Within the public education system, parents play an essential role in ensuring the rights of their child(ren) with disabilities are protected and that they receive an appropriate education. A primary goal of the IDEA is to enhance parent and student participation and involvement in educational programming. IDEA is designed to include parents of students with disabilities as critical members of the special education system. Legally, parents are considered a part of the IEP team and the school district must consider the concerns of the parent in IEP decision-making. Parents must be informed of their rights and are granted due process intended to protect their interests on behalf of the child. §1400(d)(1)(A)-(B)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Regulations: 300.39(b)(3) (2017, May 2), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.39/b/3>.

<sup>14</sup> Dear colleague letter on free appropriate public education (FAPE) (2015, November 16), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/osep-dear-colleague-letter-on-free-and-appropriate-public-education-fape/>.

<sup>15</sup> IDEA statute: Chapter 33, Subchapter I, 1400 (2019, November 7), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-i/1400>.

Research documents parents' difficult position within the special education system. In order to receive adequate services, parents often face bureaucratic educational structures and must become strong advocates. Findings indicate parents have little influence in actual decision-making with service delivery and lack of trust being top factors.<sup>16</sup>

## Core Principles of the IDEA

The IDEA has six core principles:<sup>17</sup>

- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)
- Evaluation / Eligibility (Child Find)<sup>18</sup>
- Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- Parent Participation
- Procedural Safeguards

### The stated purpose of the IDEA

*"to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living"*<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "It should be teamwork": A critical investigation of school practices and parent advocacy in special education (2012), Bacon, J. K., & Causton-Theoharis, J., International Journal of Inclusive Education, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.708060>.

<sup>17</sup> Your child's rights: 6 principles of IDEA (2021, June), Saleh, M., Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities, <https://www.smartkidswithld.org/getting-help/know-your-childs-rights/your-childs-rights-6-principles-of-idea/>.

<sup>18</sup> 10 basic steps in special education (2022, April), Center for Parent Information and Resources, <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/steps/>.

<sup>19</sup> About IDEA: Purpose of IDEA (2024, March), U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose>.

## Student Population

### Number of IDEA-eligible students increasing annually

As a July 2023 Education Week headline stated, ***“The Number of Students in Special Education Has Doubled in the Past 45 Years.”*** The number of students eligible to receive special education in the United States has doubled over the past four decades, creating a rising share of public school kids who need special education services. The total number of students receiving special education went from 3.6 million in the 1976-77 school year, to almost 7.3 million in 2021-22. These students now make up 15 percent of the K-12 public school student population across the country, nearly double what it was in the late 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

### National

Reported data shows the number of IDEA-eligible students increased 3% in 2022, including a 13.6% increase in ages 3-5.<sup>21</sup> (See Figure 2)

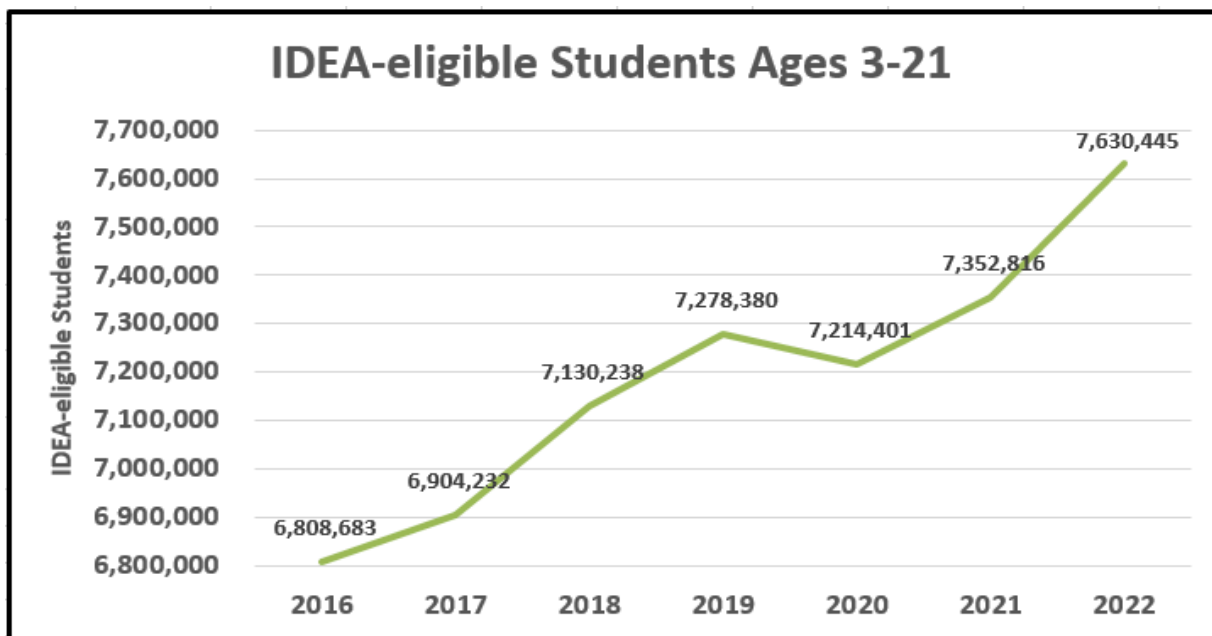


Figure 2.

<sup>20</sup> The number of students in special education has doubled in the past 45 years (2023, July 31), Pendharkar, E., Education Week, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-number-of-students-in-special-education-has-doubled-in-the-past-45-years/2023/07>.

<sup>21</sup> Number of school age IDEA-eligible students increases 3 percent in 2022 (2024, February 28), The Advocacy Institute, <https://www.advocacyinstitute.org/blog/?p=1250>.

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The percent of public school enrollment served under IDEA varies significantly by state as the table below shows.<sup>22</sup> While the national rate is 15.2%, state rates range from a high of 21.1% in Pennsylvania to a low of 11.7% in Hawaii.<sup>23</sup> (See Figure 3)

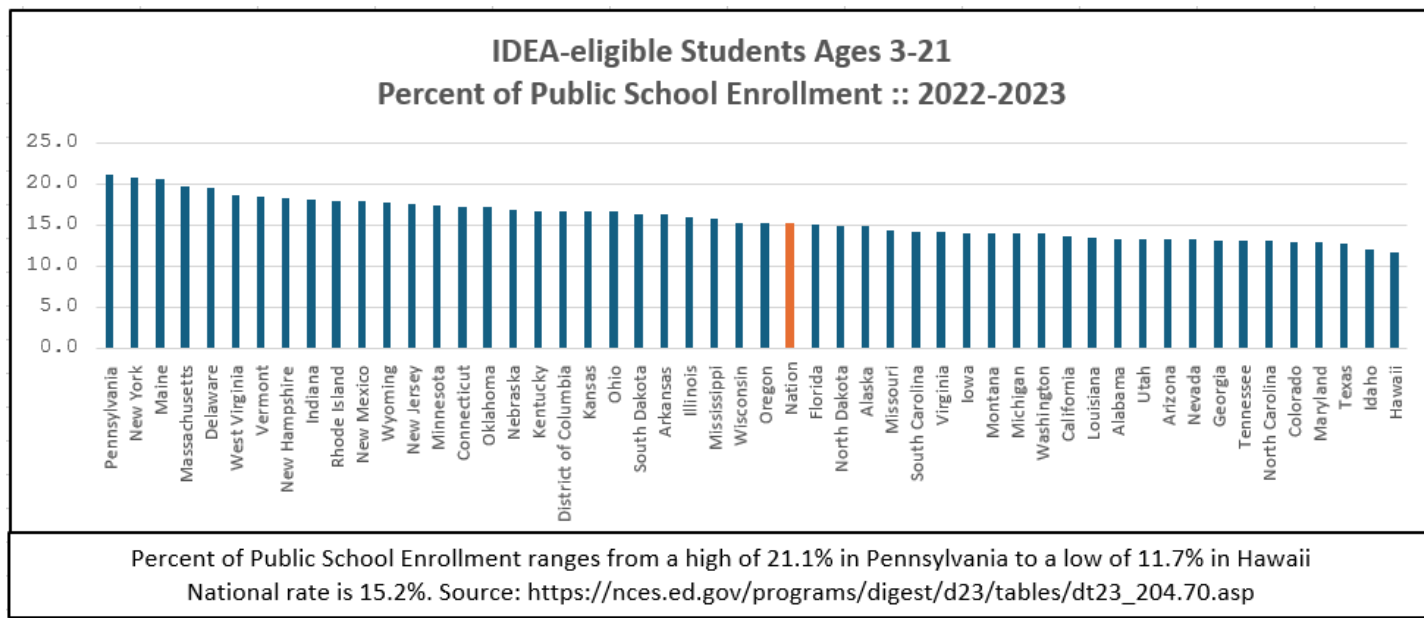


Figure 3.

<sup>22</sup> Table 204.70: Number and percentage of children served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by age group and state or jurisdiction: Selected school years, 1990-91 through 2022-23 (2023), National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23\\_204.70](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_204.70).

<sup>23</sup> Number of school age IDEA-eligible students increases 3 percent in 2022 (2024, February 28), The Advocacy Institute, <https://www.advocacyinstitute.org/blog/?p=1250>.



## Michigan

Reported data shows the number of IDEA-eligible students in Michigan was steadily increasing prior to the pandemic, then dropped significantly, and is on the rise again.<sup>24</sup> (See Figure 4)

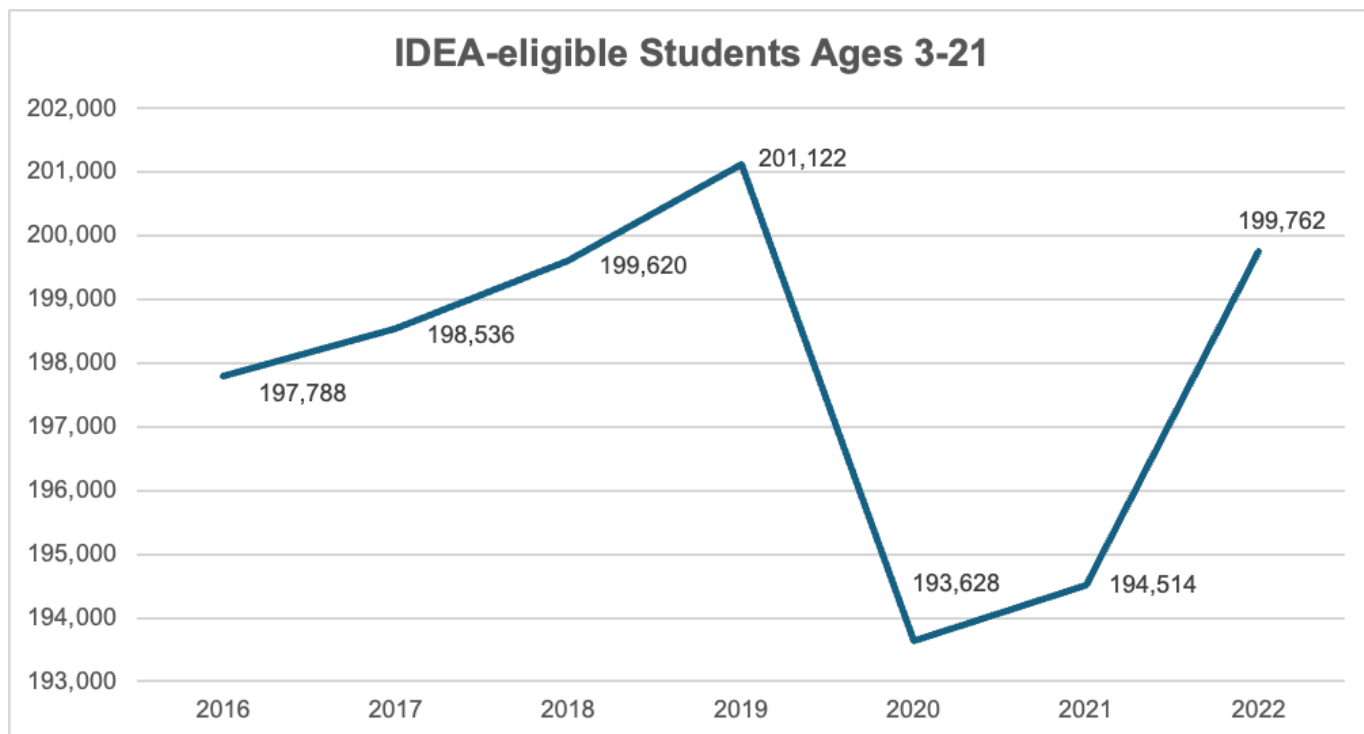


Figure 4.

<sup>24</sup> MI School Data Portal: Student enrollment counts report (2014-2023), Center for Educational Performance and Information, <https://www.mischooldata.org/>.

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The number of students served in Michigan has changed from the 2014-2015 to 2022-2023 school year. Notably, the number of students has risen for several categories including autism (38%), other health impairment (23%), speech or language impairment (10%), and developmental delay (7%). Other categories have demonstrated a decrease, including emotional impairment (-11%) and specific learning disability (-14%). (See Figure 5)

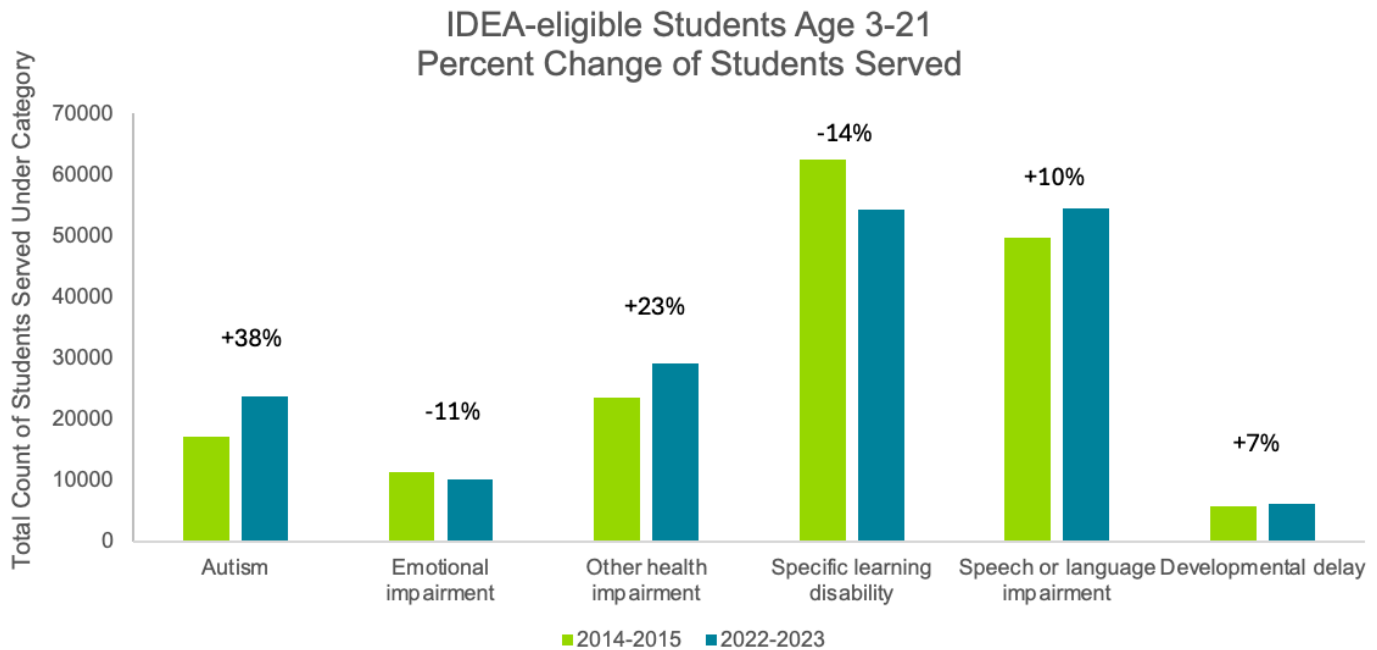


Figure 5.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

In the 2022-2023 school year, 14% of all students were IDEA-eligible students. Of those students, 65% identified as White. With the exception of White students, who nationally make up 16% of the IDEA-eligible population, Michigan’s demographics align with national numbers. (See Figure 6)

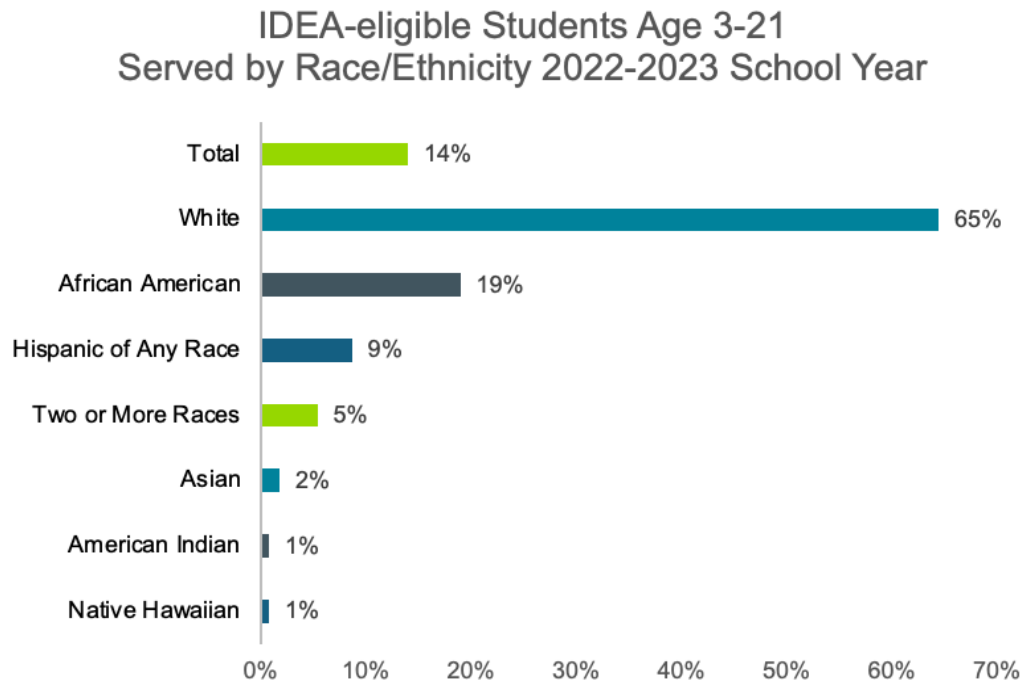


Figure 6.

The majority of IDEA-eligible students in Michigan were male (65%) compared to female (35%). These data point to an increasing issue of underrepresentation of girls in special education and overrepresentation of boys. (See Figure 7)

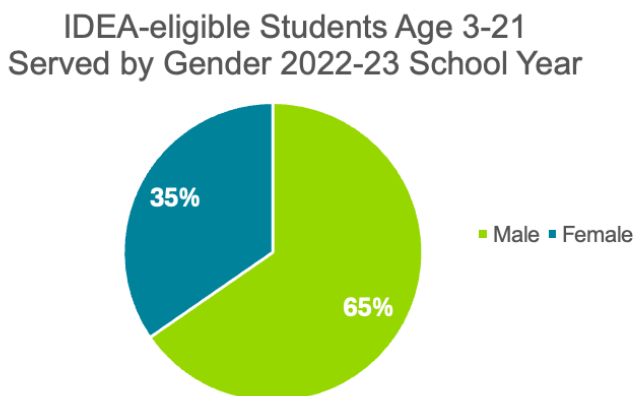


Figure 7.

## Methodology

### Research Questions and Survey Objectives

The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) Education Pillar developed the Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey in collaboration with a project team of researchers along with subject matter experts and members of the community.<sup>25</sup>

The SEE Survey was conceived as an experience survey and designed as a data collection instrument to be disseminated primarily online.

The purpose of the SEE Survey was to gain a broad understanding of the educational lifespan of an individual with a disability in the State of Michigan.

Our primary objective was to gain perspective on collective experiences and core issues for students with disabilities in public education settings across Michigan.

The secondary objective was to identify barriers and disparities within the public education system that negatively impacts student success.

SEE Survey outcomes highlight systemic issues for families of students with disabilities so that a better understanding of needs can help policymakers and system leaders address areas of concern to effect change and improvement. The overall intent of the SEE Survey was to make qualitative data real and lived experience viewed as valid.

### Survey Development

The SEE Survey was created using an iterative process. First the survey was drafted by the Education pillar of AAoM. Then subject matter experts across the United States reviewed the goals of the survey as well as the survey questions. This panel of experts included professors in special education, current and former educators, special education administrators, policy experts, attorneys, individuals with disabilities, and disability advocates. Subject matter experts included individuals with expertise in advocacy, special education and data. Subject matter experts provided feedback which was then incorporated into the final version of the survey.

The SEE Survey consisted of 335 questions focused on areas such as the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs), 504 Plans, Discipline (suspension, expulsion, restraint, seclusion), transition, and graduation experiences.

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<sup>25</sup> Special education experience (SEE) survey (2023 questions, Autism Alliance of Michigan, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jCGlChFQ1tXtZKysDNEvLIWcOvvlxps/view>).



## Instrumentation

The SEE Survey was designed as a branching questionnaire. The total number of questions each participant answered varied, as not every section was relevant to each survey participant. For example, a parent who said they had a child with a disability in preschool answered only the questions related to early childhood education and preschool and did not receive the questions about K-12, high school, or transition.

## Audience

The SEE Survey was intended for Parents/Caregivers of children with a disability as well as self-reported disabled individuals connected to special education across the PreK-12 system. In order to improve the diversity of respondents, the survey was available in English, Spanish, and Arabic.

## Questions

The SEE Survey included several types of questions, including questions assessed using a Likert scale, yes/no questions, and select all that apply questions. For example, participants were asked to rate their agreement with questions such as “I believe the goals developed for my / my student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) are/were challenging and appropriate for preschool.” Additionally, some questions asked participants to rate their satisfaction with services provided in the IEP by the school district within several areas including speech therapy, applied behavior analysis (ABA), social skills / peer intervention, and transportation.

After participants finished the survey, they were invited to complete an open-ended question. The open-ended question asked, “Is there anything else you would like us to know about your student’s (or your if the participant was self-identified) educational experience?” These questions were optional for all survey participants. The survey took approximately 20-40 minutes to complete.

## Dissemination

The SEE Survey was created in an online web-based application, Qualtrics. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. First, AAoM sent the survey via email to the organization’s database of over 24,000 contacts. Then targeted requests to share the survey were sent to the Michigan Parent Advocacy & Attorney Coalition (MiPAAC) network and their related partners. Survey participants were asked to share the survey with additional interested organizations or individuals.

The SEE Survey was fielded March 16 through April 28, 2023, a total of six weeks. To encourage completion, AAoM invited respondents to enter a random drawing to win one of sixty \$50 gift cards. It is probable that our survey initially received 4,200 responses due to “reward farmers” which are bots that complete surveys that offer monetary incentives.

## Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria

The SEE Survey received over 4,200 responses. Of these responses, 890 were valid and were used in the data analysis. Of these 890 responses, 482 were full responses and 408 were partial entries. Partial entries were due to range of experience within the educational system. For example, a parent of a preschool student only filled out the survey up to the preschool portion. We received 213 open-ended responses. 773 of the survey responses were completed on behalf of a child with a disability (87%; e.g., by a parent or guardian), 75 were self-reports from an individual with a disability (8%), and 42 respondents identified as both a parent of a child with a disability and an individual with a disability (5%).

AAoM developed a robust set of inclusion/exclusion criteria to determine whether survey responses were from real individuals versus “reward farmer” bots. Through a combination of checking IP addresses and utilizing a geolocation program, AAoM was able to clean the initial response data set. AAoM took a conservative approach and removed any response where it was unclear if the respondent was a real human or a “reward farmer” bot. We were also committed to privacy and confidentiality of participants – any responses that may have contained personally identifiable information were optional.

## Limitations

Online surveys can be beneficial because of the ability to reach people from a wide geographic region and they allow people to participate when it’s convenient for them. One of the challenges of online surveys is they draw people with devices and internet access and exclude people without these resources.

## Survey Analysis

Once data collection was complete, the responses were exported from Qualtrics into Excel. Respondent identifiers were removed for analysis to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. AAoM contracted with Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to conduct initial data analysis, in part because of the size of the data set as well as to maintain objectivity.

### Quantitative

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize participant demographics and responses to the survey questions. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis or t-tests were used to examine the relationship between variables.

### Qualitative

The goal of qualitative research is to understand why individuals think, feel, react, and behave as they do (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Grounded Theory (Merriam, 2009) and an Inductive approach to thematic

analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 2006) were used in reviewing the open-ended survey responses. Grounded Theory studies a particular phenomenon or process to discover theories that are based on the collection and analysis of real-world data. With an Induction approach, all data are analyzed together and themes identified which appear multiple times throughout the data set.

Two project team members reviewed over 200 open-ended survey responses. Using the approach described above, the team members identified 18 themes and 60 sub themes. The team members coded themes separately and then met to come to consensus on the themes identified.

## Survey Respondent Demographics

The SEE Survey yielded a strong response rate with nearly 900 participants ( $n = 890$ ) that reflected the diversity of Michigan. All demographic information for the survey was optional; therefore, there were different response rates depending on type of question and to what grade level a survey participant had experience in the education system.

The SEE Survey allowed for multiple submissions, for example, one parent with two children, would have been encouraged to submit a survey response for each child's experience. So, it is possible that fewer than 890 people total responded to the survey. Every effort was made to include 'unique' responses and no duplicates.

There were survey participants from 193 cities across Michigan. (See Figure 8)

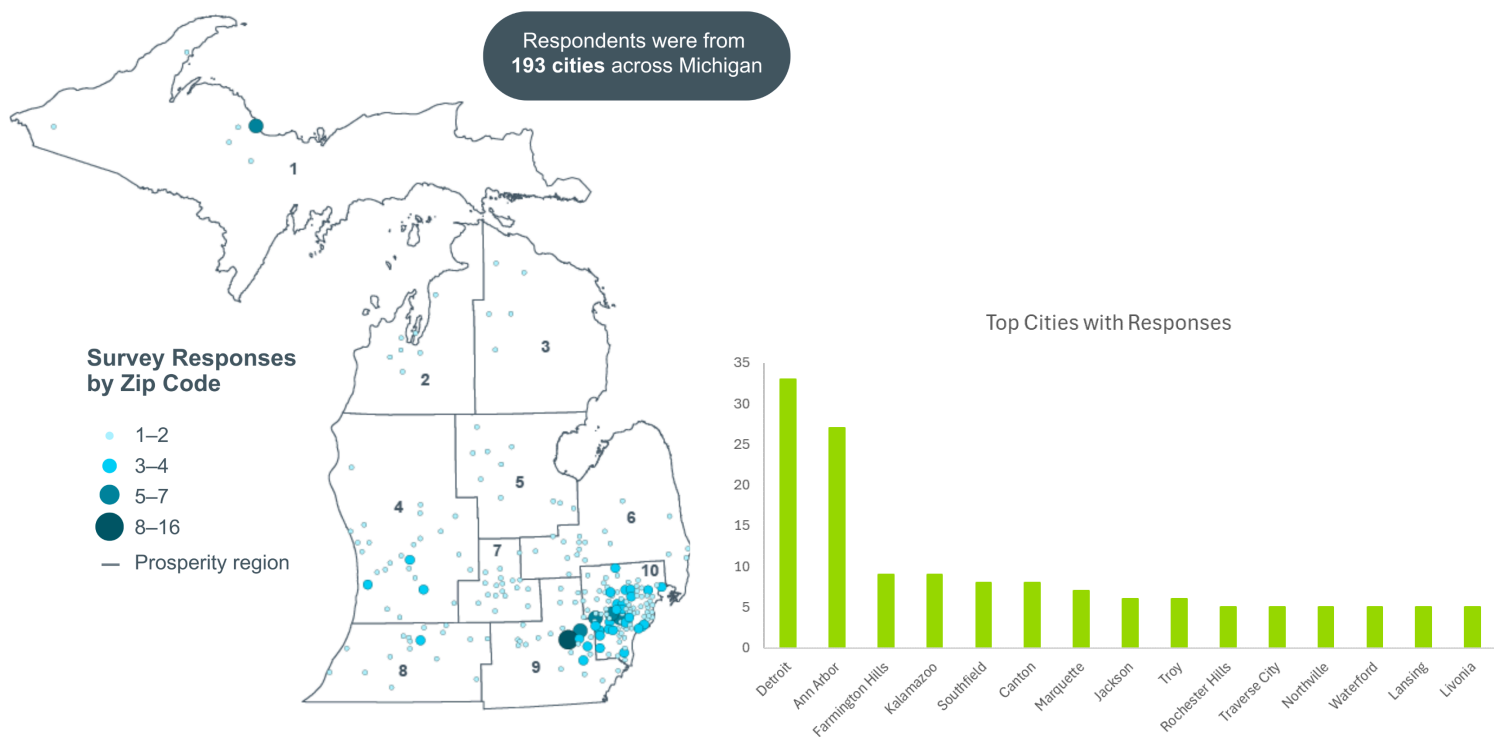


Figure 8.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Parents of students with disabilities primarily completed the survey on behalf of their student (91%) followed by disabled individuals who had previously attended public schools in Michigan (i.e., self-report; 9%). Survey respondents included mostly those who identified as parents of students with disabilities (91%) along with disabled individuals (9%) with public school experience. (See Figure 9)

## Survey Respondents

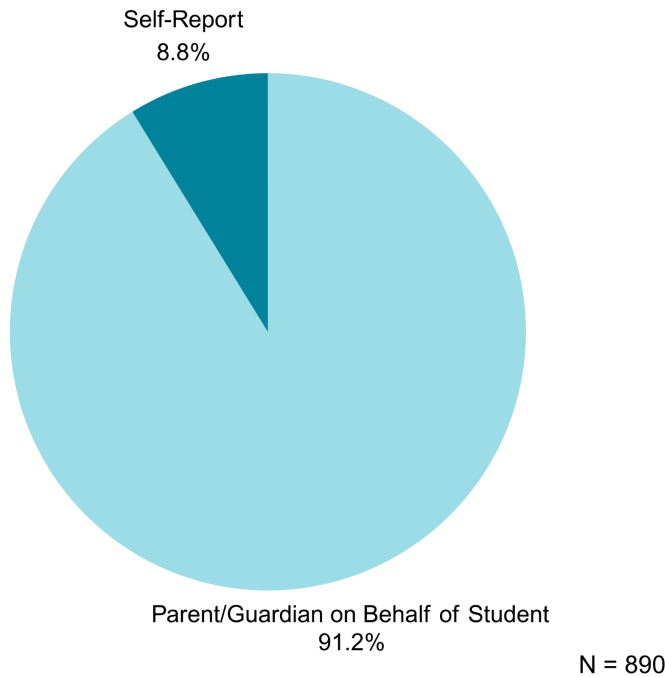


Figure 9.

The majority of survey respondents were female (84%) and self-reported as Caucasian (81%). Most survey respondents identified single-family households (80%) with household income under \$100,000 (60%). (See Figure 10)

## Survey Respondent characteristics

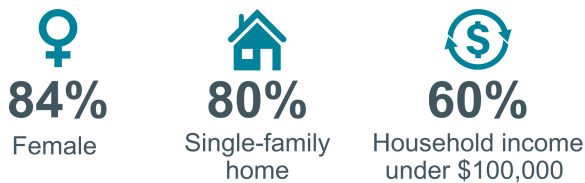


Figure 10.



# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Racial demographics of the SEE Survey respondents were compared with Michigan’s Census-based demographics (2020) and were found to mostly align. (See Figure 11)

## Survey Respondents mirror Michigan’s racial demographics

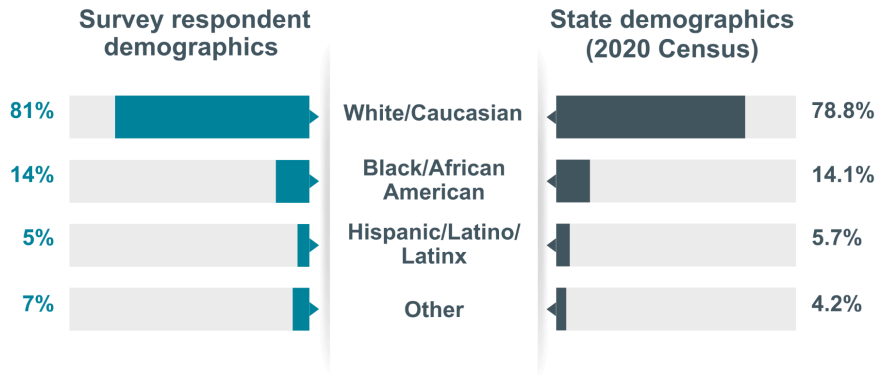


Figure 11.

Respondents included individuals with disabilities and parents of students with disabilities from various educational levels. (See Figure 12)

## Survey Respondent characteristics

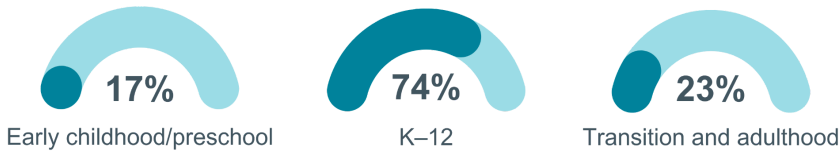


Figure 12.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

SEE Survey participants spanned the range of age (See Figure 13), grade level (See Figure 14), and education disability status under IDEA (See Figure 15).

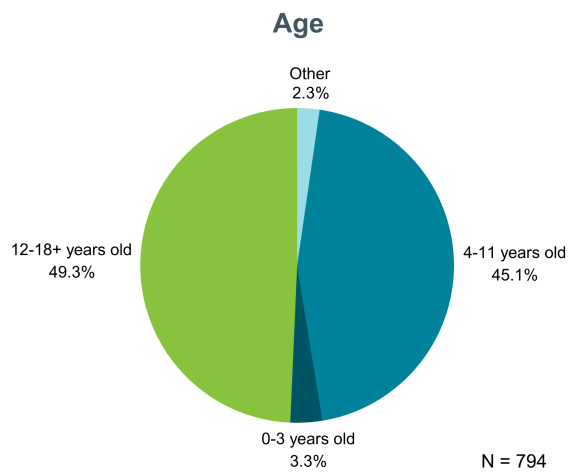


Figure 13.

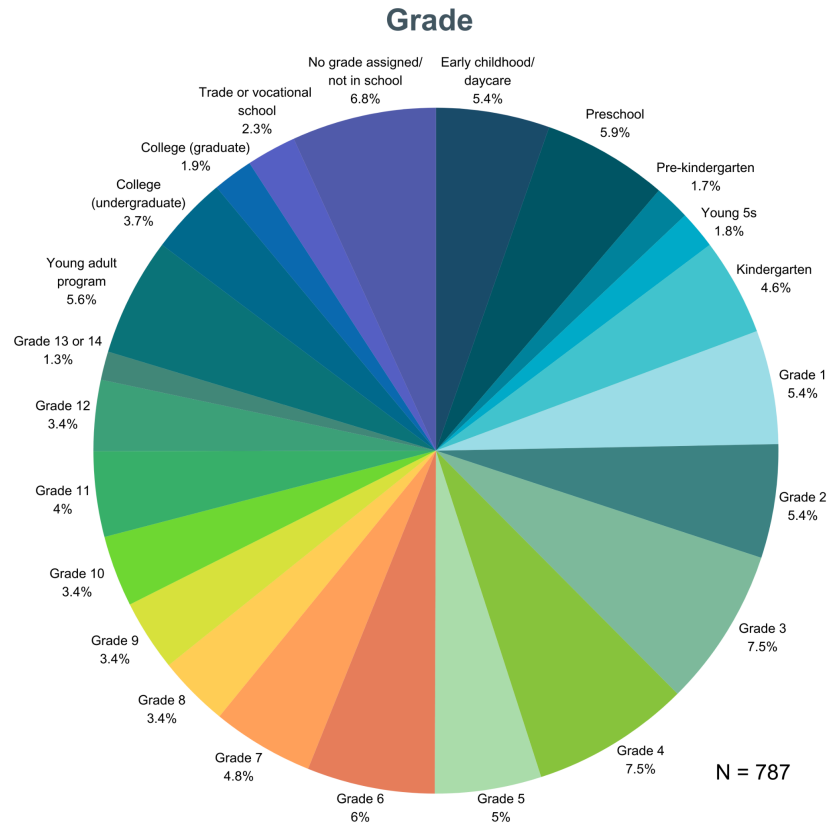


Figure 14.

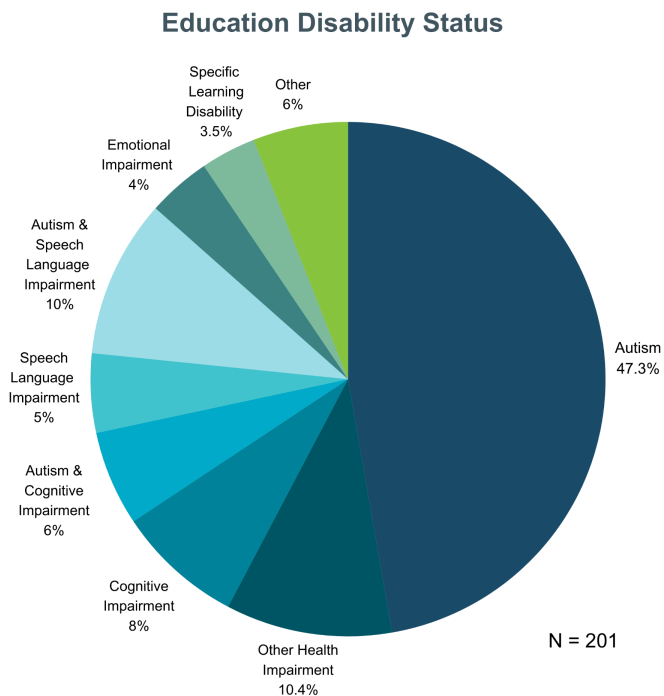


Figure 15.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

The majority of survey respondents identified a connection with autism (58%). (See Figure 16)



Figure 16.

This was not entirely surprising given that AAoM is an autism-focused organization and the survey was initially sent to the AAoM contact database. Additionally, ***autism prevalence is on the rise with the current estimates that 1 out of every 36 children has autism***. This constitutes a significant increase from the 2021 estimate of 1 in 44 which was a jump from the previous estimate of 1 in 110 in 2006.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Autism prevalence higher, according to data from 11 ADDM communities: Second report highlights disruptions in early autism detection at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2023, March 23), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Press release], <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0323-autism.html>.

***“In order to empathize with someone’s experience you must be willing to believe them as they see it and not how you imagine their experience to be.”***

- Brené Brown

*American Researcher, Social Worker, Author*

**The SEE Survey: Report to the Community and findings “snapshots” are available online.<sup>27</sup>**

The SEE Survey findings snapshots include:

- Special Education Priorities: *What’s important to families?*
- Services and Supports
- Least Restrictive Environment
- Seclusion & Restraint
- Assessment, Graduation, and Dropout
- Secondary Transition

## Survey Findings

### SEE Survey Findings: Special Education Priorities

#### *What’s important to families?*

The SEE Survey asked respondents to prioritize their top concerns about special education in Michigan. The issue areas were developed in collaboration with constituents through concerns elevated to our AAoM MiNavigator program, input from members of MiPAAC, as well as various stakeholder engagement sessions with partner organizations and committees.

Respondents ranked the eleven issue areas by order of importance. These areas represent the concerns of parents of students with disabilities and individuals with disabilities who have experience with the special education system in Michigan.

Described another way, these represent concerns of individuals with disabilities and parents who have experience with the special education system in Michigan.

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<sup>27</sup> Special education experience (SEE) survey (2023), Autism Alliance of Michigan,  
<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>.

## Top five concerns from the SEE Survey

1. School **funding** and **resources** are **not adequate** and **equitable**.
2. The **special education workforce shortage** is affecting students.
3. Students with disabilities are **not spending enough time** with **non-disabled peers** in the least restrictive environment.
4. Schools are **not identifying disabilities early enough**, preventing students from becoming eligible for special education services **as early as possible**.
5. Schools are **not engaging sufficiently with parents** and their **students**.

Respondents of the SEE Survey reported experiences across many areas of special education that resulted in a significant number of themes connected to our findings. The SEE Survey findings are informed by the quantitative results of the over 300 survey questions as well as the qualitative results of over 200 open-ended responses. Based on the qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses, the survey team identified 18 themes and 60 sub-themes.

## Themes from the SEE Survey

- Parent Advocacy
- School Culture
- Identification and Eligibility
- Services and Supports
- Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Applied Behavior Analysis
- Relocation
- Least Restrictive Environment (and Inclusion)
- Misunderstanding Disability (Ableism)
- Exclusionary Discipline
- Drop Out
- Bullying/Harassment
- Secondary Transition
- Trauma/Emotional Impact, Health Impacts
- Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic
- Dispute Resolution
- Systemic/Accountability
- Privilege

Themes centered around issues related to a student's special education and related services, such as identification and eligibility, the individualized education program or IEP, and the services and supports provided. Other themes emerged related to issues faced by students with disabilities. For example, bullying and harassment from other students was a significant issue. Many parents felt that their student's disability was misunderstood and some students experienced ableism. Others discussed privilege and its massive impact on getting proper services. Parents acknowledged that their student received high-quality services because the parent had the knowledge and often the funds to navigate a system that is often "stacked against" the parent.

## SEE Survey Findings: PARENT ADVOCACY

### *The emotional and financial cost of advocacy*

In their open-ended responses, many parents shared the necessity to engage in advocacy to get their student what they needed, but that it came at a high cost. This advocacy was often described as a “fight” or a “battle.” These efforts took an enormous amount of time and energy, and often had a significant financial impact, such as when an advocate or attorney was needed. Parents shared that the expectation to advocate for their student was not shared by members of the student’s team at school, but was expected of the parents alone, this is known as the *advocacy expectation*.<sup>28</sup>

*“We were fortunate to be able to help him with school but made sacrifices personally and professionally to ensure our child continued to make progress. Some areas of need were unable to be addressed because of school closure. Some areas of need were not addressed, even when it became feasible to do so.”*

## SEE Survey Findings: SCHOOL CULTURE

### *Burdened, Blamed, Excluded*

Overall, parents shared that the culture of their student’s school burdened them, blamed them, and excluded them from the special education process. Parents shared that they felt the burden to initiate services when it is the school district’s responsibility under IDEA.<sup>29</sup> When services were provided, parents felt that school personnel blamed them for exercising their rights as a parent. Sometimes, schools responded in adversarial manners - such as labeling parents as combative, making statements that their child would never read, and getting defensive when parents suggested options at IEP meetings. Lastly, some parents felt like they are not an equal member of the IEP team and that IEP team members do not listen/take their knowledge of their own student into consideration when creating the student’s special education program.

*“Parent blaming (making parents feel at fault for their child's disabilities) has been a common experience for me and for the many other parents of students with disabilities I've encountered during the past 15+ years. Schools should regard parents as experts on their own children, and be open to hearing ideas from the people who know a student best.”*

<sup>28</sup> Parent perceptions of the advocacy expectation in special education (2021), Rossetti, Z., et al., *Exceptional Children*, 87(4), 438–457, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402921994095>.

<sup>29</sup> 300.111 Child find (2017, May 3), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.111>.



## SEE Survey Findings: SERVICES and SUPPORTS

### *Families face barriers to obtaining services for children with disabilities*

While federal law mandates that children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), SEE Survey respondents identified numerous hurdles in efforts to access educational opportunities, services, and supports within the Michigan education system.

View the **SEE Survey Findings Snapshot: Special Education Services and Supports** on our webpage:  
<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>

Parents reported issues with schools refusing to consider a medical diagnosis from outside professionals or refusing to acknowledge a medical diagnosis. Parents also reported that they often paid out of pocket for such evaluations that were then dismissed by school personnel.

Half of parents of K-12 students with disabilities (51%) responded that their child should have been identified sooner. As a result, across the board, parents reported that their student experienced delays in receiving necessary services. (See Figure 17)

### Identifying Disabilities

#### When Disabilities Were Identified:



Figure 17.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Challenges identified include problems with implementing a student’s individual education program with fidelity (See Figure 18) along with tailoring IEP goals and supports to a student’s unique needs (See Figure 19).

## Implementing with Fidelity

IFSP or IEP implementation includes offering the agreed-upon services at the correct frequency and duration with the appropriate professional or service provider in the agreed-upon location.

### The School Is Implementing the IEP as Written

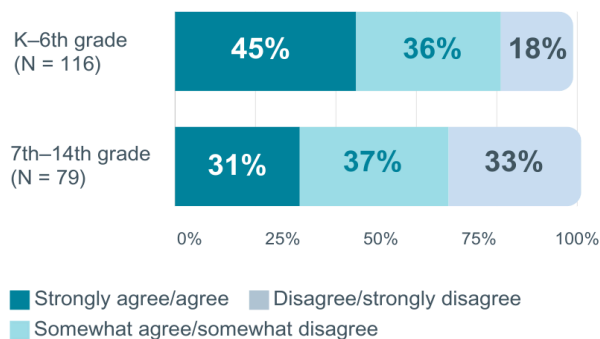


Figure 18.

## Tailoring Goals and Supports

An IEP pinpoints students’ unique needs, establishes challenging and appropriate goals, and documents the supports and services that the school district will provide to help the student reach these objectives. **Less than half of respondents with autistic children (41%) felt that the goals outlined in their IEP were challenging and appropriate.**

### My Student’s IEP Goals Are Challenging and Appropriate

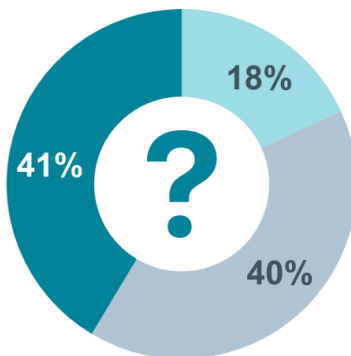
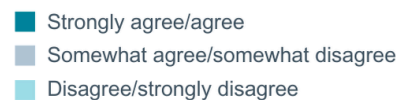


Figure 19.

*“Goals and expectations should remain high, even for students who struggle. The expectations we set, they will meet.”*

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

SEE Survey respondents shared that denial of one-on-one aide or paraprofessional support had a detrimental effect on students' education primarily connected to support for behavioral needs. (See Figure 20).

## Service Provision

**Felt that paraprofessional support  
was needed but unavailable:**



Figure 20.

The SEE Survey indicates that 60 percent reported dissatisfaction with the services provided by their district with 51% stating they disagreed that the school has the proper resources to support student needs. Of the responses, 21% stated they “strongly disagree.” Two-thirds of respondents with autistic children did not believe they received the support and services necessary to be successful in school. (See Figure 21).

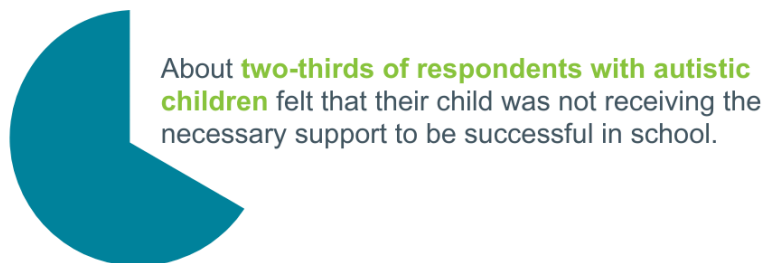


Figure 21.

*“Autism is often not understood well in schools. Too many kids are identified only by behavior, and many staff don’t understand what drives behavior (sensory needs).”*

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

The insufficiency of Michigan’s special education system is made evident by the fact that the longer a student receives services, the more dissatisfied they and their families become with the level and quality of those services. In other words, the educational experiences of students with disabilities worsen year-over-year. (See Figure 22)

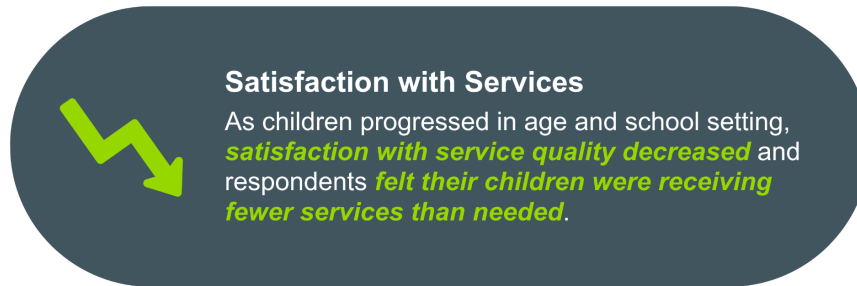


Figure 22.

*“The consequences of not getting adequate services is life threatening for minorities...if the right tools and skills are not available when molding [my children]. I feel like our mistakes can render them useless.”*

In their open-ended responses, SEE Survey participants indicated additional concerns including inadequate staffing (high ratio of students to teachers), schools experiencing difficulty filling staffing positions, and unprepared or untrained staff (i.e., school personnel with no knowledge of disability and/or teachers not trained in how to implement an IEP). Positive experiences shared in the survey responses were largely due to specific school personnel. Responsibility for poor experiences was mentioned as being connected to administrators, the school district, and/or the “system” rather than individual teachers and staff.

*“Various teachers have tried their best to help, but everyone is always overwhelmed and the ones who suffer are the special needs students who can’t express themselves to state their needs.”*

Not providing appropriate services for students with disabilities indicated in their individualized education program for reasons related to budget, caseload, capacity, service provider schedule limitations or preferences is not in alignment with school district requirements under the IDEA.<sup>30</sup>

*“When we moved here, almost 80% of my son’s services on his IEP were removed.”*

<sup>30</sup> Budget concerns do not supersede IDEA legal obligations (2020, July 1), Bateman, D., Sped Law Blog, <https://spedlawblog.com/2020/07/01/budget-concerns-do-not-supersede-idea-legal-obligations/>.

The SEE Survey included a series of questions that asked respondents to identify services that fell into categories which include: *lack of services*, *inadequate services*, and *services denied*.

- ***lack of services*** has been defined as: service was not part (at all) of student's individualized education program; however, the parent or student thought it was needed
- ***inadequate services*** has been defined as: some level of service support was included in the individualized education program; however, either the parent or student thought more was needed
- ***denied services*** has been defined as: there were services the parent and student requested from schools; however, the request was denied and not included in the individualized education program

***The three highest ranked service areas across the age groups were applied behavior analysis (ABA), social skills or peer interventions, and sensory integration therapy.***

IDEA-eligible students also self-reported a need for feeding related services, psychological therapy, and applied behavior analysis (ABA).

Open-ended responses for the SEE Survey indicated that many parents advocated for their students to receive ABA in the school setting, but those requests were denied. Parents also reported that their community-based ABA provider (e.g., Board Certified Behavior Analyst or Registered Behavior Technician) was denied access to the school environment to provide medically necessary intervention.

Additional services identified as lacking included literacy intervention, speech-language therapy, auditory integration, as well as transition programs.

SEE Survey results for the K-12 responses are included below: *lack of services* (See Figure 23), *inadequate services* (See Figure 24), and *services denied* (See Figure 25).

## Lack of services – K-12

Are/were there any services/supports that you believed your student should be getting, but isn't/wasn't at school?

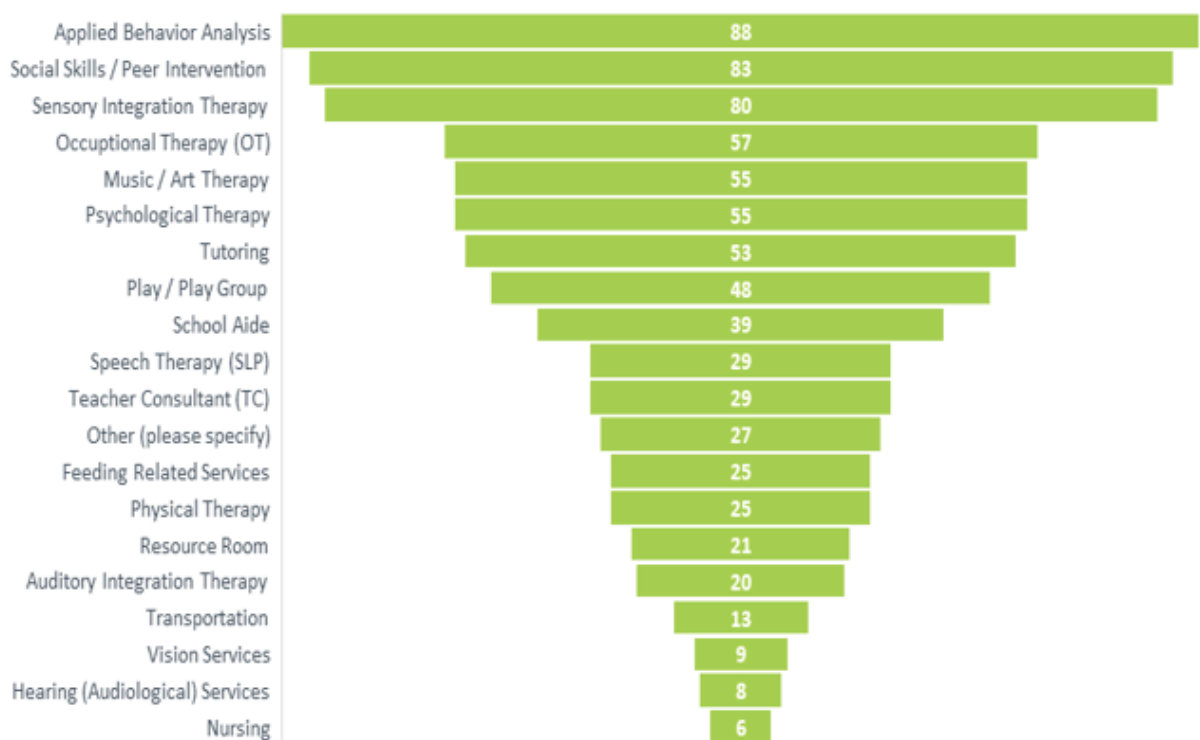


Figure 23.

Lack of services: service was not part (at all) of student's individualized education program; however, the parent or student thought it was needed.



## Inadequate services – K-12

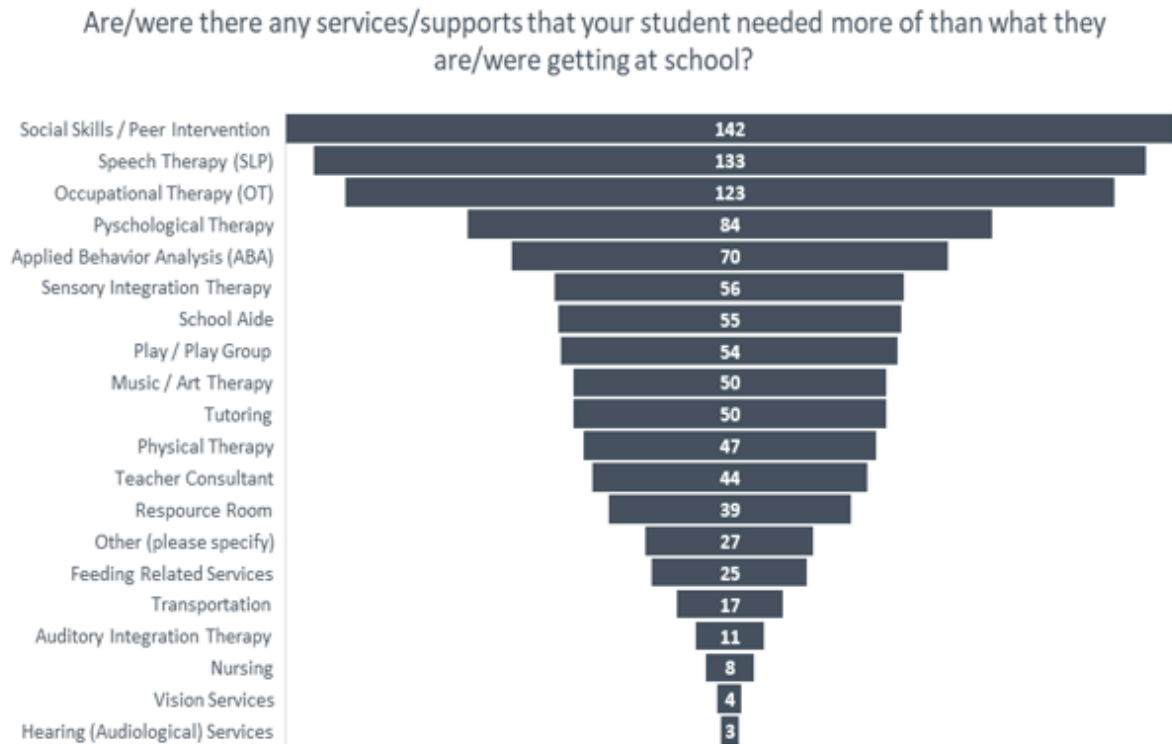


Figure 24.

Inadequate services: some level of service support was included in the individualized education program; however, either the parent or student thought more was needed.

## Services denied – K-12

Are/were there any services/supports that you thought your student should be getting, but was denied by the school?

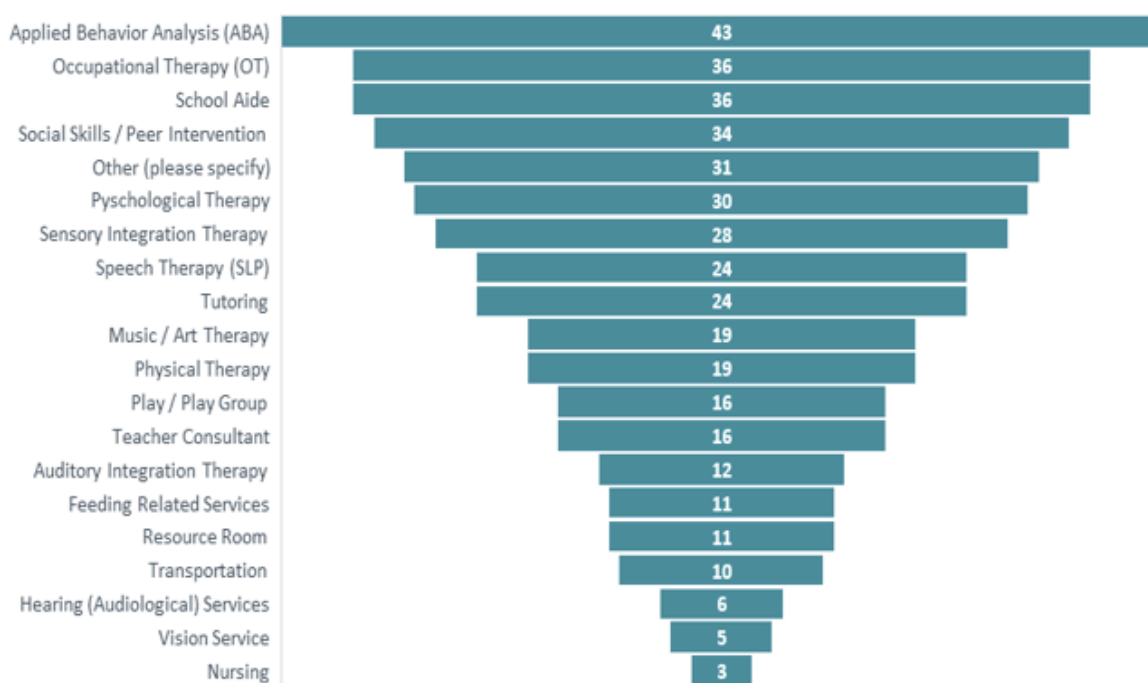


Figure 25.

Denied services: there were services the parent and student requested from schools; however, the request was denied and not included in the individualized education program.

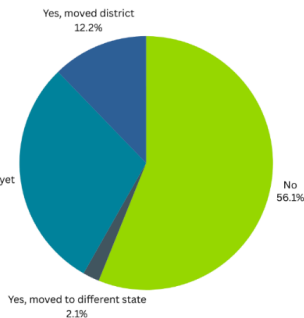
## Relocation due to school factors

Families' satisfaction with their school experience influences their choice of whether or not to move to another district for better education, services, and supports for their children with disabilities. (See Figure 26).

### Relocation due to inadequate services

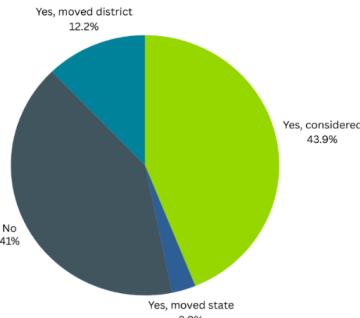
#### Preschool

Did you ever consider moving to another school district to receive better education, supports, and/or services for your student during preschool?



#### K-12

Did you ever consider moving to another school district to receive better education, supports, and/or services for your student?



#### Self Reported

Did your family ever consider moving to another school district for you to receive better education, supports, and/or services?

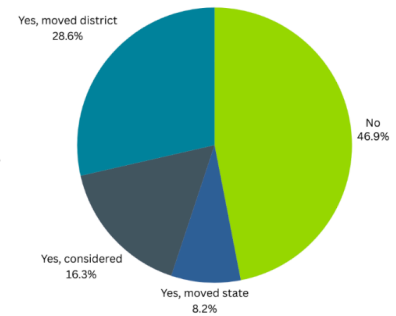


Figure 26.

**SEE Survey respondents' three most common reasons for moving or considering moving to other districts were student well-being, dislike of school experience, and lack of understanding for their child's disability.**

In the open-ended survey responses, parents reported that they moved their child from a public school to a private or charter school because the public school was not meeting their child's needs.

Parents also reported that they had seriously considered physically moving for their child or homeschooling them, but the financial burden was too great to do so. Some parents reported moving school districts due to bullying. Moving to private school, virtual school, or a different district typically resulted in better outcomes for students.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Reported data shows the service impact on school experience among preschool and K-12 SEE Survey respondents. (See Figure 27)

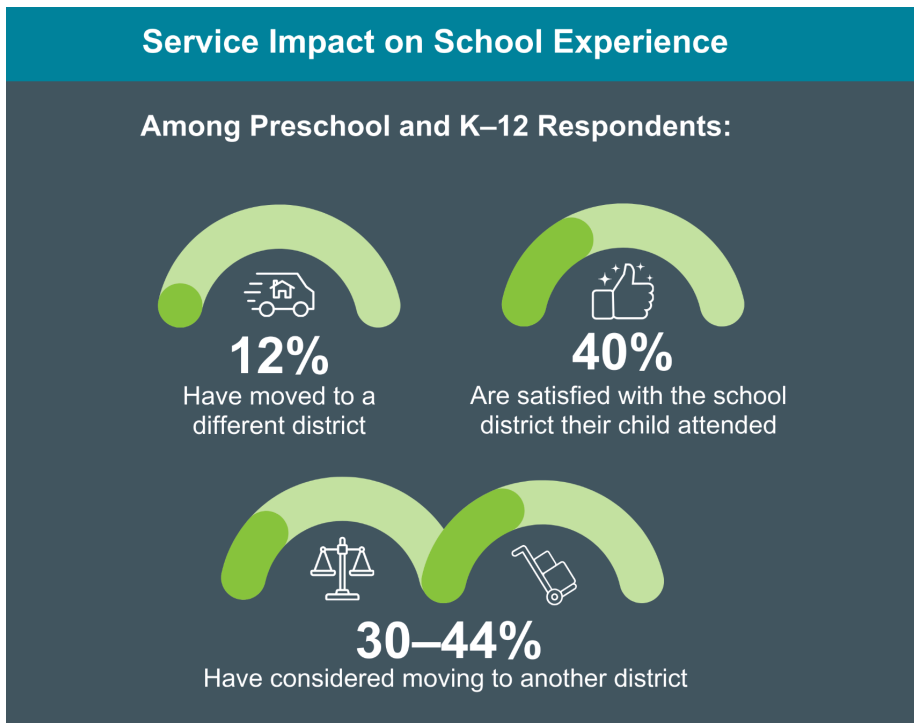


Figure 27.

## Pursuing private services

When schools fail to meet children’s needs, many families hire private support. **Speech therapy, occupational therapy, and applied behavior analysis** were the three main services respondents were pursuing privately regardless of their child’s age.

## Paying for private services

SEE Survey findings indicated 26% of parents of preschool students and 28% of parents of K-12 students reported that they spent \$5,000 to \$9,999 a year on services that were not provided by the school.

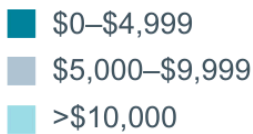
Michigan families shared their experiences with paying out-of-pocket for private services in open-ended responses of the SEE Survey:

*“I have spent thousands of dollars over the years for evaluations, OT, vision therapy, ADD assistance, and reading specialist tutors and programs. I don’t know where my child would be with parents who didn’t have the same means/opportunities.”*

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

**Overall, 60 percent reported spending at least \$5,000 annually while 34 percent spent more than \$10,000 and some parents reported spending up to \$80,000 a year on services for their child. (See Figure 28)**

## Respondent Out-of-pocket Expenditures for Private Services Per Year



*Note: Items may not total 100 percent due to rounding.*

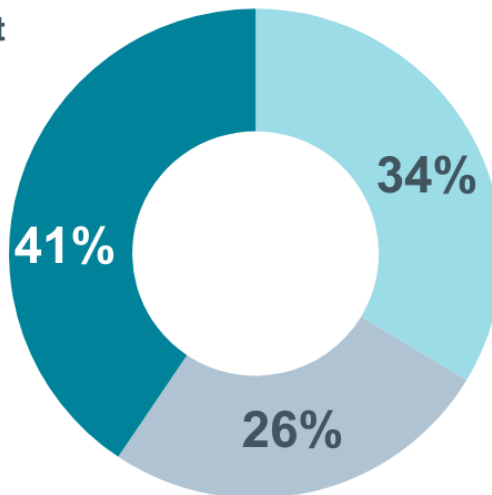


Figure 28.

## Meaningful Parent Participation

Parents often feel they must become advocates for their children to adequately obtain services, and that an ‘advocacy expectation’ exists for parents who have children with disabilities to a degree or extent that it is not required of the parents of nondisabled students.

IDEA puts forth an expectation of ‘meaningful parent participation’ which in theory is positive and in practice is often very difficult because of bureaucratic school practices that can result in decision-making that is out of context from the real needs of students.<sup>31</sup>

Research supports the value of meaningful family engagement with ***decades of research demonstrating that parent/family involvement significantly contributes, in a variety of ways, to improved student outcomes.***<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Q&A about Part B of IDEA: Parent participation (2019, February), Center for Parent Information and Resources, <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/qa2/>.

<sup>32</sup> The impact of parent/family involvement on student outcomes: An annotated bibliography of research from the past decade (2002, Fall), Carter, S., Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), <https://oaklandliteracycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Impact-Family-Involvement.pdf>.

Parents often feel like they are outsiders to the process. One parent shared,

*“I have always felt as if there is something I am missing or that the school personnel aren't telling me due to me not knowing what question to ask.”*

Of SEE Survey responses, 41% of parents of K-12 students with disabilities wanted to be more involved in the development of their child's individualized education program (IEP).

## Has there been improvement over time?

As the first statewide survey since the Special Education Reform Task Force issued recommendations in 2015 for needed changes and improvements to Michigan's education system, we wanted to compare similar outcomes to see whether there have been improvements over the past several years.

Unfortunately, in key areas highlighted by the Special Education Reform Task Force – including satisfaction with IEPs (See Figure 29) and involvement in IEP development (See Figure 30) – the answer to that question is no.<sup>33</sup>

*“It has been a constant battle during the entire process. Never, have I felt like an equal member of the IEP team or the expert in my child. I truly feel like even the director of Special Education doesn't know how to partner with parents in the IEP process...”*

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<sup>33</sup> Key findings of Lt. Governor Brian Calley's special education listening tour and survey (2015, September 8), Calley, B., Presentation to the Michigan State Board of Education,  
[https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIGOV/2015/09/08/file\\_attachments/423198/CalleyPresentationToStateBoardofEducation\\_Sept82015.pdf](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIGOV/2015/09/08/file_attachments/423198/CalleyPresentationToStateBoardofEducation_Sept82015.pdf).



# Michigan

## Special Education Experience Survey

### Special Education Task Force Comparison: Satisfaction with IEP

Special Education Task Force Survey		Special Education Experience Survey	
How satisfied are you with your child's IEP?		Overall, my student has been successful in school.	
2015		2023	
Very Satisfied	16%	Strongly Agree	9%
Satisfied	31%	Agree	21%
Neutral	19%	Somewhat Agree	27%
Unsatisfied	20%	Somewhat Disagree	14%
Very Unsatisfied	14%	Disagree	14%
		Strongly Disagree	15%

Figure 29.

### Special Education Task Force Comparison: IEP Involvement

Special Education Task Force Survey		Special Education Experience Survey	
How included do you feel in decisions regarding your child's education?		I was meaningfully involved in the development of my student's IEP. For example, I feel or felt free to ask questions and offer suggestions as the IEP team discussed the goals, strengths, supports, and needs of my student.	
2015		2023	
Always	23%	Strongly Agree	25%
Usually	31%	Agree	30%
Sometimes	27%	Somewhat Agree	22%
Mostly Excluded	15%	Somewhat Disagree	7%
Never	4%	Disagree	6%
		Strongly Disagree	10%

Figure 30.

## SEE Survey Findings: LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

### *Where are IDEA-eligible students educated?*

View the **SEE Survey Findings Snapshot: Least Restrictive Environment** on our webpage:

<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>

The principle of least restrictive environment or LRE specifies that students with disabilities are educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, alongside their nondisabled peers, while still meeting their unique educational needs. LRE must be considered for both academic and nonacademic settings and is not limited to the classroom environment.<sup>34</sup>

Numerous experimental studies demonstrate over and over again that when evidenced-based inclusion practices are implemented with fidelity, benefit results for both disabled and nondisabled students alike.<sup>35</sup>

When an IEP team determines a student's LRE, they must consider if and how the student can participate in the regular education classroom. If the student cannot succeed in the regular education classroom with accommodations, then placement may be made to more restrictive settings, such as a self-contained special education classroom or a specialized school for students with disabilities.

However, schools remain largely segregated, particularly for students with cognitive impairment.<sup>36</sup> Not only is disability a factor, but also race, with students of color disproportionately more likely to be placed in a more restrictive environment.<sup>37</sup> LRE has not been successful in changing the ways in which schools operate because schools conceptualize students as disabled due to an inability to conform to traditional schooling practices, and thus segregating these students, leading to a more efficient bureaucracy.

In the current survey, the majority of respondents (64%) felt that their K-12 student spends the right amount of time with their nondisabled peers. Most students (85%) attended a school that served a variety of students.

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<sup>34</sup> Sec. 300.114 LRE requirements (2017, May 3), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.114>.

<sup>35</sup> Are peer support arrangements an evidence-based practice? A systematic review (2017), Brock, M. E., & Huber, H. B., Journal of Special Education, 51(3), 150–163, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466917696276> (ERIC Number: EJ1158176).

<sup>36</sup> Trends in the educational placement of students with intellectual disability in the United States over the past 40 years (2018), Brock, M. E., American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 123(4), 305–314, <https://doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-123.4.305>.

<sup>37</sup> Ignored, punished, and underserved: Understanding and addressing disparities in education experiences and outcomes for Black children with disabilities (2022, September 14), Hinds, H., Newby, L. D. T., & Korman, H. T. N., Bellwether Education Partners, <https://bellwether.org/publications/ignored-punished-and-underserved/>.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

For parents of K-12 students with disabilities, 28% said their child does not spend enough time with non-disabled peers and 15% said their child spends NO time with non-disabled peers. (See Figure 31)

## School Environment

According to respondents, the settings in which students with disabilities are most likely to spend time with their nondisabled peers include:

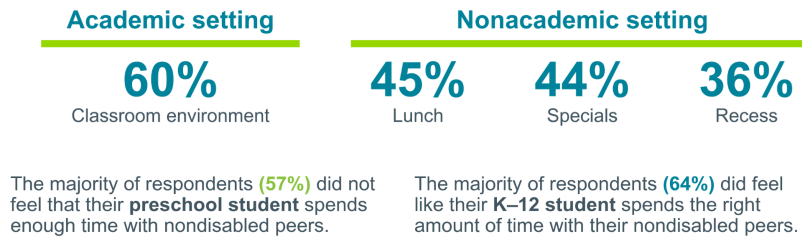


Figure 31.

Less than one-fourth (i.e., 21%) of students with autism spend time in a classroom with nondisabled peers. This is compared to 29% of students with other disabilities in AAoM’s sample. These numbers reflect national estimates, and represent a larger, systemic issue with inclusive education for students with significant support needs, including autism and cognitive impairment. (See Figure 32)

*“My biggest regret is that I didn’t know more about inclusive education when my student was starting school. He has had no general education inclusion, despite research showing the importance of being with non-disabled peers. I did not push more for it because I assumed the educators knew best but now I know that there is very little to no research that shows that self contained classrooms have better outcomes. Now that he is in middle school I feel the gap is too wide to have any meaningful inclusion with non-disabled peers...There are very few districts in our state that do this and do it well.”*

## Student Placement

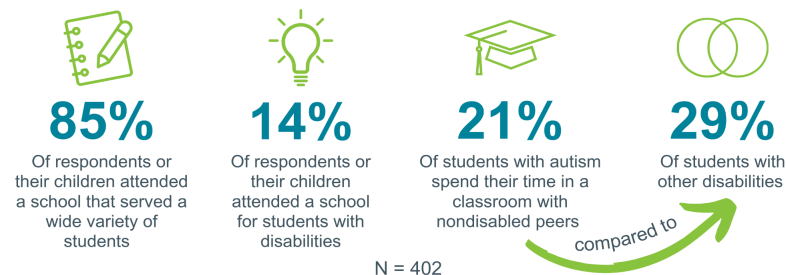


Figure 32.

Note: Respondents were asked to select all options that applied. Select options are shown here.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

One parent shared how inclusive environments made a difference in community engagement,

*“When we are out in the community as a family, general education kids come up to him and say hi. That is what I wanted. I didn’t want him to be a stranger in his own town.”*

**When students with disabilities spend more time in the regular education classroom with nondisabled peers, they have more rigorous IEP goals, more friendships, and better outcomes.**<sup>38</sup>

Despite the benefits of educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers, many students in Michigan are not receiving this opportunity.

*“It has been especially difficult for my child to be included. While she has been in the gen ed setting most of her academic career, I don’t believe full inclusion has ever been properly implemented.”*

In the SEE Survey open response section, parents shared that they feel the need to strongly advocate for their child to have any access to peers. Parents shared that schools were “hesitant” to accept inclusion. Others shared that inclusion was “tolerated,” but not always implemented to its fullest potential. (See Figure 33)

## Parent Involvement

**I was able to meaningfully participate as a member of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to determine the educational placement (i.e., their classroom environment and/or school setting) of my student.\***

Strongly Agree	55	20%
Agree	80	28%
Somewhat Agree	55	20%
Somewhat Disagree	28	10%
Disagree	23	8%
Strongly Disagree	41	15%
<b>N-Size</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Question similar to MDE Parent Survey

Figure 33.

<sup>38</sup> The evolving nature of inclusive education: Perspectives from school leaders in suburban schools (2023), Cole, S. M., et al., The Journal of Special Education, 57(1), 13–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224669221097945>.

## SEE Survey Findings: EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

### *Pushed out and underserved*

Students with disabilities, especially those with attention, behavioral and emotional challenges, are disproportionately subjected to overly harsh and exclusionary discipline practices, rather than provided the positive supports and interventions that will allow them to be educated in classrooms with their peers.

Exclusionary discipline involves methods that remove a student from the classroom or school. In addition to potential violations of the IDEA and denial of a free appropriate public education (FAPE), exclusionary discipline can have harmful consequences for students with disabilities, including:<sup>39</sup>

- Decreased academic performance
- Higher dropout rates
- More likely to be referred to law enforcement
- More likely to experience restraint and seclusion

Exclusionary discipline is ineffective at improving school safety and deterring infractions. It doesn't address the underlying reasons for behavioral incidents, nor does it create opportunities for students to learn new approaches to communicating or resolving conflicts.<sup>40</sup>

### *Exclusionary Discipline: SUSPENSION & EXPULSION*

Michigan law requires that school districts consider alternatives to suspension and expulsion. Restorative practices should be the first consideration to remediate student offenses. ***Additionally, seven factors must be considered before removing a student for even one day:***<sup>41</sup>

1. The student's age.
2. The student's disciplinary history.
3. Whether the pupil is a student with a disability.
4. The seriousness of the violation or behavior.
5. Whether the violation or behavior committed threatens the safety of another student or staff member.
6. Whether restorative practices could be used.
7. Whether a "lesser intervention" would properly address the violation or behavior.

<sup>39</sup> Behavior and school discipline for students with disabilities (2023, September 25), Institute of Education Sciences, Inside IES Research: Notes from NCER & NCSER, <https://ies.ed.gov/blogs/research/post/behavior-and-school-discipline-for-students-with-disabilities>.

<sup>40</sup> Pushed out: Trends and disparities in out-of-school suspension (2022, September 30), Leung-Gagné, M., et al., Learning Policy Institute, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/crdc-school-suspension-report>.

<sup>41</sup> Rethink discipline toolkit: Understanding the Rethink Discipline laws (Public Acts 360-366 of 2016) (2017, August 1), Student Advocacy Center of Michigan, <https://www.studentadvocacycenter.org/rethink-discipline-toolkit/>.

While students with disabilities make up approximately 14% of total public school enrollment in Michigan, 27% of SEE survey respondents experienced suspension. Of those, half (51%) involved suspension of less than 5 school days while 21% had suspension that lasted 5-10 school days and 28% involved suspension of greater than 10 school days. (See Figure 34)

### Exclusionary Discipline: Suspension

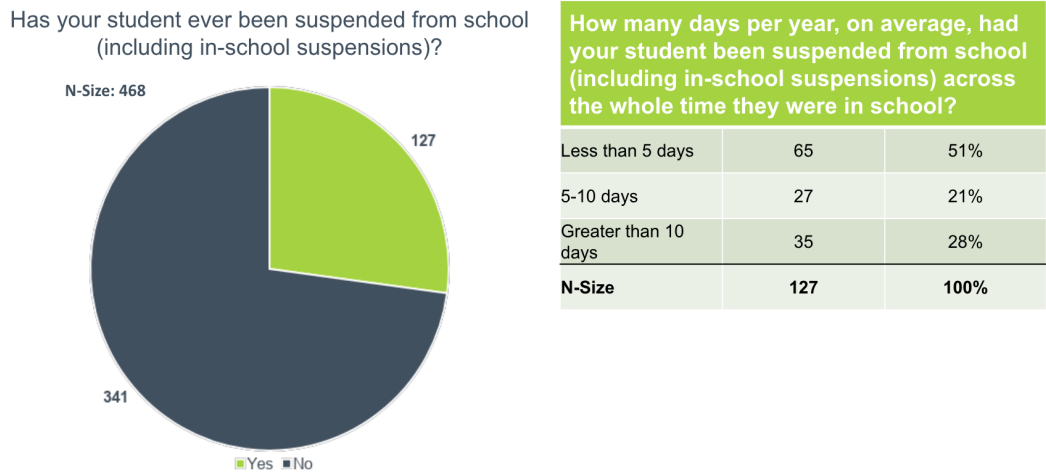


Figure 34.

Only 7% of SEE survey respondents reported experience with expulsion. The majority experienced expulsion that lasted 60-89 school days (57%) while 10% experienced expulsion between 90-179 school days and 32% experienced expulsion lasting 180 school days or permanently. (See Figure 35)

### Exclusionary Discipline: Expulsion

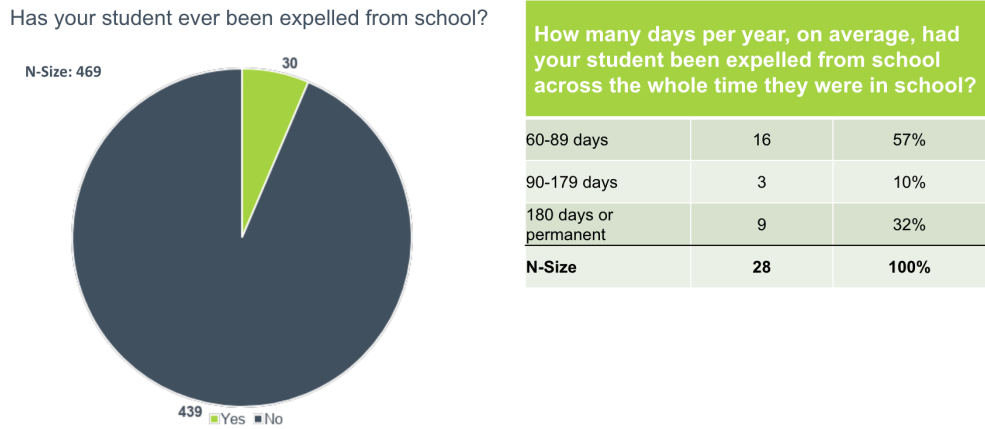


Figure 35.

## Exclusionary Discipline: SECLUSION & RESTRAINT

Michigan law states that ***restraint and seclusion may only be used in emergency situations if the student is a danger to themselves or others and should not be used for discipline or punishment.***<sup>42</sup>

Michigan law requires that any use of seclusion and restraint be reported to the parents. Additionally, schools must document the procedure used, the time of day, and the duration and location of the event. Schools must also provide a detailed account of the events before, during, and after the use of restraint or seclusion.

View the **SEE Survey Findings Snapshot: Seclusion & Restraint** on our webpage:

<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>

Historically, these disciplinary measures have been disproportionately practiced on students with disabilities. (See Figure 36)<sup>43</sup>

**Seclusion:** The confinement of a student in a room or other space from which the student is physically prevented from leaving.

**Restraint:** An action that prevents or significantly restricts a student's movement (which may include physical, chemical, or mechanical means).



Students with disabilities in Michigan are **nine times more likely to experience restraint and 15 times more likely to experience seclusion** than their nondisabled peers.

Figure 36.

The SEE Survey respondents shared experiences with exclusionary discipline in the school setting for students with disabilities.

*“She is repeatedly punished for obvious manifestations of her disabilities, and it is infuriating as parents to spend so much time educating the folks who are meant to be educating and supporting our child.”*

<sup>42</sup> Emergency seclusion and emergency physical restraint; state policy; provisions (2017, March 29), Michigan Legislature, The Revised School Code, Excerpt. Act 451 of 1976, Retrieved January 30, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Use of seclusion and restraint: Intermediate school district totals, school year 2021–2022: Aggregation of data submitted by member districts (2021-2022), Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, Retrieved November 22, 2024.



## Seclusion

About one-third of SEE Survey respondents reported that students with disabilities (36%) had experienced seclusion in school ( $n=408$ ). (See Figure 37)

### Exclusionary Discipline: Seclusion

Has your student ever experienced seclusion in school?

Seclusion includes placement in an isolated area for an extend period of time and prevention from leaving the area. Examples may include placing a student in a locked room, or where the person of authority blocks exiting this room. Other terms include isolation, timeout, alone time.

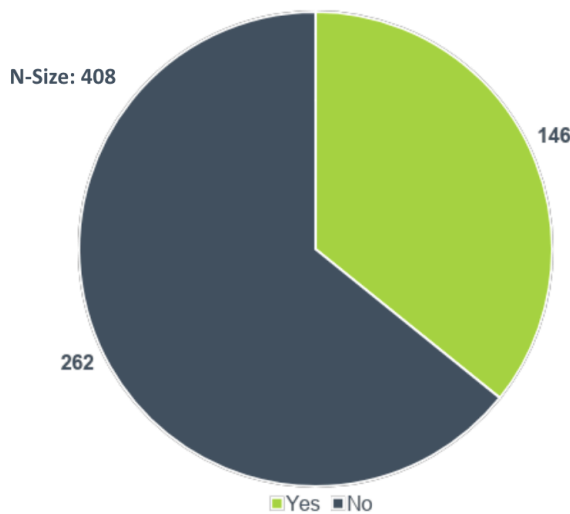


Figure 37.

What was the longest amount of time your student was kept in seclusion?		
Less than 5 minutes	11	10%
5-30 minutes	48	42%
30 minutes - 1 hour	24	21%
1 - 3 hours	19	17%
More than 3 hours	11	10%
<b>N-Size</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100%</b>

Approximately how often, per year, is/was your student secluded across the whole time they were in school?		
Daily	13	11%
Weekly	25	22%
Monthly	38	33%
Other (please specify)	38	33%
<b>N-Size</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Emergency seclusion should generally last no longer than 15 minutes for an elementary school student or 20 minutes for a middle school or high school student.** (See Figure 38)<sup>44</sup>

Of those whose students experienced seclusion:

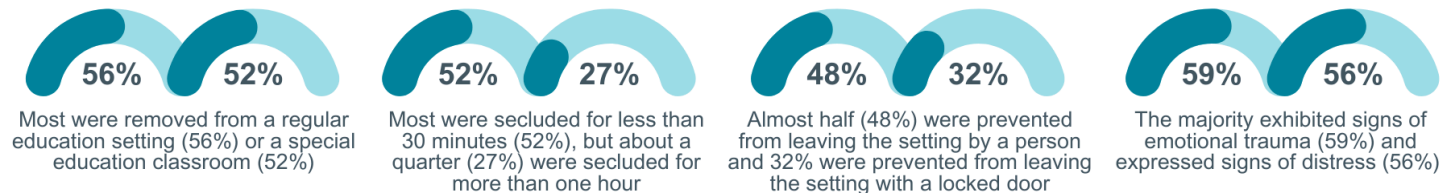


Figure 38.

<sup>44</sup> Use of seclusion and restraint: Intermediate school district totals, school year 2021–2022: Aggregation of data submitted by member districts (2021-2022), Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, Retrieved November 22, 2024.

## Communication with families about the use of seclusion

One-third of survey respondents (33%) said that they were never or rarely informed about their student being secluded, one-third said they were usually informed (31%), and one-third said they were always informed (36%). Almost one-half of respondents (47%) said they were never or rarely told how long their student had been secluded.

The most common reasons families were given for their student being secluded involved physical aggression (47%), verbal aggression (35%), elopement (32%) and property destruction (28%). (See Figure 39)

### Most respondents had not:

	Been given a copy of their school district's policy on the use of seclusion (72%) N = 110		Been asked for their consent for seclusion to be used as an intervention with their student (75%) N = 124
	Been advised on the potential negative effects of seclusion (81%) N = 118		Included seclusion as an intervention in their student's IEP (82%) N = 113

Of those respondents who brought up concerns about seclusion to the school, the majority (61%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with how their concerns were addressed (N = 126).

Figure 39.

Open-ended responses from disabled individuals included recounting challenging school experiences that often reflect how exclusionary discipline practices are used instead of working on an individual level with the student to help support them and foster a sense of belonging.

*"It sucked. Kids constantly bullied and harrassed me. Most of the time, I wanted to be left alone after an assignment to read, or was bored with curriculum activities. I required drastic additional education on how to conduct myself with others, but never received adequate amounts, leaving me somewhat introverted, stubborn and challenging to teachers, and clueless with social interactions other than through argumentative interactions. Before I was diagnosed through the school in 6th grade, I was often placed in the hallway for extended periods of time for various reasons. Neither me nor my parents were allowed to be involved in the IEP program creation. The program was horrendous; disabled students were isolated from non-disabled peers, none of the curriculum was individualized, and everything was dumbed down to fit a one size fits all approach. After half a year in the program, I got out and returned to normal curricular activities until I transferred out of the school in 9th grade."*

## Restraint

One-quarter of respondents (25%) reported that their students with disabilities have been restrained in school ( $N = 127$ ). (See Figure 40)

### Exclusionary Discipline: Restraint

Has your student ever been restrained in school?

Restraint includes the use of physical procedures by one or more individuals to limit another's freedom of movement. Examples may be holding an individual in an immobile position for a time.

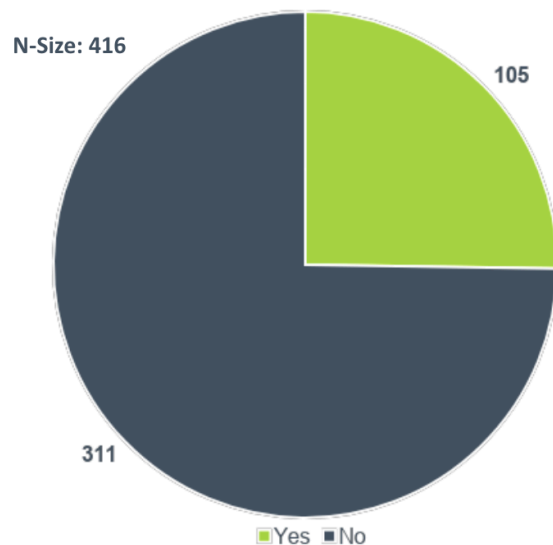


Figure 40.

How many days per year, on average, had your student been expelled from school across the whole time they were in school?

Daily	7	9%
Weekly	27	33%
Monthly	26	32%
Other (please specify)	21	26
<b>N-Size</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Emergency physical restraint should generally last no longer than 10 minutes.** (See Figure 41) <sup>45</sup>

Of those whose students experienced restraint:

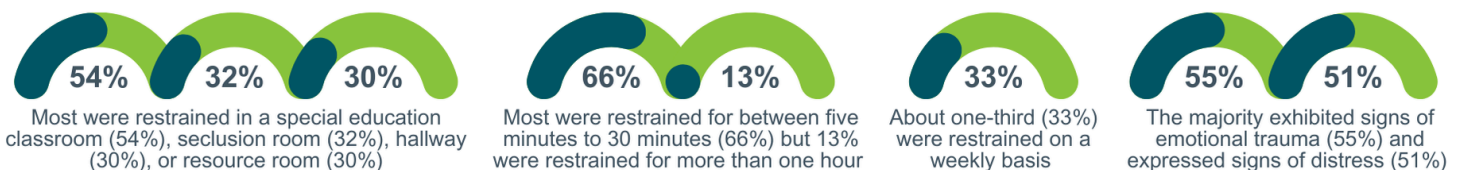


Figure 41.

<sup>45</sup> Use of seclusion and restraint: Intermediate school district totals, school year 2021–2022: Aggregation of data submitted by member districts (2021-2022.), Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, Retrieved November 22, 2024.

## Communication with families about the use of restraint

42% of respondents said they had rarely or never been informed that their student had been restrained, 25% said they were usually informed, and 34% said they were always informed. More than half (55%) said they were rarely or never told how long their student had been restrained. (See Figure 42)

### Most respondents had not:





-  Been given a copy of their school district's policy on the use of restraint (65%) *N* = 83
-  Been advised on the potential negative effects of restraint (72%) *N* = 86
-  Been asked for their consent to restrain their student (65%) as a behavior intervention *N* = 82
-  Included the use of restraint in their in their student's IEP (77%) *N* = 81

Figure 42.

The most common reasons given to families for their student being restrained included physical aggression (49%), elopement (34%), property destruction (34%), and self-injurious behavior (31%). (See Figure 43)

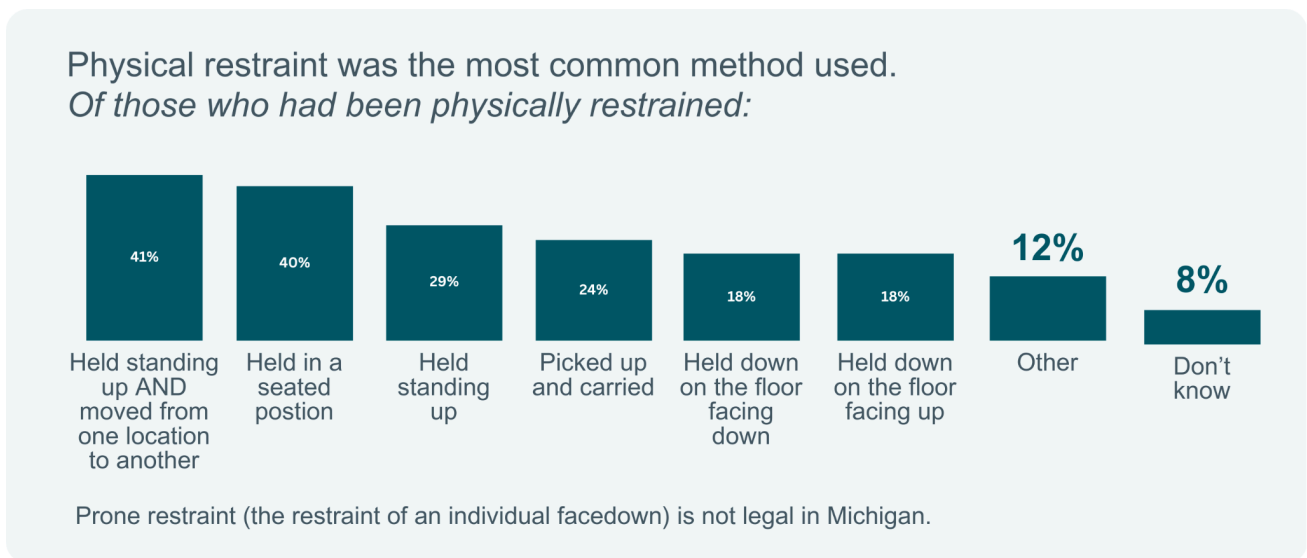


Figure 43.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Open-ended survey responses included lived experience that involved the use of inappropriate restraint (e.g., chemical restraint, handcuffs) in the school setting in addition to the illegal use of mechanical restraint.

(See Figure 44)

While less common, some students with disabilities have also been mechanically or chemically restrained (administering medication as an intervention). Of those who had been mechanically restrained, the most frequent methods included:

- **Seat-belted to chair (17%)**
- **Held in chair with arm splints (12%)**
- **Cuffs (15%)**
- **Straps or belts (10%)**

Mechanical and chemical restraint are not legal in Michigan.

Figure 44.

Of those respondents who brought up concerns about their school's use of restraint, the majority (52%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with how their concerns were addressed ( $N = 89$ ). Additionally, parents reported making requests of their child's school team for a functional behavior assessment and/or a behavior intervention plan and were denied.

*"My son was kicked out of school, abused, restrained, and secluded...we went to court, but the judge said he had no authority over the schools. We called the police who said the same thing. This was not a one-time incident. Over his school career, it happened numerous times, resulting in him learning to do the police holds on others."*

## Has there been improvement over time?

Eight years ago, Michigan lawmakers passed state policy that was intended to limit the use of seclusion and restraint in schools.<sup>46</sup>

*"It's a terrible cycle," said former Lt. Gov. Brian Calley, who signed the law eight years ago but remains concerned by seclusion and restraint. "This is not hyperbole, it is destroying kids' lives. It is stealing away their future."*

However, that change hasn't happened yet. **Recent reports have shone a light on the increased use of these practices with Michigan schools having secluded students with disabilities 11,910 times and having restrained them 9,076 times in the 2022-2023 school year.**<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Calley helps end 'barbaric' school restraint practices (2016, December 29), Lewis, S. D., The Detroit News, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/12/29/school-restraint-seclusion/95953798/>.

<sup>47</sup> Michigan failed to curb 'seclusion and restraint.' One school tries again (2024, August 27), Lohman, I., Bridge Michigan, [https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/michigan-failed-curb-seclusion-and-restraint-one-school-tries-again?utm\\_source=Bridge+Michigan&utm\\_campaign=40f0e37dd4-Education+Watch+09%2F04%2F24&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c64a28dd5a-40f0e37dd4-82731184](https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/michigan-failed-curb-seclusion-and-restraint-one-school-tries-again?utm_source=Bridge+Michigan&utm_campaign=40f0e37dd4-Education+Watch+09%2F04%2F24&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c64a28dd5a-40f0e37dd4-82731184).

Comparing survey responses for similar items between the 2015 Special Education Reform Task Force survey and AAoM’s 2023 SEE Survey, we looked for improved responses from families in Michigan almost a decade following the implementation of state law intended to limit the use of seclusion and restraint in school settings.

Unfortunately, we again found no change or improvement in the responses from survey participants.  
(See Figure 45)

Special Education Task Force Survey		Special Education Experience Survey	
Has your child ever been subjected to restraints or seclusion?		Has your student ever been restrained in school? <small>Restraint includes the use of physical procedures by one or more individuals to limit another’s freedom of movement. Examples may be holding an individual in an immobile position for a time.</small>	
2015		2023	
Yes	24%	Yes	25%
No	76%	No	75%

Figure 45.

Research has shown that traumatic experiences such as seclusion and restraint are associated with both behavioral health and chronic physical health conditions, especially those traumatic events that occur during childhood. Substance use, mental health conditions and other risky behaviors have been linked with traumatic experiences - potentially setting up a student for a life of struggle.

According to researcher Dr. Charles Bell in his article *“Suspended, restrained, and secluded: Exploring the relationship between school punishment, disability, and black and white parents’ health outcomes,”*<sup>48</sup> black children represent 18% of students with disabilities nationally, but comprise 22% of the students who were subjected to seclusion, 26% of those who experienced physical restraint, and 34% of those who were restrained using mechanical devices.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Suspended, restrained, and secluded: Exploring the relationship between school punishment, disability, and Black and White parents’ health outcomes* (2023), Bell, C., & Craig, M. O., *Children and Youth Services Review*, 153, 107119, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107119>.  
<sup>49</sup> Civil Rights Data Collection: Data on equal access to education (2024, October 22), U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, <https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/>.



## SEE Survey Findings: ASSESSMENT, GRADUATION, and DROPOUT

### *Student pathways and performance outcomes*

View the **SEE Survey Findings Snapshot: Assessment, Graduation, and Dropout** on our webpage:

<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>

### STATE ASSESSMENT

Schools use assessments to measure student proficiency and achievement. Under IDEA, all students with disabilities are expected to participate in state assessments. In Michigan, the vast majority of students with disabilities participate in the general state assessment, called the M-STEP, with or without accommodations. For a very limited number of students, those with the most significant cognitive disabilities, an alternate assessment is available in Michigan called the MI-ACCESS.

#### Three possibilities for state assessment participation:

1. General assessment
2. General assessment with accommodation
3. Alternate assessment

Participation in alternate assessments can have implications for high school completion and postsecondary opportunities. Communication between schools and parents about the potential impact of these assessments on students' future opportunities is critical when determining whether an alternate assessment is appropriate. Federal regulations include an expectation for the state to ensure that the decision to assess a student under an alternate assessment does not preclude the student from attempting to complete a regular high school diploma.<sup>50</sup>

### Understanding the impact of state assessment participation

How a student with a disability participates in state assessments is a decision made annually by the IEP team.<sup>51</sup> The use of alternate assessments should be considered for those students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and who are unable to participate in the general state assessment with accommodation.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> United States Department of Education. n.d. "Inclusion of All Students." Code of Federal Regulations 34, 200.6.

<sup>51</sup> Sec. 300.160 Participation in assessments (2017, June 30), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.160>.

<sup>52</sup> Policy memo: Requirements for the cap on the percentage of students who may be assessed with an alternate assessment aligned with alternate academic achievement standards (2023, October 24), U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/policy-memo-requirements-for-the-cap-on-the-percentage-of-students-who-may-be-assessed-with-an-alternate-assessment-aligned-with-alternate-academic-achievement-standards/>.



# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

As part of the IEP process, **parents must be clearly informed if their child's achievement is being measured against alternate achievement standards and how participation in such assessments may delay or otherwise affect the student from completing the requirements for a regular high school diploma.** (See Figure 46)

## Understanding the Impact of State Assessment Participation

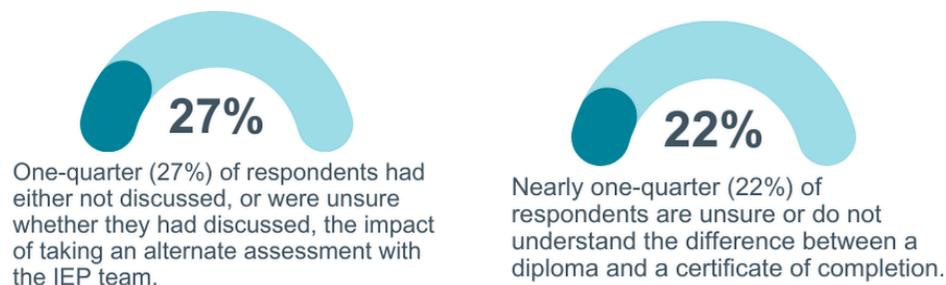


Figure 46.

NOTE: A certificate of completion is not equivalent to a diploma and is not an accredited or legally recognized credential.

Given the requirements that parents be part of the decision-making team and process to determine which type of assessment is most appropriate for their child, it is concerning how many SEE Survey participants were unsure of the type of state assessment their child takes. (See Figure 47)

### Is Your Student Taking an Alternate Assessment?

**34%** of respondents were unsure if their student with a disability takes an alternate assessment.

Figure 47.<sup>53,54</sup>

In Michigan, **96.8%** of students took the M-STEP in the 2022–2023 school year.

According to the most recent data, **11.8%** of high schoolers with disabilities took an alternate math assessment and **12.6%** took an alternate reading assessment.

## Michigan: alternate assessment

Michigan is an outlier in that the state offers three levels of the alternate assessment.

### Three levels of MI-ACCESS:

1. MI-ACCESS Functional Independence (FI)
2. MI-ACCESS Supported Independence (SI)
3. MI-ACCESS Participation (P)

<sup>53</sup> Michigan Department of Education (MDE). August 31, 2023. "2023 State Test Scores Improve in Many Grades in Math, Science, Social Studies, and EnState testing (grades 3-8, high school) (2022-2023), Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, <https://www.mischooldata.org/> English Language Arts." MDE. Accessed December 22, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Center for Educational Performance and Information. n.d. "Special Education: Indicator Report Summary." MI School Data. Accessed November 28, 2023.

About half of all students with disabilities taking the alternate assessment are assigned to the Functional Independence (FI) level.<sup>55</sup> (See Figure 48)

## 2022-2023 Alternate Assessment (MI-ACCESS) Participation

Subject	MI-Access	FI	SI	P
ELA	12,287	6381	3229	2677
Math	12,811	6907	3234	2670
Science (5/8, HS)	5443	3111	1306	1026

Figure 48.

## State assessment proficiency rates

Proficiency rates for students with disabilities on the M-STEP and MI-ACCESS for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year are outlined below. (See Figure 49)

Percent of Students with Disabilities Scoring Proficient or Above		
Assessment Subject/Grade/Type	2020-2021	2021-2022
ELA – Grade 4 – M-Step	15.69%	17.18%
ELA – Grade 4 – Mi-Access	59.35%	62.37%
ELA – Grade 8 – M-Step	23.00%	20.37%
ELA – Grade 8 – Mi-Access	71.95%	66.50%
ELA – High School – M-Step	13.97%	12.50%
ELA – High School – Mi-Access	72.47%	67.91%
Math – Grade 4 – M-Step	13.53%	14.74%
Math – Grade 4 – Mi-Access	50.29%	47.35%
Math – Grade 8 – M-Step	8.02%	8.80%
Math – Grade 8 – Mi-Access	52.80%	47.71%
Math – High School – M-Step	5.09%	3.85%
Math – High School – Mi-Access	61.19%	61.08%

Figure 49.

<sup>55</sup> State testing (grades 3-8, high school) (2022-2023), Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, <https://www.mischooldata.org/>.

## GRADUATION and DROPOUT

Graduation rates for Michigan students with disabilities are poor. In 2022, the most recent year with nationally comparable data available, the four-year adjusted cohort graduation (ACGR) rate for Michigan students with disabilities was 58 percent.<sup>56</sup> The national average for students with disabilities during this same period was 71%. Michigan ranked as the 3rd lowest in the nation.<sup>57</sup>

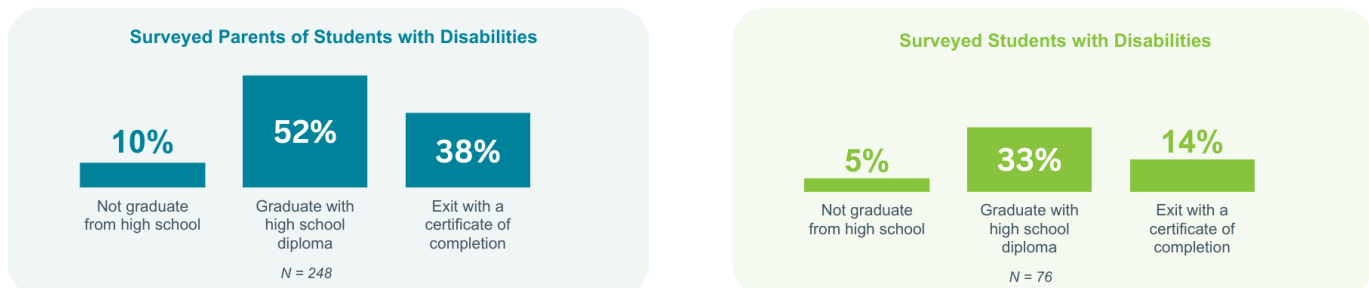
With a graduation rate below 60 percent, ***the entire state of Michigan qualifies as a dropout factory for students with disabilities.***<sup>58</sup> Of course, the pandemic affected graduation rates across the country, yet, Michigan's graduation rate in 2018 was the same 58 percent while the national average was 67 percent.

***The gap in graduation rates between Michigan's students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers is growing.***

Parents of students with disabilities have an intimate understanding of their student's abilities and potential as well as valuable insight into what their child needs to succeed, all of which inform their expectations of their child's education outcomes. We asked SEE Survey respondents to share their expectations. (See Figure 50)

### Parent and Personal Expectations

Respondent Expectations About High School Completion



Respondents were asked to select all options that applied. Select options are shown here. Results do not equal 100%

Figure 50.

<sup>56</sup> Ed Data Express (2022), U.S. Department of Education, <https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/>.

<sup>57</sup> Michigan has third lowest graduation rate in nation for students with disabilities (2023, July 6), Ignaczak, N., The Detroit News, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2023/07/06/michigan-has-third-lowest-graduation-rate-in-nation-for-students-with-disabilities/70252464007/>.

<sup>58</sup> Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? Where are they located? Who attends them? (2004, September), Balfanz, R., & Legters, N., Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Report 70, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED484525.pdf>.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Dropping out of high school may have serious implications for any student, but for students with disabilities, particularly multiply-marginalized students, dropping out of high school acts as a barrier to successful outcomes connected to overall health and well-being as well as economic mobility. (See Figure 51)<sup>59</sup>

*“He is very behind and likely will not graduate on time. I am an educator with a master's degree and had the means to find outside services, and my kid is still in danger of not graduating from high school.”*

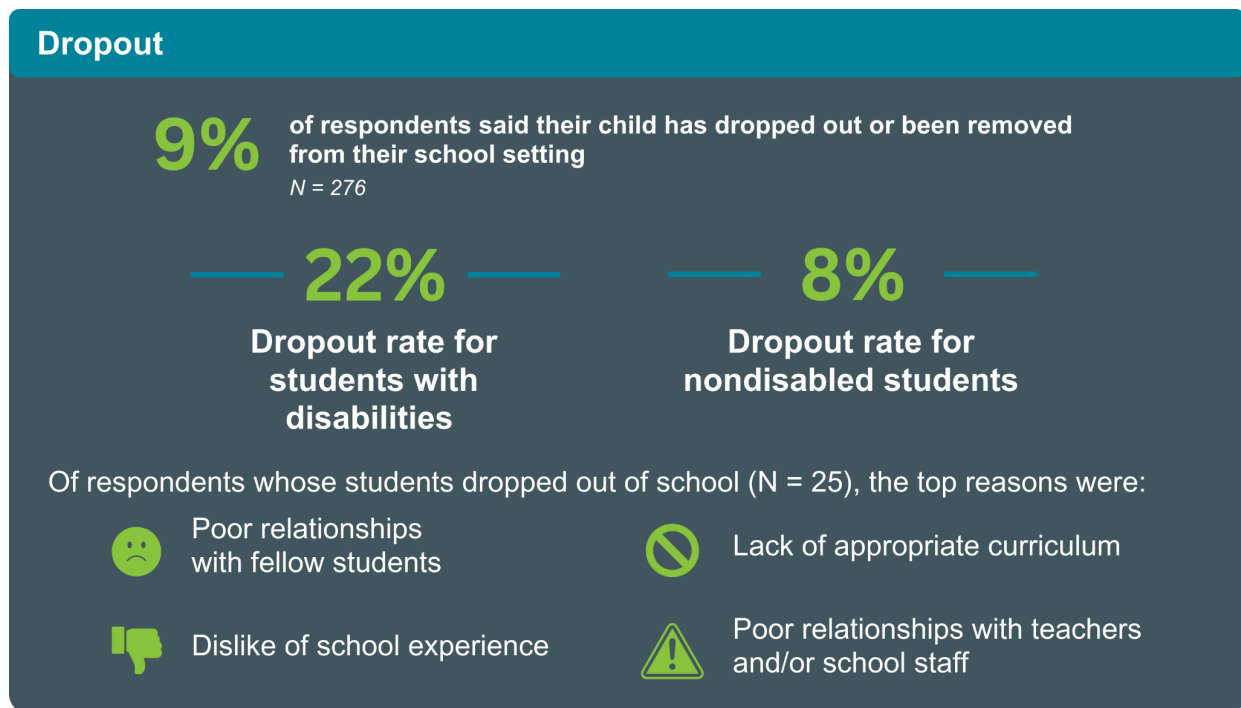


Figure 51.

Michigan families shared their concerns and frustrations with inadequate supports in the education system to keep on graduation track along with low expectations for their students with disabilities.

*“[The school] seemed shocked I had college expectations of my child. He is nearly a savant when it comes to math, yet they wanted to put him in lower-level courses. He had difficulty getting all the steps on paper because his brain was processing quicker than he could write. The attitude of the teachers and administration...has stalled his progress post-graduation because he bought into their vision of him rather than mine.”*

<sup>59</sup> MI School Autism Alliance of Michigan drives new path toward equity & adequacy in special education finance reform (n.d.), Autism Alliance of Michigan, Data. n.d. “Graduation/Dropout Rate.” MI School Data. Accessed December 22, 2023.

# Michigan

## Special Education Experience Survey

SEE Survey respondents provided reasons for dropout or removal from school as part of options in a drop down menu. (See Figure 52)

What was the reason you/they dropped out, left, or were removed from school?	
Other	21
Dislike of school experience	18
Lack of appropriate curriculum	13
Poor relationship with fellow students	12
Academic difficulty / Poor grades / Not doing well	11
Poor relationship with teachers and/or school staff	10
Illness / Disability	9
Inappropriate use of discipline (such as restraint and seclusion)	4
Lack of transportation	4
Economic reasons	4
Parent / Guardian influence	3
School too dangerous	3
Use of suspension / expulsion	3
Language difficulty	3
Needed at home	2
Military, joined armed forces	1
Religion	1
Employment, sought or accepted a job	0
Entered the criminal justice system	0
<b>N-Size</b>	<b>124</b>

Figure 52.

Additional reasons for dropout or removal from school were provided as written responses, if the reason was not provided in the menu of options.

### Reasons for dropout (free response):

- “Aged out of program, age 26”
- “Bullying + school refused to fix the issues or even attempt to.”
- “Bullying.”
- “COVID-19 pandemic.”

- “Denied services when they were needed.”
- “Found a vocational training the post program wouldn’t allow my son to do, not give the opportunity because the jobs were for higher functioning but he’s doing an awesome job elsewhere.”
- “He was bullied, we had him take GED and he immediately entered college at age 16.”
- “He would not have enough credits to graduate before he turned 19.”
- “Health issues after COVID school closures.”
- “My son became too violent for the small staff at his school. They couldn’t keep him safe from himself, themselves or others after changing the setting to keep everyone safe, that still wasn’t enough. Until he received intense treatment he was not allowed back. There had been many staff changes as well as puberty. Eventually we did homebound. Worked up to returning to school 3 days a week for 2 hours per day.”
- “Negotiated legal alternative education setting.”
- “Not supported enough. The IEP team said at the start of the school year, “Let’s see how child does, then we’ll add supports if deemed necessary” - building on failure on failure. We needed to front load supports and build on success. We tried having meetings before the start of the school year, be as well-prepared as possible, but supports came too little, too late.”
- “Online K-12 school.”
- “Poor mental health.”
- “The school district threw her out like a piece of garbage.”
- “Tried the new school and thought it was a great fit. Asked to attend there instead.”
- “Unable to receive adequate support/accommodations.”

Open-ended responses to the SEE Survey additionally shared experiences with dropping out of the public school system for homeschooling as well as dis-enrolling from public school to pursue private services (e.g., applied behavior analysis) that weren’t being provided by the district.

Bullying and harassment of students with disabilities was a significant recurring theme in the SEE Survey responses with specific mention of schools failing to provide intervention to prevent or address ongoing bullying of marginalized students.

Additionally, there were comments related to students with disabilities being blamed for the bullying they experienced in the school setting, even sometimes blaming the student’s disability (e.g., not understanding personal space due to being autistic).

*“Bullying is a real problem for disabled children. Bullying was so bad we had to put my son in another school. Administration would not help with the bullying. My son was expelled due to being taunted relentlessly for days with me asking for help from the school.”*

## SEE Survey Findings: TRAUMA

### *Emotional and health impact*

Throughout the SEE Survey responses, strong themes were noted connected to experiences shared that related to trauma (numerous mentions) as well as the emotional and health impact of being connected to the special education system in Michigan.

*“They repeatedly marginalized my child, suspended him over 20 times (as a kindergartner!) and contributed to his intense emotional unhappiness. They essentially tried to kick him out of their school indefinitely. Without a student advocate, I don’t know how we would have gotten through last year. To this day, they still refuse to change his designation to ASD instead of emotional impairment.”*

In open-ended responses, many responses mentioned the emotional impact due to bullying and harassment from other students (and sometimes school staff) which may result in a student with a disability being afraid to go to school or dropping out of school completely to avoid it.

*“They did not provide help or attempt to stop it so my son finally reacted physically and was suspended. In the MDR meeting I was told by special ed director my son did everything premeditated and with forethought. Kind of odd since he has severe ADHD which also includes emotional dysregulation and impulsivity.”*

Parents expressed the negative impact of the emotional cost of advocating for their child in the education system along with feeling hopeless that there are no other options for their child.

*“The special education system in Michigan is severely broken. It emotionally and academically harms children and emotionally and financially harms parents.”*

Students and parents reported the emotional and health impact of their education experience lasting well beyond the time they or their child was in school.

*“It’s been traumatizing and it’s not getting any better. The schools don’t take accountability for the emotional mental trauma they cause and they don’t see how some of the issues our kids have and continue to have is due to the way the schools treat them.”*



## SEE Survey Findings: SECONDARY TRANSITION

### *Student-centered planning*

View the **SEE Survey Findings Snapshot: Secondary Transition** on our webpage:

<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>

### **TRANSITION PLANNING**

Planning post-high school goals includes students developing their objectives for adult life and may begin at any point in the student's educational experience. This planning often begins with the completion of an educational development plan (EDP). All Michigan students are required to complete an EDP in seventh grade to begin to identify education and career goals aligned with their interests and abilities.

Parallel to the EDP, transition planning is an additional process outlined by the IDEA intended to assist students with an IEP with the progression from school activities to post-high school activities, including postsecondary education and/or employment. Transition also incorporates the provision of services and supports to assist the student in accomplishing their goals.

The IDEA requires that transition planning begin no later than the effective date of the first IEP after the student turns 16. Alternatively, it can begin at a younger age if determined appropriate by the IEP team, which includes the respective student and parents.

### **Transition planning: parent and student involvement**

A transition plan is based on a student's strengths, preferences, and interests, which may change year to year. In preparation for adult life, the plan also identifies opportunities for the student to gain the skills and knowledge needed for continuing education, work, and community participation.

SEE Survey open-ended responses included experiences that spanned the range of educational experience and highlighted the impact of many factors on what results in success for students.

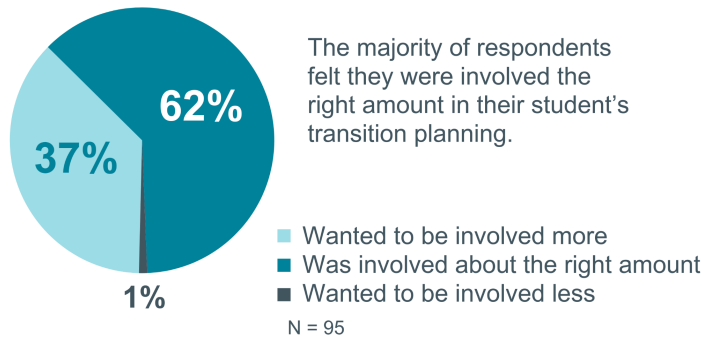
*"During Early On and preschool there was a lot of fighting (including the use of Michigan Protection and Advocacy) over our want of inclusion. Elementary through high school our daughter was fully included. There have been good years and bad, great teachers and awful ones. Our daughter is very successful, but she could be further along if the school had embraced inclusion and not just "tolerated" it for us."*

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

The SEE Survey explored the level of family involvement with the transition planning process. Parents reported they were involved “the right amount” in the planning process (62%) while others (37%) reported they “wanted to be involved more.” A little more than half of the parent respondents (57%) reported they has discussed postsecondary plans with their child’s school team while others (43%) reported that they had not. (See Figure 53)

## Family Involvement

### How Do Parents Feel About Their Involvement in Their Student's Transition Plan?



### Has the Family Discussed Post-high-school Plans with the IEP Team?

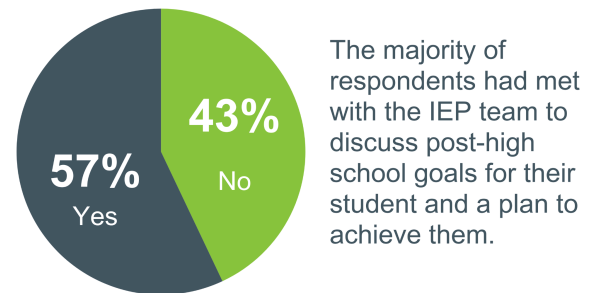


Figure 53.

Half of the SEE Survey respondents said the student actively participated in their own transition planning. (See Figure 54)

## Student Involvement

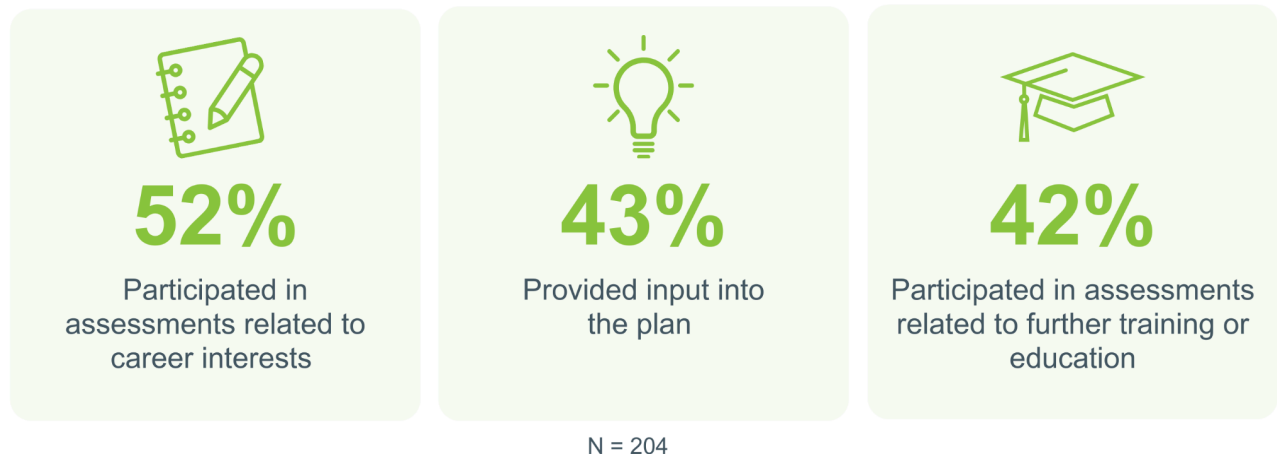


Figure 54.

## Transition experiences

Secondary transition planning is intended to consider the student's interests and strengths to build a bridge from high school to adult life. While 59% of parent respondents found transition planning either very or somewhat useful to prepare their student for life after high school, 40% reported it was not very useful or not useful at all ( $n=98$ ). (See Figure 55)

### Quality and Utility of Transition Planning

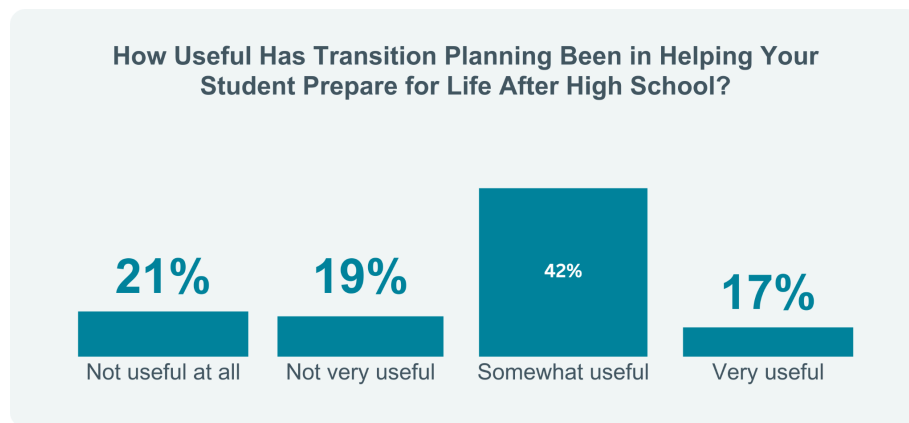


Figure 55.

A high-quality secondary transition plan includes appropriate, measurable postsecondary goals and sufficient transition services to meet those goals. Only 24% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their student has a high-quality transition plan that will support a successful transition from high school to adult life ( $n=102$ ). (See Figure 56)

### Quality and Utility of Transition Planning

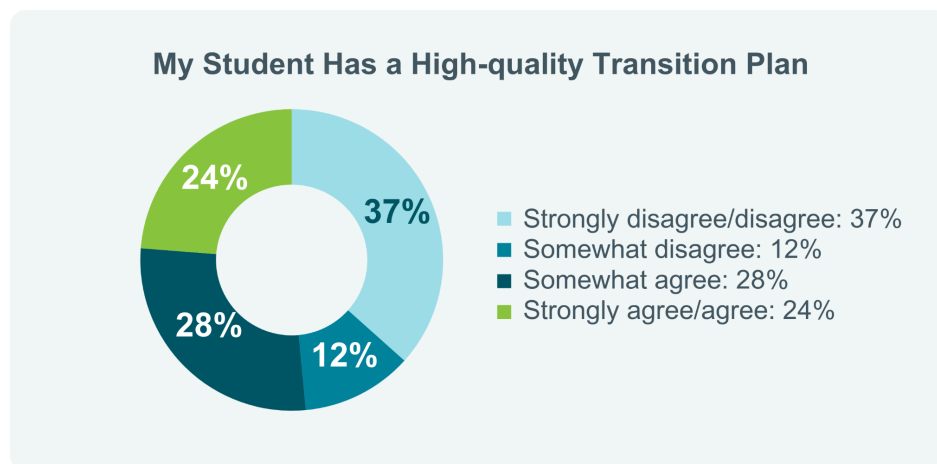


Figure 56.

# Michigan Special Education Experience Survey

Only 35% of SEE Survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their student's transition goals are appropriate considering the student's skills, interests, and preference. (See Figure 57)

## Appropriate Transition Goals



Figure 57.

*“Transition planning has been sadly lacking, especially related to options and choices for the students.”*

Many SEE Survey respondents shared that there was an overall lack of transition services available for their students after high school. One parent described it as a “cliff” students fall off when services are no longer available after they age out of the education system.

*“Transition planning was minimal and then COVID led to two years of lost time when we were supposed to be experiencing vocational options and community participation. We are about to fall off the cliff into the abyss of no openings in adult programs.”*

Respondents also felt that expectations were not high enough for transition-age students. They shared that their student had not received enough training in life skills. A lack of social support in schools which has a long-term impact on the ability of adults with disabilities who have exited the K-12 system to develop peer connections.

*“He is now 25 and will age out of all programs soon. After he leaves [the transition program], there is not much out there for him. He won't ever be able to work without constant assistance. I worry that once he is done with school, he will just be at home all day with no purpose to his life.”*

Some parents shared positive experiences, reporting that their child had graduated from college or were attending college. **Emphasis was placed on setting IEP goals that are appropriately ambitious** (e.g., challenging yet attainable) along with **focusing on developing skills and accessing supports** needed for postsecondary goals like further education, employment, and independent living, **which takes into account the individual student's unique needs and aspirations**.

## SEE Survey Findings: SYSTEM ACCOUNTABILITY

### *Calls for needed change*

SEE Survey responses included multiple calls to improve special education and related services in Michigan.

#### Recurring system issues shared in open-ended responses:

- The need to educate school personnel about school district obligations under the IDEA for Child Find (e.g., locating, identifying, and evaluating students suspected of having disabilities).
- Systemic change to address the needs of students with disabilities across Michigan.
- Funding of special education programs, services, and supports.

Parents repeatedly shared frustrations and negative experiences from advocating on behalf of their child with a disability in the school system. Many parents reported losing faith or distrusting the Michigan government and the public school system.

*“I would like to add that MDE-OSE needs to be looked into. They are rubber stamping State complaints since the pandemic. I experienced this. This is not helpful especially when outside evaluation reflects significant severe regression...The child is not learning when the provisions of FAPE are not being implemented...The MDE-OSE oversight fails to protect students with disabilities.”*

### Dispute Resolution

It is well established there is the ‘advocacy expectation’ with parents experiencing the burden of ensuring their children are identified and receive appropriate services and supports starting as early as birth and ranging potentially through age 26 in Michigan.

*“It took the threat of due process and action at the county and state level to get the school to begin to do the right thing for my child.”*

A yet-to-be published study from the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), a federally funded technical assistance center, finds nearly 50% of special education directors say school-parent conflict is increasing and they want more training and resources on early dispute strategies.<sup>60</sup>

*“They refused me an IEE...and took me through a due process hearing which I lost. Mostly because I didn't participate out of exhaustion and lack of funds. I'm out of options. Nobody will help.”*

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<sup>60</sup> Nearly 50% of special education directors say school-parent conflict is increasing: A yet-to-be-published CADRE survey finds special education directors want more training and resources on early dispute strategies (2024, August 9), Arundel, K., K-12 Dive, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/special-education-litigation-disputes-parents-OSEP/723813/>.

***“Every system is perfectly designed to get the results that it does.”***

- W. Edwards Deming  
*American Business Theorist*

## Discussion and Implications

### Challenges to confront

As the wide range of experiences and issue areas highlighted by the SEE Survey demonstrate, there are a lot of challenges to confront in Michigan if we’re going to move from being one of the bottom states for serving students with disabilities to one of the top performing states.

From early identification to appropriate program development that ensures high-quality, inclusive education settings for the entire continuum of a student’s school experience along with equitable school funding to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and youth must be the focus of what guides our actions moving forward.

### Students with disabilities are becoming a larger part of public school enrollment

Identification of students eligible for special education has increased following the pandemic. Students with disabilities were among the most adversely impacted by school closures as schools struggled to provide specialized instruction, accommodations, and interventions remotely. The recovery of students with disabilities since has been slower than their peers. There is also a growing trend where experts say students are being more readily identified for special education due to behavioral challenges, which educators say have increased after the pandemic.<sup>61</sup>

The rising share of public school children who need special education services along with the increased requests for evaluations is putting pressure on the system. Reducing, limiting, or eliminating services and supports for students with disabilities is not an acceptable solution to the current challenges, and yet, it is what parents are sharing as a concern.

### Race and gender contributing to system inequities

Research has demonstrated persistent system inequities related to race and gender. While there is no “correct” rate of students that should be found eligible for special education, all students regardless of race/ethnicity or gender are equally entitled to protection under the federal law. The concerns related to over-representation, specifically of black males in special education, has been the focus of reducing disproportionality in the system, while there continue to be concerns of potential under-identification of students with disabilities who may need special education services and supports to meet their unique needs.

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Handcuffed and pushed out’: How schools fail some students with disabilities (2024, October 7), Schultz, B., Education Week, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/handcuffed-and-pushed-out-how-schools-fail-some-students-with-disabilities/2024/10>.

Additionally, there is an existing question as to whether some girls may be under-identified for special education compared with their male peers. Theories suggest that under- and mis-identification is likely rooted in biased perceptions of how certain students present with disability in the school setting.

Boys far outnumbering girls in being found eligible to receive special education services and supports is a historically unchanged and seemingly accepted data point with girls in Michigan comprising about a third of students with special education supports while making up almost half of all students enrolled in public schools statewide (49%).<sup>62</sup> Gender is largely absent in mainstream conversations about education system inequities.<sup>63</sup>

## Structural issues with Michigan's school finance system

While there are certainly many factors that contribute to the current challenges in Michigan's education system, the most significant driver is the state's current school funding approach. Michigan is one of only a handful of states that primarily funds the state portion of special education through a percentage-based reimbursement system. And, among those states, **Michigan is an outlier still, providing a mere 28.6 percent. This is often the lowest reimbursement rate in the country.**<sup>64</sup>

Michigan's current funding structure compounds inequities as all districts receive the same reimbursement rate regardless of community wealth and income. What's more, local communities' ability to raise local revenues for special education is severely limited by law, which further shortchanges students with disabilities.

## Autism Alliance of Michigan drives new path toward equity & adequacy in special education finance reform

AAoM has been engaging with national experts on school finance and special education to look toward a broader vision of system transformation with the aim of increasing high-quality, inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities as well as improving educational outcomes (which is desperately needed in our state). This work will align efforts toward re-imagining how our system serves kids with disabilities from Pre-K through post-secondary.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> MI School Data Portal: Student enrollment counts report (n.d.), Center for Educational Performance and Information, <https://www.mischooldata.org/>.

<sup>63</sup> Exclusive: Data show girls in NYC schools receive special ed services at disproportionately lower rates than boys. How race and gender drive inequities (2019, December 16), Swaak, T., The 74, <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-data-show-girls-in-nyc-schools-receive-special-ed-services-at-disproportionately-lower-rates-than-boys/>.

<sup>64</sup> Splitting the bill: How do finance systems support students with disabilities (2024, May), Kaput, K., & Schiess, J. O., Bellwether, [https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SplittingtheBill\\_16\\_Bellwether\\_May2024.pdf](https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SplittingtheBill_16_Bellwether_May2024.pdf). Note, Wisconsin's reimbursement rate occasionally falls below Michigan's.

<sup>65</sup> *Autism Alliance of Michigan drives new path toward equity & adequacy in special education finance reform* (n.d.), Autism Alliance of Michigan, <https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-finance-reform/>.



***“We must stop constantly fighting for human rights and equal justice in an unjust system, and start building a society where equal rights are an integral part of the design.”***

- Jacque Fresco  
*American Futurist and Social Engineer*

## Summary and Conclusions

### Leadership for the path forward

The Autism Alliance of Michigan strives to create connections within and across systems on behalf of our core constituents - families. AAoM is an organization that engages as a bridge, builds connections, and provides comprehensive support services to the families we serve.

Michigan’s public education system is meant to provide a pathway for all students, including those with disabilities. Findings from the SEE Survey analysis show that, in many cases, this is not happening in the way it should. Our report highlights the frustrations and even the trauma families have experienced as part of their efforts to acquire, or help their children acquire, fundamental skills through public education.

As the first survey since the Michigan Special Education Reform Task Force issued recommendations for changes and improvements to the special education system in 2015, the SEE survey shows there has been no improvements in key areas over the past nine years.

The SEE Survey identified the top concerns for students with disabilities and their families, which include:

- School funding and resources are not adequate and equitable.
- The special education workforce shortage is affecting students.
- Students with disabilities are not spending enough time with nondisabled peers in the least restrictive environment.
- Schools are not identifying disabilities early enough, preventing students from becoming eligible for special education services as early as possible.
- Schools are not engaging sufficiently with parents and their students.

Through engagement with our core constituents and by incorporating the findings of the SEE Survey, we aim to inform policymakers and school officials while catalyzing and driving change to increase educational opportunities and improve outcomes for students with disabilities across the state.

## *Reshaping policy and politics*

For too long, the policymakers and system leaders in Michigan have been mired in adult-centered issues and entrenched lobbying blocks that are not focusing on nor addressing the needs of our most vulnerable children and youth. ***With careful and intentional work going forward, Michigan can do better for students with disabilities and their families.***

Michigan must come together to reimagine a shared vision for an improved inclusive education system where the promises made are truly for ALL students. Considering the magnitude of the structural inequities in the current system, we must honestly confront what it will take to transform our approach so there is a sense of shared responsibility for access to equitable opportunities and improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

The long-term strategy for building, bridging, and leveraging power of the collective lived experience is needed to understand the changes required to have a more coherent system that implements policies sufficient to confront the breadth and depth of barriers that our most marginalized students face.

The SEE Survey analysis demonstrates the need for improved education policies, instructional practices, and other system-wide changes. The survey findings reinforce the importance of preparing students for independent living while addressing systemic barriers to ensure accessible, high quality and inclusive education.

The shared vision for the transformation of Michigan's education system must include the meaningful involvement of parents and students with disabilities to co-create a pathway to prosperity together.

***“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”***

- Richard Buckminster Fuller  
*American Architect, Systems Theorist*

## Recommendations

### Advocacy for collective impact

Considering the findings of the SEE Survey, there is much to focus on when looking toward the necessary improvements Michigan’s special education system requires.

The Autism Alliance of Michigan is providing these recommendations as strategic areas to leverage collectively for greater impact.

#### Reimagine Improved Special Education -

1. Invest resources more equitably and effectively
2. Allow community-based professionals to provide behavioral supports and medically necessary interventions in schools
3. Decrease the overuse of alternate assessments for students with disabilities
4. Improve identification of student needs
5. Decrease discipline disparities among students with disabilities
6. Disaggregate reported state disciplinary data by district, race, income and disability

## Invest resources more equitably and effectively

### Background

The SEE survey findings cite insufficient services, support, and funding for students with disabilities.

### Impact

Increased and equitably distributed special education funding will better serve students with disabilities and better support educators to provide a high-quality, inclusive education.

### Solution

*Through a consensus-building approach, align working definitions of high-cost programming for special education in Michigan and outline a proposed weighted funding formula that embodies the intent and purpose of the IDEA in meeting the individualized needs of students with disabilities.*

---

## Allow community-based professionals to provide behavioral supports and medically necessary interventions in schools

### Background

The SEE survey findings highlight the critical need for appropriate behavior support in the school setting for students with disabilities. Additionally, students with disabilities are not receiving adequate access to medically necessary interventions, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) within the school environment due to various factors, including workforce shortages.

### Impact

Allowing external professionals to provide services in the school setting will ensure students with disabilities receive medically necessary interventions to help them function and engage in the learning environment alongside their peers.

### Solution

*Increased funding will help school systems hire more professionals directly. Additionally, Michigan needs to enact a state law that mandates an education policy allowing community-based service providers to access the school setting to meet the individualized intervention and medically necessary needs of students with disabilities.*

---

## Decrease the overuse of alternate assessment for students with disabilities

### Background

The SEE survey findings affirm statewide data showing that schools chronically overuse alternate assessments for students with disabilities instead of using the standard state assessment with appropriate accommodations. The alternate assessment path moves students away from a diploma track and toward a certificate of completion track, potentially reducing their ability to participate in the workforce or higher education.

### Impact

Using best practices to decide the proper assessment for students with disabilities increases students' abilities to participate in the workforce and higher education, which increases opportunities and improves outcomes. .

### Solution

*Re-examine Michigan's three levels of alternate assessment to make recommendations for structural changes and develop a roadmap to decrease the total number of students with disabilities on the alternate assessment track.*

*As a step toward this solution, AAoM will create a blueprint for change, identifying recommendations.*

---

## Improve identification of student needs

### Background

According to the SEE survey, only 49% of respondents said their child's disabilities were identified as soon as services were needed, with only 27% of students having their disabilities identified before age 3. Failure to identify a student's disabilities may delay the therapies or help that they need.

### Impact

Identifying learning challenges and suspected disabilities early can help families access services that improve their child's outcomes.

## Solution

*Build a public awareness campaign that empowers parents to know how to advocate to ensure public schools properly identify, locate, and evaluate students who need special education and related services.*

*This will include empowering parents to:*

- *Understand the Child Find mandate and what obligations exist for school districts*
- *Ensure comprehensive evaluations are conducted and parents are part of the eligibility determination process*
- *Enforce proper development and appropriate implementation of individualized education programs*

---

## Change statute regarding state complaint law

### Background

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the state complaint process is one of the most accessible procedural protections available to address alleged violations concerning the special education system. SEE survey findings demonstrate a need to improve this process through increased transparency.

### Impact

Improved transparency and system accountability within the state complaint process to ensure students with disabilities receive appropriate special education services and that the Michigan Department of Education enforces obligations under the IDEA.

### Solution

*Enact legislation to require the MDE to:*

- *Extend the statute of limitations on filing written state complaints to two years*
  - *Provide for a period of reconsideration of findings*
  - *Make all IDEA state complaint investigation reports available to the public*
-

## Decrease discipline disparities among students with disabilities

### Background

According to the SEE survey, the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices such as restraint and seclusion at the school building level continues to be a serious concern. Schools and educators must be made aware of discipline policies, alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and how to implement restorative practices to ensure the dignity and rights of students with disabilities are protected.

### Impact

Schools that treat students with respect and adhere to appropriate, positive discipline policies in accordance with the IDEA will prevent trauma, promote a more inclusive learning environment and improve the educational outcomes of their students.

### Solution

*Create a robust state-level monitoring system with clear protocols for implementing existing state law related to the use of seclusion and restraint along with required documentation and communication to parents.*

---

## Disaggregate reported state disciplinary data by district, race, income and disability

### Background

The SEE survey highlights the severe disparities between disciplinary practices for students with disabilities compared to their nondisabled peers. Survey responses cite the lack of clarity around discipline data reporting as a major barrier to state and local transparency, meaningful parent participation, and appropriate student treatment.

### Impact

Increased transparency at the state and local levels will improve how students are treated, empower parents to make the best school choices, and allow for further system accountability.



## Solution

*The state must reform how disciplinary data is reported and present disaggregated data to the public on district, race, income, and disability regarding disciplinary practices.*

*As a step toward this solution, AAoM will create a blueprint for change by identifying and compiling missing data elements and areas to be disaggregated based on the current data reporting system.*

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***“We are greater than, and greater for, the sum of us.”***

*- Heather McGhee,  
author and policy advocate*

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***“Change never happens at the pace we think it should. It happened over years of people joining together, strategizing, sharing, and pulling all the levers they possibly can. Gradually, excruciatingly slowly, things start to happen, and then suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, something will tip.”***

- Judy Heumann  
American Disability Rights Activist

## TAKE ACTION

### Join MiPAAC

MiPAAC is the collective impact vehicle for AAoM education system change initiatives.

→ parents, advocates, and attorneys are welcome to fill out an interest form

<http://mipaac.org/join-mipaac/>

### Share the SEE Survey Report

Use our toolkit to help share the Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey Report.

This report offers valuable insights into the experiences of students with disabilities across Michigan and will help inform advocacy efforts to improve access and opportunities for students with disabilities.

**[TOOLKIT: Special Education Experience \(SEE\) Survey Report](#)**

*We value your insight!*

Share your thoughts on the Special Education Experience Survey by visiting our SEE Survey feedback form: <https://tinyurl.com/SEE-survey-feedback>

