AUTISM ALLIANCE
OF MICHIGAN

Michigan Special Education Benchmark Report
2025

Building the Baseline, Measuring Access and Outcomes: Key Indicators for Michigan Students with Disabilities

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

autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives

This report can be found online at
autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/mi-special-education-benchmark-report/

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Executive Summary

By: Heather Eckner, Director of Statewide Education, Autism Alliance of Michigan

As Michigan marks the release of its first *Special Education Benchmark Report,* we do so at a pivotal moment for students with disabilities, their families, and our state's education system. This report arrives in the 50th year of the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, a milestone that serves as both a celebration and a mandate.[1]

Now is not only a time to honor IDEA's legacy, but an opportunity to renew our collective commitment to the future.

Michigan spends $2.8 billion annually on special education, yet outcomes remain uneven across the state and, by most measures, fall among the lowest in the nation. This report provides the first unified picture of how Michigan is serving students with disabilities—establishing a baseline of key indicators that illuminate where progress has been made and where urgent improvement is needed.[2]

Why This Matters

Fifty years after IDEA guaranteed every eligible child the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Michigan has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to evaluate how well our systems are fulfilling that promise. Too often, students with disabilities are left out of critical policy conversations, and the data needed to understand their experiences remains fragmented or inaccessible.[3]

This Benchmark Report begins to change that. By disaggregating data across settings, subgroups, and outcomes, we can more clearly see which students are being served well, which are being left behind, and where resources must be targeted to drive equitable and necessary improvement.[4]

Executive Summary

What the Data Reveal

Over the past decade, Michigan has made meaningful strides: more students are receiving services, school-age participation in regular classrooms has increased, and efforts to strengthen family engagement are underway. Yet the data also shine a spotlight on persistent gaps and challenges. In areas from preschool placement to graduation rates, from complaint resolutions to equitable resource allocation — opportunities for improvement remain.

Key findings include:

- **Early learning access:** Preschool-aged children with disabilities continue to be educated outside regular early-childhood classrooms at very high rates, signaling that early inclusion and access remain areas of urgency.

- **Family engagement:** Fewer than two-thirds of parent-engagement survey respondents reported that Michigan public schools facilitate meaningful involvement.

- **Graduation and dropout:** Students with disabilities dropout at more than twice the rate of their non-disabled peers and remain far less likely to graduate with a regular high school diploma—a reality that demands collective action.

- **Funding inequities:** Federal IDEA funding covers less than one-sixth of special education costs nationwide, and Michigan's combined state and federal contributions cover only about 44 percent of total costs for the current system—forcing districts to rely heavily on local funds with wide disparity gaps across the state.

- **Accountability and trust:** Michigan reports fewer written state complaints than the national average; however, a higher share of those complaints result in findings of noncompliance—suggesting that when families speak up, their concerns are often substantiated.

Executive Summary

Moving Forward

This report is more than a data review—it is a call to action. We must move beyond a focus on compliance to a vision of excellence. The law sets the floor, not the ceiling. True progress requires a commitment to equity, transparency, and the belief that every student with a disability deserves access to rigorous instruction, inclusive learning environments, and meaningful pathways to successful adulthood.

To realize the full promise of IDEA, Michigan must:

- Use data as a driver of equity, transparency, and continuous improvement;

- Strengthen the educator and provider pipeline to ensure specialized expertise;

- Expand access to high-quality learning environments from early childhood through high school completion; and

- Align funding and accountability systems with the real cost of delivering services that enable every student to succeed.

On behalf of families, educators, policymakers, and advocates across our state, I invite you to use this benchmark report as a living tool—one that guides policy decisions, drives resource allocation, fosters transparency, and ensures that every student with a disability experiences the high-quality, inclusive education they deserve.

Together, we can ensure that the next milestone we celebrate is not only the longevity of civil rights protections for our most vulnerable learners, but also Michigan's emergence as a national model for opportunity, access, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

"Parents and communities need accessible, usable data. Right now, systems are hard to navigate unless you're already an expert."

— Researcher and Advocate

Michigan
Public Schools

Total Student Enrollent	Students with Disabilities (SwD) receiving special education
1,489,586	**223,100 (15%)**
2024-2025	2024-2025

Pre-K

A majority (10+ hours) of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program
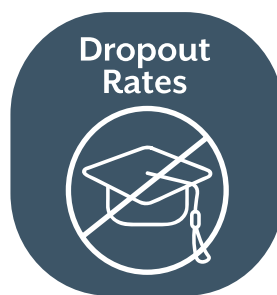
MI	National
21%	**43%**

K-12

Educated inside Regular Classroom 80% or More of the Day

MI	National
73%	**68%**

Graduation Rates

SwD graduated with regular high school diploma (4-year cohort)

MI	National
60%	**71%**

Dropout Rates

SwD dropped out of high school (6-year cohort)

MI	National
21%	**11%**

Exclusionary Discipline

Share of SwD among all students secluded or restrained

MI	National
77%	**70%**

Family Engagement
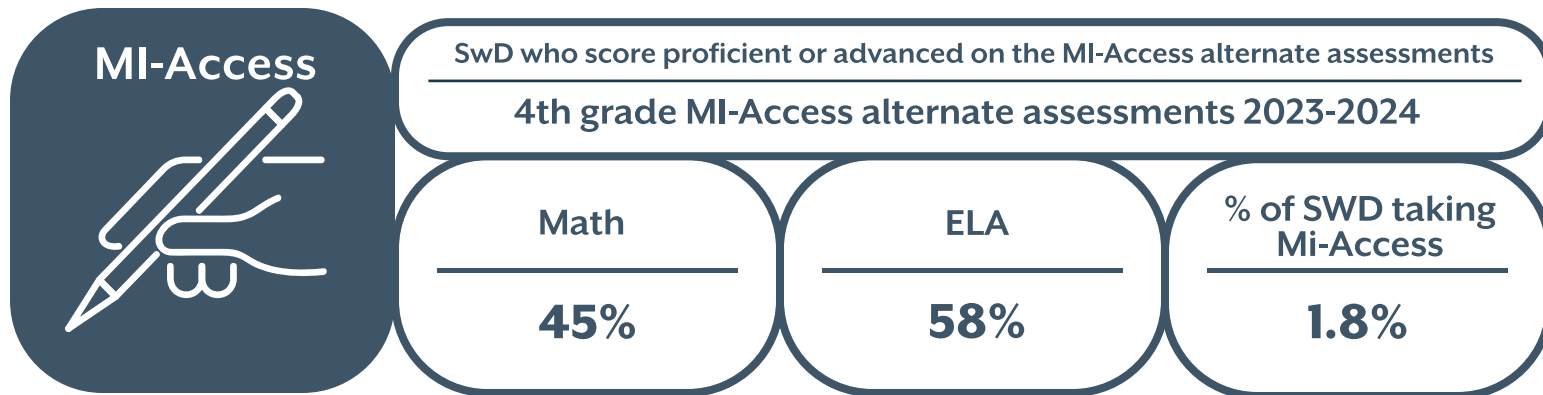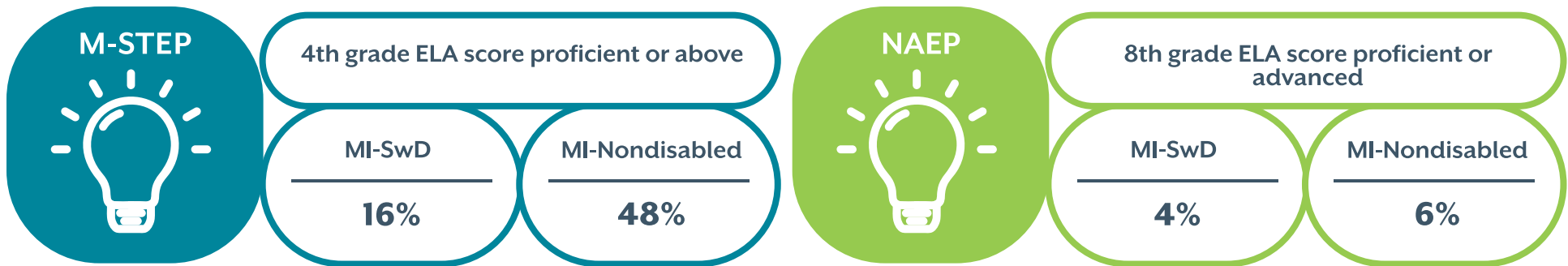
Parents who agreed their school facilitates parent involvement to improve outcomes for their children in special education

MI
60%

M-STEP

4th grade ELA score proficient or above

MI-SwD	MI-Nondisabled
16%	**48%**

NAEP

8th grade ELA score proficient or advanced

MI-SwD	MI-Nondisabled
4%	**6%**

MI-Access

SwD who score proficient or advanced on the MI-Access alternate assessments

4th grade MI-Access alternate assessments 2023-2024

Math	ELA	% of SWD taking Mi-Access
45%	**58%**	**1.8%**

Written State Complaints

Total filed per 10K child count

MI	National
12.5	**13.1**

Written State Complaints

Findings of noncompliance per 10K child count

MI	National
6.6	**4.9**

While total public-school enrollment in Michigan has been decreasing since 2018-19, the number of students with disabilities receiving special education has steadily increased since 2020-21

This trend aligns with national patterns, where overall student enrollment is declining while the number of students with disabilities is rising. Researchers project that the population of students with disabilities will continue to grow, causing their proportion of the total student body to increase despite the overall enrollment drop. This increase underscores the growing importance of sustainable special education funding and staffing while also highlighting the escalating demand for specialized services and supports within schools.

Figure 1. Total Student Enrollment in MI, 2018-19 – 2024-25
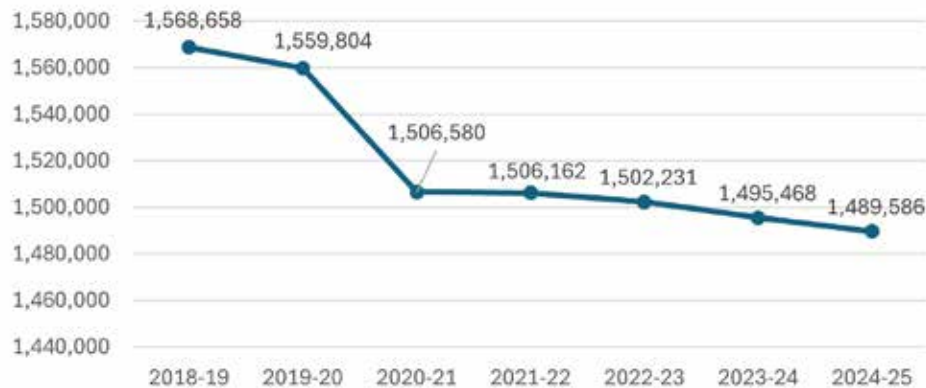
Figure 2. Percent of Students with Disabilities (0-26) Enrolled in MI, 2018-19 – 2024-25
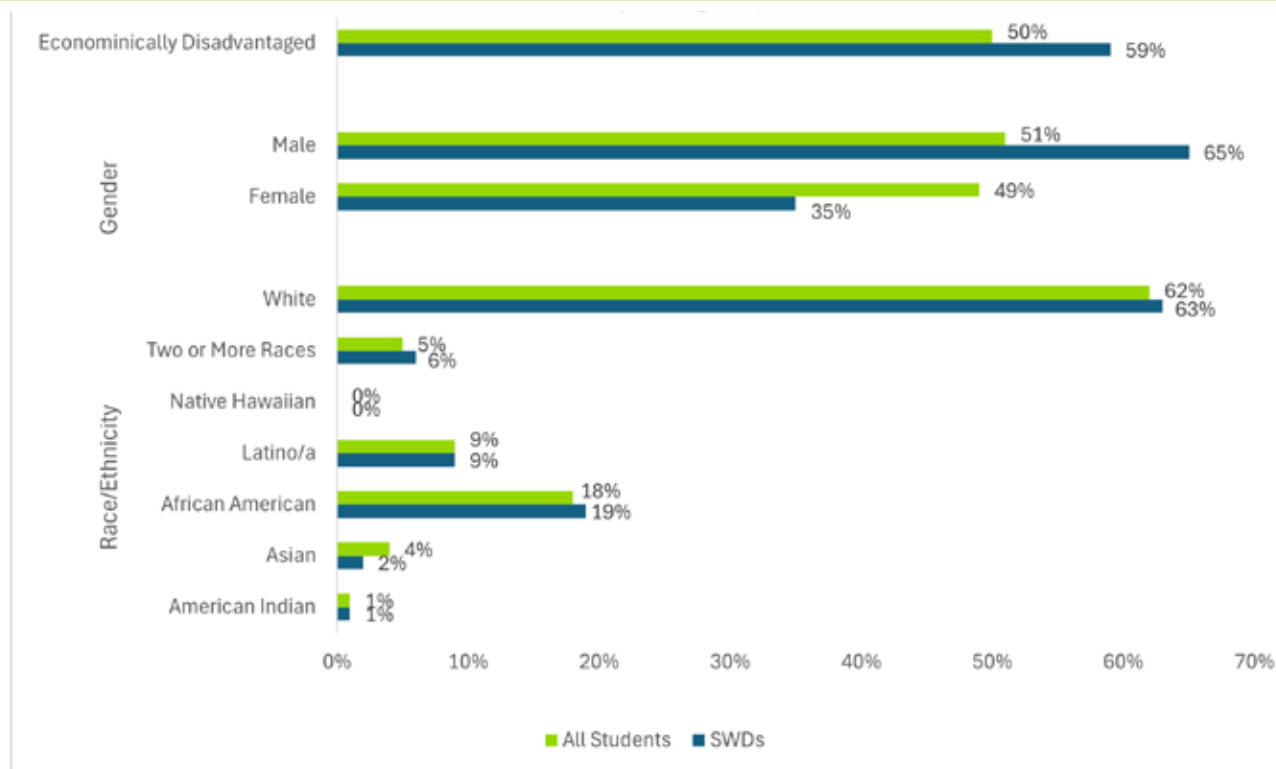
Disproportionate representation of male and low-income students in Michigan's special education population: reflecting potential disparities or identification bias

Students with disabilities in Michigan are demographically similar to their non-disabled peers in Michigan, with a few notable differences. **Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (ED) and male students are substantially overrepresented** in Michigan's special education population.

The over-representation of students from ED backgrounds and male students in Michigan's special education population can be explained by a combination of systemic factors including poverty and resource deficits,[1] referral/identification processes subject to bias,[2] and school context/quality gaps

Figure 3. Percent of Students with Disabilities and All Students Enrolled in MI, by Subgroup, 2024-25
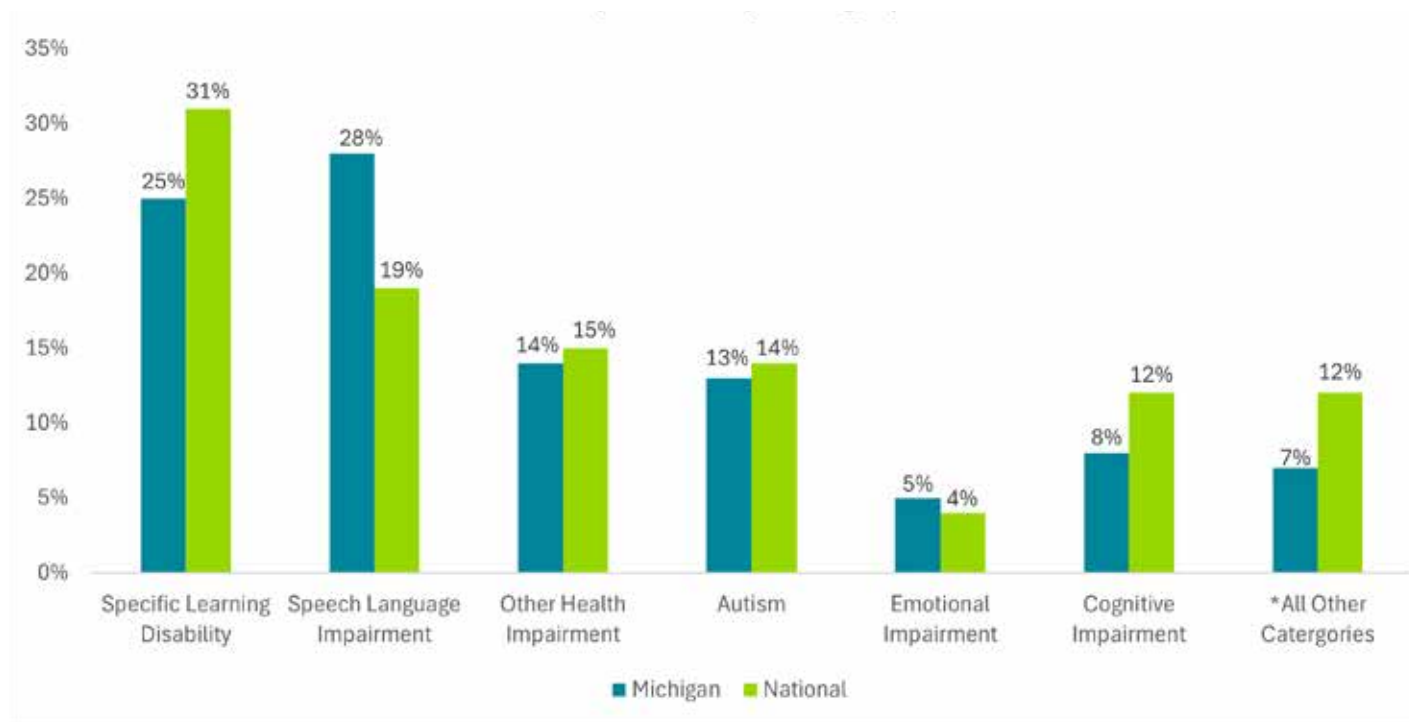

	All Students	SWDs
Econominically Disadvantaged	50%	59%
Male	51%	65%
Female	49%	35%
White	62%	63%
Two or More Races	5%	6%
Native Hawaiian	0%	0%
Latino/a	9%	9%
African American	18%	19%
Asian	4%	2%
American Indian	1%	1%

Over half of Michigan students with disabilities are identified as having either a specific learning disability or a speech-language impairment

Michigan serves a larger share of students with speech and language impairments than the national average, and a smaller share of students with specific learning disabilities; for the other disability categories, rates are generally consistent with national patterns.

Figure 4. Percent of Students Served under IDEA (ages 5-21) in MI and the United States, by Disability Category[1], 2023-24

Michigan / National bar chart:

| Category	Michigan	National
Specific Learning Disability	25%	31%
Speech Language Impairment	28%	19%
Other Health Impairment	14%	15%
Autism	13%	14%
Emotional Impairment	5%	4%
Cognitive Impairment	8%	12%
*All Other Categories	7%	12%

Policy changes that shaped eligibility trends

In 2010, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) revised its *Rules for Determining Eligibility for Special Education under a Specific Learning Disability* (SLD). [1]

This shift raised the threshold for SLD eligibility, requiring schools to document multiple tiers of intervention and track student progress before qualifying a student for special education services.

Following implementation, particularly after the 2012–2013 school year, the number and percentage of students identified as eligible under SLD declined statewide, with sharper declines in some areas reflecting local differences in implementation and district capacity. [2]

Some students who might previously have been identified as SLD were instead determined ineligible under the new criteria, or were classified under other categories, such as Other Health Impairment or Speech-Language Impairment.

Figure 4. Share of Students with Disabilities Eligible under Specific Learning Disability and Total Enrollment of Students Eligible for Special Education, 2011- through 2025
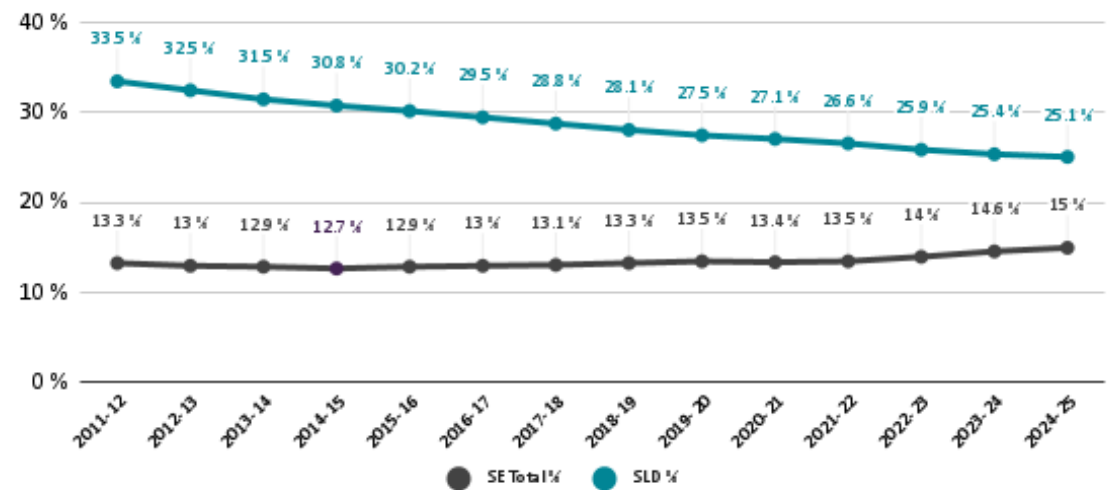
To provide students with disabilities the services and supports to which they are entitled under IDEA, several enabling conditions must be met

Research and advocacy suggest the following enabling conditions are necessary to adequately support students with disabilities and their families in accordance with IDEA:

1 **Adequate and Equitable Funding.** The special education system relies on mixed funding streams – including grants from the federal government and state and district funds – to pay for the specialized services and supports that students need to access the general education curriculum.[1,2]

2 **Trained and Qualified Special Educators and General Educators.** Ensuring service provision for students with disabilities requires schools to hire, continue to train, and retain qualified educators, support staff, and administrators. Without credentialed staff in these roles, schools cannot provide high-quality educational opportunities for students with disabilities, and students and their families do not get what they need to thrive.[1]

3 **Robust Data Systems.** Data serves a pivotal role in special education, enabling educators, administrators, and families to make informed decisions in the best interests of students.[3] This can include everything from classroom-level reporting on individual student progress to state and federal reporting on IDEA indicators. Without well-connected, centralized data systems that clearly define and track key metrics, educators, families, and advocates cannot get a clear sense of what is working and for whom, and what needs to be improved.

To provide students with disabilities the services and supports to which they are entitled under IDEA, several enabling conditions must be met

Research and advocacy suggest the following enabling conditions are necessary to adequately support students with disabilities and their families in accordance with IDEA:

4

Early and Accurate Identification of Disabilities. Early identification allows for earlier intervention, which is critical for better long-term outcomes. In AAoM's 2024 Special Education Experience Survey, which gathered nearly 900 responses, over half (51%) of Michigan parents of students with disabilities said their child's disability should have been identified sooner.[1]

5

Strong State Accountability and Guidance. To strengthen statewide implementation of IDEA, states need to establish a clear accountability framework that includes measurable expectations for districts, timely and transparent complaint resolution and follow-up, and regular public reporting.[2] The state should also publish practical, up-to-date guidance and decision tools on topics like alternate assessment participation and least restrictive environment; pair that guidance with training and technical assistance; and regularly monitor and adjust based on data.[3]

6

Collaboration between special educators and other staff that supports inclusion and belonging. Experts and advocates have noted that special education staff often work in silos within schools and districts.[4] They call for a mindset shift so that all educators are adequately trained to support students with disabilities and share responsibility for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are set up for greater success when general educators lead day-to-day instruction with special educators and related-service providers as integrated partners, and schools ensure protected co-planning time, high-quality co-teaching and teachers design lessons using a Universal Design for Learning approach and tiered academic and behavioral supports.[5,6]

Overview of Recommendations

1. Strengthen Funding & Infrastructure

- Implement the Michigan Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint.
- Ensure funding reflects the true cost of serving students with disabilities.
- Invest in robust, centralized data systems and transparent reporting.

2. Build & Sustain a Qualified Workforce

- Expand pipelines: Grow Your Own, Talent Together, tuition reimbursement, MI Future Educator Fellowships.
- Adopt OPTIMISE recommendations for hard-to-staff roles.
- Provide ongoing training on early identification, inclusive practices, UDL, and evidence-based instruction.

3. Improve Instruction, Inclusion & School Climate

- Make inclusion meaningful through qualified educators, co-planning, and high-quality instruction.
- Expand use of evidence-based literacy and math interventions.
- Reduce suspension, restraint, and seclusion by adopting trauma-informed, non-exclusionary practice

4. Strengthen Accountability & Transparency

- Set high expectations for IDEA targets and track parity with nondisabled peers.
- Require school boards to review IDEA reports and engage families publicly.
- Benchmark Michigan's results against high-performing states.

5. Ensure Equitable Pathways to Postsecondary Success

- Improve transition planning using the MITT framework.
- Expand access to CTE, dual enrollment, and work-based learning.
- Reduce overuse of alternate assessments, including eliminating the Functional Independence tier.

6. Engage, Inform & Empower Families

- Make data accessible and actionable for parents.
- Expand parent support through Michigan Alliance for Families, Disability Rights Michigan, and community-based advocacy networks.
- Encourage parent participation in state and local decision-making.
- Promote strong IEP practices: written requests, early access to documents, and advocate involvement.

Now is a crucial moment to understand outcomes for students with disabilities and advocate for improvement

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This landmark federal civil rights law ensures students with disabilities have access to educational opportunities. The 50th anniversary is a prime time for states across the nation to examine the experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities and recommit to improving special education.

The FY 2026 Michigan school aid budget increased special education spending by $205 million, bringing the total state funding to $2.8 billion (including Foundation Allowance).[1] Despite this increase, special education remains underfunded, with districts having to pick up the shortfall of state and federal funding.[2] Advocates and policymakers in Michigan are working for a more equitable weighted student funding approach for special education.[3] **To measure progress and ensure accountability, Michigan needs a clear understanding of where things stand today for students with disabilities.**

Persistent gaps in graduation rates, inclusion, and postsecondary outcomes, particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, highlight the urgent need for coordinated policy action. This moment presents Michigan with an opportunity to align funding, supports, and accountability measures to close these disparities and ensure that **all students with disabilities can thrive.**

Together, these developments make this a opportune time for policymakers to act.

This inaugural report compiles and analyzes data on the state of special education in Michigan, using key indicators identified by AAoM in collaboration with experts and advocates to build a shared understanding of how Michigan is serving students with disabilities.

We examined four key categories of indicators:

Preschool Experiences	K-12 Experiences and Outcomes	Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes	Dispute Resolution & Family Engagement

Our Approach

These domains align with the Federal IDEA Part B State Performance Plan/ Annual Performance Review (SPP/APR) indicators that Michigan is required to report on annually.

Researchers examined publicly available data, conducting both aggregated and disaggregated analyses to provide a high-level view of access, services, and outcomes of students who receive special education services.

Why does disaggregation matter?

When data on students with disabilities is reported only in aggregate, it can obscure inequities and overlook which groups of students are thriving or being left behind. Disaggregating data by characteristics such as disability type, gender, race, or geography can help reveal patterns that can help with equitable decision-making.

Unless otherwise noted, all indicators align with IDEA's Annual Performance Plan/ State Performance Review (SPP/APR) definitions and methodologies .

Please see the Appendix for our notes on language and definitions

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"Even people working in schools don't always understand how special education works–how funding flows, who's responsible, or what parents' rights are. That confusion trickles down to families."

— Researcher and Advocate

For each indicator category, key information is included.

Context, Rationale, and Indicators

Current State

Category I: Preschool Experiences

Context and Rationale

The earliest years of life are a critical period for brain development. Research has shown that children who receive services for developmental delays or disabilities in preschool or earlier are more likely to develop the communication, cognitive, and social skills they will need to reach their potential as they grow.[1]

Section 619 of IDEA Part B, also referred to as "Preschool Grants," ensures that additional funding is available for states and districts to provide special education services to preschool-aged children (ages 3-5).[2] During the 2024 fiscal year, Michigan received $16.3 million in Section 619 funding.[3]

Indicator and Key Data Reported

Given the importance of early childhood experiences in students' growth and development, the report tracks the educational environments* where preschool-aged children with disabilities receive special education services.

I. Preschool Experiences

1-1 Early Learning Environment

- % of students with disabilities ages 3-5 receiving 10+ hours of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program.
- % of students with disabilities ages 3-5 receiving special education and related services in the home.
- % of students with disabilities ages 3-5 receiving special education in other environments.

Example

Category I: Preschool Experiences

1-1 Early Learning Environment

Few preschool students with disabilities in Michigan are educated in regular early childhood programs, limiting early access to inclusive settings

Early Learning Environment

Students with disabilities receiving:	Michigan	National
A majority (10+ hours) of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program 2023-24	21%	43%
Special education and related services in the home 2023-24	2%	2%
Instruction in other environments (e.g., a separate special education class, separate school or residential facility) 2023-24	44%	22%

Key Takeaways

- Nearly half of young students with disabilities in Michigan receive instruction outside of the regular early childhood program.
- Michigan lags behind the US average in including preschool students in inclusive environments.

Sources: CEPI SPRYAPR, 2023-24 (Michigan); OSEP: Child Count & Educational Environments, 2023-24 (National). N Students with Disabilities: 13,353 (Michigan); 578,090 (National).

Example

Each category starts with an overview of the context and rationale along with the key indicator(s) and domain(s) being reported.

Following the category overview, the current status of the indicators is provided, including data from Michigan and comparisons at the national level, where applicable. Please consult the data notes and methodology to understand the reasons behind the selection of specific data sources and the variations in the dates of these sources.

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This report includes data on special education in Michigan spanning the birth

1. Preschool Experiences	2. K-12 Experiences and Outcomes	
1-1 Early Learning Environment	**2-1 School-age Learning Environment**	**2-2 Learning Outcomes**
• Regular early childhood program • Home environment • Other setting	• Regular classroom (80% or higher, 40-79%, below 40%) • Other setting	• Participation in general and alternate state assessments • Performance on general state assessments • Performance on NAEP
	2-3 Discipline and Attendance	**2-4 Qualified Professionals**
	• Suspension/expulsion • Seclusion/restraint • Chronic absenteeism	• Certification & appropriate placement • Teacher vacancies

3. Secondary and Postsecondary outcomes

3-1 Secondary Outcomes

- Graduation
- Dropout

3-2 High school Outcomes

- Enrolled in higher Education
- Competitively employed
- Other postsecondary or employment

4. Dispute Resolution and Family Engagement

4-1 Dispute Resolution

- Written state complaints filed
- Written state complaints resulting in noncompliance

4-2 Family Engagement

- Facilitated parental involvement

All federal indicators that are part of IDEA Section 618 reporting available at IDEA Data.org.[2] Some indicators are cross-listed.

"Parents have to know how to advocate for their kids–but they shouldn't have to fight for basic rights. The goal should be partnership, not survival…When systems listen, everyone benefits."

— Advocate

THE STATE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN

This section provides a high-level summary of findings on the state of special education in Michigan based on publicly available data on key indicators.

Category 1: Preschool Experiences

Context and Rationale

The earliest years of life are a critical period for brain development. Research has shown that children who receive services for developmental delays or disabilities in preschool or earlier are more likely to develop the communication, cognitive, and social skills they will need to reach their potential as they grow.[1]

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Indicator and Key Data

Given the importance of early childhood experiences in students' growth and development, the report tracks the educational environments* where preschool-aged children with disabilities receive special education services.

1. Preschool Experiences

1-1 Early Learning Environment

- % of students with disabilities ages 3-5 receiving 10+ hours of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program.
- % of students with disabilities ages 3-5 receiving special education and related services in the home.
- % of students with disabilities ages 3-5 receiving special education in other environments.

*IDEA defines an educational environment as any setting where a child aged 3-5 receives specially designed instruction to meet their unique needs in the least restrictive environment.[4] Educational environments can include Head Start and Early Head Start, state-funded & private early education programs, home based care, faith-based preschool, etc.[5]

Category 1. Preschool Experiences

1-1 Early Learning Environment

Few preschool students with disabilities in Michigan are educated in regular early childhood programs, limiting early access to inclusive settings

Early Learning Environment

Students with disabilities receiving:	Michigan	National
A majority (10+ hours) of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program *2023-24*	21%	43%
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Key Takeaways

- Nearly half of young students with disabilities in Michigan receive instruction outside of the regular early childhood program.
- Michigan lags behind the US average in including preschool students in inclusive environments.

Category 2. K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-1 School-Age Learning Environment

Access to a high-quality education is critical for students' growth and development.

Context and Rationale	Indicator and Key Data Reported

Access to a high-quality education is critical for students' growth and development[1]

For students with disabilities, it means access to rigorous instruction, inclusive environments, and skilled educators who prepare them for lifelong success[2].

We report the K-12 experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities in terms of the:

- **Educational environments** in which they receive services,

- **Learning outcomes** they achieve,

- **Behavioral corrections and discipline** they receive,

- **Attendance**, and

- **Access to qualified professionals**

Category 2. K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-1 School-Age Learning Environment

Access to a high-quality education is critical for students' growth and development.

2-1 School-age Learning Environment	2-2 Learning Outcomes	3. Discipline and Attendance	4. Qualified Professionals
% of students with disabilities educated inside a regular class ≥80% of the day	% of students with disabilities who participate in general and alternate state assessments	% of students with disabilities suspended or expelled	% of appropriately certified and placed SPED teachers
% of students with disabilities educated inside a regular class <40% of the day	% of students with disabilities who score proficient or advanced on general state assessments %of students with disabilities who take alternate assessment	% of students with disabilities secluded or restrained	% of special education vacancies
% of students with disabilities completing their education in other environments	% of students with disabilities who score proficient or advanced on the NAEP	% of students with disabilities who are chronically absent	

Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-1 School-Age Learning Environment

Michigan performs above the national average in supporting K-12 students with disabilities in regular classroom environments

K-12 Educational Environments (age 5-21)

Students with disabilities:	Michigan	National
Educated inside Regular Classroom 80% or More of the Day *2023-24*	73%	68
Educated inside Regular Classroom 40% to 79% of the Day *2023-24*	11%	15%
Educated inside Regular Classroom Less than 40% of the Day *2023-24*	10%	12%
Completed education in other environments (i.e., correctional facilities, private schools, homebound/hospitals) *2023-24*	4%	5%

Key Takeaways

- Michigan places a larger share of K-12 students with disabilities in regular classroom settings compared with the national average, with 73% spending at least 80% of their day in a regular classroom compared to 69% nationally.
- Statewide, 10% of students with disabilities are educated in settings where less than 40% of their day is spent in regular classrooms, matching the national average for this setting.
- Only a small share (5% or less) of students with disabilities complete their education in other environments, such as private schools or residential facilities in Michigan and nationally, indicating that most students with disabilities remain in public school settings for the majority of their school day.

Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-2 Learning Outcomes

In Michigan, the gap between participation in general assessments and the 99% state-set target is larger in later grades

Participation in General State Assessments

Students with disabilities who participate in:	Michigan		National	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
4th grade M-STEP (Michigan) and National general assessments (National) *2023-24*	98%	98%	93%	92%
8th grade PSAT (Michigan) and National general assessments (National) *2023-24*	95%	95%	92%	91%
High school SAT(Michigan) and National general assessments (National) *2023-24*	91%	91%	91%	90%

Key Takeaways

- Michigan consistently reports higher assessment participation rates than the national average for students with disabilities, especially at the 4th-grade level; however, no grade or subject achieves the 99% target.
- Students with disabilities in 4th grade have the highest participation rates in math and ELA assessments compared to those in 8th grade and high school, in Michigan and nationally. The gap in participation across grades is larger in Michigan than nationally.

Category 1: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-2 Learning Outcomes

Assessment Results Reveal Significant Equity Gaps for Students With Disabilities

Performance on Regular State Math and English Language Arts (ELA) Assessments

Students with disabilities who score proficient or advanced on the:	Students with Disabilities		Students *without* Disabilities	
	Math	ELA		
4th grade M-STEP general assessments (National) *2022-23*	16%	18%	43%	48%
8th grade PSAT general assessments *2022-23*	5%	23%	36%	70%
High school SAT general assessments *2022-23*	3%	13%	29%	55%

Key Takeaways

- Proficiency rates for students with disabilities are consistently low across all grades and subjects in Michigan.
- In math, the average percent of students with disabilities proficient or advanced on the regular assessment is 27 percentage points lower than the average for non-disabled peers.
- In ELA, the average percent of students with disabilities proficient or advanced on the regular assessment is 32 percentage points lower than the average for non-disabled peers.

"A diploma doesn't mean much if students leave without confidence or the ability to self-advocate. That's the real measure of success.."

— Parent Advocate

Alternate Assessments (AA)

Alternate assessments, such as Michigan's **MI-Access**, are intended to provide students with the most significant cognitive disabilities an accessible way to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.[1] Under federal law, participation in alternate assessments must be limited to only those students with significant cognitive impairments for whom the general assessment, even with accommodations, would not yield valid results.[2]

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reinforces this requirement by establishing a **1% statewide participation cap** on alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards. This cap reflects federal expectations that only a very small percentage of students should qualify for alternate assessments. Exceeding this threshold is a strong indicator that too many students are being inappropriately assessed outside the general assessment system.[3]

When used appropriately, alternate assessment data can support educators and IEP teams in tailoring instruction, identifying necessary accommodations, and ensuring students receive timely and targeted supports to progress toward grade-level alternate achievement standards.

However, Michigan's implementation of alternate assessments has presented longstanding challenges. AAoM and other advocates have raised concerns that too many students—particularly autistic students and students with complex communication needs—are inappropriately routed to alternate assessments, limiting their access to rigorous academic content and high expectations. Overuse of alternate assessments can have lifelong consequences, including reduced access to advanced coursework, transition opportunities, and future employment and independent living pathways. Michigan has exceeded the ESSA 1% threshold in multiple years, underscoring the systemic nature of the problem.[4]

Michigan's current alternate assessment, MI-Access, includes three levels that differ in complexity and expectations:

1. Supported Independence (SI): For students who need significant support but can demonstrate limited independence.

2. Functional Independence (FI): For students who can perform many tasks with minimal assistance.

3. Participation (P): For students requiring the highest level of support.

AAoM has recommended that Michigan eliminate the Functional Independence level—which is unique to Michigan and inconsistent with federal guidance—because its broad criteria have contributed to inappropriate placement of students who do not have significant cognitive impairments. Strengthening criteria, improving oversight, and ensuring that IEP teams receive guidance rooted in evidence and federal requirements are essential steps toward aligning Michigan's system with IDEA and ESSA expectations and safeguarding students' access to grade-level instruction.[5]

Michigan's continued struggle to meet federal participation limits further illustrates the urgency of reform.

ESSA restricts alternate assessment participation to no more than 1% of all tested students, yet Michigan has consistently exceeded this cap. The state received waivers from the U.S. Department of Education from 2018 through 2022; however, waiver requests in 2023 and 2024 were denied due to insufficient reductions in MI-Access participation and incomplete assessment participation rates. In 2022–23, Michigan's participation rate remained approximately 1.8%, highlighting persistent misalignment with federal expectations and the need for corrective action.

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Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-2 Learning Outcomes

High Participation in MI-Access Raises Concerns About Appropriate Assessment Placement

Students with disabilities who score proficient or advanced on the MI-Access alternate assessments:

	Math	ELA
4th grade Mi-Access alternate assessments *2023-24*	45%	58%
8th grade Mi-Access alternate assessments *2023-24*	47%	62%
11th grade Mi-Access alternate assessments *2023-24*	55%	63%

Key Takeaways

- Participation in MI-Access alternate assessments remains well above the 1% threshold established under ESSA, highlighting concerns about appropriate placement of students in alternate assessments.
- Overuse of MI-Access may limit students' access to grade-level academic content, rigorous coursework, and postsecondary opportunities.
- These patterns underscore the need for strengthened guidance, oversight, and alignment with IDEA and ESSA requirements to ensure that only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities take alternate assessments.

Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-2 Learning Outcomes

MI-Access Alternate Assessment: Participation by Selected Subgroups

Participation in alternate assessment, Mi-Access, by content area (ELA) and demographic subgroup (selected): *2023-24*

	Assessment Participation		% of Students tested using MI-Access
	Students tested via MI-Access	Students tested - all assessments	
All Students	12,757	705,179	1.8%
English Learner	790	49,669	1.6%
Economically Disadvantaged	8,765	387,806	2.3%
African American	3,469	124,745	2.8%
Hispanic	1,120	64,067	1.7%
White	7,061	448,002	1.7%

Key Takeaways

- Participation rates vary across student subgroups, with higher rates among African American students (2.8%) and economically disadvantaged students (2.3%), indicating potential disparities in assignment to alternate assessments.
- Subgroup differences highlight the need for careful oversight to ensure that MI-Access is used only for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, in accordance with federal guidance.

Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-2 Learning Outcomes

MI-Access Alternate Assessment: Participation by Selected Subgroups

Participation in alternate assessment, Mi-Access, by content area (Math) and demographic subgroup (selected): *2023-24*	Assessment Participation		% of Students tested using MI-Access
	Students tested via MI-Access	Students tested - all assessments	
All Students	12,616	707,185	1.8%
English Learner	785	52,047	1.5%
Economically Disadvantaged	8,654	388,767	2.2%
African American	3,443	124,776	2.8%
Hispanic	1,106	65,234	1.7%
White	6,972	448,334	1.6%

Key Takeaways

- Participation rates vary across student subgroups, with higher rates among African American students (2.8%) and economically disadvantaged students (2.3%), indicating potential disparities in assignment to alternate assessments.
- Subgroup differences highlight the need for careful oversight to ensure that MI-Access is used only for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, in accordance with federal guidance.

"Michigan must do better for students with disabilities. We need strong leadership willing to confront honest data and act with urgency to ensure all students thrive in high-quality, inclusive education settings."

— Heather Eckner, AAoM, Director of Statewide Education

Addressing Overreliance on Alternate Assessment

Throughout 2025, the Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) has provided public comment at State Board of Education (SBE) meetings on advocacy priorities, including calling attention to the continued challenge in Michigan's use of alternate assessments for students with disabilities.

AAoM has highlighted the overreliance on MI-Access and its impact on educational outcomes:

- **Federal Compliance Concerns:**
Michigan's waiver request to exceed the 1% federal cap on alternate assessment participation was denied for the third consecutive year (2024–25), citing insufficient progress.

- **Overrepresentation of Students in MI-Access:**
In 2022–23, approximately 1.8% of students with disabilities participated in the alternate assessment. Many may be assigned without adequate justification, risking long-term educational disadvantages.

- **Impact on Graduation and Postsecondary Opportunities:**
Students placed in MI-ACCESS often receive a Certificate of Completion rather than a regular high school diploma. Only 61% (2024) of Michigan students with disabilities graduate on time with a regular diploma, compared with 86% of peers without disabilities—a 25-percentage-point gap.

AAoM Recommendations for Immediate Action:
1. **Withdraw the Functional Independence Tier:**
This tier disproportionately includes students who may not meet criteria for alternate assessment, resulting in unnecessary educational segregation.
1. **Regular Reporting to the State Board of Education:**
Provide updates on participation rates, progress toward the 1% cap, and strategies for reducing overreliance on alternate assessment.

AAoM's Ongoing Advocacy Efforts:
- Blueprint for Alternate Assessment Cap Compliance[1], submitted to the SBE and MDE (Nov 2024)
- Public comment[2] on Michigan's waiver request (April 2025)
- State Board of Education testimony[3] (May 2025)

Why This Matters:
The overuse of MI-ACCESS violates federal guidelines and perpetuates inequities in outcomes for students with disabilities. AAoM calls on Michigan to take decisive action to ensure meaningful high school diplomas and equitable educational opportunities for all students.
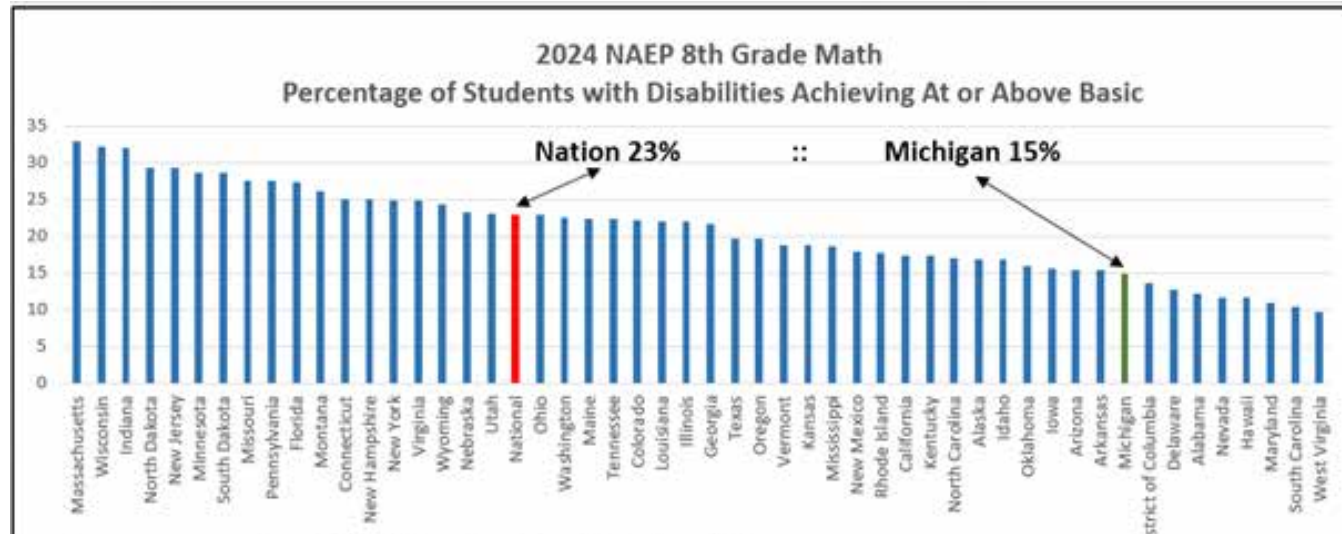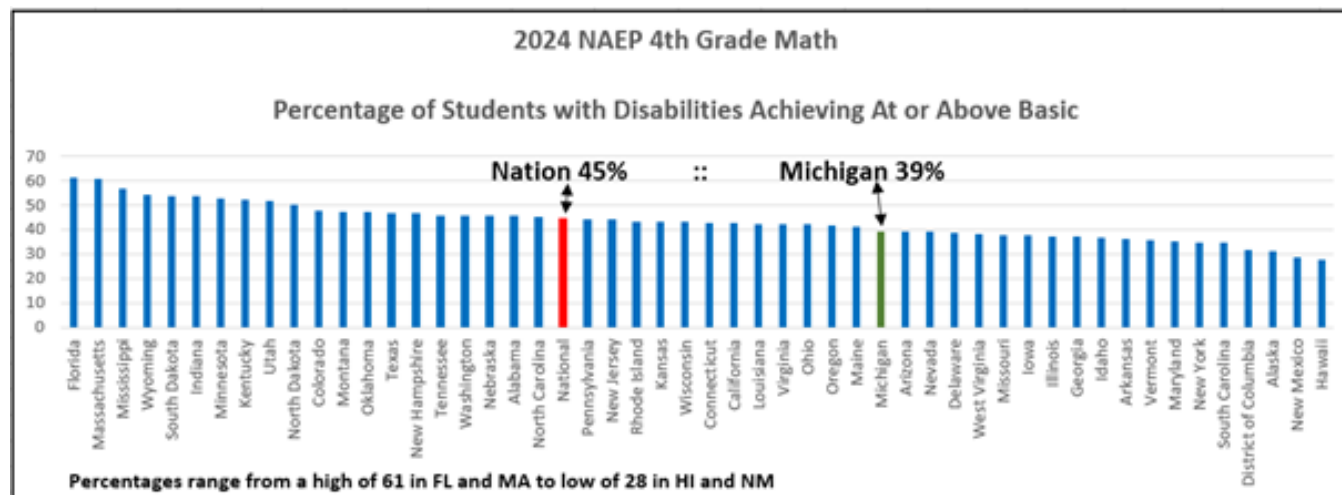
Learn More:
Public comment and advocacy resources: https://mipaac.org/advocacy/

National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the "Nation's Report Card," is the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. NAEP mathematics and reading assessments are given every two years to a nationally representative sample of students in fourth and eighth grades.

2024 NAEP 4th Grade Math

Percentage of Students with Disabilities Achieving At or Above Basic

Nation 45% :: Michigan 39%

Percentages range from a high of 61 in FL and MA to low of 28 in HI and NM

2024 NAEP 8th Grade Math

Percentage of Students with Disabilities Achieving At or Above Basic

Nation 23% :: Michigan 15%

Sources: The Nation's Report Card

NAEP provides an important comparison across states and between student groups (e.g., Black students, Hispanic students, students with disabilities, English learners). NAEP assesses fourth and eighth grades because these grades represent critical junctures in academic achievement.

2024 NAEP 4th Grade Reading

Percentage of Students with Disabilities Achieving At or Above Basic

Nation 26%   ::   Michigan 20%

Percentages range from a high of 38 in MA to low of 12 in HI

2024 NAEP 8th Grade Reading

Percentage of Students with Disabilities Achieving At or Above Basic

Nation 31% : Michigan 29%

Percentages range from a high of 43 in MA to low of 14 in HI and WV
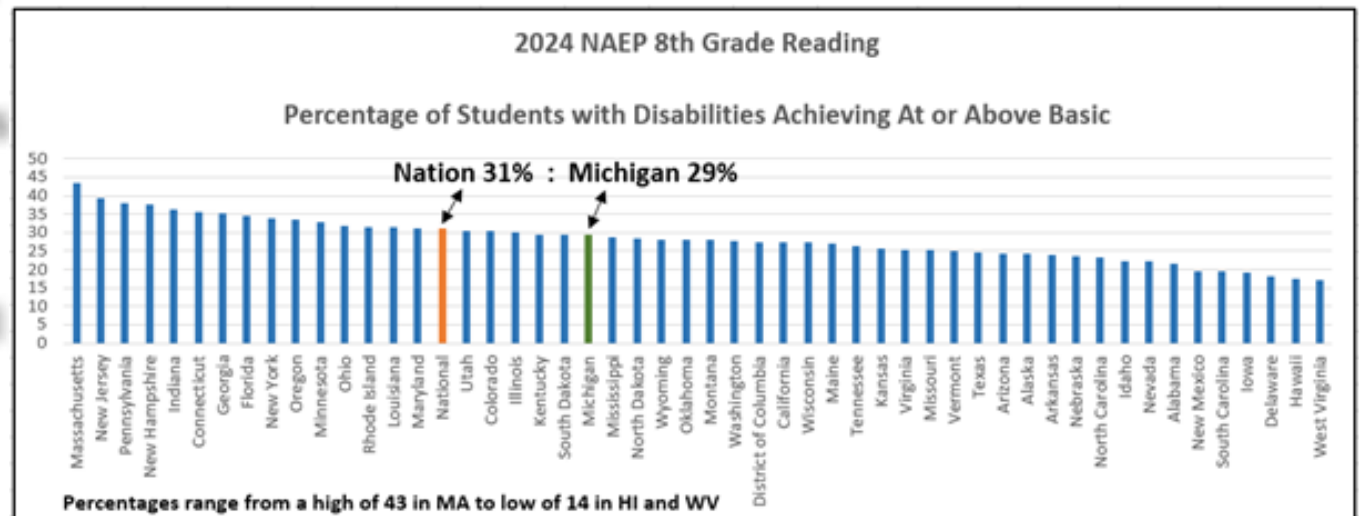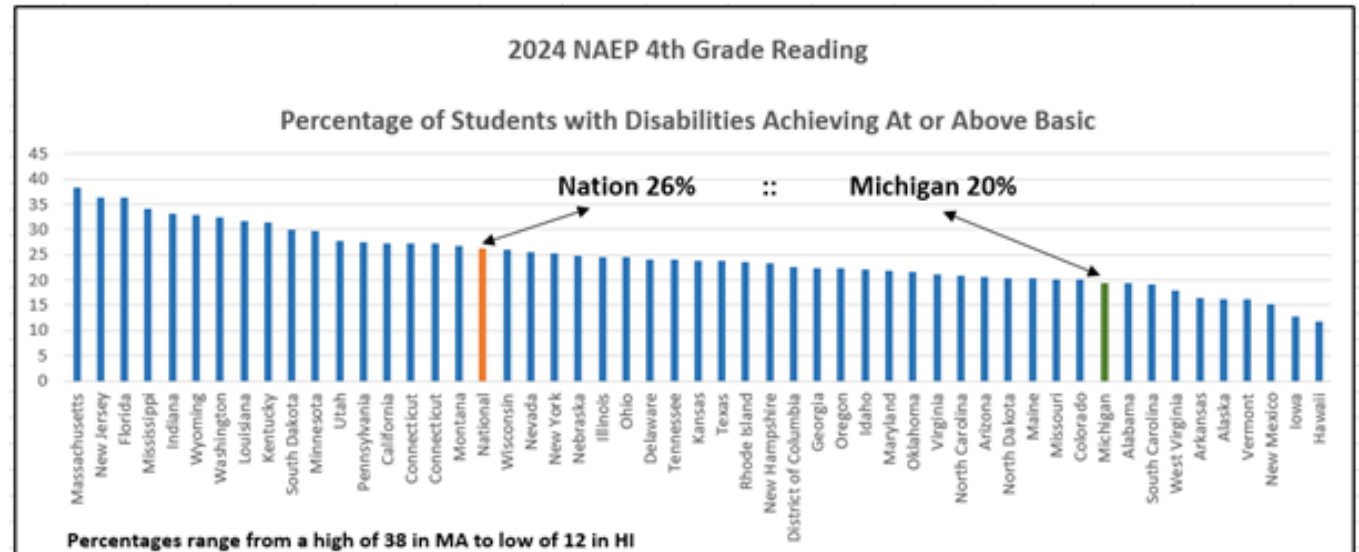
Sources: The Nation's Report Card

Category 1: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-2 Learning Outcomes

NAEP Performance of Students with Disabilities: Michigan Compared to National Results

Performance on NAEP

Students with Disabilities in:	Michigan		National	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
4th grade who score proficient or advanced *2023-24*	13%	6%	15%	9%
8th grade who score proficient or advanced *2023-24*	2%	4%	5%	6%

Key Takeaways

- Proficiency rates are extremely low overall, particularly in middle school, highlighting persistent gaps in academic outcomes for students with disabilities.
- The data underscore the need for targeted supports and high-quality instruction to improve outcomes across grade levels.

Sources: NAEP Data Explorer, 2023-24 (National). **N Estimate Using Students with Disabilities Sample Size:** 18,180 (National, 4th Grade), 392 (Michigan, 4th Grade), 15,353 (National, 8th Grade), 338 (Michigan, 8th Grade)

NAEP performance levels – Basic, Proficient and Advanced – measure what students should know and be able to do at the grade assessed. NAEP also reports the proportion of students whose scores place them below the Basic achievement level, termed BELOW BASIC.

BASIC represents partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade assessed.
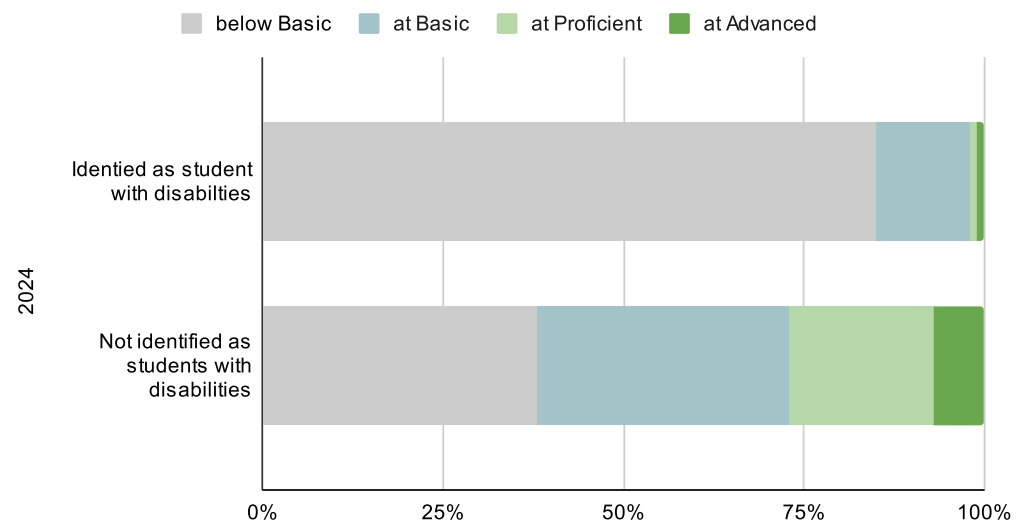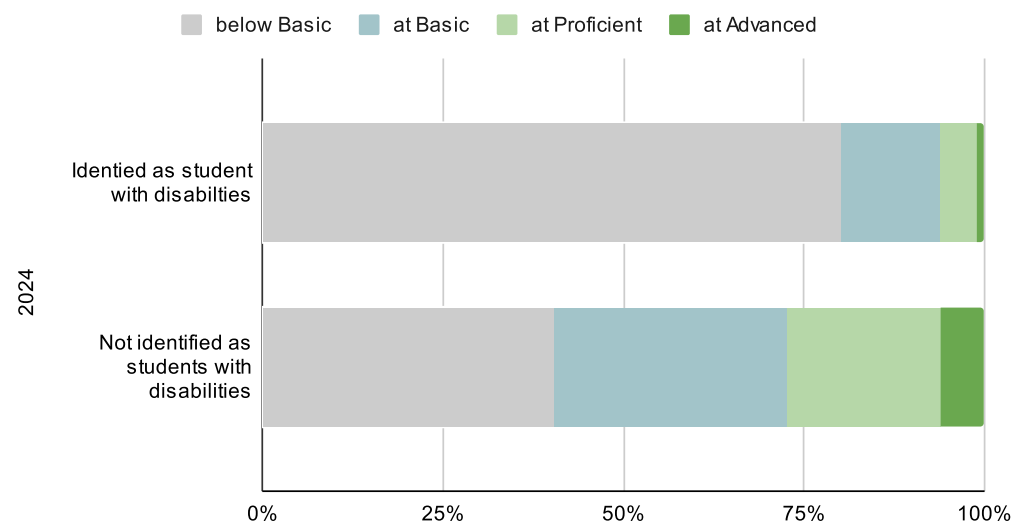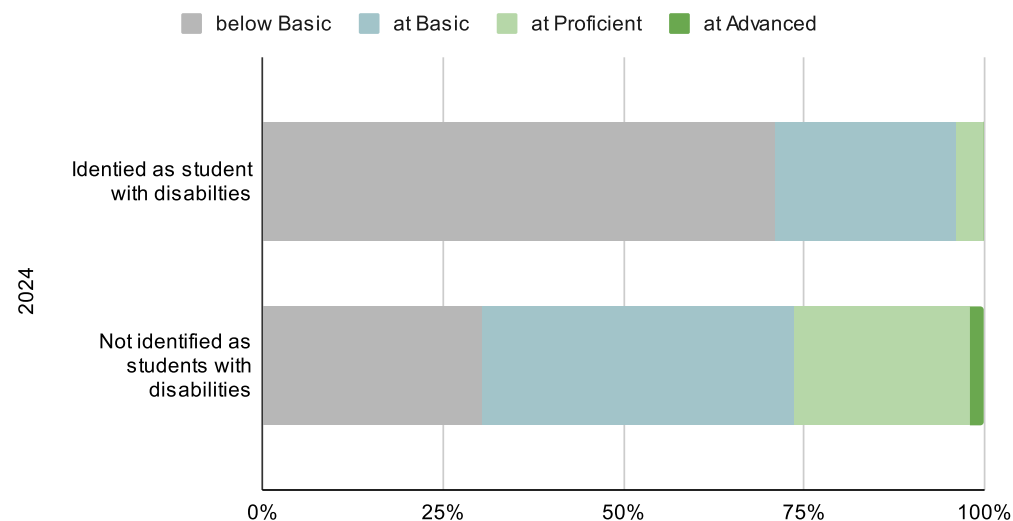
PROFICIENT represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

ADVANCED represents superior performance at each grade assessed.

NAEP | MATH 4th Grade

Legend: below Basic · at Basic · at Proficient · at Advanced

NAEP | MATH 8th Grade

Legend: below Basic · at Basic · at Proficient · at Advanced

NAEP performance levels – Basic, Proficient and Advanced – measure what students should know and be able to do at the grade assessed. NAEP also reports the proportion of students whose scores place them below the Basic achievement level, termed BELOW BASIC.

BASIC represents partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade assessed.

PROFICIENT represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

ADVANCED represents superior performance at each grade assessed.

NAEP | READING 4th Grade

Legend: below Basic | at Basic | at Proficient | at Advanced

2024
- Identied as student with disabilties
- Not identified as students with disabilities

(x-axis: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%)

NAEP | READING 8th Grade

Legend: below Basic | at Basic | at Proficient | at Advanced

2024
- Identied as student with disabilties
- Not identified as students with disabilities

(x-axis: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%)

"We have to stop thinking inclusion is just placement. It's about access to rigorous content, supported by people who believe every student can succeed."

— Advocate

Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-3 Discipline and Attendance

Michigan reports more students with disabilities experiencing exclusionary discipline practices and chronic absenteeism compared with the national average

Discipline

	Michigan	National
Students with disabilities suspended (in- or out-of-school) or expelled *2023-24*	16%	14%
Share of students with disabilities among all students secluded or restrained (mechanical and physical) *2023-24*	77%	70%

Attendance

	Michigan	National
Students with disabilities reported as chronically absent (10 percent or more of instructional days missed) *2023-24*	40%	36%

Key Takeaways

- These data indicate that students with disabilities in Michigan continue to face disproportionate disciplinary and attendance challenges, emphasizing the need for proactive interventions and inclusive practices.

Ending Harmful Seclusion and Restraint in Michigan Schools

Michigan students with disabilities continue to face harm from the inappropriate use of seclusion and restraint in schools. Data compiled by Michigan Advocates to End Seclusion and Restraint[1] show that seclusion or restraint was used more than 21,000 times during the 2023–24 school year, with 93% of instances involving students with disabilities. Thirty-three Michigan districts reported using seclusion or restraint at least once per day on average.

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) July 2025 settlement with Montcalm Area Intermediate School District confirmed systemic misuse of these practices, violating civil rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Despite statewide legislation in 2016 and administrative guidance aligned with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), implementation and oversight remain inconsistent, leaving students at risk of trauma, exclusion, and discrimination.

Key Findings:
- In Montcalm, students with disabilities were secluded or restrained over 2,400 times, often for non-emergency situations.
- Statewide survey data (AAoM SEE Survey[2]) revealed:
  - 34% of families reported their child experienced restraint or seclusion.
  - 72% of incidents occurred in non-emergency contexts.
  - 61% of students experienced emotional trauma as a result.
  - Nearly 40% of parents were not informed in a timely manner.

AAoM Recommendations[3]:
1. **Prohibit Seclusion Statewide** – Enact legislation or MDE guidance banning all forms of seclusion.
2. **Restrict Restraint to True Emergencies** – Use only in imminent danger situations, with rigorous oversight and mandatory parent notification.
3. **Mandate Trauma-Informed Training** – Require all staff to be trained in trauma-informed care, PBIS, and de-escalation strategies.
4. **Ensure Data Transparency and Public Accountability** – Report all incidents publicly, disaggregated by disability, race, and setting; notify families within 24 hours.
5. **Enact Family-Centered Oversight** – Establish panels including parents and advocates to review practices and advise ISDs.

Call to Action:
- AAoM urges families, educators, advocates, and policymakers to:
- Support statewide legislation banning seclusion and regulating restraint.
- Elevate family and youth voices to influence policy and practice.
- Monitor and review school discipline policies, filing complaints when necessary.
- Organize public forums and community discussions on safe, inclusive alternatives.
- File civil rights complaints with the DOJ or U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights if violations occur.

Michigan must act decisively to ensure every student with a disability is protected from harmful disciplinary practices and afforded safe, inclusive educational opportunities. Reform must reach every district, classroom, and child to uphold civil rights and equity.

Category 2: K-12 Experiences and Outcomes

2-4 Discipline and Attendance

While there is a shortage of special educators in Michigan, nearly all working special educators are appropriately certified and placed

Qualified Professionals

	Michigan
Special education teachers who are appropriately certified and placed *2024-25*	**90%**
Special education vacancies *Fall 2023*	**3.2%**

Key Takeaways

- Michigan reports 90% of their special education teachers are appropriately certified and placed, which is lower than across other key subject areas.
- Michigan reports a small but significant shortage of special education teachers, at 3.2%. This is higher than the vacancy rate in Michigan for any other subject.
- Strategies to combat teacher shortages should target the specific communities and specialization areas that are most in need of teachers.

"The shortage of educators, especially in special education, is the biggest challenge When I was a special education director 20 years ago, I had more applicants than I needed. Now, it's constant churn--teachers leave as soon as they can earn more elsewhere."

— Michigan Department of Education Staff.

Category 3: Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes

Context and Rationale

Although most students with disabilities can achieve the same academic outcomes as their non-disabled peers[1,2] when they are afforded an inclusive and supportive educational environment,[3] research demonstrates that students with disabilities across the nation are more likely than their non-disabled peers to dropout of high school and struggle to maintain employment.[4]

Indicator and Key Data Reported

We present the secondary and postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities in terms of:
- Graduation and dropout rates for students with disabilities, and
- Involvement in post-secondary education or employment.

Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes

3-1 Secondary Outcomes

% of students with disabilities graduating high school with a regular diploma

% of students with disabilities dropping out of high school

3-2 Postsecondary Outcomes

% of students with disabilities who, within one year of leaving high school, have been employed or enrolled in higher education or some other postsecondary education/ training program

50

Category 3: Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes

3-1: Secondary Outcomes
3-2: Postsecondary Outcomes

Unequal Pathways: Michigan Students With Disabilities Are Less Likely to Graduate and More Likely to Drop Out

Secondary Outcomes

	Michigan SwD	Michigan Nondisabled	National SwD	National all students
Graduated with a regular diploma in 4 years (4-year ACGR cohort) *2022-23*	60%	85%	71%	87%
Dropped out of high school (6-year ACGR cohort) *2022-23*	21%	11%	NA	NA

Postsecondary Outcomes, 2023-24

	Michigan	National
Students with disabilities who, within one year of leaving high school, have been competitively employed, enrolled in higher education, or enrolled in some other postsecondary education/training program *2023-24*	78%	NA

Key Takeaways

- **Michigan students with disabilities graduate at far lower rates** than their nondisabled peers (60% vs. 85%), reflecting one of the widest gaps in the education system.
- **Dropout rates are disproportionately high** for Michigan students with disabilities—21%, nearly double the rate for nondisabled students (11%), signaling unmet needs and insufficient supports.

Category 4: Dispute Resolution and Family Engagement

Context and Rationale

Family engagement is essential for the success of all students. For students with disabilities, persistent gaps in services and systemic barriers often mean that families must step in to advocate to ensure their children receive the instruction and supports guaranteed under IDEA. Parents and parents should be key partners on IEP teams, collaborating with schools to develop individualized support plans that ensure students have the necessary services and resources to be successful.[1,2]

One key way that families engage with schools and advocate on behalf of students with disabilities is through the dispute resolution process. Families and schools can sometimes disagree on the services students need or how to deliver them effectively. The dispute resolution process helps parents and schools navigate those disagreements using tools such as mediation and due process complaints.[3]

Indicator and Key Data Reported

We measure family engagement and dispute resolution for students with disabilities in terms of:

- **Parent-reported involvement** in school-facilitated engagement opportunities, and

- District reports of **complaints filed and where non-compliance is found**.

Dispute Resolution and Family Engagement

4-1 Dispute Resolution

of written state complaints filed

% of state complaints with findings of noncompliance

4-2 Family Engagement

% of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement

52

Category 4: Dispute Resolution and Family Engagement

4-1: Dispute Resolution
4-2: Family Engagement

While there is a shortage of special educators in Michigan, nearly all working special educators are appropriately certified and placed

Dispute Resolution and Family Engagement

	Michigan	National
Total number of written state complaints *2023-24*	589	9,927
Written state complaints filed (per 10K child count)	12.5	13.1
Total number of written state complaints with findings of noncompliance *2023-24*	130	3696
Written state complaints with findings of noncompliance per 10K child count)	6.6	4.9
Parents who agree that their school facilitates parent involvement to improve outcomes for their children *2022-23*	60%	NA

Key Takeaways

- Michigan reports fewer total written state complaints than the national average, but a higher share of complaints result in findings of noncompliance, suggesting that when families raise concerns, their issues are often substantiated.
- Parent engagement remains a concern, with only 60% of parents reporting that their school facilitates meaningful involvement, indicating room for improvement in fostering collaboration between families and schools.

AAoM's 2024 Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey sheds additional light on parent perspectives, highlighting five key issue areas

| 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" |

AAoM's SEE Survey report compiled survey responses from 890 parents, focusing on the experiences and issues facing students with disabilities in public schools across Michigan.[1]

According to the survey results, parents felt schools could do more to ensure that students with disabilities are identified early, educated in the least restrictive environment, and provided the proper resources and supports they need to be successful.

Together with results from Michigan's Parent Survey, these results suggest that gathering more nuanced perspectives from more parents across the state can help educators and advocates get a clearer picture of how students and families experience Michigan's special education system.

Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey

Recommendations for Collective Impact[1]
The Autism Alliance of Michigan's Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey gathered feedback from nearly 900 families across the state to better understand the experiences of students with disabilities and the barriers they face in Michigan's public education system. Findings highlight gaps in funding, services, assessment practices, identification, discipline, and family engagement. Based on these insights, AAoM recommends strategic areas for collective action to improve outcomes for students with disabilities statewide.

Reimagine Improved Special Education

1. Invest Resources More Equitably and Effectively
- Develop a weighted funding formula reflecting actual cost of service needs for students with disabilities.

2. Allow Community-Based Professionals to Provide Behavioral Supports and Medically Necessary Interventions in Schools
- Enact state law allowing qualified external professionals to deliver evidence-based services within school setting.

3. Decrease Overuse of Alternate Assessments
- Re-examine alternate assessment structures and create a roadmap to reduce reliance on non-diploma pathways.

4. Improve Identification of Student Needs
- Launch a public awareness campaign empowering parents to advocate for timely, comprehensive evaluations and appropriate IEP implementation.

5. Change Statute Regarding State Complaint Law
- Legislate extended complaint timelines, reconsideration periods, and public access to investigation reports.

6. Decrease Discipline Disparities
- Implement statewide monitoring with clear protocols, documentation, and parent communication requirements.

7. Disaggregate Reported State Disciplinary Data by District, Race, Income, and Disability
- Reform reporting structures and publish disaggregated data

The SEE Survey underscores the urgent need to transform Michigan's special education system. By investing equitably, expanding access to services, reducing inappropriate assessment and discipline practices, and improving transparency, policymakers, educators, and families can work collectively to ensure all students with disabilities thrive in inclusive, high-quality learning environments.

Learn More: Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey – Report to the Community:
https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary and Key Themes

Enrollment Trends

- Total public-school enrollment in Michigan has been decreasing since 2018-19 while the number of students with disabilities receiving special education has steadily increased since 2020-21.
- Specific Learning Disability (SLD) remains the largest category of students eligible for special education in Michigan.
- Administrative and policy changes can significantly impact eligibility trends and student classification.

Enabling Conditions

- Research and advocacy indicate several conditions are necessary to adequately support students with disabilities and their families in accordance with IDEA:
  - Adequate and equitable funding
  - Trained and qualified special educators and general educators
  - Robust, centralized data systems
  - Early and accurate identification of disabilities
  - Strong state accountability and guidance
  - Collaboration among special educators and other staff to support inclusion and belonging

A Crucial Moment for Students with Disabilities

- 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), highlighting the need to evaluate civil rights responsibilities and ensure meaningful access to educational opportunities.
- Michigan has an opportunity to transform the state's special education funding structure through the recommendations of the Michigan Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint.
- Persistent gaps in graduation and dropout rates, learning outcomes measured by state and national assessments, the use of exclusionary discipline, compliance findings, and family engagement

Summary and Key Themes

Key Indicators Across Four Categories

- Preschool Experiences
- K-12 Experiences and Outcomes
- Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes
- Dispute Resolution & Family Engagement

What the Data Tell Us

- **Inclusive opportunities are uneven**: School-age students with disabilities experience relatively high rates of placement in general education classrooms, reflecting a system-wide commitment to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). However, preschool-aged students with disabilities remain largely segregated from their non-disabled peers, highlighting a critical area for improvement.
- **Secondary outcomes indicate unmet needs**: High rates of chronic absenteeism and dropout, coupled with low proficiency and graduation rates, suggest that many students disengage before completing K–12. These patterns point to unmet academic, social, and emotional needs, particularly during critical transitions to adolescence and adulthood.
- **Compliance does not equal equity**: Michigan often meets state-defined IDEA targets, which focus on incremental progress. Yet these benchmarks fall short of parity with peers, demonstrating that compliance alone is insufficient to ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Implications

- The data reveal both progress and persistent inequities in Michigan's education system for students with disabilities.
- By addressing funding disparities, expanding high-quality inclusive classroom experiences, strengthening accountability, and engaging families meaningfully, Michigan can transform its special education system into a national model of equity, excellence, and opportunity.

This is a moment to act decisively—ensuring that the next milestone we celebrate is not just IDEA's longevity but also Michigan's emergence as a national leader in outcomes for students with disabilities.

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Recommendations for Policymakers

Support Adequate and Equitable Funding:

- Full implement the Michigan Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint to ensure funding reflects the actual cost of serving students with disabilities.

Strengthen the Educator Pipeline of Diverse, Qualified, and Trained Personnel:

- Support programs like Grow Your Own, Talent Together, Special Education Teacher Tuition Reimbursement, and MI Future Educator Fellowships to increase the number and diversity of qualified special educators.
- Adopt OPTIMISE recommendations to strengthen pipelines for high-need special education roles, including specialized service providers.

Enhance Educator Preparation and Training:

- Fund preparation and ongoing professional learning training on early identification, inclusive practices, Universal Design for Learning, and evidence-based supports for students with disabilities.
- Sustain and expand the state's investment in educator training related to the identification of reading difficulties and evidence-based literacy interventions initiated by recent legislation.

Improve Accountability and Transparency for Outcomes of Students with Disabilities:

- Require school boards to publicly review annual IDEA performance data and hold parent town halls to discuss progress and outcomes.
- Benchmark Michigan's performance against high-performing states and adopt evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes.

Recommendations for Education Leaders

Promote Shared Ownership for Student Success:
- Ensure all educators—not only special educators—receive training on IDEA protections, inclusion practices, and strategies that support students with disabilities across settings.

Adopt Trauma-Informed, Non-Exclusionary Approaches:
- Provide educators with tools and professional development to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), reducing reliance on exclusionary discipline.

Center Decisions on Student Needs:
- Engage parents and caregivers as authentic partners in planning and progress monitoring.
- Make student-level and school-level data accessible, transparent, and easy for families to understand, including how data informs supports and placement decisions.
-

Set High Expectations for State Targets:
- Establish state-determined targets that reflect high expectations and move Michigan toward outcomes for students with disabilities that are on par with their nondisabled peers.

Eliminate the Functional Independence (FI) tier of MI-Access:
- Michigan's persistent overuse of alternate assessment—particularly the FI tier—limits access to the general curriculum and can remove students from pathways to a standard high school diploma.

- **Use Data for Continuous Improvement:**
- Disaggregate school-level data by disability and other key demographics to identify gaps, guide resource allocation, and inform improvement planning.

Recommendations for Parents

Continue Being Your Child's Strongest Advocate:

- Learn more about the rights that IDEA guarantees and what an effective special education system should provide by exploring resources from:
  - Michigan Department of Education,[1]
  - Michigan Alliance for Families,[2]
  - Disability Rights Michigan[3].
- Provide testimony about your experiences at local school board meetings or at the State Board of Education (SBE) meetings—use resources like Defending Education[4] for support in getting started.
- Know your Michigan House and Senate members—connect with them to share your priorities.
- Ask questions about your child's disability, placement, services, supports, and assessment—families are entitled to clear explanations. Contact the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Special Education Information Line[5] with concerns.

Prepare for IEP Meetings:

- Make all requests to the school team in writing to ensure clarity and create a record of communication.
- Request evaluation data and draft IEP documents in advance.
- Bring a support person or advocate, if helpful.
- Use guidance from Michigan Alliance for Families[6] and communication scripts from Hands & Voices[7] to prepare questions and clarify your goals for your child.

Engage in Collective Advocacy:

- Join statewide networks—such as the Michigan Parent, Advocacy & Attorney Coalition (MiPAAC)[8]–to connect with families across districts, share data and experiences, and advocate for shared policy and budget priorities.

APPENDIX

UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL EDUCATION

What is Special Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)?

"When we talk about transition, it can't just be about paperwork. It has to be about equipping students to navigate life–college, work, and independence."

— Michigan Department of Education Staff

Understanding Special Education

All students are general education students. Some general education students with disabilities may qualify for specialized services and support to help them access and benefit from their education. These targeted services and supports are grouped under the term "special education."

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted in 1975 and last reauthorized in 2004, influences state and local funding and policy decisions by tying eligibility for IDEA grants to meeting specific programmatic and administrative requirements. **The goal of IDEA is to help prepare eligible children with disabilities for further education, employment, and independent living.**

IDEA begins with an essential truth: "**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.**"[1]

This principle emphasizes that students with disabilities are not a separate group, but an essential part of every classroom and community. Disability intersects with various aspects of diversity, such as race, language, income, and geography. Therefore, it must be a central focus in any efforts to enhance Michigan's public education system.

Key Terms

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)	Schools must provide special education and related services at no cost to families, tailored to meet each student's unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.[1]
Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)	Students with disabilities have the right to be educated alongside their nondisabled peers as much as possible, only being removed from general education settings when necessary for their needs.[2]
Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)	Every eligible child from birth to age three must have an IFSP, a legal document developed by a team (including parents or guardians) that outlines the child's developmental goals, early intervention services, supports, and how progress will be monitored.[3]
Individualized Education Program (IEP)	Every eligible student must have an IEP, a legal document developed by a team (including parents or guardians) that outlines the student's educational goals, services, accommodations, and how progress will be measured.[4]

Special education involves two components: specially designed instruction and related services

Under IDEA, public schools are required to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) to eligible students through an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Students with disabilities may be eligible to receive both specially designed instruction and related services.

Definition	Examples
Specially designed instruction refers to "adapting the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability."[1]	A student with a reading disability might receive explicit, systematic phonics instruction using specialized materials, while a student with autism may be taught social communication skills through structured role-playing and visual supports embedded in classroom routines.
Related services refer to "specialized transportation and other developmental, corrective, or supportive services that a child needs to benefit from special education."[2]	These can include services like speech-language pathology, interpreting services, and psychological services.

Under federal law (IDEA), students eligible for special education services are covered from birth to age 21, though Michigan extends eligibility for certain students through age 26

The IDEA has four parts in total.[1] **Parts B and C** outline the provision of special education and related services for all children, from birth to age 21. While Michigan extends services to certain students up to age 26.[2]

This report focuses on publicly reported data for students aged 3 to 21.

B

IDEA Part B, the main component of the initial legislation in 1975, entitles **children with disabilities aged 3-21** to specialized programs and related services, ensuring they can access the general curriculum.

C

IDEA Part C entitles families to early intervention services for **children with disabilities ages 0-2** in a variety of settings (e.g., home, childcare, preschool). Part C was amended to the legislation in 1986 to ensure the rights of young children with disabilities and their families.[1]

During the 2022-23 school year, an all-time high of 7.5 million public school students across the country, approximately 15% of the national public-school enrollment, received special education and/or related services under the IDEA.[2]

Note: Students who do not qualify under IDEA's 13 eligibility categories may still receive supports through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN

> "IDEA sets a floor — a baseline that every child deserves — but it shouldn't be the ceiling. States like Michigan can go further, ensuring every student with a disability gets the supports and opportunities they need to thrive."

— Advocate

Special Education in Michigan

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all states provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to eligible students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

While the federal requirements establish a baseline, or minimum standard, for special education, states have the authority to enact additional laws and regulations in alignment with IDEA to govern the implementation of these services within their jurisdictions, which may provide additional protections beyond the federal obligations.

Michigan has its own set of aligned rules for implementing special education, known as **the *Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE)*.**[1] MARSE consists of several important components related to special education, including Individualized Education Program (IEP) development and timelines, district responsibilities, due process procedures, and qualifications for special education administrators and teachers.[2]

While governed by IDEA like all other states, several factors make Michigan unique when it comes to special education

Understanding this context is important for designing equitable funding and policy solutions

Factors that Make Michigan Unique	Implications
1 — **Michigan is the only state in the nation with a maximum age for special education services above 22**, serving students from birth through age 26.[1]	This extension of services enabled Michigan to support an additional 3,383 students with disabilities ages 22-26 during the 2024-2025 school year.[2]
2 — Although states vary in the amount of funding they allocate for special education,[3] **Michigan only covers 28.6% of special education costs — among the lowest reimbursement rates in the nation.**[4]	Since the federal government covers less than 16% of special education services (despite congress committing to funding 40% in the original legislation),[7] the combined state and federal funding in Michigan covers only about 44% of total special education costs incurred by school districts. As a result, districts must rely heavily on local tax revenues and flexible state funds to cover the remaining expenses. Legislation such as the Headlee Amendment and Proposal A limit how schools raise local revenue.9 This limits districts' flexibility to fund specialized programs and can exacerbate special education disparities and inequities.[5]
3 — **Michigan's education system is highly decentralized**, meaning that most decision-making authority lies with local governments (i.e., school districts, Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), and communities) rather than one centralized government entity.[6]	While there are benefits to decentralization, it can create challenges in maintaining quality and equity for all students across school districts.[7] This is especially true in states like Michigan, which has over 800 local school districts and 56 ISDs.[8]

"We still don't have enough inclusive preschool classrooms. Too many children with disabilities are placed separately before they ever get a chance to learn alongside their peers."

— Educator

Notes About Language

Identity-First vs. Person-First Language Statement

Many prefer using identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") to show the importance of autism being integral to their personhood, while others prefer person-first language (e.g., "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.[1]

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."[2]

Note: Michigan also serves students under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which seeks to protect people with disabilities from discrimination. However, this report focuses on students served under IDEA, which specifically serves students with disabilities. For more information about the similarities and differences between Section 504 and IDEA, please see this resource.[3]

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 been criticized for reflecting ableist assumptions. 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 different types of support. Additionally, the support needs of any individual can, and usually do, change over time – for all of us. In recognition of this evolving understanding, AAoM does not use this term to refer to students with disabilities in the education system.

References to "Parents"

"We recognize that students are supported by many types of family structures, including parents, grandparents, foster

parents, siblings, and other legal guardians or parents, and we view all of these arrangements as valid. However, the IDEA, which is a federal statute, specifically refers to and extends rights to parents — those with legal authority to make educational decisions on behalf of a child. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this report refers to "parents" in this legal context.

Disability intersects with race, language, income, and geography, and therefore must remain central to any effort to strengthen Michigan's public education system.

DATA AND METHODS

Data Sources

Our team combined various publicly available data sources to produce the figures in this report. We provide a high-level overview of our sources here and the Appendix provides more detail.

Data Sources

All data included in this report are publicly available. We accessed data from the following sources. Throughout the report, you will see references to each source in notes providing brief details about methods and data. You can find a full description of each of these primary sources as well as additional sources in the appendix.

Source & Abbreviation in Source Notes	Description
Michigan State Performance Report and Annual Performance Reporting Source notes refer to this data as CEPI SPP/APR	• The selected Indicator Reports on the Center for Educational Performance and Information's (CEPI) MI School Data platform present Michigan state, ISD, and LEA performance on IDEA State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) indicators. • This was our prioritized data source for students with disabilities in Michigan. We supplemented CEPI SPP/APR data with additional Michigan data as needed.
Michigan's K-12 Data Files Source notes refer to to this data as CEPI: *Specific File*	• Michigan's CEPI site contains data on experiences and outcomes for students with and without disabilities. • We use CEPI K-12 data when comparing students with disabilities to non-disabled students, to supplement CEPI SPP/APR data, and to present data on student sub-groups.
Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), IDEA Section 618 Data Products Source notes refer to this data as OSEP: *Specific File*	• Includes state and national data on children and infants served under IDEA Parts B and C, encompassing categories such as Child Count and Educational Environments, Discipline, Exiting Special Education, Personnel, Dispute Resolution, and Assessment. • We used OSEP data to create all maps and to calculate national averages.

Methods Overview

Here we provide general notes to help you understand how we approached data sourcing and analysis. More detail is available in the appendix.

Data Analysis

- In some cases, we pulled data straight from public sources. In other cases, we manipulated data to produce figures in this report. Our manipulations included combining data sources, conducting basic calculations (e.g., sums, differences, averages), or creating percentages.
- We provide all specific calculations in the appendix. Unless otherwise noted, all indicators align with IDEA's SPP/APR definitions and methodologies.

Data Limitations and Notes

- We provide specific notes related to the year the data refers to, the sample size, and any other relevant information required to interpret figures throughout the report and in the appendix.
-
- **Different data sources do not always align.**
  - Reporting requirements do not always match across systems including federal IDEA, state IDEA, and ESSA accountability indicators.
  - Given the variation in data, we decided on business rules described in the appendix
-
- **In most cases, data is not available for each indicator for the most recently completed school year, 2024-25.**
  - For every figure, we used the most recent data available. We outline which year of data we reported for each indicator in the appendix.

This report presents a framework for tracking Michigan's progress toward equitable and effective special education through rigorous key indicators

The following indicators provide a consistent framework for assessing Michigan's progress in delivering equitable and effective special education services across age groups and settings this year and beyond.

A cross-sector working group prioritized this list of indicators from a larger list used in Michigan's federal reporting on special education as well as from additional sources (see appendix for details).

Federal Indicators[1]	Additional Indicators
The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) established 18 indicators to measure how well states educate students with disabilities. States, including Michigan, report their progress and improvement plans through the State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR). Indicators are classified as either results indicators, with state-set goals, or compliance indicators, with fixed federal targets of 0% or 100%.	This report includes additional key indicators not on the federal list. These indicators do not have fixed targets, but they are valuable for understanding the experiences, opportunities, and outcomes of students with disabilities in Michigan.

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- **The Center for Learner Equity – Jennifer Coco, Interim Executive Director**
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- **Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE) – Abby Cypher, Executive Director, and MAASE leadership team**
- **Abdnour-Weiker Law – Jacquelyn Kmetz, Attorney**
- **Parent Alliance for Students with Exceptional Needs (PASEN) – Jackie Darrough, Lead Advocate**
- **482 Forward – Arlyssa Heard, Deputy Director**
- **Disability Rights Michigan – Kris Keranen, Director of Education Advocacy**

Survey Participants

We also thank the many education stakeholders who provided input through our survey. Your perspectives were essential in shaping the findings and recommendations of this report.

Special thanks to the members of **MiPAAC** for their collective contributions.

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Data Notes:

- Michigan's disability categories generally align with IDEA but differ in some terminology, e.g., *emotional impairment* (vs. IDEA *emotional disturbance*), *intellectual impairment* (vs. *intellectual disability*), and *multiple impairments* (vs. *multiple disabilities*).

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- MI-Access includes three levels: 1) Supported Independence (SI) for students who need substantial support but can demonstrate some independence, 2) Functional Independence (FI) for students who can complete many tasks with minimal assistance, and 3) Participation (P) for students who require the highest level of support.

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Data Notes:

- Differences in how states count/drop-out transfers, alternative credentials, and IEP-eligible students complicate comparisons. The national rate is not the same cohort measure but provides a benchmark.
- ACGR for students with disabilities by state for 2022-23 is not yet available via NCES publicly.
- Requirements for a regular high school diploma vary significantly across states.

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Data Notes:

- There is no national aggregate for parent agreement that their school facilitates parent involvement because each state collects this data differently and response rates vary widely.

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