



RESEARCH BRIEF

Spotlight on Students With Disabilities

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OCTOBER 2020

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools across the country to close their buildings, which resulted in millions of students continuing their learning from home and led to sudden shifts in how educators provided instruction, leadership, and support. While widespread school closures led to myriad logistical and pedagogical challenges for districts, serving students with disabilities during remote instruction was one of the most demanding aspects of educating during COVID-19.

In this brief, we report district responses to survey questions from the [National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19](#) related to challenges in serving students with disabilities.¹ Specifically, we asked districts how closures during spring 2020 affected their ability to implement practices for students with disabilities. We report the percentage of districts that indicate that implementing practices was more difficult or substantially more difficult.² In addition to reporting results for all districts, we compare responses for high- and low-poverty districts, and rural and urban districts (See Box 2 for the survey items).³ On average, high- and low-poverty districts have different access to educational resources, including the one-to-one technology needed to provide remote instruction and services (Garet, Rickles, Bowdon, & Heppen, 2020). Rural districts, especially in remote locales, often

About This Brief

This brief discusses survey results about districts' perceptions of the ease with which they were able to provide services for students with disabilities and to comply with federal law governing the education of students with disabilities.

- These results are based on responses from 744 of the 753 school districts that responded to the survey between mid-May 2020 and September 1, 2020.
- We show results separately for districts in high- and low-poverty areas, given the potential association between poverty and educational resources, and for districts in rural and urban locations, given concerns about internet access in rural communities.
- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of districts reported that it was more or substantially more difficult to provide appropriate instructional accommodations.
- Districts reported providing specially designed instruction through new mechanisms, including a flipped curriculum, asynchronous therapies, and digital manipulatives.

have the added challenge of low connectivity to Wi-Fi, which could limit their ability to provide services or instructional accommodations virtually (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Subsequent briefs will draw on survey data to provide a more comprehensive picture of district administrators' perceptions of how districts served students in spring 2020.

Students With Disabilities Are Entitled to a Free and Appropriate Education

As of the 2018–19 school year, schools enrolled about 7 million students with disabilities—approximately 14% of the total student population ([U.S. Department of Education, 2020](#)). Students with disabilities have educational rights guaranteed under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) of 2004. Even in the context of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, districts were required to comply with this federal legislation. This requirement was reiterated by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)'s March 12, 2020, Q&A document outlining states' responsibilities to serve students with disabilities. Specifically, schools were required to

- Identify and evaluate students suspected of having disabilities;
- Develop an individualized education program (IEP) for each student with identified disabilities;
- Provide instructional accommodations and related services—such as speech, physical or occupational therapy, or counseling—to help students meet the

Survey Items

Closed-Response Survey Items [Select one: “No effect,” “A little more difficult now,” “More difficult now,” “Substantially more difficult now.”]

How have the COVID-19 school closures affected your district's ability to comply with the following aspects of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*?

- Referral and evaluation procedures and timelines
- Individualized education program (IEP) development and renewal meetings
- Due process complaint resolution
- Instructional accommodations and specially designed instruction
- Provision of related services
- Least restrictive environment

How have the COVID-19 school closures affected your district's ability to provide the following supports to students with disabilities (SWDs)?

- Provide SWDs with appropriate instructional accommodations.
- Provide SWDs with “hands on” instructional accommodations and related services (e.g., one-on-one aide, physical therapy, occupational therapy).
- Provide speech therapy.
- Engage families to help implement IEP requirements.
- Collaborate with social service or other agency partners (e.g., behavioral health, vocational rehabilitation) to meet IEP requirements.

Open-Response Survey Item

Has your district used any other strategies not mentioned in previous questions to support SWDs in a distance learning environment? If so, please briefly describe these strategies.

goals stated in their IEPs and to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education;

- Meet at least annually with the student’s IEP team consisting of general education and special education teachers, related school-based therapists or specialists, and the family to review student progress on meeting IEP goals, determine the appropriateness of services, and update goals based on student progress; and
- Deliver education in the least restrictive environment, which requires that students with disabilities be educated, to the extent possible, alongside nondisabled peers in an environment that provides the appropriate amount of support and rigor for them to be challenged and to experience success while working toward grade-level or other appropriate standards.

Journalists have reported on challenges related to serving students with disabilities during the pandemic in the spring of 2020. News articles have provided insight into the perspectives of parents who have been frustrated with a perceived lack of compliance with the IEP for their children with disabilities (Kamanetz, 2020; Stein & Strauss, 2020). Other media pieces have illustrated the logistical challenges and feelings of hopelessness and exhaustion encountered by school staff serving students with disabilities, explaining how they were unprepared for the overnight switch to reliance on virtual instruction and therapy and found it difficult to reach some of their most vulnerable students (Hill, 2020; Tugend, 2020).

The [National Survey of Public Education’s Response to COVID-19](#) adds to the existing understanding of how challenging it was for districts to meet the needs of students with disabilities during remote instruction by collecting the perspectives of district leaders. Below, we discuss findings from our analyses of survey items related to compliance with IDEA and provision of instructional accommodations and services to students with disabilities. We conclude with a discussion of the innovations districts made to serve students with disabilities, as gleaned from their responses to the open-response survey item.

Serving Students With Disabilities During Remote Instruction Challenged the Majority of Districts

Providing instructional accommodations and related services—such as speech, occupational, and physical therapy or social work—and engaging with families and community social service agencies are essential strategies for making education accessible and appropriate for students with disabilities and are also requirements under IDEA. Overall, districts reported that, when school buildings closed and instruction became remote, it was hard to utilize these essential strategies and comply with federal legislation. In addition, there is some evidence that some of the challenges districts faced differed by district poverty and urbanicity.⁴

Complying with IDEA was difficult. The majority of districts said that it was more challenging to provide instructional accommodations and related services needed to comply with IDEA during remote instruction (see Figure 1a). For instance, 58% of districts said it was more or substantially more

challenging to comply with IDEA requirements to provide instructional accommodations and specially designed instruction, and 52% of districts reported that complying with the IDEA requirement to provide the least restrictive environment was more or substantially more challenging during remote instruction.

High-poverty districts found one aspect of compliance with IDEA more challenging during COVID-19 than low-poverty districts. A higher percentage of high-poverty districts said that it was more or substantially more difficult to comply with IEP development and renewal meetings than low-poverty districts during COVID-19 (45% versus 32%; see Figure 1b).

Rural and urban districts reported similar levels of challenge in complying with IDEA. Rural areas—especially those that are remote—have less access to WiFi (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Nevertheless, rural and urban districts were similar in their perceptions of how challenging it was to comply with IDEA during COVID-19 (see Figure 1c).

Providing instructional accommodations and related services and collaborating with families and community agencies was challenging for all districts. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of districts reported that it was more or substantially more difficult to provide appropriate instructional accommodations, while over three-quarters (82%) said that providing hands-on instructional accommodations and services was more or substantially more difficult (Figure 2a). Similarly, the majority of districts (61%) reported that providing speech therapy was more or substantially more difficult during remote instruction (see Figure 2a).

Engaging with families and collaborating with agency partners was also more challenging for districts during remote instruction. Overall, 57% of districts said that it was more or substantially more difficult to engage with families for help with IEP requirements during remote instruction (see Figure 2a). The majority of districts (55%) reported that collaborating with social service or other agency partners was more difficult during the school closures (see Figure 2a).

Providing instructional accommodations and related services and collaborating with families and community agencies was challenging for districts, regardless of poverty concentration or urbanicity (see Figures 2b and 2c).

Figure 1a. The majority of districts reported that complying with several key IDEA requirements was more or substantially more difficult during than before the pandemic.

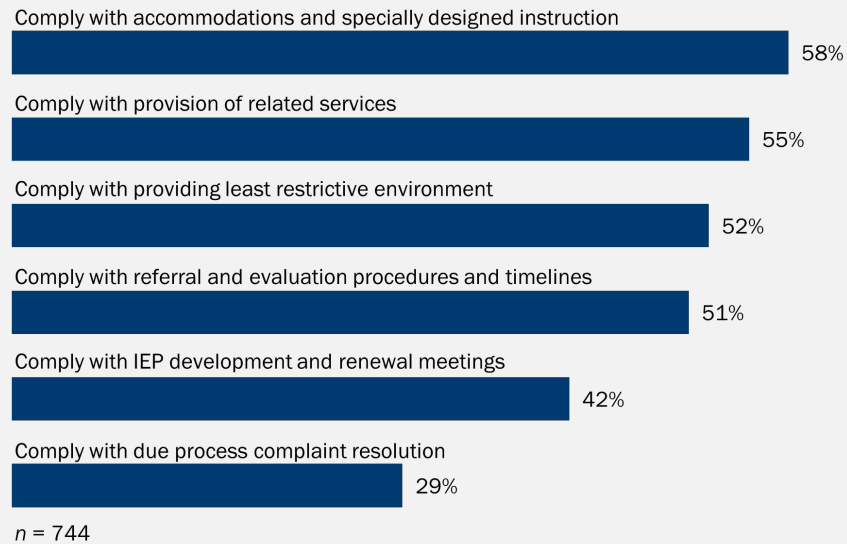


Figure 1a note. The bars represent the percentage of all districts that reported that complying with IDEA was more difficult or substantially more difficult. Sample size: 744 districts.

Figure 1b. High- and low-poverty districts reported that complying with several key IDEA requirements was more or substantially more difficult during than before the pandemic.

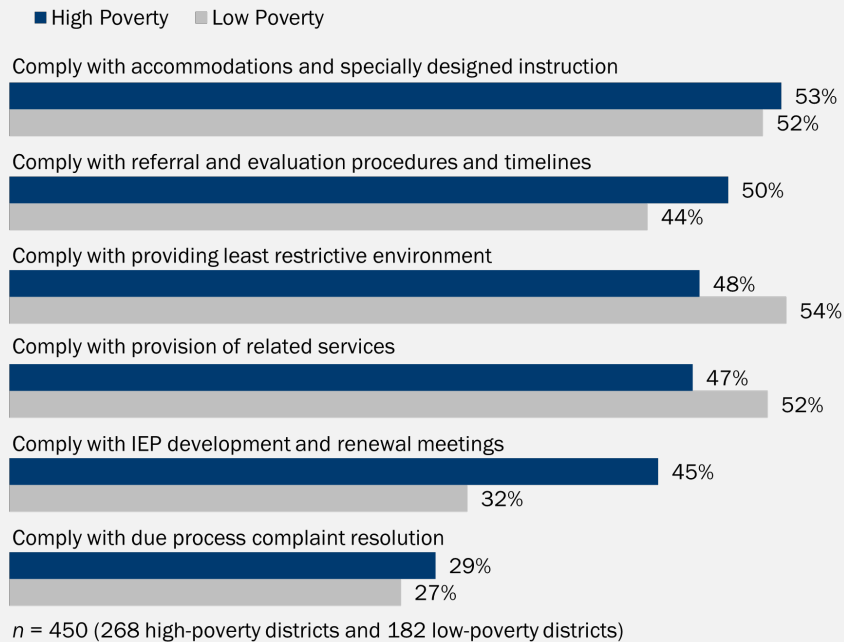


Figure 1b note. The blue and gray bars represent the percentages of high- and low-poverty districts, respectively, that reported that providing supports for students with disabilities was more difficult or substantially more difficult during the pandemic. Sample size: 268 high-poverty districts and 182 low-poverty districts.

Figure 1c. Rural and urban districts reported that complying with several key IDEA requirements was more or substantially more difficult during than before the pandemic.

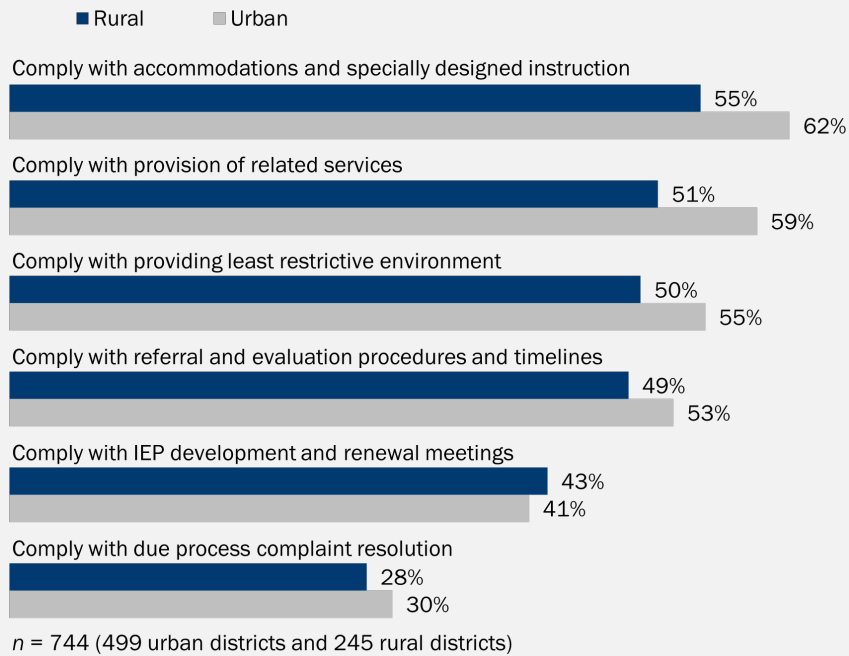


Figure 1c note. The blue and gray bars represent the percentages of rural and urban districts, respectively, that reported that complying with IDEA was more difficult or substantially more difficult during the pandemic. Sample size: 499 urban districts and 245 rural districts.

Figure 2a. The majority of districts reported providing supports for students with disabilities was more or substantially more difficult during than before the pandemic.

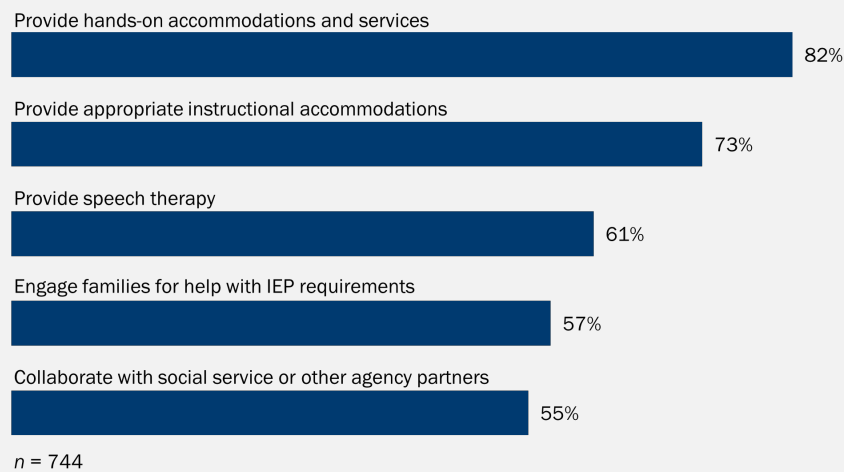


Figure 2a note. The bars represent the percentage of all districts that reported that providing supports for students with disabilities was more difficult or substantially more difficult. Sample size: 744 districts.

Figure 2b. High- and low-poverty districts reported that providing supports for students with disabilities was more or substantially more difficult during than before the pandemic

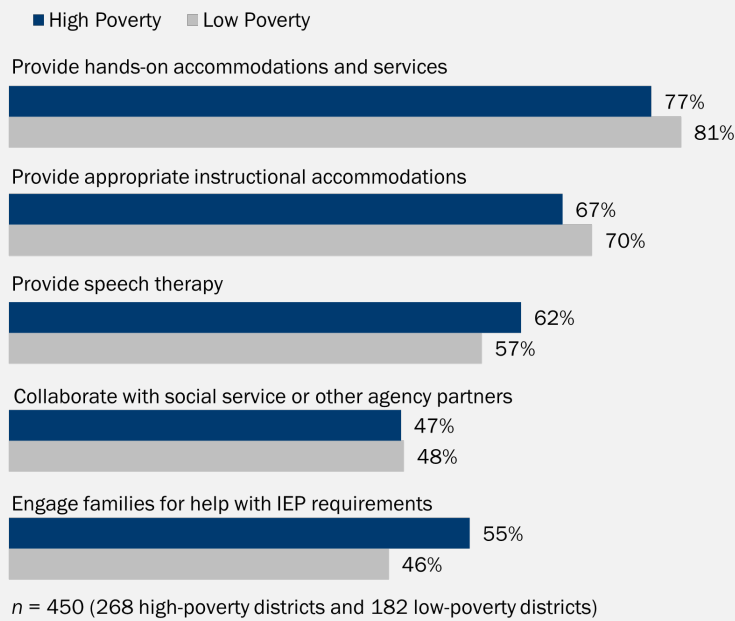


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Figure 2c. Rural and urban districts reported that providing supports for students with disabilities was more or substantially more difficult during than before the pandemic

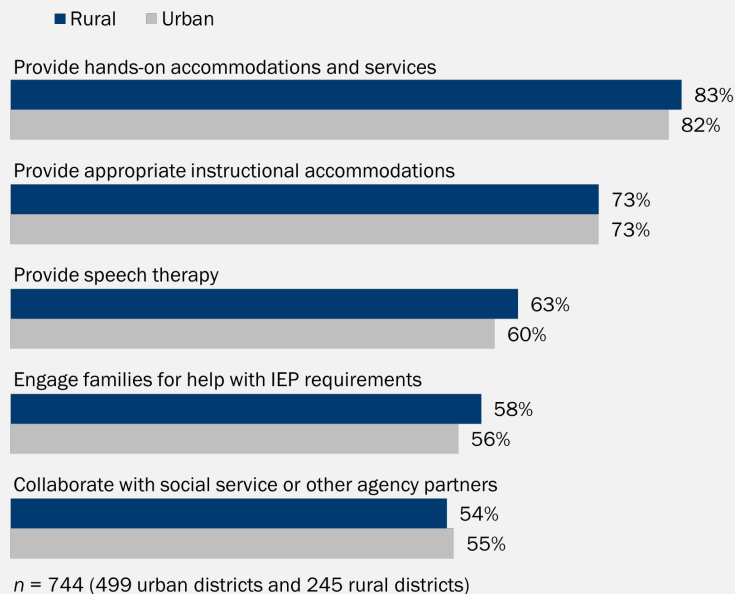


Figure 2c note. The blue and gray bars represent the percentages of rural and urban districts, respectively, that reported that providing supports to students with disabilities was more difficult or substantially more difficult during the pandemic. Sample size: 499 urban districts and 245 rural districts.

Districts Reported Several Successful Strategies That Others Could Adopt in the 2020–21 School Year

During remote instruction, districts implemented a variety of strategies to provide remote education, ranging from sending home paper packets to conducting online classes (Garet et al., 2020). As one district reported in an open-ended response on the survey, “The instantaneous shift to distance learning did not provide sufficient time to train teachers in lesson delivery. . . . Distance learning for SWDs [students with disabilities] is not as effective for students with the loss of opportunities to engage with their peers during a lesson.”

This current school year (SY), 2020–21, teaching and learning are fully or partially remote for many school districts, and even those that have fully reopened are obligated to make operational and structural changes to ensure student and staff safety. Districts will need to find and refine innovations to better serve students with disabilities and to comply with IDEA. This section presents innovations that districts reported in the open-response item on the survey.

- **Providing specially designed instruction through new mechanisms.** One district reported providing “synchronous small group lessons, digital manipulatives . . . flip[ping] curriculum and us[ing] . . . [the curriculum company’s] resources online.” Another district shared how it addressed the individual needs of students: “Our special education teacher sent materials home, including toys, manipulatives that their students were used to using at school, to create familiarity with routines and learning [that] she was trying to get them to apply at home.” One district created a system of tiered supports and flexibly assigned staff to better serve students with disabilities: “We created a system of tiered intervention for these students and redeployed staff to connect with them and their families.” If sustained, this is one innovation that has promise in SY 2020–21, because a multi-tiered system of supports is an evidence-based framework to serve students with disabilities and meet the diverse needs all students (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016; Gersten et al., 2008; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).
- **Implementing teletherapy or using asynchronous therapy.** These were commonly cited as means to deliver related services to students. One district reported that “physical therapists, OTs [occupational therapists], and some speech therapists made videos for therapy showing kids [and parents] how to do certain activities and movements.” Teletherapy and asynchronous therapy provided strategies for repeated practice and consistency for students with disabilities. In a time of disrupted learning, these strategies may have enabled students to retain some of the progress they made during SY 2019–20. In SY 2020–21, many schools will need to assess their ability to provide related services remotely and to connect with families who may be difficult to reach. Given the increased challenges faced by high-poverty districts, SY 2020–21 will require staff, parents, and students to consider new ways of implementing best practices.



- **Going above and beyond to support students with disabilities.** One district reported that it allotted additional time for staff to support students through “increased one-on-one communication with students. . . [or] spend[ing] quality time with students in a more intimate setting through conferencing platforms.” Another district reported that “[s]ome direct instruction was done with staff visiting homes and doing porch teaching.” A third district shared that “our teachers called, texted, [and] FaceTimed students and parents to help support SWDs. The challenges were substantial, but our staff did everything that they could to meet the needs of our students. Our staff put in hours beyond normal hours to reach individual student needs.” Staff were aware of how critical it was for students with disabilities to continue to receive services during school closures, and many did everything possible to individually support them.

Summary and Conclusion

Analysis of survey data from the [National Survey of Public Education’s Response to COVID-19](#) showed that school districts found it more or substantially more difficult to provide services required by IDEA in the context of remote instruction. The similarity in responses across high- and low-poverty and rural and urban districts illustrates that the need to support districts and schools in educating students with disabilities is widespread.

During the early months of the pandemic, districts used technology and human resources to create new ways to comply with the federal law. By generating ways to provide tiered systems of support and effective, evidence-based interventions virtually and asynchronously, schools have the potential to successfully support students with disabilities, regardless of whether students with disabilities are able to engage in person or remotely with educators and service providers in SY 2020–21. Even with these innovations, all districts will need more support to serve students with disabilities appropriately and fully comply with IDEA 2004.

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Endnotes

¹ AIR funded and led the survey development, which was administered by our partner NORC at the University of Chicago. We sent the survey to school districts in every U.S. state and Washington, DC, as well as to charter management organizations (CMOs) across the country. The sample contained 2,536 districts, stratified by state (for districts in 12 focal states) or region (for districts in the remaining states) and locale (urban, suburban, town, and rural). Within these strata, districts were drawn with probability proportional to the square root of enrollment. Large districts were drawn with certainty. The survey was open between May 20 and September 1, with 753 public school districts and 91 CMOs responding. The results reported in this brief use design weights adjusted for nonresponse in the 64 state- or region-by-locale strata. More information about the survey methodology is available in a [technical supplement](#).

² We sent the survey to district superintendents and suggested that they could ask other administrators to respond. Administrators were encouraged to ask colleagues for information if they could not respond to a question. Survey responses reflect the beliefs and expectations of district administrators, which may differ from the experiences of school personnel, teachers, parents, and students.

³ We defined low-poverty districts as those with less than 10% of school-age children living in poverty, as measured by the U.S. Census. High-poverty districts are those with at least 20% of school-age children in poverty (see <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2018/demo/saipe/2018-school-districts.html>). We defined rural and urban based on locale classifications provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (Geverdt, 2015), where rural districts are located within a Census-defined rural territory and urban districts are located within a Census-defined urbanized area or cluster (encompassing cities, suburbs, and towns).

⁴ The differences between high- and low-poverty districts and rural and urban districts discussed in the brief are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Differences may also be significant for other variables in the figures but are not discussed. Information on tests of statistical significance is available on request.



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