

After COVID Disruption, Special Education Identification Rates in Washington Rebound



Research One-Pager
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COVID-19 did more than upend teaching and learning.

The transition to remote instruction had well-documented and negative effects on student learning, mental health, and attendance. Beyond the disruption to specialized supports and instruction that schools provide students with disabilities (Jackson & Bowden, 2020; Nowicki, 2020), the pandemic also impacted the rates at which schools identify students for special education.

Why do disruptions to special education identification matter?

Students who missed out on special education identification during the pandemic could struggle if they don't receive the accommodations and interventions they need and deserve. Schools could face increased demand on their capacity to evaluate and identify students for special education services if they encounter a backlog that fell through the cracks during the pandemic.

What happened to identification rates in Washington state during the pandemic?

Prior evidence from Michigan suggests that at the height of the pandemic students were less likely to receive special education referrals and evaluations than before (Hopkins et al., 2023). A more recent paper from CALDER tracks monthly special education identification rates for students in grades K-5 before, during, and after pandemic-related school closures in Washington state (Theobald et al., 2024).

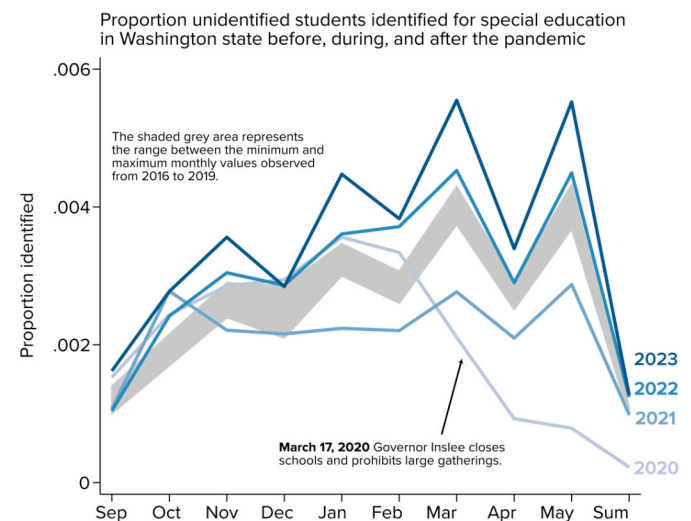
CALDER's multi-year analysis shows that, after an initial drop, identification rates in Washington state have rebounded and now exceed historical trends (Figure 1). By the end of the 2022-2023 school year, Washington state had recovered more than two-thirds of its pandemic-related decline in special education identification. Given research showing that limiting access to special education can harm students, this recovery is particularly encouraging.

Bottom line: Special education identification rates have recovered from pandemic drops in Washington state—a positive story in pandemic recovery.

This good news notwithstanding, researchers and policymakers in Washington and other states still need to monitor student progress and identification rates going forward to ensure schools and districts have the resources they need to support students with disabilities and to mitigate the remaining fallout from the pandemic.

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FIGURE 1. Special education identification rates dropped during the pandemic before rebounding and surpassing historical trends..



Hopkins, B. G., Strunk, K. O., Imberman, S. A., Truckenmiller, A. J., Guzman, M., & Fisher, M. H. (2023). Trends in special education identification during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from Michigan (No. w31261). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Jackson, D., & Bowdon, J. (2020). Research brief: Spotlight on students with disabilities. American Institutes for Research.

Nowicki, J. M. (2020). Distance learning: Challenges providing services to K-12 English Learners and students with disabilities during COVID-19. Report to Congressional Committees. GAO-21-43. US Government Accountability Office.

Theobald, R., Goldhaber, D., & Katz, A. (2024). Special education identification throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. CALDER Research Brief No. XXX-XXXX



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