

Special Education Identification Rates Decreased Dramatically During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research One-Pager
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COVID-19 did more than upend teaching and learning. It impacted how schools identify students for special education services.

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 how schools identify students for special education services.

Prior evidence from Michigan, for example, 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). To examine if similar patterns occurred elsewhere, researchers from CALDER recently tracked monthly special education identification rates for students in grades K-5 before, during, and after pandemic-related school closures (Theobald et al., 2024).

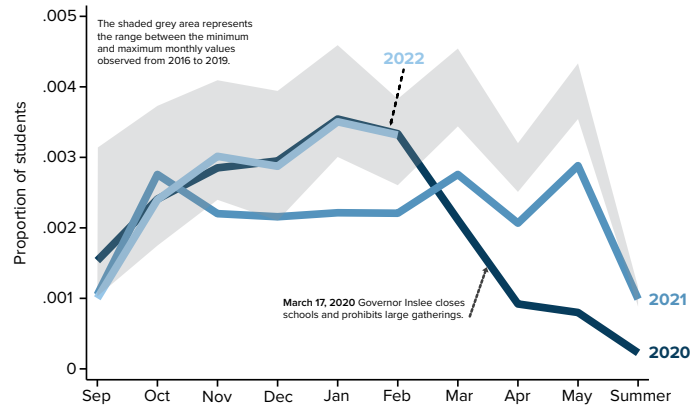
Special education identification rates plummeted during the pandemic in Washington state.

Analyzing student-level administrative data in Washington state, researchers found identification rates dropped well below pre-pandemic norms in 2020, when the Governor ordered statewide school closures (Figure 1). Rates then started recovering in 2021 and returned to pre-pandemic norms by early 2022.

The researchers estimate these declines could mean around 8,500 fewer elementary students were identified for special education services during the pandemic in Washington than would have been expected based on prior trends. To put that in perspective, that is enough students to fill almost 450 elementary classrooms in Washington state, where average elementary class sizes are around 19 students.

FIGURE 1. Special education identification is back to pre-pandemic levels after dropping during the pandemic.

Proportion unidentified students identified for special education in Washington state before, during, and after the pandemic



The Bottom line: Special education identification rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels, but significant concerns remain.

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. Meanwhile, 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.

Going forward, researchers and policymakers will need to monitor student progress and identification rates to ensure schools and districts have the resources they need to support students with disabilities across the state and mitigate the fallout from the pandemic.

Go Deeper: <https://caldercenter.org/>

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. 37-0624