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The Future of Special Education: Compliance, Data, and Transformation

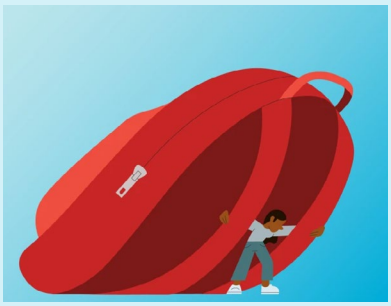


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EDITOR'S NOTE

This collection of articles highlights special education at an inflection point, where **compliance, data, and technology** are no longer back-office concerns; they are central to **equity**. From legal scrutiny and **digital accessibility mandates** to smarter **progress monitoring, inclusive models,** and **tech-enabled interventions**, districts must modernize how they serve students with disabilities. The priority is clear: stronger leadership, better data, accessible tools, inclusive and flexible models, and airtight compliance to deliver real results for students with disabilities.



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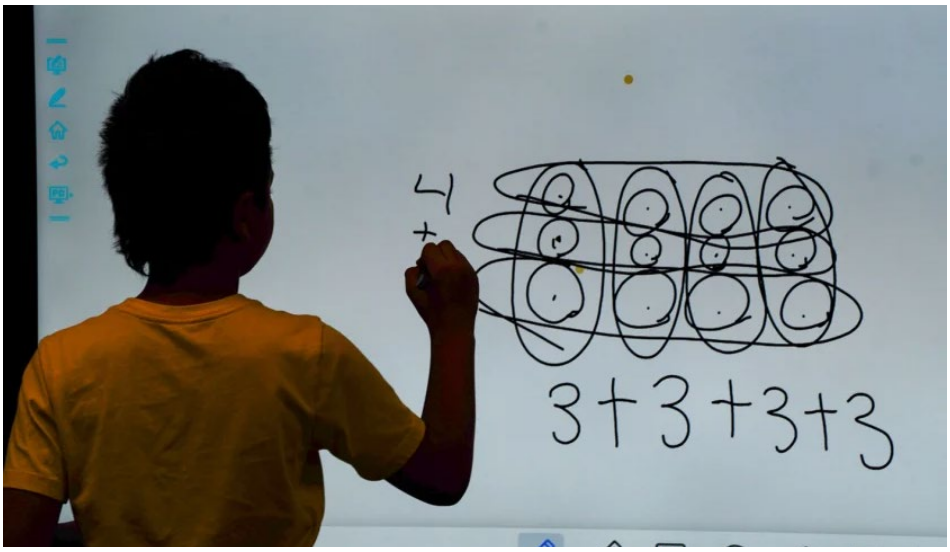
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Rebecca Slezak/AP

A student works a problem in a 2nd grade math class at Place Bridge Academy in Denver. The math instructional strategies that teachers employ can vary depending on whether they trained as general or special educators—a divide researchers say could hurt struggling students.

Published August 21, 2025

How Should We Teach Math? General And Special Ed. Researchers Don't Agree

By Sarah Schwartz

About a decade ago, leaders at the Kentucky Department of Education set out to develop guidelines for what quality math instruction should looked like in the state, convening educators from the general education and special education teams at the agency.

But those two groups found themselves at odds over one key issue: encouraging "productive struggle."

Math leaders wanted to include the approach, in which teachers present students with challenging, open-ended questions that prompt them to grapple with mathematical ideas and persevere to solve problems. But special educators were hesitant, said Amanda Waldroup, the assistant director of the division of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act implementation and preschool in the Kentucky education department's office of special education and early learning.

"They were worried that it would create frustration for students," Waldroup said.

This back-and-forth in Kentucky might seem like a small disagreement, but it's representative of a broad gap between how general educators and special educators understand what good math teaching looks like. And it's a tension that reverberates throughout math education policy, since states such as California and major math education groups have embraced inquiry-based math education.

A new paper that examines the tension argues that teachers need proven strategies to serve students with disabilities and those who struggle in math—and the divide between general education and special education makes it less likely they'll get access to them. What's more, its authors say, the root of the problem lies in differences in how these groups of teachers are trained.

"To us, it was really clear that this starts within colleges and universities, but has widespread implications," said Nathan Jones, an associate professor in special education at Boston University and one of the authors of the paper. (He is currently on leave as the commissioner of the Institute of Education Sciences' National Center for Special Education Research.)

Researchers disagree over teachers' role in student learning

It might seem reasonable that there's a difference between general and special ed. in terms of what teachers are taught about best practices. Students with math disabilities, after all, have some unique needs, frequently needing more help with developing number sense and place value. But most general education teachers have some students with disabilities in the classrooms, and nearly all of them will teach kids who are struggling in math.

The study, from researchers at the University of Virginia, Boston University, and the University of Delaware, catalogs the similarities and differences between how researchers in general education and special education conceptualize the goals of math education and the roles teachers should play. Jones and his colleagues Julie Cohen and Lynsey Gibbons drew on a series of structured interviews with 22 prominent academics, 11 each in special ed. and general math education.

They asked the researchers what they thought math teaching and learning should look like, covering big themes—like what knowledge and skills should take center stage, what the role of the teacher is in the classroom, or what "success" means in math—as well as specific topics that have become flashpoints in the math field, such as the role of productive struggle, or guided practice.

Both groups agreed that students needed to develop deep conceptual understanding of math topics, and that teachers needed to differentiate instruction to serve all learners. But they differed in their perspectives on how educators could best achieve these ends, and at some level about the very purpose of the subject itself.

Special educators tended to focus on what the authors called "school-based" goals. Success in math could be measured by data-based outcomes like mastering standards, or being prepared for more advanced courses in high school and college. General math ed. researchers, in contrast, focused on broader goals, like finding "joy" in math, or using it to engage in civic life.

"Special educators framed their goals based on the world as it is, pushing for change, but without necessarily challenging the status quo structure of K–12 schools," the researchers wrote. "General educators, by contrast, more often proposed radical change to that status quo, underscoring ideas about the world as it should be and proposing goals to reimagine why we learn mathematics."

The groups also diverged in what role they

expected teachers to take in student learning.

The math general education researchers prioritized inquiry, arguing that classrooms should be weighted toward student discourse over teacher-directed instruction, and that students should try tackling problems first before teachers modeled how to solve them.

Special education researchers said the process should happen in the opposite order: Teachers should use explicit instruction to break down complicated processes first, guide them through examples, and then give students the opportunity to try challenging problems.

This tension between explicit instruction and a more inquiry-based approach is one of the issues at the heart of the ongoing "math wars," a decades-long debate about the best way to teach the subject that's waxed and waned through the years.

How do divides in math teaching methods show up in classrooms?

There are several ways these divides show up in the classroom.

"The high-quality instructional materials that are being rolled out across the country, a lot of those programs really privilege inquiry approaches and discourse-heavy pedagogy," said Julie Cohen, an associate professor of education at the University of Virginia who studies teacher quality and evaluation, and the lead author on the study.

Such programs can still be effective for students who struggle in math, but the instructional techniques researched in special education could help "scaffold kids and support them," she said. Some of those techniques feature more explicit, step-by-step teaching to guide students' mathematical reasoning—a technique that's proven to help students who need more support in the subject.

But, Cohen said, "it was just so clear in the research we did for this paper that the most prominent math education researchers in this country were pushing back against this idea."

General education researchers mostly "did not demonstrate familiarity with mathematics-related disabilities," the study's authors wrote.

For their part, special ed. researchers also weren't fluent in some of the issues that math general education researchers studied—like the effect of bias on students' math achievement and self-perception.

"Special educators were using a lot of deficit language," Cohen said, for example, talking about students' use of "immature" strategies. They didn't usually discuss how social factors, like race and power, could influence classroom dynamics and shape whether kids saw themselves as math people.

"The way we talk about kids and their ideas, and their strategies, and the way that they approach math, I think those things really do matter," Cohen said.

A larger battle over 'evidence based' math instruction

Back in Kentucky, the general and special ed. leaders eventually found consensus on "productive struggle," said Waldroup of the state department of education.

They kept the recommendation, but qualified it, noting that teachers should prompt students with strategic questions to ensure students keep moving forward. "A lot of that revolved around how you do it, so that it doesn't create frustration for the students," Waldroup said.

How schools do, and should, define best practice is an especially salient topic now. Several states have passed legislation requiring that schools screen students for math difficulties and intervene early. Some, including Alabama and Indiana, specify that these tools and approaches should be "evidence based."

But with two competing research literatures, the field is still fighting over the definition of "evidence based."

In 2024, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Council for Exceptional Children—professional organizations for math teachers and special education teachers, respectively—put out a joint statement in an attempt to reach common ground.

The document said students with disabilities "have a right to high-quality instruction" and should be "provided with appropriate supports." It included a list of high-level recommendations, including that teachers "position students with disabilities as valuable owners of and contributors to the mathematics being learned," and "build meaningful connections between concepts and procedures."

In response, more than 30 special education researchers signed a letter arguing that many of the recommendations were "merely beliefs and philosophies without significant and rigorous research to support them."

The joint statement from NCTM and CEC didn't emphasize systematic, explicit instruction, a decision that letter writers called "educational malpractice" given its strong research base in supporting students with disabilities.

The episode underscores the challenges inherent in this kind of collaboration, said Jones. "It is much easier to come to consensus on making instruction accessible, and [saying] everyone belongs," he said. "It is much harder to put pen to paper and say, we agree on these practices."

One group of special education researchers has planted a flag, launching the "science of math" in 2021—a movement modeled after the "science of reading," making the argument that a similar focus on systematic, explicit instruction and guided practice is necessary in both subjects for students to develop foundational knowledge. It rejects the inquiry-based methods promoted by professional organizations like NCTM.

But a "science of reading" framework might not map as easily onto math, in part because there isn't quite as large of a body of research, said Jones.

"I think we want to avoid the scenario with other subjects where we have winners and losers in a way that is not always helpful. I think we have this opportunity with math," he said.

If there's anything to emulate from the science of reading movement, though, he said, "it's planning with the marginalized student in mind. It's instruction with those students at the center." ■

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Inside a K-12 District's Plan for a Charter School For Students With Autism

By Caitlynn Peetz Stephens



Kaylee Domzalski/Education Week

Roosevelt Nivens, superintendent of the Lamar Consolidated Independent school district in Texas, speaks after being named superintendent of the year by AASA in Nashville, Tenn. on Feb. 12, 2026. The district Nivens leads will open a new charter school for students with autism in the 2026-27 school year.

When students return to the Lamar Consolidated schools in Texas after summer break, some will attend a new district-sponsored school that's on track to become the latest charter school designed specifically to serve a growing population of students with autism.

Bright Futures Academy, in the 45,000-student district southwest of Houston, is slated to open in August, offering a dedicated program for children on the autism spectrum where they can receive therapeutic supports integrated into the school day, without being pulled out of class.

The charter school, which will be located at the Lamar Consolidated school system's Beasley Elementary School, will start off serving about 100 students ages 3 through 2nd grade who apply and are chosen through a lottery.

Bright Futures' schedule will carve out dedicated time for therapy and other academic supports, district leaders said, and parents will be welcome to see their kids receiving services.

Lamar won't be the first to open a charter school designed to serve children with autism as the population of children on the spectrum nationwide has grown. A top special education official at the U.S. Department of Education, for example, founded a network of Arizona charter schools for children with autism as well as a national accelerator to help other autism-focused charter schools open.

The goal in Lamar is twofold: First, as the district's number of students on the autism spectrum grows, teachers need more support. At Bright Futures, staff will be specially trained to work with students who have disabilities. This takes pressure off educators in mainstream classrooms who are not equipped to handle all students' unique needs. The specialized focus will include helping students develop self-regulation skills and prepare for independent adulthood.

"We all have our own barriers, and just because you have autism doesn't mean you can't go out into the world and be a successful young adult," said Superintendent Roosevelt Nivens, who was recently named the national superintendent of the year by AASA, The School Superintendents Association. "It's our job as educators to help and support students and help them learn those skills so they can do exactly that."

The second goal, Nivens said, is to cut down on families' out-of-pocket costs for supportive services. At the charter school, families will have direct access to many of those services through district-contracted providers.

One parent he spoke with said she had to sell her home and move into an apartment because her bills to support her child with autism were too high—even with the child receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

"He was in public school, but she would have to take him out and take him to these other places for services and [was] spending all this money, and it just got me thinking, 'Man, how can we help these families?'" Nivens said. "In my head, that's what the public school system is supposed to do. We're supposed to have partnerships. We're supposed to have programs that support all kids."

Working more closely with students' therapists will also ensure that school staff are implementing the same strategies—for emotional regulation, for example—that kids are learning in therapy, said Tiffany Mathis, the district's director of special education. The schedule will also allow for children's teachers to attend therapy sessions with them, if necessary.

"We're trying to combine the two and allow everybody to work together so that we can see progress—to move kids along faster to reach their goals," she said.

Of the 45,000 students in the Lamar Consolidated district, about 1,700 are identified as having autism, Mathis said, up from just over 700 in 2021.

A different approach to inclusion at a specialized charter school

The Lamar district isn't the first to design a special program for children with autism or other developmental or intellectual disabilities.

And while it's an approach often driven by parents' needs and their desire to support their children, it has also drawn skepticism from experts and advocates who say incorporating students with disabilities as much as possible into general education classrooms benefits all students. That idea, in fact, is enshrined in federal law.

IDEA requires that students with disabilities be taught in the "least restrictive environment" that's appropriate for their needs. Generally, that means participating in classes alongside their general education peers at least some of the time.

Specialized charters try to meet the least restrictive environment requirement in different ways. Some recruit a mix of general education and special education students. Others promote interactions with nondisabled peers through special programs or clubs, as the Bright Futures charter school plans to do, which Nivens said is perhaps the most exciting part of the Bright Futures Academy program.

Bright Futures is located about a five-minute drive from the district's career-and-technical education center, Nivens said, so students in the program can be routinely bused over and they can learn from the older students and have the chance to practice social skills in new situations.

Bright Futures parents, therapists, or teachers can accompany students on these visits and help them practice responding to situations that might feel challenging, overstimulating, or scary.

And students in the CTE program also will get valuable experience working with people with disabilities, Nivens said. Students in the cosmetology program might provide haircuts, facials, or manicures to students from Bright Futures, for example, he said.

"When they leave Lamar CISD, they have on their resume and can say they know how to provide support to people with autism and they will be more sought-after for having that skillset that not many other 18- or 19-year-olds have," Nivens said.

"All of this kind of intertwines, but the end goal is, when students graduate, they have to go out and be successful young adults. We have to meet every kid where they are to help them do that."

Ultimately, Nivens said, he considered whether the specialized charter approach would be beneficial for students when weighed against research and other districts' experiences. In the end, the potential positives for families tipped the scales.

"My first thought was that maybe parents wouldn't want their students to be singled out, or want to make sure they're in the mainstream with everyone else," Nivens said. "But these parents who are signing up have realized their child does need these supports and that this setting could be useful to get experiences and build their self-regulation skills for long-term success."

Bright Futures' success will be measured in progress on students' IEPs

Lamar's investment in the new special education charter comes at a time when districts across the country deal with tightening budgets and the ever-present struggle to pay for costly special education services.

Lamar leaders said they spend about $6 million more than what the federal government provides to the district for special education annually, and have done so for years, pulling dollars from other areas of a total budget of more than $473 million. The district intends to solicit donations from community partners to help fund the work at the Bright Futures charter school, Nivens said.

If the program is successful, Nivens hopes to expand it and add new grade levels at locations across the district.

To measure success, district leaders plan to evaluate each student's progress against the goals set in their Individualized Education Program, or IEP, Nivens said.

"We'll have a committee of folks who will say, 'By the end of the year, this student needs to have fewer negative interactions with his peers,' or whatever his goal is, and that's a conversation that we'll have for every individual student," he said. "We'll measure our success that way." ■

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Schools Have Another Year to Make Websites Accessible. Why That Matters

By Evie Blad

School districts will have another year to comply with new regulations designed to make their websites more accessible to people with disabilities after the U.S. Department of Justice delayed a deadline originally set for this month.

The regulations under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act were set to take effect April 24 for public agencies, including school districts, serving communities with more than 50,000 people. The deadline for smaller agencies and districts was originally set for April 2027 and has been delayed to 2028.

Here's what you need to know about the rule, why districts wanted extra time, and why disability rights advocates are concerned by the delay.

Why do school districts need web accessibility rules?

Title II of the ADA, the nation's primary disability rights law, says that people cannot be excluded from accessing or benefiting from services provided by public entities because of their disabilities. For school districts—which increasingly rely on web platforms to share information, communicate with families, and abide by open-records laws—that means ensuring everyone from students to taxpayers can access, read, and interact with information and forms posted online.

The rules of accessibility for physical spaces are clearly defined under current ADA regulations, which require building features like ramps at entrances and restroom stalls large enough to accommodate wheelchairs. But because the web was in its infancy when the Justice Department wrote those rules in 1991, agency officials did not include specific details about digital accessibility.

Though the Justice and Education departments have long held that online content must be accessible under the ADA, public entities, including school districts, have lacked clear regulations defining what that means.

"The Department has consistently heard from members of the public—including public entities and individuals with disabilities—that there is a need for additional information on how to specifically comply with the ADA in this context," the Justice Department's delayed regulation says.



Shivendu Jauhari/Getty

What do the web accessibility rules for schools say?

The recently delayed web-accessibility rule was originally issued by former President Joe Biden's administration in 2024 following years of discussions that started in 2010.

The regulations require that schools ensure that content on the desktop and mobile versions of their websites and smartphone apps complies with version 2 of accessibility guidelines created by an international organization called the Web Accessibility Initiative. That includes content hosted by third-party apps and websites through agreements or contracts with districts, like sites that host school board documents, the rule said.

"Just as stairs can exclude people who use wheelchairs from accessing government buildings, inaccessible web content and mobile apps can exclude people with a range of disabilities from accessing government services," the rule said. "It is critical to ensure that individuals with disabilities can access important web content and mobile apps quickly, easily, independently, privately, and equally."

The guidelines apply to all online text, images, sounds, videos, controls, animations, and documents. How they apply:

Online content, including charts and forms, must be compatible with assistive technology, like speech-recognition software or screen readers used by blind people.

Videos and sound files must include captions for deaf and hard-of-hearing users.

Photos and images must include embedded alternative-text descriptions that can be read by assistive software.

Users must be able to resize text and and change contrast levels to make it easier to read.

Why did some school districts want to delay the web accessibility rule?

Some school districts and advocacy organizations like AASA, the School Superintendents Association, argued that complying with the new regulations is costly and requires extensive staff time.

In a survey of 200 school communications directors conducted by the National School Public Relations Association and Sogolytics, a web analytics company, just 14% of respondents said their districts are "close to completing compliance work." Forty-six percent of respondents said their district had made accessibility "a high priority," according to the survey, which was conducted last August and September.

Respondents said their districts' accessibility work largely focused on public-facing websites but excluded apps, third-party parent communication platforms, and learning-management systems. Seventy-four percent of respondents identified vendor limitations as a barrier in accessibility efforts.

Are disability rights groups concerned about the delay?

Disability rights organizations called the delay a serious setback that will further hinder the people they represent from fully participating in public life.

"This delay is not abstract," said a statement from the American Association of People with Disabilities. "As more and more government services, from public benefits applications to emergency alert notifications to voter information, move exclusively online, inaccessible government websites are not a minor inconvenience. They are a barrier to the full participation of people with disabilities in society."

The National Federation of the Blind said its most immediate concern is for blind students "who are among those most directly harmed when public entities rely on inaccessible websites and mobile apps for course materials, assignments, and student portals."

"When information is not accessible, blind students are excluded from the same curricula as their peers, face delays in completing coursework and degrees, and encounter unnecessary barriers to entering the workforce and participating fully in society," the organization said in a statement. ■

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Published February 03, 2025

This Tech Director Is Revolutionizing Special Education With Gaming

By Alyson Klein



Michelle Gustafson for Education Week

Evan Abramson, the director of technology and innovation at Morris-Union Jointure Commission, in Warren, N.J. Abramson spearheaded an esports program to help students on the autism spectrum connect with one another and learn new skills. The gaming arena where students play together may be the first-of-its-kind in the country.

Sarah Sasiak remembers how painful it once was to watch her now 18-year-old son Tanner in elementary school chorus concerts.

Tanner, who is on the autism spectrum, has communication challenges that can make it hard for him to be understood—or be part of a choral ensemble.

"He would just stand there with all these other kids around him, singing," Sasiak said. "He couldn't even get the words out," because of language processing difficulties.

As he grew, Tanner longed to participate in the kinds of activities his three neurotypical siblings do.

But for years, his options for engagement and socialization were limited. Then, in 2022, Morris-Union Jointure Commission, the specialized school district Tanner attends, created an esports arena geared specifically to students with significant cognitive challenges, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The room looks like a cross between a computer lab and a high-tech gym. It is filled with large monitors appropriate for gaming, but also special consoles that can accommodate players with fine-motor differences and other challenges.

The specialized arena, which its architects think is the first in the country to be housed in a school district, is the brainchild of Evan Abramson, Morris-Union Jointure Commission's director of technology and innovation. It is emblematic of Abramson's creative, student-focused approach to harnessing technology to help students with significant cognitive and behavioral challenges thrive.

In addition to dreaming up the arena, Abramson, a 2025 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From honoree, has become a go-to expert in New Jersey for using artificial intelligence in the classroom, particularly for students in special education. He's the kind of hands-on tech director teachers can rely on to explain cutting-edge tools from a practical, classroom-focused perspective.

It takes a special kind of tech leader to understand how to marry the "wires and pliers" aspects of the job with teaching and learning—all while helping teachers embrace, not fear, technological transformation, said Janet Fike, Morris-Union Jointure Commission's superintendent.

"I think he is a visionary," Fike said of Abramson. "I think he has a lot of energy for new things. And when things don't work out, he can accept that and go to Plan B."

She praised Abramson's communication skills and ability to navigate the political minefields that inevitably accompany district leadership: "He can talk to anyone about anything. As a leader, you have to [meet] people where they are and give them what they need. And I think he does that very well."

'Doing everything you can to make them feel normal'

Though his mother was a teacher, Abramson, 47, didn't set out to follow in her footsteps. A talented baseball player, he attended college in south Florida on a sports scholarship. While there, he interned for the St. Louis Cardinals and prepared for a career in sports management.

Abramson put those plans on hold when a difficult family situation drew him back to New Jersey. To earn money, he started teaching at a Catholic school, eventually making his way to public schools around the Garden State. He taught physical education and even led a class combining physical education and math before becoming a tech coach, then tech director.

In early 2021, while leading technology work at Millburn Township schools in central New Jersey, Abramson saw the job description for a newly created tech director position at Morris-Union Jointure Commission, a nearby district with an unusual structure and mission. The district's board consists of leaders from 30 Garden State districts. It provides their schools with expertise on serving students in special education.

Morris-Union Jointure Commission also directly serves around 225 students with cognitive and/or behavioral challenges that their home districts don't have the expertise to address. Some attend school in Morris-Union Jointure for just a year or two before heading back to their own districts. Others spend most of their educational careers at Morris-Union Jointure Commission, which serves students up to age 21.

The more Abramson considered the position, the more he felt personally drawn to it. His mother and aunt had taught special education. His own son was born premature and later developed a malformed eardrum and other physical problems that inhibited his hearing.

After multiple surgeries, his son, now 13, has regained most of his ability to hear, and is a general education student. But for years, he wore hearing aids and had an Individualized Education Program to support his needs, Abramson said.

"A lot of the passion for what I do now certainly came because of him," Abramson said. As a special education parent or educator, "you're trying to do everything right, everything you can to make sure they feel normal."

'This esports thing is pretty legit'

Abramson's son also inspired the esports arena. When he turned 10, the boy begged his parents to be allowed to play Fortnite, a popular online video game. Abramson relented, though he didn't love the idea of his kid staring at a screen, steering his way through violent scenarios.

But Abramson was surprised by what he saw as he watched his son and his friends play.

"It was pretty incredible, because I was hearing all the conversations that I had always felt he would have on the football field or the basketball court," Abramson recalled. "They were empathetic. They were critically thinking. They were problem solving. They were doing all these things that we want our kids to do. And I was like, 'this esports thing is pretty legit.' "

Not long after those gaming sessions opened Abramson's eyes to the benefits of esports, Fike found herself with a $50,000 technology grant from a local foundation. She wanted to use it for an impactful, outside-the-box project and asked Abramson for ideas.

He told her, "We should put an esports arena in for these kids, because I have seen what it did for my own kid, who has needs," Abramson recalled. Fike's support was immediate and emphatic, he said. "She was like, 'it sounds great, and it sounds innovative.'"

District officials, led by Abramson, partnered with SHI, a local tech company, to build the arena, with an assist from Logitech, a hardware manufacturing company. The district also enlisted vSEVEN, another hardware company, to provide specialized keyboards that can be run through a dishwasher, to keep the arena as germ-free as possible.

The district also got high-end, adaptable controllers from Microsoft that had already been created for competitive gamers and were appropriate for students with limited fine-motor skills, or behavioral challenges. It even built a shout-casting station—the esports version of an announcer's desk—so students with verbal capabilities could further develop their communication skills by explaining what was happening in the games, just as a sports broadcaster might for basketball or tennis.

'Something happened that we didn't anticipate'

But some teachers were skeptical of the project. They thought the money would be better spent on iPads, Chromebooks, and classroom supplies. Fike believed teachers' support for the project was key, so Abramson took them to Kean University, a nearby college with a massive esports arena. For a few hours, they all played video games together.

Within 10 minutes "they started talking trash and playing with each other and having a great time," Abramson said.

Though the gaming session was a good start to helping teachers embrace the project, a majority of the district's roughly 30 teachers still wondered whether the students the districts serve would be able to handle gaming.

But that started to change a few months later at a ribbon cutting ceremony for the 12-seat arena with Morris-Union Jointure families.

That's when "something happened we didn't anticipate," Abramson said. As students played, some of their neurotypical siblings sat down and joined in.

Some of "the siblings had never played with each other before. They didn't know they could play with these kids," Abramson said. Parents' eyes welled up. Teachers got teary too.

"We knew from that point on that we had built a bridge, that our students could feel normal, they could play with their own siblings at home," Abramson said. "And I think for us, that was everything."

'They are just as deserving as everyone else'

Time in the esports arena is used in part as a student incentive, particularly for a subset of Morris-Union Jointure students who struggle with appropriate behavior but have higher cognitive abilities.

It can be a powerful motivator for some of Marissa Zinberg's students, 18- to 21-year-olds on the autism spectrum. She recalled how one, a particularly big technology fan "was glowing and so happy" when the arena was unveiled, she said.

To be sure, the esports arena isn't appropriate for at least half of the district's population due to their cognitive abilities and fine motor skills, Zinberg said.

But for those who can take advantage of it, "it was a great thing," she said.

Students whose learning and physical challenges aren't considered among the most severe can "get lost sometimes, not necessarily in our district, but in a lot of districts, because they're higher [functioning] than a lot of the special needs [students], but lower than typical kids," Zinberg said. "To be able to give them something that they can interact with their peers, interact with their siblings, they are just as deserving as anybody else."

The district also created a smaller space—called the Esports Training Lab—for its elementary students. It features Nintendo Switches where students can play Mario Kart or build in Minecraft, all while learning to work in teams and cheer each other on.

Morris-Union Jointure Commission has used the arena to forge connections between its older students and the broader community.

Students have played against general education students from a neighboring district and against local police officers, who are trying to learn more about people with ASD, in part, so that they can respond to them appropriately when they encounter them in public spaces. The interaction also gave students face time with officers so that they could see them as "friendly and non-threatening" and may feel more comfortable going to them with a problem, Abramson said.

Those community connections are powerful for students in special education, said Lindsay Jones, the chief executive officer at CAST, a nonprofit education research and development organization that works to make curriculum accessible for students with disabilities.

"One of the biggest issues we have is isolation of students. That leads to anxiety, depression. And when you're a student who is not communicating in typical ways, there's even bigger isolation," said Jones, who noted that there are higher rates of anxiety and depression across all disabilities.

Getting to play games with law enforcement, with general education students from nearby schools, and with their siblings helps

others see students with ASD and other challenges as a "whole child, a whole person in many ways," Jones said."They aren't just their disability."

'The first one out of the gate' on AI

Recently, Abramson's quest to harness cutting-edge technologies to support teaching and learning has lead him to generative artificial intelligence. He is learning how AI tools like ChatGPT and Google's Gemini can help educators—particularly those who work with students in special education—do their jobs more efficiently.

He's spoken to some 40 districts about the technology. His message: AI must be used with caution, but it isn't anything to be afraid of. It can help educators brainstorm, craft lesson plans, even write emails to parents. And it has potential as an assistive technology for students in special education.

"He was the first one out of the gate," said Melissa Signore, the superintendent of River Vale school district, a northern New Jersey district where Abramson gave AI trainings. "He's always on what I like to call the bleeding edge, where he's out there, trying to get in front of what's coming so that he can prepare [educators] for what needs to be done, not only for his district," but around the state.

It's a significant undertaking at a time when districts around the country are racing to offer teachers training in AI. A little less than half—43 percent—of teachers said they have received at least one training session on the technology, according to a nationally representative survey of 1,135 educators—including 731 teachers—conducted last fall by the EdWeek Research Center.

That's a nearly 50 percent increase from a survey EdWeek conducted in the spring of 2024, when 29 percent of teachers said they'd received such training—a signal that professional development on AI is in high demand.

Abramson's PD sessions are grounded in a practical, teacher-focused point-of-view, Signore said. Abramson developed the material himself. He's drawn on extensive research and interviews with experts and created different types for different audiences, including aimed at staff, administrators, and parents.

"Evan understands the infrastructure and the technology side, but he really understands the educational piece of it," Signore said. "That's a huge flip. You don't get that combo in one human resource very often."

Tech can engage students in special education 'in a different way'

In addition to sharing his knowledge about AI and esports, Abramson is happy to pop into classrooms to give tech demonstration lessons, sometimes paying particular attention to individual students' interests.

For instance, Alex, one of Zinberg's former students, is passionate about electric cars. Abramson spent time taking him on a virtual field trip to the New York auto show, where he could see inside dozens of models and check out their interiors. The highlight: A Tesla.

"I think he's just really tried to bring a different viewpoint to the district and really open up our eyes to technology," Zinberg said.

She, like other teachers, has long had "the same repertoires, the same websites that I've used for however long they've existed. And all of a sudden, he's bringing us these other concepts and ideas, which I think is just so helpful, and it really engages the kids in a different way."

The exposure to esports has certainly been powerful for Tanner.

When he and other students are in the arena and at the controls, competing in teams, they look just like any other video-game obsessed adolescent or young adult, disability or no, the district's staff say.

Gaming has helped Tanner "develop confidence, a sense of pride and independence," said Sasiak. Maybe even more importantly: "It's just a great bonding for him, with his siblings. It's something that they can all do together." ■

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Special Education Is Buckling Under Its Own Complexity.

The provider shortage is real. The deeper problem is the complexity around it.

Dr. Omar Dawood, Chief Executive Officer, Huddle Up
Keith Kostrzewski, SVP of Strategic Partnerships & Growth, Huddle Up

THREE FORCES BEHIND THE COMPLEXITY

01 **Too many vendors**
Coverage is split across a roster of staffing sources that don't share systems, standards, or a single point of management.

02 **No standardization**
Requests, records, reporting, and documentation are scattered across disconnected systems, hard to track and harder to roll into one student record.

03 **Staffing that can't flex**
Demand peaks and dips unpredictably across the year, but a one-size-fits-all workforce model can't shift capacity to match it.

This isn't a failure of effort. *It's the structure districts have inherited. The way through isn't more staff or any one delivery model. It's a flexible system that reduces complexity, standardizes the work, and puts support within reach of every student who needs it.*

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Special Education Is Buckling Under Its Own Complexity

Hiring alone won't fix it. The deeper problem is complexity, and the cost lands on students.

BY DR. OMAR DAWOOD & KEITH KOSTRZEWSKI · Huddle Up

One of the hardest jobs in the district

Few operations inside a school district are as complex as special education, and that complexity has been climbing for years. Coordinating evaluations, services, providers, timelines, documentation, and compliance across students whose needs look nothing alike is, by any honest measure, one of the hardest jobs a district has to run.

The instinct is to read the strain as a numbers problem: not enough providers, so hire more. The shortage is real, and the people managing it are doing skilled work with too few tools. But hiring alone never reaches the deeper issue. When a role won't fill, the natural move is to bring in another vendor, and that move quietly makes the operation harder to run, not easier. What makes special education so hard today isn't only who is missing. It's how much complexity has accumulated around the work itself, a level of operating complexity that, in most districts, doesn't need to be there. And the cost is never abstract: it lands on students, who wait for the support they are owed.

To understand how district leaders experience this, we surveyed 111 K-12 superintendents across seven states for *The Hidden Costs of Special Education Vacancies*, a 2026 Huddle Up research report. What we heard was strikingly consistent: the strain they described was structural, not occasional, and it traced again and again to a system grown too tangled to run cleanly.

Every vendor adds management load, not just capacity

To cover demand, districts do the rational thing: they bring in help wherever they can find it. A staffing agency here, an independent contractor there, a virtual vendor or two for the roles no one local can fill. Each addition solves an immediate gap. Together, they create a new problem.

Every vendor runs on its own systems, its own standards, and its own way of reporting, and none of them coordinate with the others. Past a certain point, each new contract makes the operation harder to manage rather than easier: more handoffs, more reconciliation, and no single party rowing in the same direction. The roster grows, but the district's ability to see and steer the whole shrinks.

In practice that means one agency for speech, another for occupational therapy, a handful of independent contractors for mental health, and a virtual provider covering school psychology. Each comes with its own portal, its own invoicing, its own credentialing, and its own idea of a job well done. None was hired to look at the whole child, because none can see it.

THE MANAGEMENT TAX

98%

of surveyed districts said coordinators and administrators spend **more than 20 hours a month** on IEP logistics: scheduling, tracking, and reconciling a fragmented operation. Nearly half spend more than 41.

Those hours go to holding a complicated system together rather than to the instructional coaching, progress monitoring, and proactive planning that move students forward. The complexity doesn't just cost money. It pulls the focus of the very people best positioned to improve outcomes.

And because no one is accountable for the whole, the hardest questions slip through the gaps between contracts. Is this student on track? Which services were missed this month, and who is making them up? When the answer is spread across four systems that don't talk to each other, the honest answer is that nobody fully knows.

And the effect compounds. The same complexity that consumes coordinator hours also creates inefficiencies for providers, who lose time to scheduling friction, duplicated paperwork, and disconnected systems, time that could have gone to students. Effective capacity shrinks, and the short-

The work has no standard shape

The second force is quieter, and in some ways more corrosive. The requests that drive special education almost never arrive in a standard form. They come in by email, on paper, and through one-off documents and spreadsheets a coordinator built by hand. Each is reasonable on its own. Together, they make the work nearly impossible to see as a whole.

Our research bears this out. Most districts reported tracking IEP services across several systems at once: a dedicated IEP platform, the student information system, manual logs, and spreadsheets layered on top, none of them fully synchronized. The picture of any single student has to be reassembled by hand.

WHEN THE DATA IS SCATTERED

73%

of superintendents said they are **less than fully confident** in the accuracy of their IEP tracking data. The doubt isn't about one platform. It's that the picture lives in too many places at once.

"The single biggest headache is the lack of a unified data system across our in-house and contracted providers. Service logs and progress notes end up scattered across three or four different platforms."

SUPERINTENDENT · 10,000–24,999-STUDENT DISTRICT

The cost of that fragmentation isn't only the hours spent reconciling it. When service logs, provider time, and progress notes live in systems that don't reconcile, a district can't see which students are quietly falling behind, compliance becomes guesswork, and reimbursement the district earned for services it actually delivered goes uncaptured. You cannot manage, or fund, what you cannot see in one place.

Demand that refuses to sit still

The third force is the one districts feel most and plan for least: demand doesn't hold steady. Referrals and evaluations come in waves, heavy in some stretches and light in others, rarely in a rhythm a district can staff against. Yet staffing is built for a flat line, a fixed roster sized to a yearly average that rarely matches the level of need in any given season.

A roster sized to the yearly average is overwhelmed when need rises and underused when it falls, and the students caught in the busy stretches are the ones left waiting.

So the system runs perpetually out of phase with its own demand: overwhelmed and backlogged at the peaks, carrying capacity it can't fully use in the troughs. Multi-million-dollar IEP budgets don't stretch as far as they should, and not because the money is too small. There is no way to flex capacity up when demand rises and back down when it eases.

Faced with that curve, districts are left with two poor options: staff to the peak and carry expensive capacity through the quiet months, or staff to the average and absorb a backlog when need rises. Neither uses the budget well, and neither serves students on time. The money is rarely the real constraint. The rigidity of how it gets deployed is.

THE CORE MISMATCH

One size, all year

Demand rises and falls, but a fixed roster holds the same flat line, overstretched when need spikes and underused when it dips. The shortage is hard to solve. The complexity it creates is not.

Three forces, then, compound into a single operating problem: a roster too fragmented to manage, a workflow too improvised to trust, and a demand curve no fixed staffing model can match. The instinct is to attack each one in isolation. The districts pulling ahead do something different.

▸ *Continued on page 4*

The answer isn't a head count. It's a system.

After more than a million delivered sessions, one thing is clear to us: there is no single right way to staff special education. In-person isn't the answer on its own, and neither is virtual. But the fix for that isn't a longer roster of vendors. It's the opposite. A mix of modalities only works when it runs as one coordinated system: a single standard, a single source of data, and a single point of accountability, flexible enough to meet students where and when they need support.

Three things define that system. It reduces complexity, consolidating a scattered roster of vendors toward a single point of management and accountability. It standardizes the work, so requests, records, and reporting move through one consistent process instead of a dozen improvised ones. And it flexes, scaling capacity up and down to match both the acuity of each case and the volume of demand. Together, those turn a tangle of contracts into one accountable system, with data you can trust, compliance you can prove, reimbursement you can capture, and students who get what they are owed.

That last piece is where the in-person and virtual question actually gets answered, not as an either/or but by matching the provider to the need. In-person providers are the right call for high-acuity cases and hands-on, on-site support. Virtual specialists deliver many services just as effectively, serving as the consistent, ongoing provider for students whose needs are well suited to it. They also give a district the reach to cover roles no one local can fill and the flex to meet rising demand. The point isn't to pick a side, but to deploy each where it does the most good.

A partner on the journey, not another vendor

Districts don't have to design that system alone, and the best ones don't. A partner that has supported millions of students brings a hard-won playbook to the table. The work starts not with résumés but with a diagnosis: understanding how a district's program actually runs, where the complexity concentrates, and what is driving cost and risk. From there, the partner helps simplify the vendor landscape, standardize the workflow, and stand up a system that flexes with demand.

THE SHIFT WORTH MAKING

Don't start with a résumé. Start with a diagnosis.

The districts pulling ahead understand the problem first, then build the solution around it. Not the other way around.

This is transformation, not evolution, and not a critique of the district leaders doing this work. They are managing extraordinary complexity with real skill and too few tools. The opportunity is to take that complexity off their plate: the same budget and dedication, aimed at a system built to flex rather than strain. The shortage won't ease soon, but the complexity stacked on top of it can be redesigned. Take it on, and you build something steadier: a system that puts support within reach of every student who is owed it.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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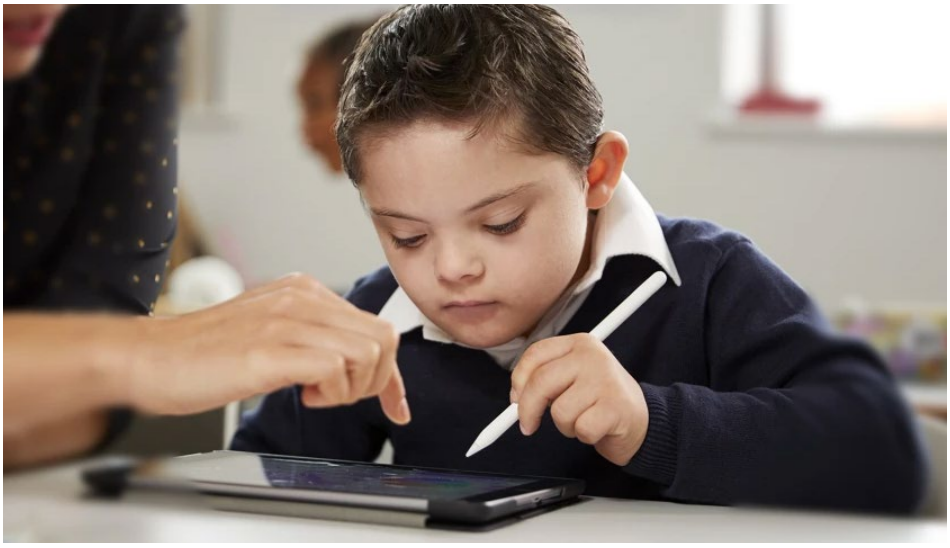
Huddle up ABOUT

Huddle Up is the accountable partner for special education related services. We plan, recruit, employ, deliver, and document speech, occupational therapy, school psychology, and mental health as one integrated program, supported by W-2 providers who stay with students year after year. Districts receive more mandated service minutes, cleaner compliance and reporting, and one comprehensive solution instead of managing multiple vendors.



SOURCE

1. "The Hidden Costs of Special Education Vacancies," Huddle Up research report; survey of 111 K-12 district superintendents across seven states, conducted March 2026.



iStock

Published August 05, 2025

Principals Don't Always Understand Special Education. That's a Problem

By Jennifer Vilcarino & Olina Banerji

One main responsibility for principals: supporting their teachers. But some special education teachers, who deal with heavy caseloads, mountains of paperwork, and individualized expectations feel like their school leader doesn't quite understand what's happening in their classrooms.

This was something that Jodee Prudente, a principal at Washoe County school district in Reno, Nev., had heard when she began teaching special education early in her career.

Teachers were saying, "The people who supervise and evaluate me don't know and understand what I'm supposed to be doing with the student population," said Prudente. "From there, it was, well, do they? Let's find out."

Prudente paired up with MaryAnn Demchak, a professor of special education at the University of Nevada, to study whether principals in rural Nevada understood how special education teachers led their classrooms, and learn how principals felt about the kind of support they provided to special education teachers.

The study, published earlier this year in the journal The Rural Educator, used the Autism and Low Incidence Classroom Observation Tool—which contains indicators about a student's progress and equips teachers with ways to adapt a program to better fit the student—to see whether principals understood how an indicator worked, its importance, and how capable they felt as school leaders to evaluate both those indicators and the special education teacher.

For example, a quality indicator in special education is how a student uses high- or low-tech assistive technology.

The results indicated that principals' "perception of themselves is that they may not be confident in their ability to provide feedback across every indicator," Prudente said.

Based on Prudente's experience in special education, she wasn't surprised.

As of 2012, just eight states required principals to receive specific special education training, with their preparation program covering mostly legal requirements, one study found.

This lack of training for principals can make special education teachers feel less supported at work and contribute to the high turnover rate in their field.

"Principals are the leaders within their buildings, and they are responsible for ensuring that all students are learning and reaching their outcomes, and how they facilitate instruction in the classroom for all students is critical," said Carole Clancy, the bureau director of special education at the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

"If you have a principal that doesn't understand special education or understand the criticalness of instruction of all students, they may not be equipped to do the job," she said.

The role of principals in special education

Sometimes, principals have to sit in on individualized education program meetings, and they also have to supervise and provide feedback to their special education teachers.

Natasha Veale, the dean of the School of Social Sciences and Education at Greensboro College in North Carolina, interviewed several principals across the state on their special education training for her dissertation, which later became the book, *How to Retain Special Education Teachers.*

During the interviews, Veale said, principals poured out their thoughts and experiences in supporting special education teachers. They were eager to have this conversation, which hasn't been at the forefront of school leadership, Veale said.

Principals expressed wanting better relationships with their special education teachers and more professional development in this area.

"The self-efficacy for their ability to be leaders was sometimes low ... in that area because they may recognize that they may have a lack of knowledge of special education," said Veale.

Oftentimes, existing special education training focuses on either legal education or how to create an inclusive environment for these students, when it should be both, said Cathi Davis, the principal of Ruby Bridges Elementary School in Clearview, Wash.

"That organically creates some real dichotomies in leaders' minds," she said. "I think that separating special education from the overall educational experience of students leads us to a path where we don't work together, and we don't provide a complete experience for students."

What principals can do to better support special ed. teachers

Veale said principals can seek outside support, in addition to the professional development provided to them at the district or state level.

"They would have to seek out information about the different disability areas and the different needs of the students in order to effectively run the special education programs," she said.

Pennsylvania is one state working to meet that need.

In 2007, the National Institute for School Leaders began working with the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network to develop special education modules. The training, which launched in 2009, is now known as Principals Understanding Leadership in Special Education or PULSE.

PULSE is a three-day training. Principals earn 30 hours of PD credit on topics that range from the legal needs of special education to best practices for instruction and inclusion of students and families with educational partners.

"This is just one tool in the toolbox for principals that have a very demanding job to help them know what they need to know to support them to do the job that they need to do," Clancy said.

While the PULSE course is optional, Pennsylvania requires its principals to complete competencies in special education during their preparation programs, which contributes to its popularity, said Clancy. The course has been completed by about 800 principals in the past nine years, she said.

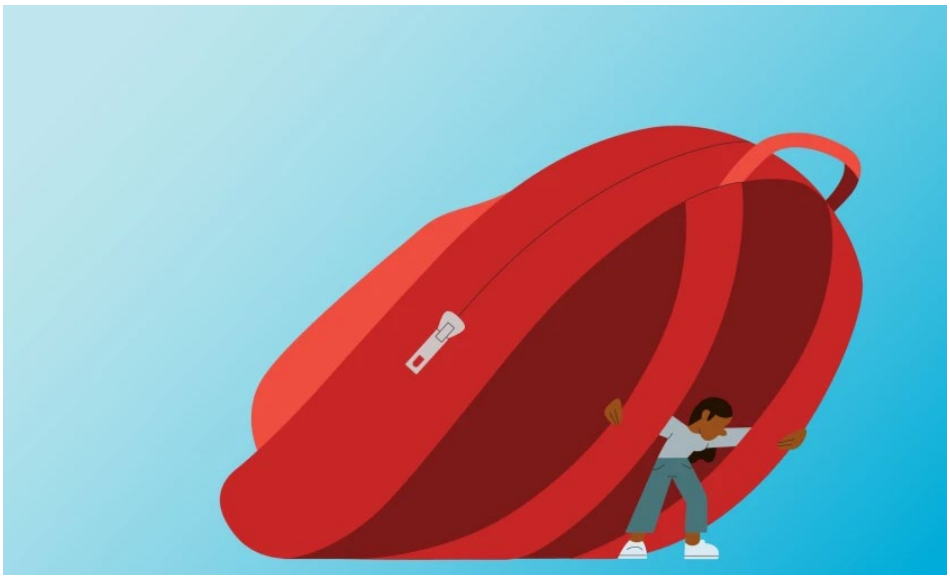
While it's important to have well-trained special education teachers, the results can be better with the support of well-trained principals, said Clancy.

"I can only imagine that having principals feel confident and equipped to do their job and support students with disabilities can help us meet the outcomes, and help our students meet their outcomes," she said. ■

Published November 05, 2025

A Small Change in Special Ed. Rules Could Affect Equity, Accountability, Advocates Warn

By Evie Blad



DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

A paperwork change proposed by the U.S. Department of Education would end an important accountability measure that helps ensure states adequately identify and address racial inequities in special education, disability rights advocates say.

The agency said in an Aug. 21 proposal that ending the requirement that states report changes to their methods for calculating "significant disproportionality" on their annual federal applications under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act would ease paperwork burdens for state education departments.

But comments on the proposal, which the agency accepted until Oct. 21, overwhelmingly oppose the plan. Those advocates contend the change would save states little time and come at the cost of important transparency.

"This is part of the Trump administration's pattern" of eliminating key data collections about students and schools, said Ivy Morgan, the director of P-12 research and data analytics at EdTrust, an organization that advocates for educational equity. "It's another chisel mark in their process of chipping away all of the data we need to be sure that states and districts are doing right by students."

The proposal coincides with the Education Department's decision to lay off 460 employees, virtually wiping out the office of special education and rehabilitative services, which holds states accountable for properly serving students with disabilities. Though a federal judge has paused those plans, disability rights advocates remain concerned about a broader lack of oversight for a vulnerable student population.

Here's what you need to know about significant disproportionality and the Education Department's proposal.

What is significant disproportionality?

Data show that Black, Latino, and Native American students are often more likely to be identified for special education services, more likely to be taught in alternative settings like separate classrooms, and more likely to be disciplined than their white and Asian American peers.

To address these concerns, the IDEA law requires that states identify and address "significant disproportionality" in the placement, identification, and discipline of students with disabilities. Congress reauthorized the law in 2004, adding a requirement that districts with significant disproportionality must commit 15% of their funds to remedy those imbalances through efforts like increased early intervention services.

Why are states' methods for measuring disproportionality in special education so important?

While the 2004 amendment required states to identify school districts with significant disproportionality, it left it up to state agencies to set criteria for making that determination. Some states subsequently set the bar so high that few or no districts were ever identified, noted a February 2013 investigation from the Government Accountability Office, a nonpartisan public watchdog agency.

"In Nebraska, one of 21 states that did not require any districts to provide services in 2010-11, racial and ethnic groups must be identified for special education at a rate three times higher than for other groups for two consecutive years," that report said.

Based on widely varying state criteria, just 356 districts out of more than 13,000 in the United States were required to address racial imbalances in special education that year, the GAO found.

"Half of these districts were clustered in five states, and 73 were in Louisiana alone," the agency said.

Without more consistent criteria, states could easily dodge accountability, disability rights advocates warned.

When did the Education Department require more details on their significant-disproportionality formula?

The Education Department released new regulations in 2016 that created a standardized approach, giving states more limited discretion.

Under that regulation, states must calculate the statistical likelihood that students from various racial and ethnic groups will be identified for special education, taught outside of a general education classroom, or subject to exclusionary discipline, like suspensions. States must then set a "risk ratio" that determines how

much overrepresentation is necessary to flag a district for significant disproportionality.

Under the first Trump administration, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos pushed to delay that rule, which was created by former President Barack Obama's administration, arguing that it amounted to setting harmful race-based quotas. But a federal judge ordered the Education Department to implement it.

Why do advocates want states to continue to report their methodology?

Because the 2016 rule still gave states some discretion in their methodology, the Education Department also required them to report any changes to their methodology on their annual IDEA applications, allowing the agency to check for "reasonableness."

States must report changes to "n size," or how they determine when there are too few students in a particular racial or ethnic group to perform a statistical analysis without violating the privacy of individual students. They must also document any changes to their risk ratio.

Under the Trump administration's proposed rule change, states would no longer be required to include that information in their IDEA applications, which are subject to public review and comment before they are submitted.

All states would still be required to collect data on disproportionality and take steps to address it. But the public may not be aware of changes to how they calculate it—and how that calculation could identify more or fewer students.

The equity regulation amounts to a "check engine light" to ensure states are appropriately responding to inequality and bias, wrote Denise Marshall, the CEO of the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, an advocacy group, in a comment on the proposed rule change.

"The absence of public reporting would defeat one of the benefits of the Equity in IDEA regulation, which was to promote transparency and allow parents and stakeholders, including COPAA, the ability to compare the methodologies used by various states," she wrote.

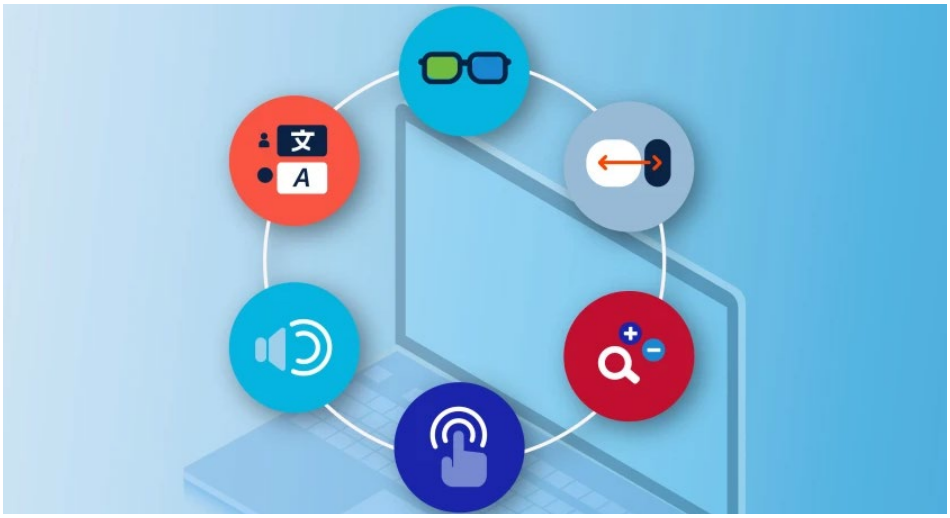
The other 94 comments on the proposed rule included similar concerns.

"Removing data collection requirements will not make this persistent issue go away, it will only serve to cut off transparency and accountability," 25 special education researchers wrote in a joint comment.

Without clear disclosure about changes to methodology, "the public loses the ability to understand whether changes in significant disproportionality over time are due to changes in methodology or genuine improved policies and practices," a coalition of 11 education groups, including Ed Trust, wrote.

What happens next?

Public comments on the proposal are now closed, and the Education Department will review all submissions and incorporate responses into a final proposal for White House review. ■



Collage via iStock/Getty

Published February 28, 2025

The Steps Schools Should Take So All Students Can Use Ed Tech

By Lauraine Langreo

Much of what a student needs to do for school is online nowadays. Students need to access and submit their assignments on learning management systems; teachers use videos, online quiz apps, or digital games for student engagement; and an increasing number of schools are using adaptive learning programs to help supplement instruction.

But these digital tools are not always built to accommodate all students, especially those with disabilities or multilingual learners. Some educational technologies might not have captions for videos, their content might not be easily readable by students who need to use screen readers, or they might not have the option for students with physical disabilities to verbalize their responses.

To help schools create more accessible digital learning environments, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in January published a brief on digital accessibility that provides recommendations for districts to consider. The brief was produced under the direction of the Biden administration, not the current Trump administration.

The accessibility advice for schools came nine months after an update to regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which calls for public entities—including schools—to verify that those with vision, hearing, cognitive, and manual dexterity disabilities can access their online content.

In a conversation with Education Week, Desmond Rudd, an American University professor who works on special education issues and served as the project lead for developing the Education Department brief, discussed what accessibility is, why it's important, and what schools need to do to ensure their digital infrastructure meets the needs of all students.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

What does the brief mean by 'digital accessibility'?

We're really focused on making sure that when we're talking about online platforms and engaging students from the digital perspective—anything that is based online or using any form of technology—students should be able to have equal access and opportunity to whatever is happening within that classroom, regardless of their disability. [It's about] specifically making sure that we're reducing the barriers within our classroom environment when using technology.

Why do K-12 schools need to think about this?

When we talk about digital infrastructure, accessibility is a prerequisite. It is foundational. [The digital infrastructure] impacts our daily lives. It's a huge part of us making sense of what is happening, of being able to determine whether something is factual or not factual. It's also the distance between whether or not someone's going to have a solid education.

For instance, let's think about someone who may be hearing-impaired or has a visual impairment of some sort. That can be very difficult if their resources online aren't accessible. It isn't conducive for learning.

That is why it is so important that we should be talking about this, that schools should be worried about it, because it is producing the next generation of leaders within our society.

What's one thing districts and schools need to do if they want to make their digital infrastructure more accessible?

The first thing that they could do is stop working in silos. When we talk about creating things that are accessible, it's not just a special education department's job. The school leadership needs to be on board with it. The IT department needs to be on board with it, as well as procurement. We need to make sure that we are communicating with each other, sharing ideas and thoughts around what we think about accessibility and how we approach it.

What other steps should schools take?

Assess what you have, what you don't have, and bring in everyone in the room, including special educators, your speech language pathologist who deals with the assistive technology pieces; you want to bring in school leaders' voices, as well as your procurement team. Bringing them all to the table is going to be really important as you talk about the idea of digital accessibility.

Once you do that, gather information, thoughts, and opinions around how you all define digital accessibility and create specific pieces around who's responsible for what.

Engage with other school districts. People are doing this work across our country. We've seen it, and it's highlighted within our accessibility brief, as well as our national ed-tech plan. Be in community with those who are also having the same issues, because you're not the only school having issues around digital accessibility.

The last part within that is to develop a rigorous plan so that everyone understands who's a part of what. Educate your families on what's happening. ■

Published February 09, 2026

How Nashville Dismantled Segregated Classrooms For Students With Disabilities

By Evie Blad



Brett Carlsen for Education Week

Debra McAdams, executive director of the department of exceptional education at Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, visits Isaiah T. Creswell Middle School of the Arts in Nashville, Tenn.

When Debra McAdams stepped into her role leading special education for Nashville schools in 2009, she knew she would immediately face a deeply entrenched system that separated students with disabilities from their peers.

Elementary and middle school students with disabilities were largely taught separately from students without disabilities, often bused past their neighborhood schools—including those attended by their siblings—to regional hubs where educators offered specialized services.

The district, the second largest in Tennessee, operated nearly 200 segregated classrooms, where students with disabilities learned apart from their peers. That included many students with relatively low support needs, such as speech impairments, most districts would place in general education classrooms for the full day. The situation wasn't just stigmatizing; it conflicted directly with a federal requirement that students with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment."

It was McAdams' job to tear down those silos.

Under her leadership, the district committed to a clear principle: students with disabilities would attend their zoned neighborhood schools and participate in core general education classes unless there was a clear educational justification not to.

"All of our students, including those with disabilities, are general education students first, and we should not have separate settings," McAdams, a 2026 Leader To Learn From honoree, said. "We are all part of one big community, and the earlier that everybody understands that for all of our students, the more accepting everyone is."

'A massive mindset shift'

The transformation—part of a broader, multipronged effort to improve education in the 81,000-student Nashville district—required strategic planning, coalition-building, and deep trust-building from McAdams and her team. But the results were measurable: Before the work began in the 2008-2009 school year, about 36% of Nashville students with disabilities spent more than 80% of their time in general education classrooms, a federal metric used to define the least restrictive environment. By the 2023-24 school year, that number had climbed to 76%.

"It was a massive mind shift change," said Sonya Dobbs, the director of exceptional education student supports for Nashville schools. "It wasn't easy, and it didn't just happen. There were a lot of bumps in the road, but we stuck with it because it's what was best for [the] children."

A committee of educators, community members, and a Vanderbilt University education professor collaborated on the transformation plan with support from the city's mayor and business leaders. Students with disabilities who had previously been sent to hub schools would instead attend their neighborhood campuses, starting with kindergartners the first year and adding an additional grade each following year.

The change required a mindset shift from both special education and general education classroom teachers, McAdams said.

"We had general education teachers who had never had a child with autism or a child with an emotional disturbance in their classroom," she said. "We had to really work to ensure students had access to general education at their new schools."

To support that shift, the district created targeted professional development on inclusive classroom practices for principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers. Leaders trained staff on co-teaching strategies and classroom management, and they embedded special education in clusters of schools to aid implementation.

Special education leaders also focused on the details. One of the first changes was linguistic: The district adopted "people first" language, referring to students as individuals before referencing their disabilities. Where a teacher might have once said "a disabled child," they were encouraged to say "a child with disabilities."

At each school, leaders mapped students' support needs by cataloging all the services and accommodations outlined in every student's individualized education program, or IEP. They then ensured that general education classrooms had the resources to meet those needs—like adaptive technologies or help from a paraprofessional—and encouraged collaborative planning among general education, special education, and English-learner teachers.

Leaders also briefed parents about the changes in their children's IEP meetings,

home visits, and larger meetings. While many parents were eager to send their children to neighborhood schools, some needed assurances that their needs would still be met in the new setting.

At the secondary level, the district has partnered with local employers, like the Nashville Zoo, to offer professional learning opportunities and internships for students with disabilities as part of their transition planning, said Megan Cobb, a former special education teacher who now works as a family-engagement specialist with The Arc Tennessee, an organization that helps families navigate the special education system.

McAdams is "very approachable," Cobb said. "That's her strength."

Shoveling the ramp first

Ask people who work with McAdams to describe her approach to education, and many will point to a cartoon she includes in every presentation. It depicts a ramp and a staircase leading to a school, both covered in snow. Students, including one in a wheelchair, wait at the bottom while an adult shovels the stairs.

"If you shovel the ramp first, we can all go in," the student in the wheelchair says.

"When we do something for students with disabilities, we do something for all students," Dobbs said. "That's really her message."

With that philosophy in mind, the district emphasized universal design for learning practices, which stress giving students options in how they engage with material and demonstrate understanding. For example, a teacher might tape off an area around a desk, allowing a student with ADHD to stand and move without disrupting classmates. Clearly posted lesson goals and classroom expectations can support students with disabilities who value predictability, but they may also help all students stay engaged in their work.

As logistics and classroom practices shifted, educators noticed less formal but equally powerful signs of inclusion. Students with disabilities no longer had separate field trips and separate tables in school lunchrooms, McAdams said.

"I knew we'd made progress when I opened a yearbook, and there was no longer a separate page for the special education classroom," she said.

A teacher at heart

McAdams earned credibility with educators because she had spent years as a special education teacher in a variety of environments before stepping into leadership, said David Williams, the deputy chief of academics for the district.

After growing up in Long Island, N.Y., McAdams attended Mansfield University in Pennsylvania before working in a lab school for students with disabilities at Lehigh University, co-teaching students by day and going to class at night.

She held roles as a master teacher, a coordinator for students transitioning to college and career, and a behavioral interventionist before moving to Nashville in 1999. There, she taught at a K-8 school in the Nashville district serving students who needed extensive support for behavioral difficulties. In 2006, she helped create a similar school for high school students.

"It's difficult because you're dealing with very aggressive behaviors all day long and students who have had major trauma in their life," McAdams said. "But at the end of the day, those kids knew that we cared about them and that we weren't giving up on them."

Today, McAdams leads the district's largest academic department, which has about 400 employees, including coaches, behavior interventionists, school psychiatrists, and other staff, Williams said. She has deep expertise in special education law, but she's also still a teacher at heart, he said.

Williams recalled visiting a middle school classroom with McAdams and noticing a student struggling to manage his emotions.

"The first thing Debbie does is sit on the floor next to him and talk to him. She had never met him before, but that part of her nature just turned on," he said. "She carries that clarity and credibility into interactions with kids, lawyers in remediation, parents, principals."

A process that never ends

McAdams acknowledges that the district still has work to do.

Like most districts, Nashville struggled to address the needs of students with disabilities during the abrupt shift to remote learning in March 2020. Parents worried about lost instructional time for their children when services like physical therapy couldn't be delivered in a remote environment and when technology platforms didn't seem to fit their complex learning needs, said Tiffany Acuff, who chaired the district's Exceptional Education Families Advisory Council during the pandemic.

Acuff credited McAdams for her willingness to hold online forums to hear concerns from families of children with disabilities, even when there weren't clear answers. Acuff also ran a private Facebook group for parents, and met with McAdams weekly to share feedback.

Despite significant progress, the district fell short of the state's least restrictive environment targets last year, McAdams said. In response, educators are auditing IEPs school by school to determine what resources they need to provide in general education classrooms to ensure students with disabilities can spend more time learning with their peers.

It's a process of continuous improvement that will never end, McAdams said.

"This is not just me," she said. "This is our department, this is our team, this is our district." ■

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