



## Position Paper on COVID-19 and Education

### What is the issue?

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for children and youth with disabilities and their families. Although students with disabilities have faced academic barriers in and outside of schools throughout history, the pandemic certainly exacerbated many of these barriers. “Almost all children with significant disabilities (93%) have missed milestones due to the pandemic compared to around half (54%) of their non-disabled peers.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, half of surveyed DC parents of students with disabilities said their child’s academics have worsened during the pandemic.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, students with disabilities faced added barriers to receiving adequate accommodations. “Only 39% of parents [in DC] felt their child’s IEP [individualized education plan] was followed during distance learning... and 43% of the participants had their IEP services changed because of distance learning.”<sup>3</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in diagnosis of children at risk for and with developmental delays and the subsequent provision of early intervention services because teachers and school staff have not seen children’s behaviors in person regularly enough to refer children to resources as they normally would.<sup>4</sup>

### Why is this issue important to the DC DD Council?

The DDC believes in the fundamental right of children and youth with disabilities to receive a high-quality, free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that supports students’ and families’ goals. The DDC supports advocacy and programs to achieve this objective through the [FY22-26 State Plan](#) under the goal of community living. Students with disabilities and their families should be involved in the IEP-creation and goal-setting process and be confident that IEPs will be carried out appropriately. Students with disabilities should be provided with adequate resources and appropriate accommodations to support their academic needs in remote and in-person settings.

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<sup>1</sup> EasterSeals. (2021). *COVID-19’s Impact on People with Disabilities*. <https://www.easterseals.com/shared-components/document-library/media-room/easterseals-study-on-the-impact-of-covid-full.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (n.d.). *Education Justice Project Needs Assessment*. Google Docs from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1amvkYflrDxZiHNUNJQ6C1V\\_TUZ3uiw\\_2/view?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1amvkYflrDxZiHNUNJQ6C1V_TUZ3uiw_2/view?usp=embed_facebook)

<sup>3</sup> Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (n.d.). *Education Justice Project Needs Assessment*. Google Docs from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1amvkYflrDxZiHNUNJQ6C1V\\_TUZ3uiw\\_2/view?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1amvkYflrDxZiHNUNJQ6C1V_TUZ3uiw_2/view?usp=embed_facebook)

<sup>4</sup> EasterSeals. (2021). *COVID-19’s Impact on People with Disabilities*. <https://www.easterseals.com/shared-components/document-library/media-room/easterseals-study-on-the-impact-of-covid-full.pdf>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey of parents of students with disabilities in DC found that “a third of participants say their child has been marked absent for having their [camera] off during distance learning.”<sup>5</sup> Many teachers and school staff are not informed about the needs of students with disabilities and appropriate accommodations in a remote setting where policies like “mandatory cameras on” may negatively impact the student’s ability to participate and learn in class.

School-wide goals for academic achievement, graduation, and discipline should focus on evaluating how the pandemic has impacted students with disabilities and on eliminating the disparities between students with and without disabilities in each of those areas. As of the 2020-2021 school year, the five-year graduation rate of students with disabilities in DC increased 4.4% since 2018-2019 compared to an increase of 1.1% in the graduation rate of all students. Although the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students with disabilities in many ways, it also provided resources like remote learning that have helped some students with disabilities achieve graduation at higher rates. Remote learning is not an answer for all students with disabilities, but it should continue to be available as an accommodation for those students who benefit from it.

A clear positive change due to remote learning was the decrease in discipline for students with disabilities. In 2018-2019, students with disabilities were twice as likely as non-disabled students to receive out-of-school suspension and were overrepresented for every type of discipline.<sup>6</sup> Data from 2017-2018 also shows that discipline was even more disproportionately enforced for Black students with disabilities who were 2.5 times more likely to receive any discipline than their non-Black counterparts with disabilities.<sup>7</sup> From 2020-2021, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) could not report disciplinary data for students with disabilities due to the significant decrease in incidents during remote learning.

### What is the DDC’s position and what is the change we would like to see?

The DDC believes that education is not a privilege but a human right, and that all DC children and youth deserve access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). DC Public Schools (DCPS) and OSSE should recognize that COVID-19 has negatively and disproportionately impacted students with disabilities in academic achievement, social and emotional development, and mental health. It has created barriers to the successful formation of and adherence to IEPs, and made it harder for students who need specialized therapies or accommodations to receive those. The DDC puts forth the following recommendations to DCPS and OSSE to address the interests and needs of

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<sup>5</sup> Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (n.d.). *Education Justice Project Needs Assessment*. Google Docs from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1amvkYflrDxZiHNUNJQ6C1V\\_TUZ3uiw\\_2/view?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1amvkYflrDxZiHNUNJQ6C1V_TUZ3uiw_2/view?usp=embed_facebook)

<sup>6</sup> Office of the State Superintendent of Education DC. (2019). *Students with Disabilities in the District of Columbia Landscape Analysis*. <https://osse.dc.gov/page/students-disabilities-district-columbia-landscape-analysis>

<sup>7</sup> Office of the State Superintendent of Education DC. (2019). *Students with Disabilities in the District of Columbia Landscape Analysis*. <https://osse.dc.gov/page/students-disabilities-district-columbia-landscape-analysis>

students with disabilities and their families as the District of Columbia continues to adapt to an endemic phase of COVID-19.

- Revisit policies, practices, and funding for all special education services<sup>8</sup> based on “lessons learned” during the COVID-19 pandemic that take into consideration necessary changes in systematic approaches to teaching and other supports that assure academic success and emotional well-being of students with disabilities across all racial, ethnic, cultural, and identity groups.
- To ensure that each student’s needs are met, IEPs must be developed and monitored based on their capacity to be implemented in both in-person and remote learning environments. Teachers, therapists, counselors, student support teams, and other classroom staff should receive professional development and technical assistance to enhance their knowledge and skills in providing special education services remotely.
- Given the percentage of students with disabilities who are English Language Learners in the District, there must be an intentional focus on identifying and addressing the unique interests and needs of these students and their families using culturally and linguistically competent approaches. Ongoing monitoring and reporting to document what works for these students and best practices are strongly recommended.
- As the District adapts to the endemic phase of COVID-19, continue to collect data to document disparities in special education services attributed to the type of disability, race, ethnicity, languages spoken, socio-economic status, and Ward of residence. Publicly report these data and collaborate with parents and community stakeholders to address them.
- Continue using remote learning technologies and other evidence-based accommodations used during the COVID-19 pandemic for students with disabilities for whom these accommodations were beneficial. Implement a 360-evaluation process to determine the efficacy of these technologies and accommodations from the perspectives of the students, their families, and the professionals delivering special education services and supports.
- DCPS and OSSE should create policies and training to maintain the low discipline rates for students with disabilities, particularly Black students with disabilities, that were maintained during the pandemic.

## Glossary

DCPS: DC Public Schools, the DC traditional public school system

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<sup>8</sup> <https://dcps.dc.gov/specialeducation>

DDC: Developmental Disabilities Council, responsible for identifying the most pressing needs of people with developmental disabilities and advancing public policy and systems change that help them gain more control over their lives.

FAPE: Free and Appropriate Public Education, a federal policy in IDEA that guarantees that all students with disabilities have a right to a free, public education that appropriately accommodates their needs

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, a federal law ensuring that students with disabilities have rights to education and necessary accommodations. FAPE and IEP requirements are included in IDEA.

IEP: Individualized Education Program, a legal document that must be created for each student in the public school system receiving special education supports. IEPs present students' accommodation and support needs from the school and must be adhered to by all school staff. Laws requiring IEPs and that staff follow them are present in IDEA.

OSSE: Office of the State Superintendent of Education, the state education agency responsible for DC's education programs and policies for public and public charter schools