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## COVID and the Classroom: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Special Education and Policy Implementation

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COVID and the Classroom: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Special Education and  
Policy Implementation

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Senior Honors Thesis

### **Abstract**

This research examines how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the learning of special education students and the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States. The importance of this research is reflected in the unprecedented and novel context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Never at any point in IDEA history have all special education students been simultaneously denied the services that are considered essential for their development and advancement. While some previous research has looked into how constraints such as natural disasters have impacted students, never has anything this drastic been studied. In this study, I found that the classroom alterations that special education students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic in compliance with safety guidelines were not conducive to their learning. Furthermore, the guidance offered from the federal level was overall low in specificity and mandatoriness, leading to high levels of discretion in how to alter practice. This led to high levels of variation across schools and many different interpretations of how to implement IDEA in the altered setting. Therefore, in drastic contextual changes, policymakers should consider enacting policy that allows for an appropriate amount of discretion while also ensuring that the necessary parts of the policy will be effectively implemented in the classroom.

### **Introduction**

Between March and May 2020, 214,000 public and private schools in the United States closed in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This affected approximately 55 million students around the country (Peele & Riser-Kositsky, 2020). As the 2019-20 school year concluded and the 2020-21 school year began, the education of students dramatically shifted from the normalcy of the traditional classroom. This impact was most heavily felt by one of the most vulnerable groups: special education students.

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and parents of students with disabilities struggled to properly implement the existing special education law in the United States: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under normal circumstances, teachers and parents maintain student goals, ensure appropriate resources, and guarantee equitable schooling under the policy that conforms to IDEA. Through intentional and complete federal, state, and local guidance, those who work the most closely with students have been able to operate effectively within the parameters of IDEA to provide an appropriate education to all students in the United States. However, as the unprecedented pandemic swept the nation, the normal avenues that they would take to ensure these key facets of the classroom crumbled, and new challenges arose in their place that made it considerably more difficult to implement the same quality of instruction and accommodations.

While it will be years before the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is understood, there is no doubt evidence that it critically altered the manner in which schools function and how teachers and other school officials operate in the education of students. There is also little doubt that it has altered the way in which policy implementation, namely IDEA implementation, takes place and operates. The purpose of this paper is to understand how schools changed in response

to the pandemic in terms of classroom operations and IDEA implementation and how this ultimately impacted the fidelity and effectiveness of special education provision as compared to how it normally operates. This is understood through the following research questions:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the schooling experiences of special education students in the United States?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the IDEA implementation process?

## Literature Review

### Historical Background of IDEA

Throughout the history of education reform and change, there has been one group routinely left out of the conversation: special education students. Education, though deemed an inherent right to all students across the United States, often lacked or completely missed the mark when it came to serving those with disabilities. Prior to the passage of the first legislation regarding appropriate special education in 1975, students with disabilities faced a long history of inadequate care and exclusion from educational services— a history which led to the important question of how to define and ensure their educational rights (Hehir & Gamm, 1999).

**Exclusion was the rule.** Prior to the 1960s, schools were not expected to educate or adapt to students who required extra care or accommodations, and generally, the rights of students were not considered in policy (Weiss, 2000). The eugenics movement (1866-1944) that sprung from Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) supported the idea that hereditary "defects" were a threat to regular society and that people with disabilities, as an extension, were better off institutionalized and separated from the general population (Hehir & Gamm, 1999; Rivard, 2014). Regularly, students with poor academic ability were denied education, as was upheld by

court rulings of the time. The Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1919 denied a student with cerebral palsy an education due to the fact that he “produce[d] a depressing and nauseating effect upon the teachers and school children.” In 1893, the Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld the expulsion of a student due solely to poor academic performance (Esteves & Rao, 2008). Special schools for students with disabilities existed around the country, such as one Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb in Maine (Wright & Wright, 2021). In general, special education students were regarded as separate from their general education peers, and therefore kept on the margins to continually be disregarded at both the federal and local level.

**Tension and pressure to change.** However, with the birth of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, the mood around special education students and their rights gradually began to change, a sentiment which began to be reflected in law. Due to attention from parental groups such as the United Cerebral Palsy Association, the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and the American Association on Mental Deficiency, more and more federal attention was given to the inadequacies in the care of disabled individuals, both in and out of the school system (Weiss, 2000).

The first court case to directly promote special education and signify a change in judicial attitude was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) with the ruling that segregation in schools on the basis of race is unconstitutional. Subsequent to this determination was the understanding that all individuals, regardless of race, gender, or *disability*, have a right to public education in the United States, and that an education is essential for a child to succeed later on in life (Esteves & Rao, 2008; Hehir & Gamm, 1999). Parents began to bring lawsuits to their districts with the argument that the segregation of disabled students was a form of discrimination, and that the new precedent of *Brown* supported this conclusion. In 1965, Congress enacted the Elementary

and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in an official attempt to establish better opportunities and overall improvements in schooling for disadvantaged populations, including students with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2021). While primarily aimed towards the War on Poverty and towards ensuring more professional development, instructional materials, and efforts towards parental involvement, it also allocated resources to special education students, denoting a visible shift in the attitudes of federal officials towards the value of individuals with disabilities as well as education as a whole (Paul, 2016).

**Structuring special education rights in law.** The efforts towards strengthening special education practices post-*Brown* continued to be fought in the courts as two impactful cases changed the ways special education would be approached at the federal level: *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PARC)* and *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (Hehir & Gamm, 1999; Wright & Wright, 2021).

PARC (1971) questioned Pennsylvania state law that allowed children certified as “uneducable and untrainable” to be excluded from public schools and compulsory attendance laws (Hehir & Gamm, 1999). Relying on *Brown*, the class action suit argued that, by denying fourteen students with developmental disabilities a public education, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had violated the Equal Protection and Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Stewart, 2020). The court agreed that the students’ rights had been violated, and that “all mentally retarded persons are capable of benefiting from a program of education and training.” Furthermore, the court established the legal concept of least restrictive environment (LRE), or the idea that disabled students as much as possible must receive their education alongside their general education peers:

“Among the alternative programs of education and training required by statute to be

available, placement in a regular public school class is preferable to placement in a special public school class and placement in a special public school class is preferable to placement in any other type of program of education and training.”

Expanding on this conclusion, *Mills* expanded the idea of LRE to disabled students outside of those with developmental disabilities, including individuals with mental, behavioral, physical or emotional disabilities. Furthermore, the court concluded that “if sufficient funds are not available to finance all of the services... then the available funds must be expended equitably in such a manner that no child is entirely excluded” (Stewart, 2020). This established the precedent that would become free and appropriate education, or FAPE (Wright & Wright, 2021).

This hard-fought history was the groundwork for what would become the primary special education law in the United States: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975). This law operates to guarantee that all students with disabilities are given the resources that they need to have an adequate and meaningful public education with as little restriction and segregation as possible, and holds the school accountable for ensuring that this happens.

### **Components of IDEA**

IDEA functions through four key components that operate and work together to define and ensure the rights of students with disabilities. The proper implementation of these are essential in maintaining the goal of IDEA. They are as follows: least restrictive environment (LRE), free and appropriate education (FAPE), individualized education plans (IEPs), and due process hearings.

**LRE and FAPE.** While routinely denied in the past, LRE and FAPE formalize the rights of students with disabilities. LRE requires that students are with their general education peers as much as possible. Specifically:

“Each public agency must ensure that—



- I. To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and
- II. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (IDEA)

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) requires that schools provide any services that a student may need at no cost to the family. Furthermore, this must be made available at the school closest to the students residence/the school most easily accessible to the family if at all possible.

Specifically:

A free appropriate public education must be available to all children residing in the State between the ages of 3 and 21, inclusive, including children with disabilities who have been suspended or expelled from school.

Both of these ideas are fundamental to the core of IDEA, and all policy and implementation done in accordance with this law must do all possible to ensure that students have both of these in the classroom.

**Individualized Education Plans and Due Process.** In order to practically ensure that LRE and FAPE is met, IEPs lay out how a student will receive services as well as set the standard at which operations must take place throughout the school year (Bray & Russell, 2016). In creating an IEP, general education teachers, special education teachers, parents, school administrators, related professionals, and the students themselves gather to create a truly individualized document that caters to the student’s goals and development throughout their public education. The topics considered in an IEP include supplementary aids and services, LRE expectations, postsecondary transitional plans, as well as performance achievement goals (Goldberg, 2018). This IEP is then maintained throughout the school year through occasional meetings to monitor progress and note any issues with how services have been provided. By

taking this approach to creating a plan for educating students, IDEA has crafted a unique opportunity for a child's learning to be flexible and adaptable to individualized needs, as well as ensures that parents and guardians are involved in the decisions made about their children (Kupper, 2000).

However, in the case that a parent feels an IEP is not being met or services have not been supplied appropriately, they are entitled under IDEA to go through dispute resolution procedures, which can vary from mediation (a voluntary meeting in which the disputed parties communicate and help resolve differences) to due process (a federal complaint that involves a hearing request) in attempt to resolve possible IEP discrepancies (Bray & Russell, 2016). Often, IEP disputes are resolved through mediation or voluntary meetings in order to avoid the time and expense that is associated with due process proceedings. However, hearings still do occur, and are an integral part of how IDEA functions and mandates fidelity.

### **Some Critiques of IDEA Implementation**

While IDEA has no doubt paved the way for improvement in special education, there are still several points of weakness in the law that have led to gaps in its implementation. While this is not an exhaustive list, they are several that have been of increased salience in current research. One immediate issue is the vague nature of the term "appropriate education". Despite mandating that all students have a free and appropriate education (FAPE), there is no specific declaration of what an "appropriate" education is, resulting in uneven implementation of the law. The attempt to understand this provision has resulted in a series of court cases and legal battles, all of which continue to define IDEA and special education as being led through the courts.

Another area of weakness of IDEA is that, despite its emphasis on Equal Protection and equitable outcomes for disabled individuals, there is unequal representation between different

groups represented under IDEA. This is shown primarily in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, calling to light a correlation between ethnicity, school failure, and placement that IDEA fails to address (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Furthermore, for those receiving special education services, parents of students from privileged backgrounds are much more likely to pursue due process hearings and actively participate in them, as compared to parents of students in disadvantaged backgrounds, who are more likely to settle or compromise before any legal proceedings take place (Ong-Dean, Daly, & Park, 2011). The disparity in due process use between students of different financial and ethnic backgrounds can be largely attributed to the hefty cost and involvement such proceedings take, another common criticism of IDEA. A due process hearing can cost a district upwards of \$150,000, with the cost being even more if a case is lost. Special education directors and other professionals involved can spend anywhere from 40 to 60 hours of their own time preparing for hearings, not including the time they need to take off from their previous duties to attend the hearing itself (Bayne, 2018). This huge strain on resources often pushes poorer districts to settle and avoid any hearing, whereas wealthier districts are able to accommodate or more easily recover from lost resources. Similarly, a parent from a privileged background is more likely to have the know-how and economic capital to pursue litigation, as opposed to a parent with less income (Ong-Dean, Daly, & Park, 2011).

Generic and vague definitions of various disabilities has led to inconsistencies in how one student may be labeled, and therefore placed or treated, between districts. While IDEA does denote the different disabilities considered for special education services, districts vary in how consistently they use the classification scheme and interpret the designations. This, in turn, leads to an inconsistent use of various labels such as intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed, meaning that a student may be reclassified when moving districts or may not even be classified

correctly in their original district (Singer et al., 1989).

All of these factors result in an inequitable approach to due process and IDEA in general, as certain groups are better equipped to operate within the bounds of the law. This negative variation between students of different identities is one manner in which variation under the law as it responds to contextual changes has led to disparity and inequity in implementation. However, despite evidence of clear pitfalls within the law, there is still an insurmountable amount of evidence to suggest that IDEA has significantly improved the status of disabled individuals in many ways. It has reinforced and standardized a positive climate and attitude towards a group of people who were historically underserved and mistreated, and it is no doubt one of the most impactful and far-reaching pieces of legislation to date that serves to benefit children in American schools (Singer & Butler, 1987). It has allowed for positive variation, such as the molding of the law to the individual and local context. Therefore, the manner in which IDEA policy and implementation changes in response to contextual changes (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) will have critical implications on the very students that it is intending to serve.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Despite the impactful design of IDEA, it is still entirely dependent on the quality of its implementation, as all policies are. With this understanding, I will be using the street-level bureaucrat (SLB) framework as originally defined by Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) when investigating the implementation of IDEA policy in this current research. They defined the street-level bureaucrat as an individual who works at the local level and works closest to the individuals that the policy is intending to impact, allowing them substantial discretion in how the policy is ultimately implemented. This makes them, in many ways, the policymakers. In

Weatherley and Lipsky's original 1977 research, they examined how Massachusetts teachers coped with and managed a new state law that required various professionals to work together as teams to complete vast evaluation, classification, and related paperwork for special education students. SLBs adjusted to this workload in ways such as using broad labels, clumping students together, or skipping steps that ended up missing or undermining the intent of the reform to be more individualized and thoughtful. This framework is as follows: When a new policy is imposed on a previously established practice, individuals at the street or grassroots level will interact with and potentially modify a policy in order to fit their current needs and understanding, meaning that the policy is dependent on the situation and possible constraints that an SLB may be encountering. It is this interaction that determines how a policy will impact students.

In this research, COVID-19 and the related safety protocols are the constraints that teachers and parents are encountering, causing possible alterations to the intended effects of original IDEA policy and overall special education quality.

Overall, there are two factors that shape how SLBs alter or interact with a given policy: contextual and environmental differences and/or individual differences such as prior beliefs and understandings.

### **Macro-Level Contextual Differences**

While it is easy to consider all American public schools under the same lens, the reality is that resources and approaches to managing and operating within said resources differ depending on the geographic and demographic contexts in which the population operates (Jimenez-Silva, Bernstein, & Baca, 2016). Therefore, while developing a framework of how SLBs may interact with policy, it is important to consider ways in which the populations under observation may critically differ, resulting in differences in implementation. As first described by Norman

Fairclough (2003, 2013, 2015) in the critical discourse analysis approach to analyzing interactions between text and action, there is a two-way relationship between a text, such as a policy, and the context (social and cultural structures; Jimenez-Silva, Bernstein, & Baca, 2016). Subsequently, the history, location, and ideology of a region will determine how the population interprets and implements a given policy.

One factor that may alter interpretation and implementation is the history of the area, specifically how it is differentiated between rural and urban communities. What continually defines the rural school is the small, interdependent community in which it grew and continues to operate in cooperation with (Tyack, 1972). Likewise, while the relationship with the community has been an essential component to the rural identity, also central to understanding a rural school is how it differentially distributes and maintains resources, largely due to how they were established in relation to urban communities. As urban centers began to grow, resources often centralized there, leaving diminished opportunities for the dispersed communities left in the outskirts of urban development. This trend is still seen today, with urban schools experiencing high demands of resources in order to meet the needs of large populations. The urban school, therefore, is often characterized by the concentration of many individuals requiring the same needs, meaning that resources are more concentrated in order to accommodate the demands of the dense population (Fitchen, 1991; Truscott & Truscott, 2005).

Furthermore, population density, while generally not considered in past studies, is now critical in the examination of how populations react to policy. Population density and size is now a critical variable in viral spread and, therefore, health and quarantine related policy. Likewise, the size of a population as perceived by an individual may increase the salience of health risks and the possibility of spread. Urban and rural schools, by proxy, now stand not only for the

differences in historical contexts, but also more tangible differences of population size and infection risk, with densely populated urban areas at a higher risk for more severe outbreaks. This research, therefore, takes a unique and novel perspective on the urban and rural divide, as the response to COVID-19 policy may vary depending on perceived risk, along with the policy itself varying depending on the specific nature of a local outbreak and what is deemed necessary by local officials. This wide array of evidence supports the pertinence of the current research, as a novel pandemic will certainly result in novel strain and interact with the many differences that SLBs hold.

### **Micro-Level Individual Differences**

Along with variation in context, differences between individuals will alter the way in which they interact with and adapt a policy to their needs. While it is often assumed that all policy documents are consumed in a similar manner, “policy messages are not inert, static ideas that are transmitted unaltered into local actors’ minds to be accepted, rejected or modified... rather, the agent must first notice, then frame, interpret, and construct meaning for policy messages” (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, p. 392, 2002). These individual interpretations by SLBs are what will alter their interaction with a given policy and ultimately determine whether it is adapted with or without fidelity, making it an essential part of the implementation process to highlight. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) posit that what a policy means for an SLB is determined by the interaction between three variables: individuals’ cognitive structures, their situation, and the policy signals.

The first variable discussed, cognitive structures, refers to an SLB’s experiences, knowledge base, and beliefs. It is through an individual’s cognitive structure that they make sense of and interpret a policy as well as understand what exactly it is that they are responding

to. With new experiences, bias, attitudes, or goals, this schema will be altered, and thereby change the way in which an individual makes sense of new information. One special education teacher with, for example, a goal to follow a policymaker's intentions compared to a teacher who wishes solely to follow their local directors intentions will have a fundamentally different interpretation and approach to implementing a policy. Therefore, cognitive structures are an important way in which individuals will differ in their approach to and adjustment of policy that they encounter (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002).

Along with the individual's cognitive framework, their situation on the micro-level is very important in understanding how individual differences change policy interpretation. As opposed to the larger scale urban and rural differences, this factor refers to an SLB's immediate and tangible context. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) argue that individuals' cognition is often shaped by the colleagues and community around them along with the practices and common beliefs that are held by it. An individual's professional community will have its own norms, expectations, and assumptions about the world, creating a natural limit and structure to the practices and innovations SLBs engage in there. Further contexts nestled within the structure as well as informal structures, such as a special education department within a school or a parent group, will also have their own framework and influence, altering how an SLB engages with and implements a policy.

### **Context of the Policy Itself**

Finally, the manner of the policy itself is essential in understanding the complete picture of how individual differences affect policy approach. Policy signals (e.g., brochures, legislation, regulations) and the design of the policy are key in understanding how an individual may interact with a policy. For example, a policy that presses for a large amount of change at the expense of



the SLB will have more complex cognitive implications for the agent and, therefore, will affect how they might approach the policy or interact with it. For example, a policy that is abstract, does not clearly outline goals, or does not allow for supervisory measures is likely to have even higher levels of variation of implementation as those factors add on to the already established differences in variation depending on the individual and situation. Another example was that noted by Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) in their examination of Massachusetts special education law, where they found that the design of the policy and how it placed added work on the SLB altered its implementation. Therefore, differences in policy signals and designs will interact with the individual to create novel and potentially dangerous mutations. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) explain that a successful policy signal will keep these factors in mind, and take efforts to intentionally and thoughtfully design policy, given that these contexts are what often will determine the success or failure of future implementation. All of these characteristics, whether ultimately beneficial or harmful, will alter the way in which an SLB interacts with a policy. In conclusion, as one is considering the whole picture of how an SLB, such as a teacher, will interact with a policy, it is essential to consider these individual differences in order to understand the whole picture of implementation.

Ultimately, these individual and contextual differences interact and alter the ways in which an SLB may interact with and change a policy that they encounter. Therefore, it is at this level of implementation, the level at which the intended target, meaning the student, is affected, that any adaptation or alteration will alter the way in which the policy ultimately behaves and influences its target population. It is for this reason that it is essential to understand how policy is designed and intended to act, as well as to understand the individual variation in contexts currently operating that may impact the way an SLB acts with or without fidelity.

### **Disaster Framework**

Weatherley and Lipsky's (1977) framework stands to describe how policy innately behaves and how SLBs routinely affect policy implementation. However, one would be remiss to not note that the framework was originally applied to and created in consideration of a system not under the strain of an exogenous shock such as a global pandemic. Therefore, given that there are novel and unique constraints that SLBs are currently experiencing, there will be novel and unique responses that previous literature has not explored.

In exploring this unique disaster-based framework, I consider the past precedent of events similar to the COVID-19 pandemic (or lack thereof) and the distinct type of policy that arises from these events to establish how SLBs may alternatively behave and interact with the policy that they encounter in the current research.

### **Event Precedent**

While there are incidents in United States history that have resulted in a disruption or change in how special education is administered, none have done so in the manner and breadth of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown and schooling changes. Post-IDEA, there has only been one case of illness-based lockdowns in American schools. Following the outbreak of the H1N1 strain of influenza, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released guidelines that left decision-making at the local level, recommending that schools separate ill students and staff and promote hand-washing as well as "respiratory etiquette" (using a tissue to cough/sneeze). School closure was only advised in the case where there are high numbers of "medically vulnerable students." As a result, there was a peak of 726 school closures, affecting 468,282 students total. However, these closures lasted anywhere from one day to two weeks, a break that is minimal compared to the COVID-19 disruption that affected 55 million students

nationwide over an extended period of time (Stern, Cetron, & Markel, 2009; Education Week, 2020).

These disruptions have been found to have adverse effects on schooling as individuals affected often find themselves with both short term and long term educational costs. Shocks such as natural disasters often increase rates of malnutrition, decrease academic progress and attainment, as well as hinder future labor productivity (Wang, Yang, & Li, 2017). Therefore, attention turns to how to make up for what is lost, and this is done through compensatory education.

Compensatory education, as not addressed in IDEA, is a creation of case law. Though shaped by many different cases, the first to firmly establish the idea was *Miener v. State of Missouri* in 1982. After finding that the child in question had been denied special education services, the court mandated that she was “entitled to recover compensatory educational services”. Since then, *Miener* has continually been cited as the legal authority for compensatory services (Wright & Wright, 2021).

From this point forward, when a child has been denied IDEA mandated services, compensatory education is often employed in an attempt to remedy what was lost and support a student’s further growth (Seligmann & Zirkel, 2013). Therefore, in an event such as COVID-19 where so many students have been denied services, the concept of compensation is a unique policy that’s in play, as well as one that is going to be overwhelmingly approached given the sheer amount of service delays and disruptions to IDEA mandates. While this current research won’t be timely enough to examine these compensatory policy interpretations as they happen, they nevertheless will likely have an impact on the operations of SLBs as teachers and parents consider and prepare for the possibility of future compensation that must be paid.

Natural disasters and their effects on policy and compensatory education have been seen before. However, nothing to the extent of COVID-19 has ever been researched. This justifies the current research and the motivation to study how policy has been impacted and altered in an attempt to cope with the contextual weight.

### **Policy Forms**

While IDEA and IEP mandates model this original framework, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new type of policy into schools that bears different implications if adapted or shortcut: health policy. As mandated by each state's CDC and then interpreted by individual districts, policy related to social distancing, facemasks, and capacity limits will place a strain on educators the same way instructional policy would (see Appendix). However, health policy holds different expectations and values because fidelity could mean the difference between life and death. Due to the difference in weight between health related policy and instructional policy, it is likely that SLBs will respond to and apply discretion to different policy forms in different ways.

Ultimately, while the full extent of this pandemic will not be seen for years to come, the precedent that does exist in the disasters seen thus far emphasizes the importance of studying how SLBs cope and adapt their implementation of competing demands. It brings us to the conclusion that SLBs will alter their behaviors in novel and complex ways due to the disaster context they are in. This research aims to expand on this concept and explore the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted IDEA implementation and the education that students with disabilities receive.

### **Methods**

I chose a qualitative research design composed of interviews that selected for state, rurality/urbanicity, and parent/teacher differences and document analysis of policy documents

that were selected from the federal and state level and related to IDEA implementation. This analysis is an important contribution to the research on policy implementation, as it is a novel and pertinent topic that will highlight the ways in which the current system can adapt and change.

### **School Contexts**

By March 25th, 2020, all US public school buildings were closed in response to COVID-19 being declared a national emergency. While different schools varied in their approaches, the majority of students were being educated via remote learning platforms such as Zoom and Google Meets by early May (Decker, Peele, & Riser-Kositsky, 2021).

Moving into the 2020-21 school year, there were three main teaching formats adopted by schools in order to operate during the continued pandemic: in-person learning, remote learning, and hybrid learning. In-person learning most closely reflects how schools operated prior to March 2020, with students gathering together five days a week and not having any classes conducted via online platforms. While there are adaptations in order to conform to Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines (see Appendix), the majority of this learning took place in the traditional classroom setting. On the opposite end, remote learning resembled the system used during the initial lockdown, with students being entirely online and not gathering in-person. However, the most frequent form used was hybrid learning. While the specific manner in which it operates varies by the school/district, hybrid learning is generally defined as the combination of online learning sessions with in-person traditional sessions, a system that is meant to allow students to gather while also reducing the risk of disease spread by minimizing the amount of time students spend together.

**Initial lockdown (March-June 2020).** Of the 14 participants interviewed, all 14 utilized

components of online, remote learning (See table 1a). No one was in-person in any form. Within the sample group, the manner in which remote learning was conducted varied. Some individuals moved into formal, scheduled meetings via Zoom or Google Meets that mimicked the style of in-person learning done prior to the pandemic. Others, however, maintained only informal contact, such as weekly phone calls, occasional Zoom meetings, or supplemental work that was completed on their own time. Overall, there was high variation within the participant group in how schools were conducted, with the only consistent factor being that there was no in-person learning.

Table 1a

*School Formats in the Initial Lockdown*

	Colorado (N=7)		Maine (N=7)	
	Rural (N=2)	Urban (N=5)	Rural (N=3)	Urban (N=4)
Remote	2	5	3	4
In-Person	0	0	0	0

**2020-21 School Year.** For the fall semester, no one was fully remote/online in any form. (See Table 1b). While Colorado rural schools utilized in-person forms, this was not reflected in Maine where no rural classrooms were completely in person and all utilized some sort of hybrid form. This shows the general inconsistency in format by school; rurality/urbanity was not a clear predictor of whether or not a school would choose to operate completely in person or hybrid. In Colorado schools, the hybrid format was somewhat more commonly used than the in-person, whereas in Maine, 5 out of the 7 schools went hybrid, suggesting variation across the country in how the 2020-21 school year was formatted. For those who are hybrid, the manner in which students alternate between in-person and remote learning also showed variation. Some

schools utilize a cohort system with one group of students being in-person while the other is remote and switching the two throughout the week, whereas other schools simply shortened the school days and had all students split their time between in-person and remote instruction. In this set up, parents regularly are given the option of keeping their child fully remote if desired.

Table 1b

*School Formats in the 2020-21 School Year*

	Colorado (N=7)		Maine (N=7)	
	Rural (N=2)	Urban (N=5)	Rural (N=3)	Urban (N=4)
Remote	0	0	0	0
In-Person	2	2	0	2
Hybrid	0	3	3	2

**Participants**

To better understand how SLBs have interpreted and responded to COVID-19 related special education policies and changes, I interviewed a total of 8 teachers and 6 parents from late October 2020 to early February 2021 over Google Meets regarding their experiences during the initial lockdown as well as the 2020-21 school year thus far. All participants provided written consent prior to the study and received \$10 Amazon gift cards in compensation.

**Teachers.** In order to randomly select teachers from representative urban and rural populations, I utilized spreadsheets provided by the Colorado and Maine Department of Education (DoE) that had complete lists of all schools in the state along with other defining variables. After sorting schools by density (urban and rural) and status as a public middle school, I randomly selected three schools for each descriptor variable that I aimed to capture, urban versus rural and Colorado versus Maine. After selecting these schools, I used school or district

website staff lists to identify special education teachers and their contact information. If a possible research candidate responded, an interview was organized.

**Parents.** In order to find parent populations available for study, I sent a flier to various special education parent associations that specifically advocate for special education students in Colorado and Maine and asked if they could distribute them within their parent groups. From there, I received emails from interested parents and organized meetings when they reached out. While I was not selecting for urbanality/rurality, I did note it.

Table 2

*Participant Variables*

	Colorado		Maine	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Teacher	2	2	2	2
Parent	3	0	2	1

**Interviews**

All interviews took place over Google Meets. They utilized a standardized interview protocol where participants were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions regarding special education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate to allow for in-depth discussions. Interviews generally lasted 25-30 minutes. The questions collected information on the following subjects: a) changes and challenges that resulted from the onset of the pandemic, b) perceptions of how students’ education has been impacted, c) how and when discretion was used, and d) guidance utilized in modifying practice. I recorded all interviews to aid in future analysis and all responses were kept confidential.

All interviews were then transcribed using a transcription service and uploaded to the



Dedoose program for further analysis. I developed codes based on the common themes discussed by participants. For instance, when a participant would discuss a new challenge that occurred during the pandemic, the quote was coded as a “challenge”. I then went in later and further subdivided and grouped codes. The quotes within the “challenge” code would be subcoded as being related to “use of technology” or “distribution of resources”, for example. This same process was used throughout all interviews. I then added the descriptor variables of urban or rural, parent or teacher, and Colorado or Maine to all interviews to aid in further quote analysis.

I analyzed all data by carefully reviewing each code and selecting quotes that strongly identified a common theme or highlighted significant trends. By doing this, I was able to see the general shared experiences of participants and highlight significant quotes that would best encapsulate them.

### **Policy Documents**

To find policy documents that were released from the federal and state level, I looked on the Department of Education website as well as the Maine and Colorado Department of Education websites. I went to the section of the website that specifically pertained to COVID-19 related guidance and from there selected and downloaded any guidance related to IDEA and special education. I examined a total of 14 documents, 6 from the Department of Education, 5 from the Colorado Department of Education, and 3 from the Maine Department of Education. I then moved those documents into the Dedoose program for further analysis.

In order to analyze the effectiveness of this guidance and the manner in which it would impact SLBs, I analyzed them on measures of mandatoriness (the extent to which the action mentioned is required) in which a high measure would use the words “must” or “need” and a low measure would say “may” or “encourages” and specificity (the generality or precision of the

language) in which an example of high specificity would be “students must wear masks” and an example of low specificity is “teachers must consider social backgrounds”. This resulted in a total of four codes: high mandatoriness and high specificity, high mandatoriness and low specificity, low mandatoriness and high specificity, and low mandatoriness and low specificity. Lines that gave specific guidance in the policy documents were then placed into one of these four codes. To find the prevalence of a specific code, I divided the number of policy directives identified in that code by the total number of policy directives identified for the desired descriptor variable. This allowed me to have comparable data between different variables.

## **Findings**

### **1. COVID-19 changes were generally not Special Education friendly**

Throughout all teachers and parents interviewed, there was one conclusion that was continually emphasized: the move to remote/hybrid learning was not conducive to an optimal education for special needs students. While the characteristics of the online classroom may have shifted between initial lockdown and the 2020-2021 school year, the format of schooling still proved exceptionally difficult for students, parents, and teachers. Specifically, this finding is a function of three main characteristics of the remote/hybrid classroom: the difficulty of learning on online platforms, the lack of personal connection, barriers in following CDC-imposed guidelines, and the added burden of other stressful factors on students such as changes to routine that exacerbate learning difficulties.

**Online platforms were not conducive to students with disabilities.** While online classrooms serve the purpose of limiting contact between students and the chance of viral spread, they are severely limiting in many ways to special education students. One instance of this that

was described by the parents and teachers interviewed was how the online format heavily reduced the availability and use of accommodations that were normally accessible to students with IEPs. For example, students often work with manipulatives, or teaching objects that students can hold and work with, as one teacher described. In a remote environment, the students do not have the same level of access to these tools as they would when in the traditional classroom. Likewise, the absence of braille or sign-language interpreters for students who are blind or deaf has highlighted a way in which the remote setting proves difficult for special education students. One teacher described in regards to the remote setting used in the initial lockdown, “another [student] was deaf and his family was deaf. So it’s just that the online format didn’t really work for them,” (UMT 1)<sup>1</sup> resulting in the student withdrawing contact and not interacting with the school in any form for the remainder of the school year. One parent recounted, “my daughter has a vision impairment, right? Like it’s not the easiest for her to sit there and look at the screen... like that is not the whole of her senses” (UCP 1). Overall, there was a decisive lack of specific accommodations normally available to special education students.

Furthermore, when the lockdown hit, special education students who received extra and supplemental services such as physical therapy (PT), occupational therapy (OT), and other services no longer had them accessible. One parent described how “they had pretty much a minimal amount of services outside of the general education classroom” (RMT 2) during the remainder of the 2019-20 school year. Specifically, the barriers in moving to telehealth and adapting normally in-person services to remote meant that students went without the support structures that had then so far been essential to their education and general functioning. This was

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<sup>1</sup> Participants are individually identified here forward as an abbreviation of their urbanality/rurality, state, and role followed by a number identifier to separate participants of the same context. For instance, one Urban Maine Parent would be UMP1 and another UMP2 (there is no significance to order). A Rural Colorado Teacher would be RCT1, RCT2, etc.

a significant factor in the deterioration of learning during this time period.

Another prominent issue with the online format as noted by participants was that students with operational deficits, fine motor deficits, and severe disabilities cannot independently operate computers/Zoom. The following are quotes from teachers describing how students struggle to operate computers independently:

“These learners don’t know how to type” (UMT 1)

“There’s some that just can’t handle it that are struggling with more of the executive function piece of it all, like how to log on to schoology” (UCT 1)

“[There is a] first grader who cannot get on the computer and can’t use zoom” (RCT 1)

Participants described how, often, in order to overcome these deficits, students required help from another individual or parent, resulting in a students’ performance being entirely dependent on whether or not they receive this assistance. However, many students encountered challenges in finding this outside help, which often led to them withdrawing contact or becoming increasingly absent in the remote format.

The final significant downside of the remote format as described in interviews was the difficulties that students had connecting and relating to people on a screen. While this is certainly something that all students, both general and special education, encounter, students with executive function disabilities often rely on face-to-face interaction to develop skills and complete school work. As summarized by one teacher, “[online learning is] not the way to teach kids with disabilities who really just need you there to help them make progress.” (RMT 2) Similarly, teachers described the difficulty of attempting to work with a student who is not vocal or lacks communicative skills. When trying to lead a student through a worksheet, the teacher had no idea what page the student was even on, making it close to impossible to effectively work through the student’s task.

**Teachers found it difficult to personally connect with students online.** One factor of learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as noted by nearly every teacher interviewed was the inability for teachers to personally connect with students, thereby adding a barrier to their teaching and making the situation exceedingly more difficult. This resulted from the difficulty in connecting with students over the Zoom platform.

*Zoom/online platforms are not conducive to establishing teacher-student connections.*

Nearly every teacher emphasized the difficulties they have had in connecting with their students over Zoom/online platforms. As communicated by one teacher:

“You don’t really get to see their skills and their social skills and academic skills, a lot of things that make up a whole child that really tells you how that student is a learner, as a person. So remotely, it’s just been a lot more of a challenge to really assess a student in all aspects” (UCT 1)

This was a factor for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, but also for the 2020-21 school year, as many teachers met their new students for the first time over a screen and continued to interact with them with the restrictive hybrid model, splitting the time they spend with students between traditional in-person learning and remote. This challenge was described by many teachers as a burden in teaching their students as they are unable to adjust their teaching to individual needs, something that many rely on in order to individualize and maximize their teaching efficacy.

**CDC imposed guidelines were difficult to follow for students with severe disabilities.**

While the CDC-recommended guidelines for K-12 schools (See Appendix) proved difficult for general education and special education students alike, participants noted ways in which specific guidelines were exceedingly difficult for special education students to follow which led to added barriers in the classroom. Teachers, specifically those who work with the more severely disabled students, described how handwashing and respiratory etiquette had been an IEP goal for students

years before the pandemic; it had been a consistent struggle for students to maintain this level of hygiene in the school environment.

Likewise, more severely disabled students struggled in masking and maintaining social distancing. One teacher described this struggle:

“I have three students with emerging mask skills, which we define as when they wear a mask, their nose is still exposed. We’re trying to get them, like significant prompting to keep it on. And I have some other individuals who just are really working up, even just having a mask next to them is throwing this thing away from me. We have one student who wears a face shield, sanitation, working on hands, and not touching [their face] and surfaces has been a challenge” (UMT 1)

The same teacher also describes the following:

“If you were to talk in my room, you would probably be startled because you wouldn’t, you probably haven’t seen someone unmasked, running up to you, yelling in your face, you know” (UMT 1)

While the CDC did exempt individuals with severe disabilities from masking, teachers emphasized that they had regardless still been working with students on meeting CDC expectations in an attempt to reduce the chance that they themselves would get sick. One teacher who worked with specifically disabled students described how she wore full personal protective equipment (PPE) in order to mitigate the risk of working with students in this population.

Likewise, the use of masks was described by participants as a barrier in connecting with and relating to students who normally rely on that connection to complete work, specifically in students with more severe disabilities. The following quotes from one teacher describe this barrier:

“I wear my face mask, the hospital grade face mask all the time. But when I work with him, if I feel like he’s not responding as good as I would like him to, then I will put the face shield on so that he can see my face because he responds much better if he can see my facial expressions, whether it be a smile or whether it be concern or, you know. And so long as he can see my face, he does work harder” (RCT 2)

“Like with him, in order for him to focus, he needs to be able to visually watch you. And

the other part of that is if he has something on his face, it bothers him to the point where he can't focus, like even with just a shield or whatnot, he can't focus because it's there" (RCT 2)

Collectively, even with students with less severe disabilities, teachers emphasized that the additions of plexiglass, masks, and distancing guidelines (such as cohorts) made it increasingly difficult for special education students who struggle with their surroundings in a "normal" school year.

**Other stressful factors for students.** Along with the barriers of online platforms and CDC guidelines, factors specifically stressful to students with disabilities emphasized the extent to which COVID-19 changes were generally not conducive to special education. One factor noted by nearly every participant, parents and teachers alike, was that format changes disrupted students who rely on routines or are more sensitive to disruptions.

The following are quotes from parents in regards to how the change in routine in both the initial lockdown and the 2020-21 school year affected their special education students:

"Well, obviously, we had, nobody's going to school, so I think that that routine was disrupted heavily. And so we started to see a lot of behaviors emerge. I think it was kind of his way of understanding everything going on" (UCP 3)

"[Student] is definitely a creature of habit. Every day he's like, oh, I get to go to school today. No buddy, you can't go to school and like with the going to video, for example, with speech, it was adjusting to I need to go to speech and physically be there and interact that way to being upset that he couldn't do that, so for him, it was very upsetting, but to be mainly that change with everything that he had come to be accustomed to" (UMP 1)

The following are from teachers:

"[Student] has an intellectual disability and I don't think he can truly understand really what was going on with all these changes" (RMT 1)

"But I think the kids now having so many schedule changes, it's now weighing on them. Like to hear, I gotta do this now and I got to do this. It's just, it's too much, especially for those kids who suffer from executive function disorders" (UCT 1)

The inconsistency of the normally stable classroom on top of the challenges these vulnerable students already experience meant that there were more barriers to student learning. Likewise, participants described the stress that students, teachers, and parents alike felt in managing the knowledge that more severe disabilities place students at a higher risk of suffering severe harm were they to fall ill with COVID-19, specifically students with comorbidities that put them at higher risk. One teacher described how special education students with underlying conditions have voiced concerns regarding their general education peers removing their masks when they should not. Likewise, several parents described the choice to keep their child remote when given the option of a hybrid setting, preventing that student from receiving the same level of support that they normally would in a “normal” school year.

## **2. Parents and teachers encountered higher levels of stress and pressure**

Many COVID-related changes were inherently difficult for students. Likewise, the shift into learning in a pandemic environment exacerbated the stress and pressure that was placed on teachers and parents, making it far more difficult for special education teachers and parents of special education students to complete their jobs as compared to “normal” times in the traditional classroom. This was a result of the following factors related to COVID-19 learning: added challenges in allocating resources, exacerbated logistical challenges, increased workload, and increased personal stress. These factors directly relate to the ability of parents and teachers to interact effectively with their students and carry out the role of policy implementation as SLBs.

### **Teachers and parents encountered an added challenge of resource allocation.**

Likewise, teachers and parents communicated that there was a consistent challenge in receiving resources and using those resources effectively. While the manner in which these challenges



impacted teachers and parents varied from the initial lockdown to the 2020-21 school year, there was no doubt a consistent mention of how the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the previously established patterns of resource distribution and usage.

*Initial lockdown.* In regards to the initial lockdown period, teachers consistently mentioned how they encountered a challenge in receiving the resources that they needed to effectively teach their students. These resources included tangible items such as whiteboards, printers, visuals, teaching books, and computers that were left inside school buildings when teachers left without being aware that they wouldn't be allowed back in again for weeks. It also included non-tangible items such as knowledge on how to work new websites and technology as well as novel resources that weren't needed prior to remote learning such as wifi hotspots in teacher homes.

These challenges are described in the following teacher quote:

“I ended up buying my own printer and printing a ton because we couldn't even enter in schools and that was an issue. I spent so much of my own personal money because I need visuals and manipulatives and I was doing dropoffs in mailboxes. I almost spent seven hundred personal dollars of just going and printing supplies and supplies going for my staff because they were like, I'd love to have a whiteboard, and I'm like oh my gosh, so I'm ordering on Amazon and mailing it to them” (UMT 1)

Parents similarly experienced this challenge. In the following quote, a parent described the challenges they encountered in trying to get their hands on the sensory tools that their child would normally use in school:

“I reached out to a couple of people and the answers I got was or were, I don't know, I don't know how you would get that. I don't know how the insurance would cover it. They should cover it, but I don't know how. And so that was pretty frustrating. That would have been so helpful to have those tools available. To at least have something to work with him physically with more, to give him more of what he had” (UMP 1)

Given the switch from in-person to remote learning for all participants interviewed, many parents and teachers alike suddenly faced the expectation to supply their children with the same resources they had while in school during non-COVID-19 times. However, by the nature of the lockdown, participants had a much more difficult time obtaining these basic necessities, thereby adding more pressure and stress to the already high expectations that these populations face. This challenge was exacerbated by the uncertainty regarding where these resources would come from or how they would be paid for.

*2020-21 school year.* In the 2020-21 school year, teachers described how the new challenge was managing the influx of new resources. As opposed to the general deficit they encountered in the initial lockdown period, teachers reported having been supplied with a large amount of resources as granted to them through special funding from CARES, a COVID-19 relief fund meant to provide additional resources to schools. This included new technology, such as iPads, projectors, and cameras, as well as more functional resources such as bins to separate student belongings or plexiglass to place on student desks. This is summarized by a quote from one teacher:

“They went out and provided when we got back in the fall, they provided us with a, you know, an iPad and a microphone. But I don’t use any of that stuff. You know, I’m just trying to learn. I think it was too much. I’m trying to learn all of the different technology pieces that I need. I don’t need to learn about new equipment, the timing. Maybe if they pulled us in during the summer and said, hey, we’re offering training on all this new stuff, I would have been there, but we teachers were all overwhelmed in the fall, you know, we have all of this stuff that the district puts at us about now what we are supposed to do and the requirements and the data collection. And, you know, we were no capacity left.”  
(UCT 2)

While functional resources such as plexiglass or separation bins seemed well accepted by participants, several teachers reported feeling overwhelmed with the number of new materials

thrown at them. This spattering of new resources described by teachers became a stress factor itself, as several participants described feelings of burnout and exhaustion over the sheer degree of “newness” that they were experiencing.

**Teachers and parents faced exacerbated logistical challenges.** Teachers and parents described ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected the most basic of school structure: staffing and teacher availability. The following quotes from teachers and then a parent describe this challenge:

“We don't have enough substitutes to cover on a regular normal year. Now, if we have teachers that go into quarantine because they've been exposed to students, what do we do then? And it just kind of there's a lot of domino effects that the state level really didn't think about. And there's a lot of effects to a lot of different things that are going to come down the pike that no one's thought about.” (UCT 1)

“There's constant turnover happening, every week we're losing a teacher” (UMT 1)

“So that one-to-one help for him is super important, you know, and then on top of it this year, they kind of took away his one-to-one para and made it to a shared para. The jump from second to third grade is pretty big. And so instead of, like, slowly moving towards independence, which was one of my goals for him this year, he, it was kind of just like ripped out from under his feet. And a lot of that has to do with the lack of staffing, you know, they can't hire [para-professionals] and it's all really difficult in that way” (UCP 2)

The availability of instructional staff was significantly impacted in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, a factor which affected both teachers and parents alike. With the increased turnover and job loss that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools lost support staff and other individuals who are essential in contributing to an effective and cohesive school unit. This led to teachers having to step up and take on new roles, such as described by one teacher, who says that “[she] also supports a couple of ELL kids that legally [she] would not have to. But [members of the community] just do because you know what, they need support and there's not enough manpower” (RCT 2). Parents also felt this loss, as they reported having to step up and

take on the role of a paraeducator in order to make up for the inability of the school district to hire individuals in the middle of the lockdown or during high case numbers.

**Parents and teachers encountered increased workloads.** Possibly the most pervasive stressor mentioned by parents and teachers was the increased workload. Twelve of fourteen participants mentioned that they had more responsibilities than prior to the pandemic, and that this increase was a contributor to stress.

The increase in workload was a result of many variables. For teachers, COVID restrictions meant that they were required to create contingency plans for students as well as make time for students whose IEPs required specific services. This is described in the following quotes:

“We've been having conversations all week with the kids. Just ‘if we go to remote learning, this is what it's going to look like.’ And so we've been able to have those verbal conversations with them. And so now the contingency plans will be put in place. It does take more time. Time is really the big piece. It just takes more time to get ready for all of that. But hopefully we're ready” (RCT 2)

“It was chaotic, a little stressful, trying to figure out how to do google classrooms, how to manage students that have IEP services and to make sure that they are receiving those services to meet IEP needs. So we're not in an audit situation where, you know, we're not meeting those needs.” (UMT 2)

“It's been a lot of paperwork, a lot of communication with parents and teachers.” (UMT 2)

Likewise, parents described an increased workload when it comes to their normal parental and job-related activities now combined with the new role they must adapt in assisting their children's education, a job that was normally performed by educators in the classroom. This was often exacerbated by the need to attend to multiple children at the same time. The following quotes capture this:

“Well, I work full time, so both of us and my husband work full time. And, you know, we're having to finish work after they go to bed because during the day, we're with them

either doing some, you know, activities on the computer or just doing extra PT or OT. So it does pull, I get pulled away from other responsibilities that are still important to me.” (UCP 3)

“I opted not to have the therapies. If therapies happened during remote, just because I have three kids who all have special needs and they all have one to one support at school, and I am one person and I can't I can't do it all. I can't sit with all of them. They all need someone to sit with them to do the work. And I can't, I can't, I can't do it.” (RMP 1)

“And while it took my life away, you know, he, he at least had that support where a lot of parents are trying, both have to work and keep a roof over their heads and keep food on the table in a pandemic, you know.” (UCP 2)

Teachers and parents responded in several ways to these challenges. Several teachers described how their district alleviated the burden by altering IEP requirements, such as not requiring testing or reducing the total number of IEP hours a student must receive (see Section 4). Parents described that they worked through this workload by hiring outside help, cutting certain services that their child would receive such as physical therapy, or simply staying up later/redelegating time that would normally be spent on other tasks to work with their child in the place of an educator. Overall, higher workloads for both teachers and parents resulted in accommodations and the altering of practices that were routine in non-pandemic school years.

**Parents and teachers encountered higher levels of personal stress.** Lastly, along with the added pressures described previously, 8 of the 14 participants recounted feeling personally more stressed and overwhelmed. This was from two main characteristics of pandemic learning: the chaos and uncertainty of new changes and their outcomes and general exhaustion and burnout.

*The chaos and uncertainty of new changes and their outcomes.* Parents and teachers alike described the anxiety and stress related to the constant variation and change of practice, both in

the initial lockdown period and the 2020-21 school year. The following quotes describe this in regards to the initial lockdown period and the 2020-21 school year, respectively:

“Somebody sent out an email about the plan or, OK, if there's a case that comes up in your school then the school for a couple of weeks, it's like a couple of days if it's one case, a couple of weeks for two cases kind of thing, and then. I was like, OK, that sounds reasonable, you know, that that seems like a good plan and then I think the next day they were like, OK, never mind, we're just going to shut down” (UCP 1)

“There's changes all the time. Like we just have a new bell schedule change on us for this Wednesday that we got yesterday. So there's constant changes. The kids have had constant changes” (UCT 1)

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were characterized by constant change and alteration of practice. Just as discussed previously in Section 1, this uncertainty and change in routine was stressful for students, teachers, and parents alike. Overall, this uncertainty led to parents and teachers becoming increasingly stressed about their practices. In order to accommodate for the possibility of change, teachers and parents had to actively anticipate and prepare for any situation, a practice that led to more work and worry about potential situational outcomes. One teacher described their worry in the initial lockdown about how the change to remote would affect students, saying “I was contacting every day to avoid a regression of skill, I don't even think we got that far; and that's what I was worried about when we shut down, was that it would be a waste of three months” (RMT 1).

These sources of worry and uncertainty in the novel pandemic environment were described by many participants as stressful and burdensome. As teachers and parents were flooded with changes that did not exist in the previous school years, they were left to operate in novel ways that would have a significant bearing on students for years in the future, a thought that was extraordinarily burdensome and worrisome for participants, thereby contributing to their overall stress levels.

*General exhaustion and burnout.* Finally, participants reported feelings of being overwhelmed and generally burned out from the added pressures discussed previously. This is encapsulated by the following quotes from special education teachers regarding teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic:

“It’s just a hard job” (UCT 1)

“I was working 18 hour days” (UMT 1)

“It has put a great amount of stress on us as teachers and the families and students that we serve” (RMT 1)

As teachers continued on past the initial lockdown and 2020-21 school year, they faced challenges and personal stress related to the weight of such a significant event as a pandemic. Several discussed personal factors that have contributed to their stress, such as family members getting sick, worries regarding job/financial security, and concern towards their own health and safety. These contributing factors along with the stress accumulated from the classroom signify the vast amount of stress and pressure placed on parents, all of which greatly affected the ways in which they performed and moderated their activities day-to-day.

### **3. Learning quality generally diminished**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, learning varied in many ways. However, a factor that was continually recounted by participants was that the learning quality of special education students has diminished. Every single participant, both teachers and parents, discussed this at length, suggesting that it was a common and pervasive theme of the pandemic.

Overall, there was a remarkable decline in student learning during the initial lockdown as

described by every individual interviewed. The general sentiment echoed by the teachers and parents can be encapsulated in the following quote:

“The first six months of the pandemic, so March through September, it was [no learning], like there was like on a scale of one to 10, it would be a one. There was nothing.” (UMP 1)

This steep drop in learning can be boiled down to two main contributing factors that were characteristic of the lockdown period: decreased student participation and decreased work quality. These three characteristics of learning in the initial lockdown as they varied from the previous school years contributed to the overall diminishment of learning quality during that time.

**Decreased student participation.** Both parents and teachers discussed how remote learning in the initial lockdown contributed to students participating less in their day-to-day classes or not attending at all. Teachers describe this trend in the following quotes:

“I had very few students who really stayed on board fully with me during that time, some got lost, you know, their parents refused to contact” (RMT 2)

“So basically, they shut down and they gave us maybe one day of notice that they were shutting down. And I didn't really hear from anyone. I didn't get any assignments. Nothing really happened for about a month and a half” (UCP 2)

As echoed by these quotes, when the uncertainty of the lockdown began, students heavily varied in how much time they devoted to schooling as well as how much was expected of them from their schools, resulting in little emphasis being placed on a schooling regime. Consequently, many didn't participate as much as they had before, and as no schooling took place, no learning did either.

**Decreased work quality.** Likewise, participants recalled that the work completed by students during the initial lockdown period was of poorer quality than the months before. Many participants discussed how this was a factor of the diminished weight that assignments had:



“Grading didn't happen, right? And kids knew it” (RMT 2)

“[There] was pretty minimal growth in workload day to day, and teaching, and I don't think we really learned during that time” (RMT 1)

“The kids kind of had the idea in the spring that if they did their homework, fine, if they didn't do their homework, fine” (RCT 2)

The lack of set structure and expectation associated with informal schooling meant that students often exhibited little motivation to complete their work, and, along with the fact that many students knew their work would have little bearing on their final grades, they often put in very little effort to the assignments that they did finish.

Decreased work quality was also seen in the 2020-21 school year. As discussed in Section 1, remote or hybrid schooling is very restrictive to student learning. This is described in the following quotes:

“She's not getting as robust of an approach as she would get at school and in person” (UCP 1)

“ I would say the social piece [has been lacking] as well, because yes, they can encourage chatter, but they can't encourage that close working together... somebody with a diagnosis like socially, they already struggle and so this just kind of takes away from any progress that they've made with that social working together and working hand-in-hand with people” (UMP 1)

“I think everyone's doing the best that they can to help anyone, but I don't think that their needs are being met because I believe with the lack of opportunity to receive the education they needed last year, they're further behind than others. And there's just not a chance to kind of catch up. And therefore, they're just going to fall like they're going to fall through the cracks” (RMP 1)

These quotes capture the restriction that remote formats have had, specifically in how they reduce the social opportunities for students and opportunities that they have had in the past to advance their learning. In the online format, students cannot interact and improve their social skills in the same manner as they could in a traditional platform, meaning that they are meeting

inevitable deficits in their education. This, combined with the lack of in-person resources that special education students normally utilize daily in the traditional classroom, contributed to a decline in learning quality.

#### **4. IEPs could not be properly met**

In terms of the legal aspects of IDEA, participants conclusively described how the changes made to schooling in response to the pandemic did not allow for adherence to special education law. Both parents and teachers emphasized how the facets of IDEA that they had been accustomed to were innately impossible in the face of the novel restrictions. Specifically, least restrictive environment (LRE) and free and appropriate education (FAPE) expectations were increasingly difficult to meet, individualized education plan (IEP) meetings were not optimal in remote formats, and compensatory practices and IEP amendments became commonplace. This contributed to a deterioration in the original intention of IDEA law: to ensure optimal educational practices for special education students.

**LRE and FAPE were increasingly difficult to meet.** LRE and FAPE requirements are put in place to ensure that students receive an education equal to that of their general education peers and that schools are legally held to provide it. However, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the changes put into place innately could not coexist with these requirements, a fact that makes the response to legislation and resulting policy more significant. This meant that SLBs had to exercise high levels of discretion in determining which facets of which law were the most essential to follow and maintain in the classroom.

*LRE.* Least restrictive environment dictates that special education students are with their general education peers as much as possible. However, several individuals recalled how LRE

was difficult to meet due to restrictions in the remote and distant environment, as described below:

“Their IEP hours are 4.75 hours a day, if not more. Because of least restrictive environment, they were accessing, you know, mainstream classes, which isn’t included in their special ed instruction. And that’s not a reality. My own children cannot stay on the computer for that long” (UMT 1)

These teachers described how, regardless of the setting, the changes implemented in response to COVID-19 made LRE difficult to achieve. In the remote setting, LRE requires special education students to spend extended time on online learning platforms in classes with general education students. However, this attempt to meet IDEA requirements presents its own problem, as the time spent in these online classrooms were rarely as immersive as was intended with the implementation of IDEA law, questioning whether the same spirit of inclusion and equal treatment previously present could exist with students learning remotely and asynchronously. What this has resulted in is the essential improbability of LRE being enacted with its original policy intention.

*FAPE.* Just as expectations of LRE were difficult to meet, free and appropriate education (FAPE) requirements were challenging to meet in the face of the pandemic. FAPE requires that students are given a free and appropriate education, meaning that they receive the resources that they need in order to receive the same education as their peers. This is accomplished through IEP goals and interventions as dictated through the IEP. However, implementing these expectations proved problematic due to the circumstances of the pandemic, as described by the following parent:

“So basically, they shut down and they gave us maybe one day of notice that they were shutting down. And I didn’t really hear from anyone. I didn’t get any assignments. Nothing really happened for about a month and a half. You know, general education went kind of right on to some platform, you know, Schoology or something like that. But he couldn’t do those assignments. But for special education it took them a really long time

just to get those one assignment weekly, it was in a Google doc and was you know, do this. It a long time to get there” (UCP 2)

According to FAPE, special education students should receive an education equal with that of their peers. However, as described here by a parent in regards to the initial lockdown, much of the instruction for special education students was delayed. As a result, they did not receive what they were entitled under FAPE. Many parents described how this trend continued on into the 2020-21 school year as students faced continued challenges and confusion in meeting their IEP goals and requirements in the face of restrictions. The following quote exemplifies this:

“Now, they're only doing half of the minutes that are on his IEP, though, because for the general education, they're only doing half a day grade of synchronous learning. They're only required to do half of the special education minutes. Yeah, that's the free and appropriate agenda, you know, but it's the impact to special education students is a completely different impact than it is to general education. Yeah, I don't think it should be the same. I think there should be different laws around that” (UCP 2)

As emphasized by this parent, the change in the school year to online learning meant that special education students' IEP mandated hours were significantly shortened. As a result, they were not meeting the same quality education that they were prior to the pandemic. Consequently, for both LRE and FAPE requirements, the alteration of expectation to the pandemic meant that students received significantly fewer resources than prior to the pandemic.

**IEP meetings were not optimal in the online setting.** Many parents and teachers alike echoed sentiments regarding how it was unfavorable to complete IEP meetings in the online format and that there was a preference for in-person conversation. For instance, one parent said the following:

“I just had a zoom IEP meeting for myself, which is not my favorite thing, I think it's really hard to have a conversation about your kid's struggles when you're looking at everybody like Brady Bunch style” (RMP 1)

Another parent had a similar response:

“So we just had a meeting last month and what they ended up doing because normally you can be in person, which I really like because just relatability wise. It's just nice to be in person, Zoom's not the same. Yeah, we did. We did do, I believe it was like Microsoft... so you could still see everybody, but it was different.” (UMP 1)

In total, these sentiments echo a dissatisfaction with the manner in which standard IDEA practice had been forced to change, as well as the challenge that COVID-19 changes had placed on parents and teachers who are trying to continually ensure that their students' rights are being upheld.

**IEP compensatory practices and amendments became necessary.** With the onset of the pandemic, IEP practices were also forced to adapt. They changed in two principal ways: compensation and amendments.

*Compensation.* Another theme that nearly every participant discussed was the common practice of compensation, a practice that wasn't common prior to the pandemic. When the initial lockdown hit and every special education student across the country was denied an adequate education for a substantial period of time, they all became entitled to compensatory practices, meaning that teachers had to document and plan for ways to make up what students had lost during that time. On this topic, one parent said “the kids are still, their IEPs are still in place ... the kids are entitled to compensatory services. Even if the school district tells you that they don't need to. They do. So they need to meet IEP accommodations and goals, whether or not they're in person or not” (RMP 1).

The same parent continues:

“I know my special education director... and he said, well, we can do complimentary services next summer. Well, that's not acceptable. Compensatory services can happen now. But now he said, well, we can't do that because we can't have activities. Well, this is not an after school activity. This is still school. Compensatory services are still part of the school day... and he was like, well, how do you expect me to do that? I said, well, it's not my job to figure it out, it's yours, but I expect it to happen. And I just don't think, you know, I don't think they know what they're doing. And not that I blame anybody, but we

really do need to figure it out for these students because we can't just brush it under the rug and just hope that it gets better” (RMP 1)

In this quote, RMP 1 expresses their concerns about the school not prioritizing and starting compensatory practices. However, there was a disconnect between the director and the parent as to what exactly that entailed. Several teachers considered it to be something that would occur far later, such as one teacher who said, “I had to make ideally at least 30 minutes of contact a day [in the initial lockdown] and I had to report it, keep a record of it for compensatory education purposes down the road if that became necessary” (RMT 1).

By the nature of an uncommon practice suddenly becoming necessary, there was a wide range of interpretation as to when, what, and where these practices should/will take place. This contributed to the already distorted implementation of IDEA.

*Amendments.* Likewise, teachers were forced to make amendments and changes to IEP plans in order to accommodate the changes created by COVID-19. However, the manner in which amendments were made varied widely by teacher. One says the following:

“[Administration has] encouraged us to write amendments for IEPs and for the most part we have, and so we've put contingency plans in these amendments... So, for example, a contingency plan that was written in an amendment stated ‘contingency plan if [name] school district were required to transition to remote learning due to covid-19, the student will receive one hundred and twenty five minutes per week of direct services outside the general education classroom for academics by a paraprofessional via Zoom or Google Classroom’” (RCT 2).

On the other hand, some teachers reported no amendments despite changes to instruction:

“I was told [during the initial lockdown] that they were looking at about a half an hour a day, regardless of the fact that the direct instruction times in their IEPs were much greater” (RMT 1)

Other changes were made as well, such as in response to CDC guidance:

“We've had to do amendments of IEPs because they're not meeting COVID safety protocols. So we have to keep COVID safety protocol modified in my classroom setting to do that” (UMT 1)

Despite how common IEP compensation and amendments appeared to be across participants, none of the changes mentioned by one teacher or parent resembled those mentioned by another. In other words, many changes were made, but what those changes were varied by the individual district and teacher. In total, there were vast amounts of changes and variation in how schools altered their IEP practices, ultimately implying that different students throughout the country were experiencing different variations of the same IDEA law and would continue as compensatory practices were fleshed out in the years that followed.

### **5. Policy Guidance from Federal, Colorado, and Maine Departments of Education**

Just as parents and teachers played a key role in classroom operations following the COVID-19 pandemic, the policy guidance released from the federal and state levels played a key role in how administrators would understand and adapt classroom practice. The manner in which this policy behaves, or is useful and meaningful, will have a direct impact on the behavior of SLBs and how they interact with and operate under the changes and constraints being forced upon them in a novel environment.

In the Spring and Summer of 2020, the Department of Education (DoE) as well as the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and Maine Department of Education (MDE) all released guidance to schools in order to instruct them on how to maintain IDEA amidst the new challenges associated with COVID-19. The findings are reflected in the following table:

Table 3

*Mandatoriness and Specificity in Federal, Colorado, and Maine Policy Documents*

Source	Low specificity		High specificity		Total policy directives identified
	Low mandatoriness (%)	High mandatoriness (%)	Low mandatoriness (%)	High mandatoriness (%)	
DoE	27.3	52.3	11.4	9.1	N=44
CDE	52.4	28.6	7.1	11.9	N=42
MDE	32.6	37.0	13.0	17.4	N=46
Total	37.1	39.4	10.6	12.9	N=132

In comparing the total number of policy directives that fell into each of the four codes, the most common was guidance that was low in specificity but high in mandatoriness, with 39.4% of the total policy directives from all sources falling into this code. Following closely after is low in specificity and low in mandatoriness, with 37.1% of the directives. This means that, overwhelmingly, the majority of guidance (76.5%) given in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on how to properly implement IDEA was low in specificity. This meant that SLBs received guidance that left them a significant amount of individual discretion.

This originated with the guidance first released by the DoE, where over half (52.3%) of the policy directives released were low in specificity but high in mandatoriness. This meant that states were receiving guidance that was mandatory to follow, but left discretion on how exactly it should look or be practically applied. This, therefore, contributes to a high level of variation at the state level, meaning that different states may take different approaches as they interpret and implement the guidance in different ways.

This discretion can be seen in the approaches taken by the CDE and MDE. The CDE



generally took a hands-off approach and emphasized more local control, as shown by the majority of their guidance (52.4%) being low in specificity and low in mandatoriness. The MDE, however, took a slightly more directive and centralized approach, with only 32.6% of policy directives being low in specificity and mandatoriness and 37.0% being low in specificity and high in mandatoriness. In total, this variation in policy directive displays the impact of the DoE leaving significant amounts of guidance up to discretion; two different states that should theoretically be implementing and interpreting federal guidance in the same way took different approaches, leading to increasingly greater variation as one moves closer to the local level.

However, one interesting trend to note within the policy documents was the disparity in how health advice (e.g. what precautions to take) and general IDEA advice (e.g. how to ensure equitable implementation) were perceived.

Table 4

*Mandatoriness and Specificity in Policy Directives Related to Health and IDEA Implementation*

Directive Topic	Low specificity		High specificity		Total policy directives identified
	Low mandatoriness (%)	High mandatoriness (%)	Low mandatoriness (%)	High mandatoriness (%)	
Health	20.0	13.3	20.0	46.7	N=15
IDEA	39.3	42.7	9.4	8.5	N=117
Total	37.1	39.4	10.6	12.9	N=132

As seen in Table 4, there was a delineation between health- and IDEA-related guidance in terms of levels of specificity. Of the 15 policy directives that were related to health, 46.7% were high in specificity and high in mandatoriness. Of the 117 policy directives that were related to IDEA, only 8.5% were high in specificity and high in mandatoriness. Health-related guidance, as

compared to IDEA-related guidance, was given in a more practical and applicable manner, with little being left up to individual discretion.

## **6. Guidance was perceived by SLBs as unclear and vague**

As reflected from the policy document analysis, the overwhelming majority of guidance received by teachers and parents was not specific and left a considerable amount to individual discretion, leading to a large amount of variation in a small area. Take, for example, the following policy quote:

“Districts will need to consider the individual learning needs of students in determining how to provide services” (CDE).

In this policy document, the CDE deferred to districts to consider their specific students’ needs and how this should impact their direction going forward. However, nothing was said about what “individual learning needs” are, or how they should inform how districts provide services. What services should be considered was also not mentioned, which led to a large amount of discretion in what could be considered meeting this requirement. Districts were allowed to exercise community discretion to such an extreme point that they could individually consider not only what services to provide but also when and to what extent to use them. This is echoed in the following quotes:

“It was more of, ‘here are the guidelines, do what you can.’ It was very vague. It was very vague for the longest time as it was here, you know, ‘here's certain things you have to do in regards to holding IEP meetings, how to meet the minutes—do the best you can.’ It was very vague and then it was very open ended in terms of how to present lessons and do the asynchronous learning to all the students. So it was just kind of make it up as you go. So, my department and I, we kind of collaborated and said, here’s how we wanna [teach]” (UCT 1)

“And so I know that at least for Colorado, the guidance was kind of open for interpretation a little bit. I have some colleagues that work for [large neighboring districts], and they had a different interpretation of the state guidance than how our

[district] took it. So we were told that an appropriate education needs to be comparable to the education of the other general education students. That was kind of, that's kind of our guiding light, I guess" (RCT 1).

Just as this teacher had to turn to herself and her immediate peers in order to find conclusive guidance, 9 of the 14 teachers and parents interviewed described how they had turned to third party, outside guidance when faced with minimal direction from school officials. These resources included but were not limited to: third party virtual academies, instructional videos, Facebook/social media groups, advocacy groups, professional organizations, and peers from other districts. This means that, compared to the traditional school year pre-COVID, there was an overwhelming generality of guidance, leading SLBs to exercise local discretion or seek out other forms of guidance that were not standardized to all educators.

### **7. There was a large variation in adaptations to teaching**

Because of the vague policy guidance and the general perception by SLBs of said guidance as being unclear and unhelpful, there was a large variation in approaches to teaching within groups located even right next to each other. Whereas I originally went into this research expecting there to be a difference in interpretation by urbanicity/rurality and state, there was no consistent trend, with even participants located close to each other experiencing widely different IDEA implementation in the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported getting guidance from school officials that encouraged them to take individual discretion, such as described in the following quote:

“What we did was, because it was new to the district, it was new to the administration, it was new to teachers, at that point, they gave it, they gave us a lot of flexibility. They said, we want you to maintain instruction, but everybody does not have to do it the same way” (RCT 2)

As described, due to the novel nature of the pandemic as well as the generic guidance that teachers and parents were receiving, individual discretion allowed for a large variation in how teaching actually occurred. Specifically, there was variation among participants in teaching approach, IEP amendments, and teaching methods. This meant that students experienced vastly different interpretations of the same IDEA law.

**Variation of teaching philosophy.** As the 2020-21 school year began, teachers were given the guidance to generally “adapt to and monitor student needs” (CDE). However, given the generality of this guidance, teachers adapted very different philosophies to how students should be educated during the pandemic. Consider the discrepancy between the two following quotes, both from rural Colorado teachers:

“We pretty well let them know that [if we had to go remote again] the expectations for your peers is the same for you. We didn’t, we haven’t really cut them any slack whatsoever [in academics]” (RCT 2)

As opposed to:

“I guess that’s my main motto this year, I’m like, don’t focus on the test scores or where they were last year and where they are now... we need to get kids happy again and back in the rhythm” (RCT 1)

These two teachers, both from the same school context, took widely different philosophies to what the most beneficial approach was. One considered academic rigor and maintenance to be the most important, whereas the other considered it to be the least important in respect to emotional wellbeing. Variation in what manner to approach teaching in both the initial lockdown and the 2020-21 school was found in many ways throughout all participants, with students being exposed to a large variety of interpretations and classroom dynamics.

**Variation in IEP amendments.** As discussed previously in the section on the difficulty of meeting IEP goals amidst COVID-19 changes (Section 4), there were variations in how/if

IEPs were amended. Several teachers described making changes to IEPs, such as the teacher discussed previously in Section 4 who was encouraged by her district to make changes to her students' IEPs to reflect the changing instructional times that they would receive in the online format. However, other teachers described making different changes, such as the following:

“So we've had to do amendments of IEPs because they're not meeting COVID safety protocols” (UMT 1)

“So basically what we did is we did a CLP, which is a contingency learning plan at the beginning of the year, which basically said, like, here's here's a new learning plan we're going to put in place for your student's IEP based off of COVID because we can't meet your student's goals or our's on the IEP. So that's what we did at our district to basically say we have to change their IEP during this time” (UCT 1)

“And so for the past three weeks, I don't know, since the third week of October, I have been working on his IEP and remote learning plan and there's been so much back and forth on that getting his goals ironed out for the next year because they didn't have any involvement in March” (UCP 2)

Here are three different approaches and manners in which IEPs were altered due to COVID-19 changes. One teacher made changes only in response to COVID-19 CDC guidance, another did not alter the IEP itself but instead put into place a new contingency plan, and another parent described how their child's IEP has undergone continual changes and modifications. All of these approaches are wildly different from one another, yet all are some form of interpretation of the federal guidance that is low in specificity and allowed SLBs to use discretion in how they managed student performance.

**Variation of teaching methods.** Other forms of variation noted among teachers and parents were instances where individuals utilized different materials, ultimately contributing to a variation in teaching methods and altering what students were exposed to.

In the initial lockdown and into the 2020-21 school year, when faced with uncertainty

about what exactly to teach and how, teachers adapted by creating their own learning plans. For example:

“And so I made both my [assistant teachers] come in on a day off during spring break... and spent a whole day just planning and getting packets together to send home to students and kind of got all that programming figured out. And then a little, like a few days later, I ended up calling all the parents on my caseload and I just told them what we're going to be doing, you know, what their services were going to look like and we just decided to continue our normal classes via zoom for most of our classes” (RCT 1)

This teacher had to format their own lesson plans and decide what their classroom was going to look like. Several other teachers described similar practices of formatting their own lesson plans and formats when forced to alter practice after the initial COVID-19 changes. This meant a variety of implementation and teaching methods, and no clear guidance as to how classrooms should function.

Different teachers also used different materials. For example, one teacher (RMT 2) used a third party online program in order to teach some of their special education students who were fully remote in the 2020-21 school year. Another teacher, however, approached remote teaching in a similar way to the traditional classroom, and just met with her students over Google Classroom and Zoom (RCT 2). Overall, large amounts of discretion were taken by all teachers in how to teach their students, leading to more significant and problematic manners of implementation.

## **8. Teachers and Parents had to alter their roles in educating students**

With the changes that came during the pandemic, the roles and responsibilities of both parents and teachers in students' schooling shifted. Specifically, as the location of schooling as well as the focus of it changed, parents and teachers adapted to what was newly expected of them in order to meet student needs. The manner in which individuals shifted varied between parents

and teachers.

**Parents.** When schooling shifted to remote and hybrid formats in the initial lockdown and the 2020-21 school year, students were suddenly completing schooling at home as opposed to the classroom. This meant that the assistance that students would normally receive from paraeducators or special education teachers was shifted to the parent. Every parent interviewed described this shift and their new responsibilities in managing their child's education, as shown in the following quote:

“I had to sit right next to him the entire time, there's nothing else I could do. So it just became my life became trying to teach a child. And I don't have the education to do that, you know, I wish I did. You know, oftentimes kids don't want the help from their parents, you know, especially with special education. Parents are these I mean, it's their safe place. It's the person they come home to screaming in a fit because they had a hard day at school, you know? And so for that role to be reversed and for you to become this like proctor in their lives and be pushing them, and then I feel like it just changes the model of them having that safe place” (UCP 2)

“I had to become their teacher. Honestly, I had to sit and do their work. And my whole day was, you know, I thought it would be great being at home. I don't ever want to homeschool my children just like, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. But like, my whole day, like, it was like being at my school but at home with my own children” (RMP 1)

As described by these parents, many had to adapt to a more active role in teaching their children. Students with disabilities may be dependent on having extra assistance in the classroom; they often have paraeducators who sit with them and help them adjust as they need to complete their assignments. However, when learning shifted to an online format, this responsibility that was normally far from parents became essential in educating their children. The normally passive role of the parent shifted into one that resembled the responsibilities of teachers.

**Teachers.** On the flip side, teachers had to alter facets of their teaching to more closely resemble a parent role. Specifically, teachers shifted away from the normal academic approach to one that focused more on student social and emotional wellbeing.

“So it's definitely changed, not just my how I grade kids, but that the general ed teachers are learning or need having to understand that just because Bob didn't show up for class or did show up, he's responsible for his two younger elementary brothers. So figure out who needs the help and support and understand that, you know, it's not just all about us and our grades this year. It can't be. We have to have the compassion and understanding that a lot of these kids are home. They're helping younger kids, siblings; mom and dad aren't there to help them do their work either. So let's have some compassion built in” (UCT 2)

“And really a lot of it was just social, emotional wellbeing is what we were looking to help students with a lot. You know, it was a really scary time and kids were in all sorts of different situations at home, you know, but this one student would come in and she would work with me two hours every day. And basically she was my buddy. I think she was just alone” (RMT 2)

This shift took place with the understanding that the uncertainty and anxiety of a pandemic was directly related to student performance. Therefore, in order to help students reach their academic potential, they had to acknowledge and attempt to alleviate the effect COVID-19 had on students' emotional wellbeing. Teachers, such as those from the quotes above, heavily emphasized how the changes from the pandemic directly led them to alter their teaching practices and adopt a more understanding and personal role in students' lives.

**Parents and teachers were generally unaware of the weight of this change in relation to policy implementation.** Despite the fact that teachers and parents' roles as an SLB in students' education were exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic, relatively none were aware of what their responsibilities were as they related to policy and implementation. This is critically shown in the following quotes, one from a teacher and one from a parent, respectively:

“I'm not really, I haven't been up on the current if there has been a change in policy or what's ahead with the new president and in. I haven't seen you know, we're down here at the little people level, so we don't know or see a lot of change” (UCT 2)



“I think there was just so much going on, it was very overwhelming that I don't know that even if the information was there, I would have really processed it and thought it would be helpful unless it was addressing, like, an immediate need” (UCP 3)

In terms of policy implementation, the SLB holds the most critical role in determining what actually affects students. However, due to the immediate needs and weighty responsibilities of both parents and teachers during the pandemic, they placed little attention on specifically how critical their roles as active agents in policy interpretation. Furthermore, for parents, who had a role closely resembling teachers, none knew too much about what policy was out on how to educate special education students, and no parent was aware of any guidance specifically geared towards how they should act in this new role, suggesting that not even policymakers were considering parents as SLBs; no federal or state guidance mentioned the role of parent in the new pandemic circumstances.

### **9. Despite unprecedented deficits, there were pervasive feelings of patience/empathy towards those in positions of influence**

Across all individuals interviewed, there was a pervasive and consistent sentiment that the education special needs students were receiving was not adequate, and that this could have long-term impacts on student performance. The following teacher quote echoes this sentiment:

“COVID has disadvantaged a group of students who are already significantly disadvantaged... it has, I feel, probably been the worst thing that has happened to public education because it's essentially stopped it and is impeding it from getting started again in a meaningful way” (RMT 1)

However, despite the understanding that what happened was insufficient, little blame was placed on those who, normally, would be targeted in the face of deficiencies, such as school administration, state leadership, and federal leadership. Instead, blame was consciously placed

on the situation, as every single individual described how, if there was something better leadership could have done, nobody knew what that was. Therefore, it was the fault of the situation, and not those who were enacting failing policy. For example, despite expressing that special education was failing its students, RMT 1 also said the following:

“I don't think I need anything from the district or the state that I'm not getting. I just don't feel like the model that we're operating under is sufficient, which almost sounds a little contradictory, but I feel like for what we're doing, it's just not a, it's not a great model, but it doesn't mean that there's something more I should be getting within that model” (RMT 1)

However, this does not mean that individuals were without criticism towards individuals in power. This is exemplified by the following quotes:

“Schools didn't really know what to do. There was no, there's no indication just, not even at the state level, of what to do specifically with my student population” (RMT 2)

“I don't think [the district or state] listens to teacher's concerns” (UCT 1)

“I'm sure there's more resources available, but the school's not making anybody aware of them.” (UMP 2)

“There is no guidance from the state level. So, you know, there's nothing there's nothing that is required based on this, is that the only thing that really holds is it needs to be, you know, equal to what general education is having.” (UCP 2)

Participants acknowledged many ways in which those in leadership positions failed to adapt and operate in the pandemic environment. However, this blame was consistently paired with the sentiment that these failures were a factor of an unprecedented environment as opposed to a blatant disregard for student wellbeing. For example, one teacher says that “they could have given us countless time to transition and we still wouldn't have been ready, but just because it was such unknown territory” (RCT 2). Therefore, participants acknowledged and accepted the deficits in a system that, normally, would not be accepted.

In general, there were three main tropes that were used as an “excuse” for the problems facing schools and for expressing empathy/patience towards those in positions of influence:

1. “What we are currently doing is not enough, but no one is aware of a better approach”
2. “The current deficits are not from a lack of trying”
3. “Nobody knows what the best course of action is; there is no precedent”

These three sentiments expressed by participants and the general attitude of forgiveness and understanding was perhaps the most interesting and unexpected finding of the current research. This idea rewrites the normal conversation around policymaker performance, and is unprecedented in itself as forgiveness is not usually offered in the face of policy deficits. This is especially profound considering the weight that the changes placed on schools, creating such a drastic deficit in schooling that it led RMT 1 to describe it as the worst thing to ever happen to schooling. However, this contradiction displays a pervasive theme that came from the COVID-19 pandemic and schooling: in the face of general misfortune and loss, perhaps the most important policy to adapt is that of understanding and sympathy.

### Discussion

In total, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the practices of special education teachers and parents in ways that critically altered the manner in which IDEA was implemented as compared to how it performed in the traditional classroom. Previous research (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Bayne, 2018; Bray & Russell, 2016; Esteves & Rao, 2008; Hehir & Gamm, 1999; Ong-Dean, Daly, & Park, 2011; Seligmann & Zirkel, 2013) explored how IDEA has functioned and operated within the context that it was meant to be enacted: the traditional, in-person classroom where students can interact and learn next to their peers. It explored how changes in IDEA policy have interacted with school contexts, and how this has altered the way in which the policy is implemented. Variation, both positive and negative, in response to policy changes has been thoughtfully examined in order to understand the mechanisms that influence policy and its efficacy. Changes that occur from top-down strain, namely a policy enacted by a policymaker influencing SLB discretion and how they implement policy, have been explored in depth (e.g., Jimenez-Silva, Bernstein, & Baca, 2016; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). However, in the case of COVID-19, it wasn't the policy itself that critically changed, it was the context. Suddenly, the intended environment for IDEA implementation morphed into a classroom that was distant and impersonal. Therefore, COVID-19 captured the effects of bottom-up strain: drastic contextual changes at the SLB level altering how SLBs exercise discretion and implement policy. The current research expanded the SLB framework and understanding of policy discretion in implementation by adding the consideration of alternate ways in which SLBs may change how they interact with an existing policy after encountering novel situational strain.

Drastic disaster-based bottom-up strain, a new idea in the consideration of the SLB framework, led to the alteration of IDEA in novel ways. One novel implementation factor was the addition of parents as SLBs, a role previously only considered for those working directly in the school with students. Policymakers did not consider parents as critical in the proper implementation of LRE or FAPE. In practice, the concept of due process places parents directly opposite the school, naming them as players who have no direct impact on the implementation of the law itself; the parent's main function is holding the school accountable. However, as discussed in Findings Section 8, parents became essential bureaucrats in the successful implementation of IDEA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, the clear delineation between parent and SLB was blurred, with guardians adopting the critical role of the teacher, a role that necessitates policy implementation. However, they were generally not considered as such, with policymakers giving parents little to no guidance in how to respond effectively to the new role they had been given. This change in response to COVID-19 fundamentally altered the roles that different players in the maintenance and implementation of IDEA had, questioning the framework of IDEA and how policy should adapt to accommodate these changes in a way not previously explored.

Another novel addition to the SLB framework is the idea of legibility when comparing health-related guidance and IDEA-related guidance (Yurkofsky, 2020). The guidance released by the CDC and then adopted by schools (see Appendix) critically differed from IDEA-related guidance in one key manner: it was more legible to SLBs, meaning it was more practical and clear in how it should be implemented. Health related guidance, such as social distancing procedures, is highly specific, leaving SLBs little to leave up to discretion. IDEA policy, on the other hand, was overwhelmingly low in specificity, including phrases such as “consider social

background”, a direction that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, meaning that it is low in legibility. While it was critical that both types of policy were implemented, legibility was a critical factor that contributed to the success and extent to which the policy was followed with fidelity.

Likewise, the addition of legible, health-related policy meant that SLBs, a group only previously considered to make decisions related to IDEA, were required to accommodate and integrate policy that carried the serious implications of health and safety. Critically, discretion on this topic was not nearly as acceptable; lack of fidelity meant spread of disease. Previously, in the traditional classroom context, LRE and FAPE were the principles that SLBs were expected to adhere closely to. However, when challenged with the concept of disease spread and prevention, they were forced to reconcile the inherent conflict between emphasizing inclusion, as mandated by LRE expectations, and keeping students separate, as mandated by CDC expectations. When faced with this divergence, SLBs had to adapt previous practice to accommodate new health and safety expectations. This discrepancy highlights the new ways in which SLBs were challenged and utilized discretion in their practices. While all policy is interpreted and altered by SLBs, variation is only considered acceptable when health is not on the line, meaning that certain policies may be more or less likely to be differentially interpreted by SLBs depending on the extent to which it is innately acceptable to exercise discretion in the first place.

In total, the degree to which individual discretion and local adaptations were allowed during the COVID-19 pandemic was extreme. Due to the lack of specificity in guidance, there was high variation in class format, teacher philosophies, performance maintenance, and more, all of which critically affected the implementation and action of IDEA. Discretion, however, is not unprecedented. Teachers and parents alike have continually taken action to alter and shift their

local classroom to fit the needs of the community and students that they serve (e.g., Bayne, 2018; Bray & Russell, 2016; Jimenez-Silva, Bernstein, & Baca, 2016; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). However, when faced with the initial lockdown, policymakers left more to discretion instead of re-regulating previous practice into the new context. Because of the added room for discretion, factors such as population density and political adherence critically altered IDEA implementation despite previously having little to no effect. Policy became far too responsive to local needs, creating an implementation environment where two seemingly similar teachers have far different interpretations and actions. This meant that the goals of IDEA were occasionally mismanaged and variably implemented, impacting the education of students around the country.

Ultimately, these factors emphasize the following: the importance of creating policy in ways that anticipate and thoughtfully attempt to solve the disparities that may result from implementation. IDEA in its original design was not intended to be applied to the disaster context where students are in exacerbated and increasingly stressful situations. It was not designed to anticipate the effects that such an event would have on factors beyond the classroom, such as the job market, economy, and political spheres. Therefore, when an event appears that challenges a law as essential as IDEA, it is imperative that policymakers are able to react to and create meaningful temporary changes that properly balance the amount of discretion SLBs have and will still allow the core facets of the law to be maintained in the classroom. In the COVID-19 pandemic, the special education classroom significantly lacked compared to how it performed prior; a lack of intentional change meant that SLBs were left up to extreme levels of individual discretion, resulting in high variation and a discrepancy in the quality of special education around the country. States significantly varied from each other in guidance approach; guidance that was low in specificity yet mandatory meant that two districts placed directly next

to each other were experiencing wildly different manners of implementation.

Post COVID-19, the policymaker is able to see how drastically an event such as a pandemic can shift school practice and how it ultimately alters the practices that directly impact students. However, there is far more that has yet to be explored into how COVID-19 impacted special education and education in general. Due to the natural limitation of time, the current research was only able to look at a small window of actual IDEA implementation. Future research will be able to explore not only how policy changed over the span of the pandemic but also how classrooms recovered. Ultimately, when the full social and academic impact of the pandemic is understood, something that will hopefully happen in the years to come, policymakers will be able to understand how they can specifically alter their actions to better prepare should this event happen again in the future.

The current research is only a small look into the complex mechanisms surrounding this novel pandemic and the mechanisms of policy implementation, making it overwhelmingly valuable to continue to look into the trends discovered and their possible underlying causes. Hopefully, with further insightful research, educators and academics alike will be able to understand and ultimately enhance not only special education in the United States, but the education of all students.



## Appendix

### CDC COVID-19 Transmission Guidance for K-12 Schools

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#### Five Key Prevention Strategies (as of March 19, 2021)

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1. Universal and correct use of masks
    - a. A person with a disability who cannot wear a mask, or cannot safely wear a mask, for reasons related to the disability are exempt from this requirement
    - b. Face shields are not substitutes for masks
  2. Physical distancing
    - a. Should be maximized to the greatest extent possible
    - b. In elementary schools, students should be at least 3 feet apart
    - c. In middle schools and high schools, students should be at least 3 feet apart in areas of low, moderate, or substantial community transmission. In areas of high community transmission, middle and high school students should be 6 feet apart if cohorting is not possible
  3. Handwashing and respiratory etiquette
  4. Cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities
  5. Contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine
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Information retrieved from

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>

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