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# How Are Teachers Educating Students with Disabilities During the Pandemic?

## Key Findings

- Nearly two in five teachers said that their schools offered alternative instructional arrangements for students with disabilities (SWD) during the pandemic, but this was less common in majority non-White and high-poverty schools.
- Teachers in remote arrangements were equally likely, if not more likely, to report weekly one-on-one and small-group communication with SWD as teachers in hybrid and in-person arrangements, but reported significantly lower assignment completion for SWD.
- Most teachers were less confident in their capacity to meet the requirements of their students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) when teaching remotely.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has led to major disruptions in the way that teachers educate students with disabilities (SWD).<sup>1</sup> In March 2020, as schools closed, disabilities rights advocates, teachers, and families expressed concern that SWD would be affected disproportionately by the shift to remote learning. By that summer, a group of 100 families filed suit against every school district and state department of education for failure to provide legally obligated services (Bond, Schoeneck, and King PLLC, 2020). Nearly a year later, several Republican U.S. House of Representatives committee leaders are requesting an investigation on the effects of school closures on SWD (Scalise et al., 2021). This Data Note explores teachers' reports of how they are educating SWD during the COVID-19 pandemic using a nationally representative survey of more than 1,579 teachers in the RAND Corporation's American Teacher Panel (ATP), which

<sup>1</sup> We use the term *students with disabilities* throughout this report to refer to students who qualify for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (Pub. L. 101-476), or students with 504 plans, covered under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. § 701). In the survey items that were reported, we specifically asked teachers about students with IEPs or 504 plans, but we use this term for readability.

was fielded from mid-September to mid-October 2020.<sup>2</sup>

Remote and hybrid arrangements can present particular challenges to SWD. For some students, the disruption to schedules and learning environments, along with demands for more independent work, can be especially daunting. Services from which SWD have long benefited, such as occupational or physical therapy, might be harder to deliver remotely. Teachers of SWD have had to navigate providing accommodations and specialized instruction for their students remotely; ensure that their students' IEPs are in compliance and are being updated in a timely manner; and be flexible as schools shift among remote, hybrid, and in-person arrangements. Formative research conducted during the pandemic confirms many of these challenges even as it reveals profound efforts to adapt. In a national survey of district leaders conducted in summer 2020, nearly three-quarters of respondents said that it was more difficult to provide appropriate instructional accommodations for SWD during the pandemic. Survey findings also highlighted creative solutions that districts employed to support students, including digital manipulatives (e.g., digital tiles or clocks for math lessons), using online platforms for small-group or one-on-one lessons, and using teletherapy or asynchronous videos to deliver related services (Jackson and Bowdon, 2020). RAND's ATP surveys show that

<sup>2</sup> This sample was selected and weighted to be representative of teachers nationally. Majorities of teachers nationally are general educators (compared with special educators) and most commonly serve SWD in inclusive settings. Therefore, we infer that our findings are largely reflective of general educators' experiences serving SWD in inclusive settings during the pandemic.

### Abbreviations

AEP	American Educator Panels
ATP	American Teacher Panels
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
ESY	Extended School Year
FRPL	free or reduced-price lunch
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Education Program
SWD	students with disabilities

the percentage of teachers reporting that they did not have adequate support or guidance for addressing the learning needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities during school closures increased slightly over the course of the pandemic, from 25 percent in spring 2020 to 31 percent in fall 2020 (Kaufman et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2020).

Researchers have projected substantial learning losses for all students (Kuhfeld and Tarasawa, 2020), but learning losses might be even steeper for SWD when they are not getting the appropriate support to access remote instruction. Learning losses might be greatest among SWD whose schools experience disparities in access to educational resources—specifically, those in high-poverty and rural areas (Chandra et al., 2020; Garet et al., 2020; Stelitano et al., 2020). This Data Note builds on the existing research by providing insights that are specific to teachers' experiences educating SWD in early fall 2020, with an emphasis on how different instructional arrangements (e.g., remote, hybrid, in-person) and school characteristics have shaped education for SWD during the pandemic.

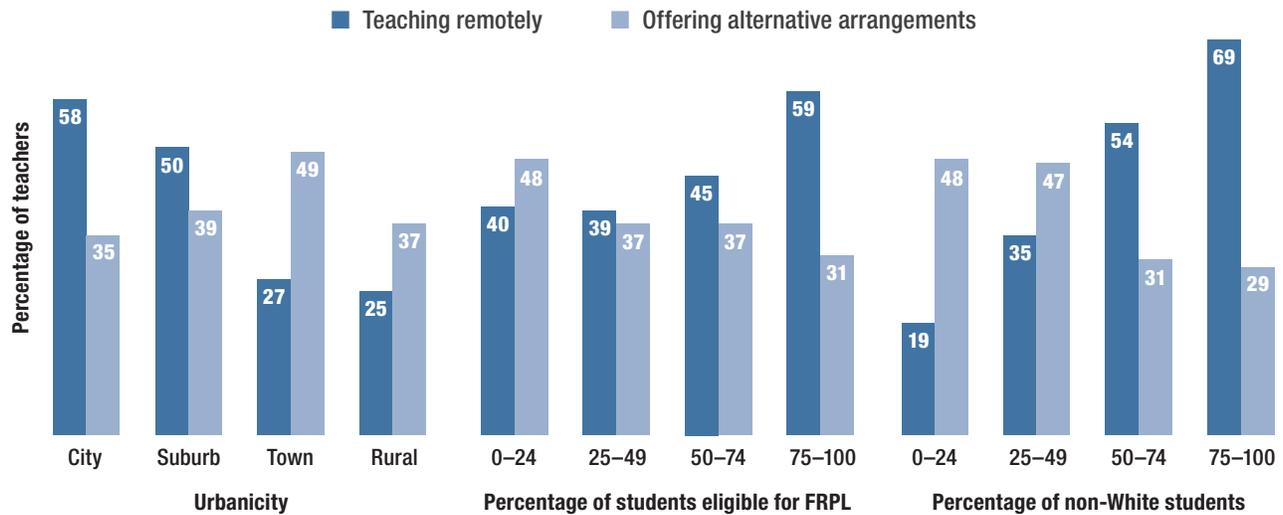
## Nearly Two in Five Teachers Said That Their Schools Offered Alternative Instructional Arrangements for SWD During the Pandemic, but This Was Less Common in Majority Non-White and High-Poverty Schools

In fall 2020, 38 percent of teachers indicated that their schools offered alternative instructional arrangements for SWD during the pandemic compared with those offered to the general student body. Teachers in schools using hybrid models were most likely to indicate that their schools offered alternative instructional arrangements for SWD (42 percent), compared with those using fully remote (36 percent) or fully in-person arrangements (35 percent). Teachers in schools with remote or hybrid models indicated that these different instructional arrangements typically involved offering in-person

FIGURE 1

## To What Extent Are Schools Using Fully Remote Teaching Arrangements and Offering Alternative Instructional Arrangements for SWD?

Percentage of Teachers Reporting That Their Schools Use Fully Remote Instruction and That Schools Offer Alternative Arrangements for SWD



NOTES: This figure shows responses to two survey questions. The first question was, “How are you currently teaching your students with IEPs and/or 504 plans?” Teachers were given the choices of “remote only,” “in-person only,” or “hybrid.” This figure shows the percentage of teachers who selected “remote only.” Pairwise comparisons are used to calculate statistical significance at the 5-percent level ( $p < 0.05$ ). For urbanicity, all differences are statistically significant except for the difference between town and rural. The percentage of remote teaching is significantly higher for schools with 75 to 100 percent of students eligible for FRPL than for schools with 0 to 24 percent, 25 to 49 percent, or 50 to 74 percent eligible for FRPL. The comparisons between the groups with less than 75 percent FRPL eligibility are not statistically significant at the 5-percent level. At schools where 75 to 100 percent of students are non-White, teachers are significantly more likely to be teaching remotely than at schools with 0 to 49 percent non-White students. The second question was, “In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, does your school offer different arrangements for students with IEPs and/or 504 plans than it does for general education students?” Schools with 0 to 24 percent of students receiving FRPL were significantly more likely to offer alternative arrangements for SWD than schools with more students receiving FRPL. Schools with 0 to 24 percent and 25 to 49 percent non-White students were also significantly more likely to offer alternative arrangements than schools with more non-White students. Schools in towns are significantly more likely to offer alternative arrangements than schools in cities, suburbs, or rural areas. The differences between the other types of locales are not significant.

instruction for SWD before it was available to the rest of the student body, offering more days of in-person instruction for SWD when using hybrid models (e.g., four days in-person for SWD versus two days for the general student body), or offering additional instructional periods or one-on-one check-ins virtually to meet the required time for specialized instruction in students’ IEPs. Teachers in schools with fully in-person instruction described specialized support that SWD would receive if their families chose to remain remote (e.g., the option to receive some services in person, options for home visits, additional online periods of instruction). Overall, the wide variety of teachers’ descriptions of alternative arrangements for SWD shows that schools are striving to accommodate SWD

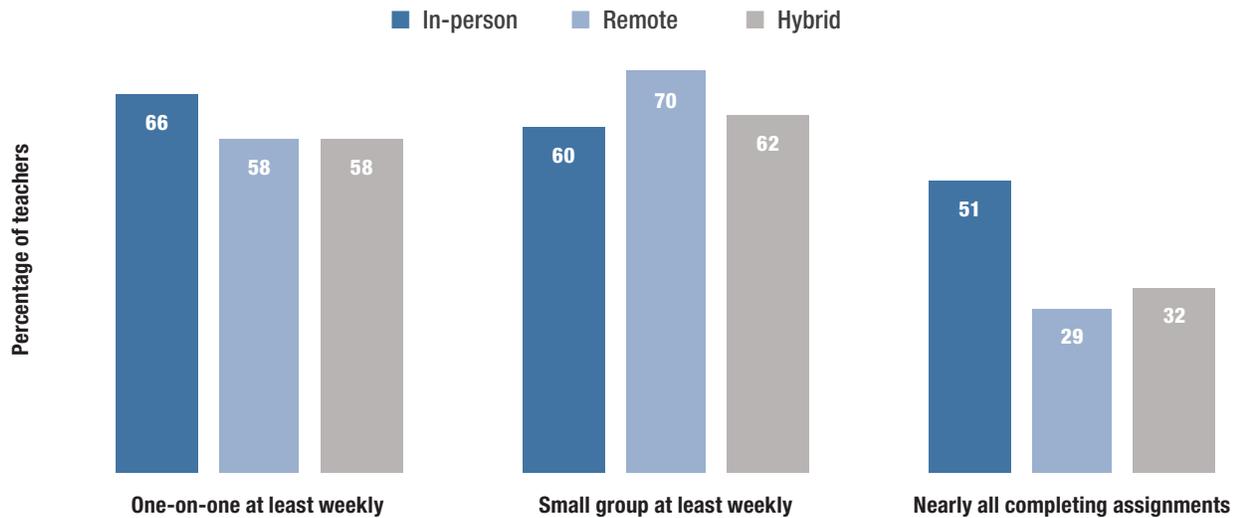
in unique ways and that SWD experiences during the pandemic might differ widely depending on the model that their schools implement.

Teachers in towns, in the lowest-poverty schools (with 24 percent or less of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch [FRPL]), and in schools serving lower percentages of non-White students (0 to 24 percent or 25 to 49 percent) were more likely to report offering alternative arrangements for SWD. For instance, teachers in schools with the lowest poverty levels were 17 percentage points more likely to report that their schools offered different instructional arrangements for SWD when compared with teachers from schools with the highest poverty levels (Figure 1). Similar to findings from other studies,

FIGURE 2

## To What Extent Are Teachers Communicating Weekly with SWD in Small Groups or One-on-One?

Percentage of Teachers Reporting at Least Weekly Synchronous One-on-One or Small-Group Communication and That All or Nearly All Students Are Completing Assignments



NOTES: This figure shows responses to two survey questions. The first question was how often teachers communicate in real time (i.e., synchronous, not prerecorded) with SWD in one-on-one and small-group formats. Teachers were presented with the options of “never,” “less than monthly,” “monthly,” “bi-weekly,” “weekly,” and “daily.” This figure combines the percentages of teachers who selected “weekly” and “daily.” Second, teachers were asked to estimate the percentage of SWD who were completing assignments. Teachers were given the options of “none or almost none,” “approximately 25 percent,” “approximately 50 percent,” “approximately 75 percent,” “all or nearly all,” and “I don’t know.” The figure shows the percentage of teachers who selected the option “all or nearly all.” Pairwise comparisons are used to calculate statistical significance at the 5-percent level ( $p < 0.05$ ). The differences across formats for meeting one-on-one are not statistically significant. For small-group meetings, the percentage for remote teaching is significantly different from both hybrid and in-person percentages. For assignment completion, the percentage for in-person teaching is significantly different from both hybrid and remote percentages.

teachers in our sample were more likely to be teaching remotely if they taught in city schools, high-poverty schools, and schools serving a higher percentage of non-White students (Diliberti and Kaufman, 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that school offerings of alternative arrangements for SWD are inequitably available to students, based on school demographics and poverty level, and might be tied to disparities in other resources.

### Teachers in Remote Arrangements Were Able to Communicate with SWD One on One and in Small Groups to a Similar—if Not Greater—Extent Than Teachers in Hybrid and In-Person Arrangements

Across remote, hybrid, and in-person arrangements, teachers in remote settings were more likely to communicate with SWD in small groups at least weekly (70 percent versus 62 and 60 percent, respectively) and only slightly less likely to meet with them one-on-one (a difference that is not statistically significant) (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> Teachers’ one-on-one and

<sup>3</sup> The survey defined *communication* broadly as meetings, lessons, tutoring, or check-ins.

small-group communication with SWD did not vary significantly by other school characteristics—including school poverty level and percentage of non-White students—when holding instructional arrangements constant. Although these findings do not imply anything about the quality or content of this communication, they show that teachers in remote arrangements have been able to find ways to communicate with SWD one on one and in small groups to a similar, if not greater, extent than teachers who can meet their students in person. It is important to note that teachers’ capacity to communicate with SWD—both one on one and in small groups when in person—is likely not the same as it was before the pandemic, without social distancing and other guidelines. Without prepandemic data about the frequency of teachers’ one-on-one and small-group communications with SWD and more-qualitative insight into what transpires during these communications, it is difficult to assess the extent to which different instructional arrangements might shape communication. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that this analysis shows a correlation between different instructional arrangements and other factors examined in this report, including communication with SWD, but it cannot show causation. Other differences across schools and teachers could be driving the difference in teachers’ communication with SWD.

## Teachers in Remote and Hybrid Arrangements Reported Lower Assignment Completion for SWD

Teachers using in-person teaching arrangements were significantly more likely to report that all or nearly all of their SWD completed assignments, compared with those in remote (22-percentage point difference) and hybrid (19-percentage point difference) teaching arrangements (Figure 2). We found no significant subgroup differences in assignment completion for SWD by school poverty level or percentage of non-White students when comparing within instructional arrangements. Teachers’ open-ended responses provided insight into the challenges raised

by incomplete assignments for SWD when instruction is remote. When students did not complete work in remote teaching arrangements, teachers felt unable to analyze and address their instructional needs. One respondent commented, “for students who don’t turn in remote work, we often don’t know if it was because they were confused, they could not get it online, or they simply did not feel like doing it.” These findings show a similar trend to those in other research on students’ assignment completion in fall 2020, in which assignment completion for students in remote arrangements lagged behind those of students being taught in person (Diliberti and Kaufman, 2020).

## Teachers Were Less Confident in Their Capacity to Meet the Requirements of Their Students’ IEPs When Teaching Remotely

The survey asked, “When teaching remotely, to what extent have you been able to meet the requirements laid out in your students’ IEPs (e.g., specialized instruction, accommodations, and other supports)?”<sup>4</sup> Sixty-six percent of respondents reported feeling that they were either somewhat less, much less, or not at all able to meet the requirements of their students’ IEPs when teaching remotely, compared with when teaching in person.<sup>5</sup> Teachers’ responses did not vary significantly by school poverty level or urbanicity, suggesting that remote instruction presents challenges to teachers’ capacity to meet their students’ IEP requirements in all contexts. These findings are consistent with those from a survey of district leaders

<sup>4</sup> Response choices were “More than I previously had when teaching in person,” “The same as I always have,” “Somewhat less than I previously had,” “Much less than I previously had,” “Not at all,” and “N/A [not applicable]: I do not teach any students with IEPs remotely.” Our reporting excludes teachers who indicated that they did not teach any SWD remotely.

<sup>5</sup> The survey question asked teachers specifically about their ability to meet students’ IEP requirements when teaching remotely, but did not ask the same question for other instructional arrangements. All teachers were asked this question, regardless of the current teaching arrangement they selected, giving teachers a chance to reflect on a time when they were teaching remotely (either as part of a hybrid or fully remote arrangement); they could select “N/A” if they never taught remotely.

from summer 2020, in which 73 percent of respondents felt that it was more difficult to provide accommodations for SWD during the pandemic (Jackson and Bowdon, 2020).

In open-ended responses, teachers who discussed challenges with meeting their students' IEP requirements remotely often mentioned difficulties with ensuring extra time allotted for assignments, providing physical accommodations, and getting in the required minutes for students' IEPs. One teacher stated that, "Some of the accommodations are related to physical elements of the classroom and cannot be modified in the remote setting." Other teachers described difficulty in managing how to give students different assignments with different expectations in their online systems. Additionally, some teachers described the difficulty of meeting IEP/504 plan requirements while balancing remote and in-person learning in hybrid models, which left little time to give SWD enough attention. One respondent said, "I am a hybrid teacher (simultaneously teaching in-person and virtual students) [and] I have no built-in time to check on my students. I am overwhelmed with planning and tech issues as well as splitting my time/attention in the two tracking formats and therefore am unable to dedicate the extra time my students with IEPs and/or 504s [need]."

## Implications

Nearly a year into the pandemic, this survey shows that the early concerns of disability rights advocates, educators, and families about the inequitable impact of the pandemic on SWD were well founded. As many as 45 percent of teachers reported educating SWD in fully remote arrangements. The majority of these teachers seem to be maintaining regular, real-time communication with SWD. However, as anticipated early on in the pandemic, these teachers are struggling to provide the services, supports, and attention that their students need to succeed in the classroom, and few report that their SWD are completing all of their assignments.

Although these findings amplify the urgency of addressing the learning needs of SWD, the

American Rescue Plan Act's nearly \$2.6 billion in grants to states under part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) presents an unprecedented opportunity for enhancing the education of SWD (Pub. L. 117-2, § 2014, 2021). The survey results suggest the following recommendations for how state-, district-, and school-level education leaders can invest federal funding to address challenges that SWD and their teachers have faced during the pandemic:

- School, district, and state leaders should prioritize and expand opportunities for in-person learning for SWD, including summer, after-school, and Extended School Year (ESY) programs.** Providing the services and supports that SWD need in remote settings has proven difficult for teachers, regardless of school and student demographics, and is likely to result in even steeper learning losses. Given these difficulties and the likelihood of learning losses, SWD should continue to be prioritized for in-person learning. Our survey findings show that many districts have already provided alternative arrangements for SWD, suggesting that district leaders sense the urgency of providing more in-person learning for SWD. Although many schools have been or will be reopening in the near future, summer, after-school, and ESY programs could provide a prime opportunity to expand in-person learning opportunities for SWD. Local education agencies that receive funding from the American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund must reserve at least 20 percent of that funding to address learning losses by implementing evidence-based interventions, which might include summer, after-school, or extended school year programs (Pub. L. 117-2, § 2001(e)(1), 2021). ESY is provided to eligible SWD at no cost to families through IDEA, and school teams determine student eligibility based on students' risk of experiencing learning losses over the summer. Given the large risk of learning losses for all SWD, state

education agencies may rethink the guidance that they provide schools to expand eligibility for ESY and could use funding to pay for additional educators or aides in the summer. As local education agencies and schools prepare and plan for this funding, they should plan for how SWD can be prioritized in their adoption of evidence-based after-school and/or summer enrichment programs. This will require selecting evidence-based programs that have been found to be effective for SWD, and including families and special education teachers and leaders as important stakeholders in planning for the rollout of in-person learning opportunities.

- **School, district, and state leaders should invest in training and preparation systems to enhance the capacity of all teachers to effectively educate SWD.** As our findings show, many teachers felt inadequately prepared to educate SWD remotely and uphold their IEP requirements during the pandemic. According to a fall 2020 survey of teachers nationally, nearly one-third reported receiving inadequate guidance and support for addressing the learning needs of SWD (Kaufman et al., 2020). In a national survey of district leaders, almost 80 percent reported that professional development to help teachers meet the needs of students with IEPs and English language learners was a moderate or great need (Schwartz et al., 2020). These findings speak to the need for more training for teachers on how to educate SWD remotely, but likely reflect a need for better training and preparation for educating SWD in general. Since well before the pandemic, qualified special education teachers have been in short supply (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, undated), and threats of teacher burnout and turnover from the pandemic could exacerbate such shortages (Diliberti and Kaufman, 2020). The federally funded Collaboration for Effective Educator

Development, Accountability, and Reform provides resources, tools, and technical assistance for how states can build the capacity of their teacher preparation systems to prepare teachers to implement evidence-based practices for SWD (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform, undated). For training in-service teachers, school and district leaders could devote collaborative learning time to helping all teachers learn effective strategies for educating SWD, whereby special educators or other specialists can share their effective teaching strategies with their colleagues. State, district, and school leaders can look to federally funded technical assistance centers, such as those sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs, to provide training content and guidance on best practices for educating SWD, either in person or virtually. For instance, the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports put out a comprehensive and actionable guide with recommendations for state, district, and school leaders on how to support SWD as they return to in-person schooling (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2020).

- **School and district leaders must invest in and deploy evidence-based strategies to accelerate learning for SWD.** Evidence-based strategies and interventions to accelerate learning are a hallmark of effective special education. Federally sponsored resources, including the What Works Clearinghouse, IRIS Center, and the National Center on Intensive Intervention, as well as other nonprofits, such as the National Center for Learning Disabilities, provide easy-to-use tools and guidance for strategies that are proven to accelerate learning for SWD (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2021). Funding from the American Rescue Plan will be a helpful start for shouldering the additional cost of evidence-based strategies or programs.

## How This Analysis Was Conducted

In this Data Note, we use responses from 1,579 teachers from RAND's ATP who completed a fall 2020 survey. Specifically, we examined teachers' responses to questions about their instructional arrangements for serving SWD, the frequency with which they have synchronous small-group or one-on-one communication with SWD, their estimation of the percentage of SWD who were completing assignments, the extent to which they believe that they are able to meet the requirements of their students' IEPs when teaching remotely, and their open-ended responses about the biggest challenges they face to effectively educating SWD remotely. Teachers who indicated that they do not teach any students with IEPs and/or 504 plans were excluded from these analyses.

Throughout this Data Note, we report full sample and subgroup averages for variables of interest. All statistics are weighted using a set of nationally representative weights described in further detail in the RAND American Educator Panels Technical Description (RR-3104-BMGF, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3104.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3104.html)). We examined teachers' responses based on National Center for Education Statistics–designated school urbanicity (i.e., city, suburb, town, rural) and school poverty level (based on student eligibility for FRPL) to build on existing work and facilitate comparisons. We use the National Center for Education Statistics, 2018–2019 Common Core of Data to obtain measures of school poverty and urbanicity. Specifically, we operationalize school poverty using school percentage enrollment of students eligible for FRPL and urbanicity using NCES urbanicity designations. It is important to note that FRPL is an imperfect proxy of poverty level because determinations about qualifications for FRPL are not standardized across states. Student characteristics in a school categorized as high-poverty (in which 75 percent or more students qualify for FRPL) in one state might not be economically equivalent to those in a high-poverty school in a different state. Still, our designation provides a rough understanding of how students' educational experiences vary between schools with relatively higher and lower poverty levels, and making such comparisons is important for building on existing research that has highlighted school poverty level. To assess whether differences were statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, we performed a series of Wald tests for each survey item that compared the weighted means of two subgroups at a time (e.g., low-poverty remote schools versus high-poverty remote schools). Because the intent of this Data Note was to provide descriptive information rather than to test specific hypotheses, no adjustments were made for multiple comparisons. To review themes from teachers' open-ended survey responses, we randomly selected and reviewed a sample of 459 (almost one-third of all) open-ended responses and categorized prominent themes.

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## Key Recommendations in This Report

School, district, and state leaders should prioritize and expand opportunities for in-person learning for students with disabilities (SWD), including summer, after-school, and Extended School Year (ESY) programs.

School, district, and state leaders should invest in training and preparation systems to enhance the capacity of all teachers to effectively educate SWD.

School and district leaders must invest in and deploy evidence-based strategies to accelerate learning for SWD.

### About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public school teachers and leaders who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand more about how to better support their hard work in schools. We also thank our reviewers, Betheny Gross, Andrea Phillips, and Fatih Unlu, for helpful feedback that improved this report.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and decisionmaking. More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this report should be directed to [lstelita@rand.org](mailto:lstelita@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

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