Supporting Students with Disabilities During the Pandemic: Rural Districts Least Likely to Provide Information

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KEY POINTS

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Missouri districts—and districts nationwide—were forced into a virtual education model of which they had previously never explored. For students receiving special education services (about 14% of the student body in Missouri), districts knew little about how to maintain these students' educational goals or how their progress would be impacted. In this policy brief, we provide an overview of how federally mandated special education services translate to virtual educational environments and examine how Missouri districts communicated information regarding these services in their Fall 2020 reopening plans. We find:

- Nearly one-third of districts provided no information for students with individualized education plans (IEPs).

- Very few districts (11%) provided detailed or highly detailed plans for special education students and families.

- Districts serving a higher proportion of students with IEPs were more likely to communicate support plans.

- Rural districts were the least likely to mention students with IEPs in their reopening plans while serving, on average, the highest proportion of IEP students.

- Over half (57%) of districts that started fully in-person, commonly rural districts, provided no information about support plans for students with IEPs.

Introduction

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states are required to meet the special needs of eligible children between the ages of 3 to 21 who have a disability that adversely impacts the child's educational performance.[1] In Missouri, local education agencies (LEAs) are responsible for providing all students with a range of physical and learning disabilities a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.[2] To ensure these requirements are met, LEAs collaborate with professionals and family members to create an individualized education plan (IEP) that describes a student's educational goals and the services they are entitled to that support their education. IEPs are a critical part of IDEA because they lay out an educational plan or program specific to each student's needs and abilities.[3]

IDEA in Virtual Settings

When LEAs unexpectedly switched to virtual instruction, many educators were

unsure of how to continue supporting students with disabilities. While the Office of Special Education Programs within the U.S. Department of Education shared recommendations for IDEA in virtual settings during the COVID-19 pandemic,[4] nearly 75% of states lacked guidance regarding which entities (the home district vs. online learning provider, etc.) are responsible for IDEA provisions in online environments, leaving LEAs to address this uncertainty on their own.[5] Additionally, more than half of states were missing policies specific to how IEPs should be conducted and reviewed in virtual environments.[6] LEAs struggled to redefine the least-restrictive environment and conduct evaluations virtually.[7]

Moreover, many communities lacked adequate technological infrastructure to transition IEP services from in-person to virtual. Families needed sufficient access to the internet and devices to support virtual IDEA requirements, and LEAs had to ensure any new technology was compatible with assistive technology solutions for students with disabilities.[8, 9] LEAs also had to find compatible platforms and coordinate data sharing across LEAs, the student's school, and online learning providers to conduct mandated progress monitoring.[10]

Impacts of COVID-19 Shutdowns on Special Education Students

Like other vulnerable student populations, students with disabilities faced hurdles accessing services during the pandemic. Seventy-three percent of districts nationwide claimed it was more difficult to accommodate students with disabilities during the pandemic and many halted evaluations, which help determine if a child has a disability as defined by IDEA and how that child's educational needs can best be met.[11, 12] Families felt that delayed

evaluations suggested that students with disabilities were a lower priority to their districts,[13] and many noticed severe learning loss and skill regression during spring building closures and the following summer.[14] Advocates also worried about the time necessary to work through the backlog of assessments. In Boston Public Schools, nearly 1,800 students were waiting on assessments when schools reopened in August 2020.[15]

Special Education in Missouri COVID-19 Reopening Plans

The PRiME Center studied Fall 2020 reopening plans for a sample of Missouri districts,[16] including whether districts provided information for supporting special education students. The analytic sample included 191 traditional and charter school districts that serve nearly 586,000 students, approximately two-thirds of Missouri's public school population. The sample had a slightly lower proportion of students with IEPs than the state average (13% compared to 14%), and the district percentage of students with IEPs ranged from 4% to over 21%.

District plans reflected months of district preparation between the statewide shutdown in March 2020 to the start of the next school year in August. We examined Fall 2020 district reopening plans by a variety of different characteristics—urbanicity, level of detail in plans for special education students, and instructional mode. Some plans included detailed documents outlining precise procedures on how the district would effectively deliver education to the students they serve while still considering the health and safety of the student body. These documents were often approved with community feedback and sometimes the first line of communication between families and their district. For students with disabilities, these documents could aid families in assessing, and choosing, the best educational option.[17]

Supporting Students with Disabilities Varied by District Characteristics

Nearly one-third of districts provided no information for students with IEPs.

This finding highlights that many Missouri students with disabilities and their families lacked communication about how they would be supported. Clear communication, particularly in times of uncertainty, for students with disabilities, is vital. Options for instructional modes for IEP services (e.g., in-person, distanced), platforms for delivery of IEP services, and how IEP teams will be available for support should be communicated whether changes are occurring or not. Additionally, mentioning students with disabilities in district plans is more inclusive and may help these students to feel valued, and not overlooked, by their districts.

Very few districts (11%) provided detailed or highly detailed plans outlining support for students with disabilities and families.

Of the two-thirds of districts that mentioned students with IEPs, slightly more than half (57%) of districts provided brief details (e.g., stating IEP teams would contact families). Plans with brief details provided minimal information such as stating that IEPs would be followed regardless of educational setting. Districts who provided detailed or highly detailed plans gave an in-depth explanation of how schools would ensure students had access to special education services and how services might differ depending on instructional modes. Districts with highly detailed plans (Table 1) provided additional information about screenings, IEP meetings, modes of delivery for compensatory services, modifications to the virtual learning

*Table 1:* Highly Detailed Examples of Districts' Plans for IEP Students

District Name	Detailed Reopening Plan Information
Arcadia Valley R-II	For students learning virtually, the district mentioned the possibility of providing in-person therapeutic sessions.
Farmington R-VII	Clearly communicated that even if a family chose to learn remotely, in-person services required by a student's IEP would still be given at the school. Made IEP teams available to work with families to provide the best possible learning plan for their students.
Webb City R-VII	Provided a FAQ document specifically for families of students with disabilities that outlined transportation availability for in-person services.

environment, and support for special educators.

Districts serving a higher proportion of students with IEPs were more likely to communicate support plans.

As the IEP incidence rate increased, more districts provided support details for students with IEPs (Figure 1). Forty-two percent of districts with the lowest proportion of IEP students provided no details in their reopening plans while 28% of districts with the highest proportion of IEP students provided no information. Of districts who served the highest proportion of students with IEPs, 60% provided plans with some detail and 13% provided detailed or highly detailed plans. Regardless of how many students in a district have IEPs, all families deserve timely and pertinent information to help navigate virtual learning and provision of support services. Further, detailed

Figure 1: Districts' Level of Detail for IEP Plans, by Percent IEP
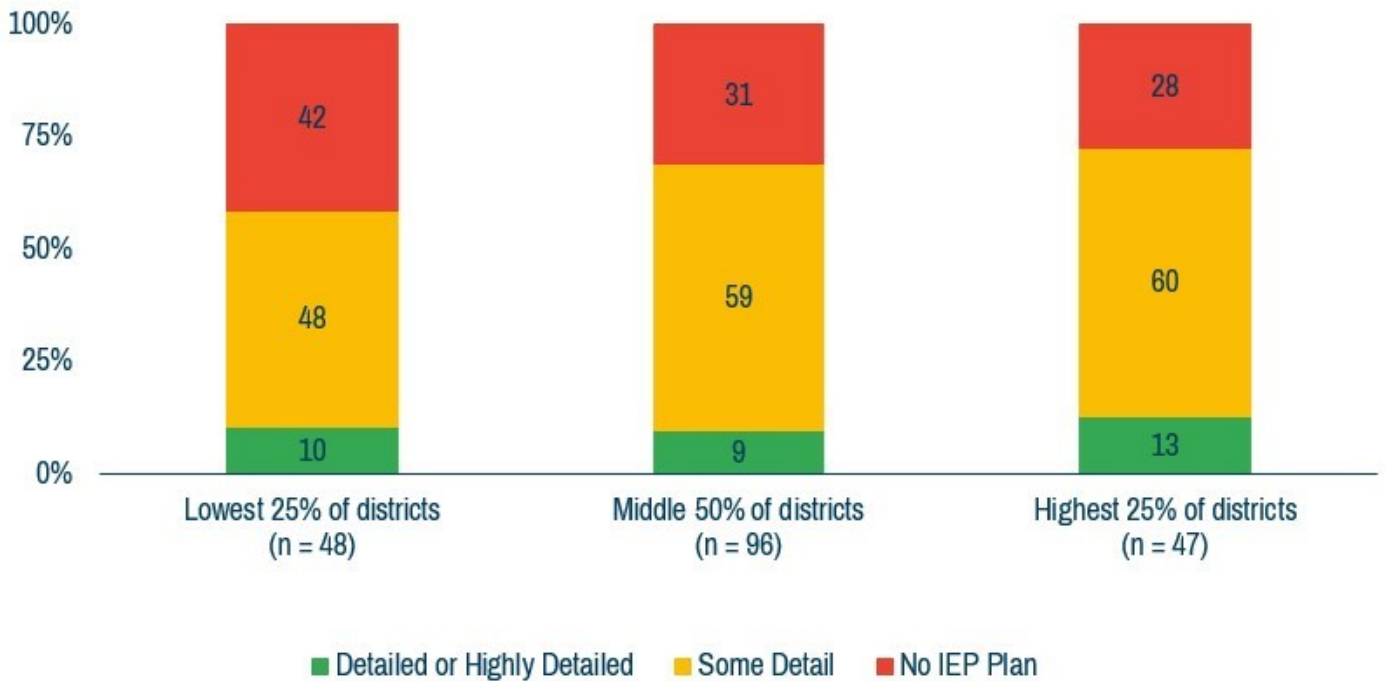
plans are especially important as they describe how students will receive academic and supportive services in the safest possible environment and allow parents to make informed decisions for their child.

Rural districts were the least likely to mention students with IEPs in their reopening plans, while serving, on average, the highest proportion of IEP students.

Fifty-three percent of rural districts mentioned students with IEPs in their reopening plans compared to over 70% of the city, suburban, and town districts (Figure 2). Rural districts were more likely to utilize in-person instruction, which may have contributed to the lack of information in reopening plans regarding special education. However, 73% of rural districts offered a different mode of instruction on the first day other than strictly in-person (e.g., in-person and distanced, hybrid+, or fully distanced), which indicates that there was likely a need to communicate alternative plans for students with IEPs.[18]

Nearly half (47%) of rural districts did not provide any information to families despite the fact that these districts were more likely, on average, to serve a higher proportion of IEP students (Figure 3). We rated 21% of suburban district reopening plans as providing detailed information to families, while only 3% of rural districts were rated similarly. Students with disabilities comprise 14% of the student population in rural districts, compared to 14%, 13%, and 11% of students in town, suburban, and city districts respectively. These findings highlight the need for better communication to students and families in rural districts. Parents in rural districts may not have felt supported or aware of options for their child without the proper communication in place.

Over half (57%) of districts that started fully in-person, commonly rural districts, provided no information about support plans for students with IEPs (Figure 4).

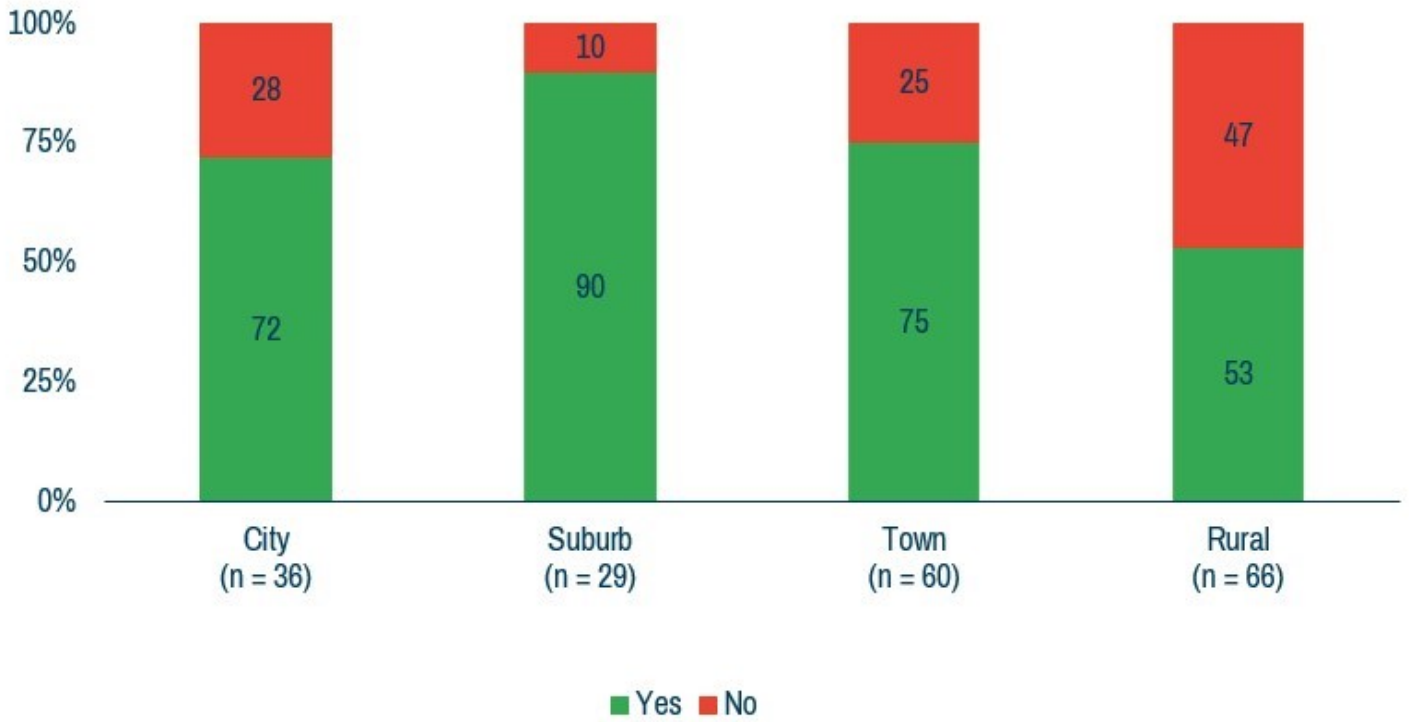**Figure 2: Districts Addressing IEP Students in Reopening Plan, by Urbancity**

Urbanicity	Yes	No
City (n = 36)	72	28
Suburb (n = 29)	90	10
Town (n = 60)	75	25
Rural (n = 66)	53	47

■ Yes ■ No

Figure 3: Districts' Level of Detail for IEP Plans, by Urbanicity

Urbanicity	Detailed	Some Detail	No IEP Plan
City (n = 36)	11	58	31
Suburb (n = 29)	21	59	21
Town (n = 60)	13	62	25
Rural (n = 66)		50	47

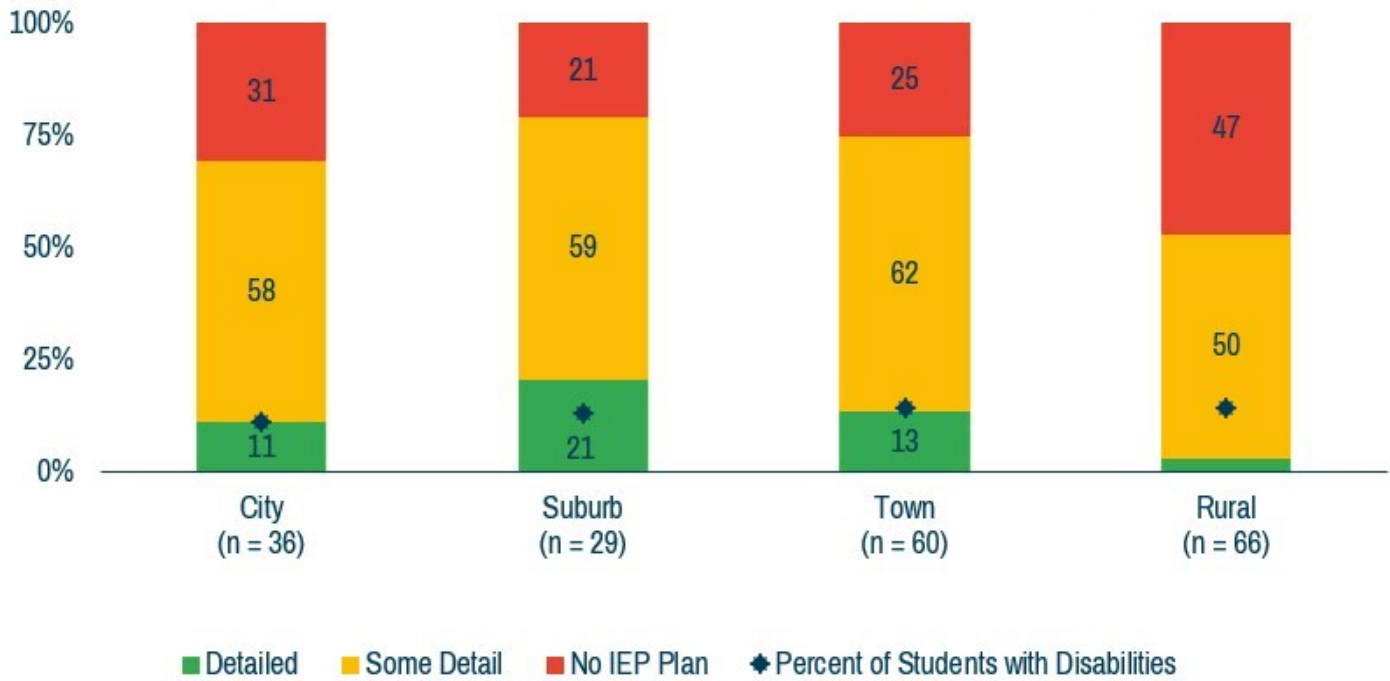■ Detailed ■ Some Detail ■ No IEP Plan ◆ Percent of Students with Disabilities
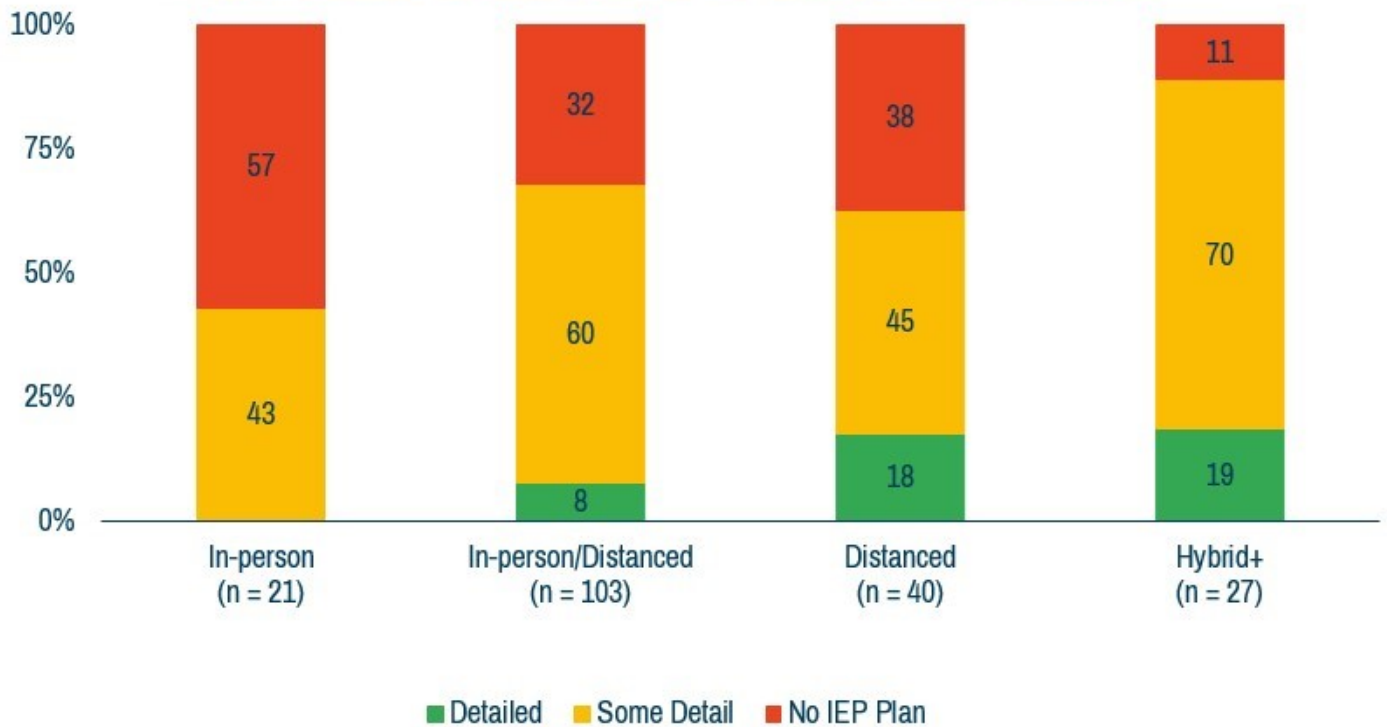
Figure 4: Districts' Level of Detail for IEP Plans, by Instructional Mode

Moreover, no districts that started the year fully in-person provided detailed information regarding plans for students with IEPs. Rural districts were the most likely to start the 2020-21 school year fully in-person; no urban or suburban districts started the year fully in-person.[19] Districts that started fully distanced or hybrid+ options, commonly urban and suburban districts, had the largest proportion of highly detailed IEP support plans, 18% and 19% respectively. Since many of the districts offering fully distanced instruction required students to remain in that same mode of instruction for a quarter or semester, providing these details to parents helps them choose the best mode of educational delivery for their child.

Several districts (38%) that started fully distanced also offered no information for students with IEPs. Often, students with disabilities face additional barriers to receiving adequate education from a distance. Many have lost access to the educational support they typically receive from school. While not acknowledging students with disabilities is not necessarily an indication that the district made no adjustments to accommodate them, families of students with disabilities and the students themselves have expressed levels of higher stress, depression, and anxiety at the failure of districts to continue communicating plans to continue their learning.[20] Even the failure to communicate a plan can have an impact on student wellbeing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

COVID-19 school building closures uncovered inequities in information about and provision of accessible virtual special education services. As highlighted, rural districts were the least likely to provide students with disabilities information as were districts that started fully in-person. Additionally, very few districts provided detailed information in their reopening plans and even fewer provided highly

detailed information. Overall, this lack of communicated information could hinder decision-making for students with disabilities and their families.

With the possibility that virtual learning could continue beyond the COVID-19 pandemic,[21] districts should clearly communicate the format families should expect their services to take place (e.g., in-person, distanced) and how IEP teams will be available to support students. Following the guidance of the Office of Special Education Programs within the U.S. Department of Education, districts should make publicly available how they will continue IEP processes (including referral, evaluation, intake, providing services, and reevaluations). Districts can also utilize Form G,[22] an additional form that supports districts designing IEPs outside of the in-person school environment. Overall, all families should be provided with timely and pertinent information to help navigate virtual learning and provision of support services.

The lack of IDEA regulation in virtual environments also creates equity issues for students receiving special education services. Policymakers should standardize virtual IDEA supports and require virtual curricula to follow Universal Design for Learning, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, and other standards for accessibility in virtual environments.[23] Policymakers might also consider how to ensure consistency of care for special education students in virtual settings. At the district-level, accessible technology features should be shared with families.

Finally, both districts and policymakers can provide additional support to teachers and parents of students with disabilities. Professional development for special education teachers, aides, and even general education teachers could address how to modify instruction in a virtual setting. In addition, district leaders could provide parents with resources to help them deliver academic content or provide therapeutic sessions when learning at home. In all, LEAs and policymakers need to ensure consistent and equitable access for virtual special education students and families going forward.

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