

DISABILITY AND DISTANCE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

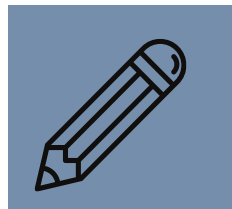
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
COMMISSION ON DISABILITIES

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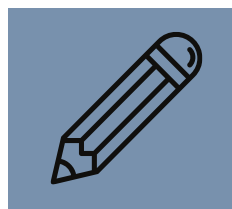
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Purpose:

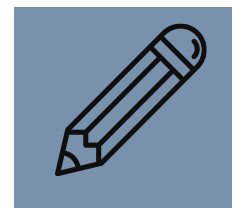
To document the impact of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on students with disabilities in both K-12 and post-secondary institutions as well as the efforts of schools, parents, and teachers to serve these students.



Inform future parent and educator strategies

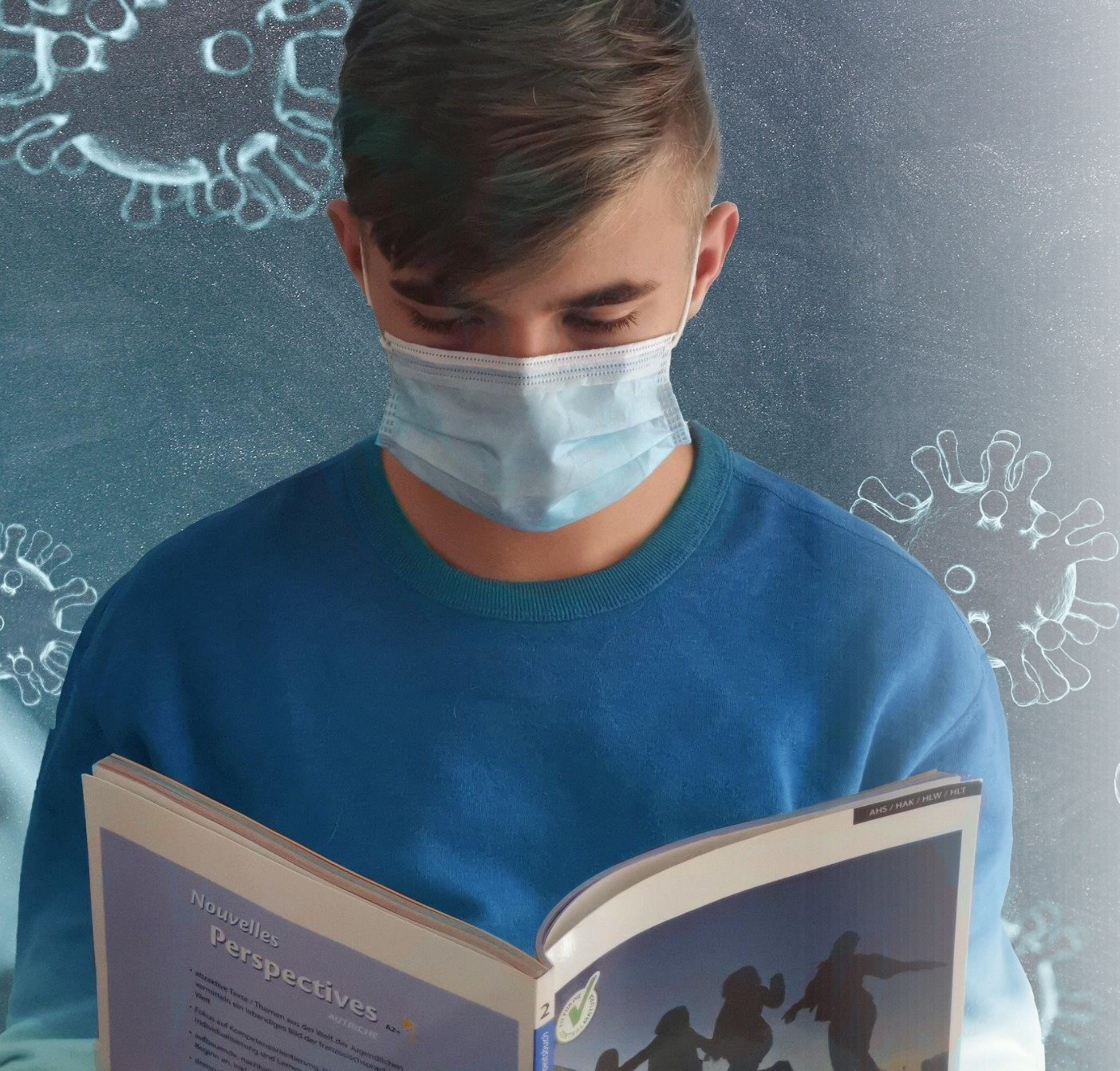


Inform future academic and community crisis response



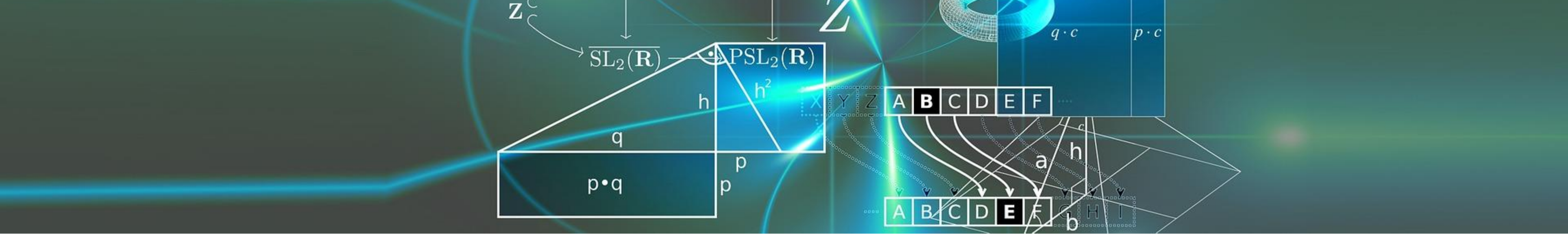
Inform future Commission advocacy priorities





Background

- Pandemic necessitated a rapid pivot to distance learning
- Students with disabilities were most likely to experience learning loss and skill regression.
- Landscape was shifting too rapidly to allow for informed, timely and effective advocacy during the current pandemic
- Emphasis changed from informing advocacy during the *current* pandemic to documenting the events, efforts and impact to inform future advocacy and preparation for future events.



Analysis

- Data collected from surveys and interviews was supplemented by national, state, and local policies and guidelines as well as recommendations put forward by advocacy groups.
- Data was considered using a thematic analysis framework to identify patterns or themes.
- Overarching themes were further illustrated by incorporating specific anecdotal examples into the narrative describing gaps and innovative educator solutions to address gaps.



K12 Data Collection

- Structured around Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) guidelines which align with California Department of Education (CDE) guidelines.
- **Educators**
 - Online survey was administered to district-level special education administrators with follow-up interviews as needed.
- **Parents (on behalf of students)**
 - An anonymous online parent survey to capture firsthand experiences of students with disabilities and their families.
 - Most survey questions were multiple choice with room to include additional information in the comments. Remaining questions were open-ended, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words.



Barriers

- **Educator Participation**
 - Districts responsible for 12% of the County's students declined to participate, although districts responsible for 88% participated fully.
- **Rapidly Shifting Landscape**
 - The severity of the outbreak continued to shift
 - State and locally mandated guidelines continued to shift
 - School crisis response and distance learning strategies were varied and continued to fluctuate.
- **Impossible to catalogue and capture every student's experience.**



8 KEY AREAS OF INTEREST

- Adherence to CDC Guidelines
- Provision of In-Home Support Services
- Provision of Cohorts
- Adjustments to Individualized Education Plan Services
- Provision of Compensatory Services
- Provision of a “Least Restrictive Environment”
- Provision of Parental Support
- Coordination of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Special Education (SPED) Services.

Challenges:

- CDC guidelines present difficulties for some students with disabilities.
- Schools had to balance the needs of the special education students with the health and safety issues

Strategies and Successes:

- Schools provided additional PPE, modified health screening routines & developed curricula (e.g., use of social stories) to address students' social & emotional needs.

Recommendation:

The Commission encourages schools to share their successful strategies with other schools facing similar challenges.

ADHERENCE TO CDC GUIDELINES



A photograph of a classroom with rows of wooden desks and purple chairs. A teal rectangular overlay is positioned on the left side of the image, containing white text. In the background, a chalkboard with some faint writing is visible.

PROVISION OF IN-HOME SERVICES

Challenges

- Students couldn't access higher levels of support at home
- More difficult for low-income families
- Even if families could hire support, sometimes they couldn't access it because the demand was so high
- Pandemic exacerbated need for respite care

Recommendation:

The Commission supports policies, programs & legislation to provide free respite care for families including provisions described in President Biden's "American Jobs Plan" that expands Federal funding for the care work sector.

Strategies and Successes

- Cohorting was developed as an alternative (although this was not a direct solution)
- School staff remained focused on equity throughout
- 1:1 online tutoring was offered
- Subsidized respite care is available through supplemental security income & Medi-Cal.

Provision of Cohorts

CHALLENGES

- Faculty and some parents of medically fragile children are reluctant to return to in-person instruction.
- Faculty resources strained
- Difficulty maintaining stable cohorts

STRATEGIES AND SUCCESSES

- Northern California Court protected parents' right to opt out of in-person learning for their children
- Districts use remote platforms for small groups & schedule distance learning/in-person days for 1:1 services.

RECOMMENDATION

The Commission supports policies, programs & legislation allocating funding for school resources/staffing to maintain both in-person and distance learning.



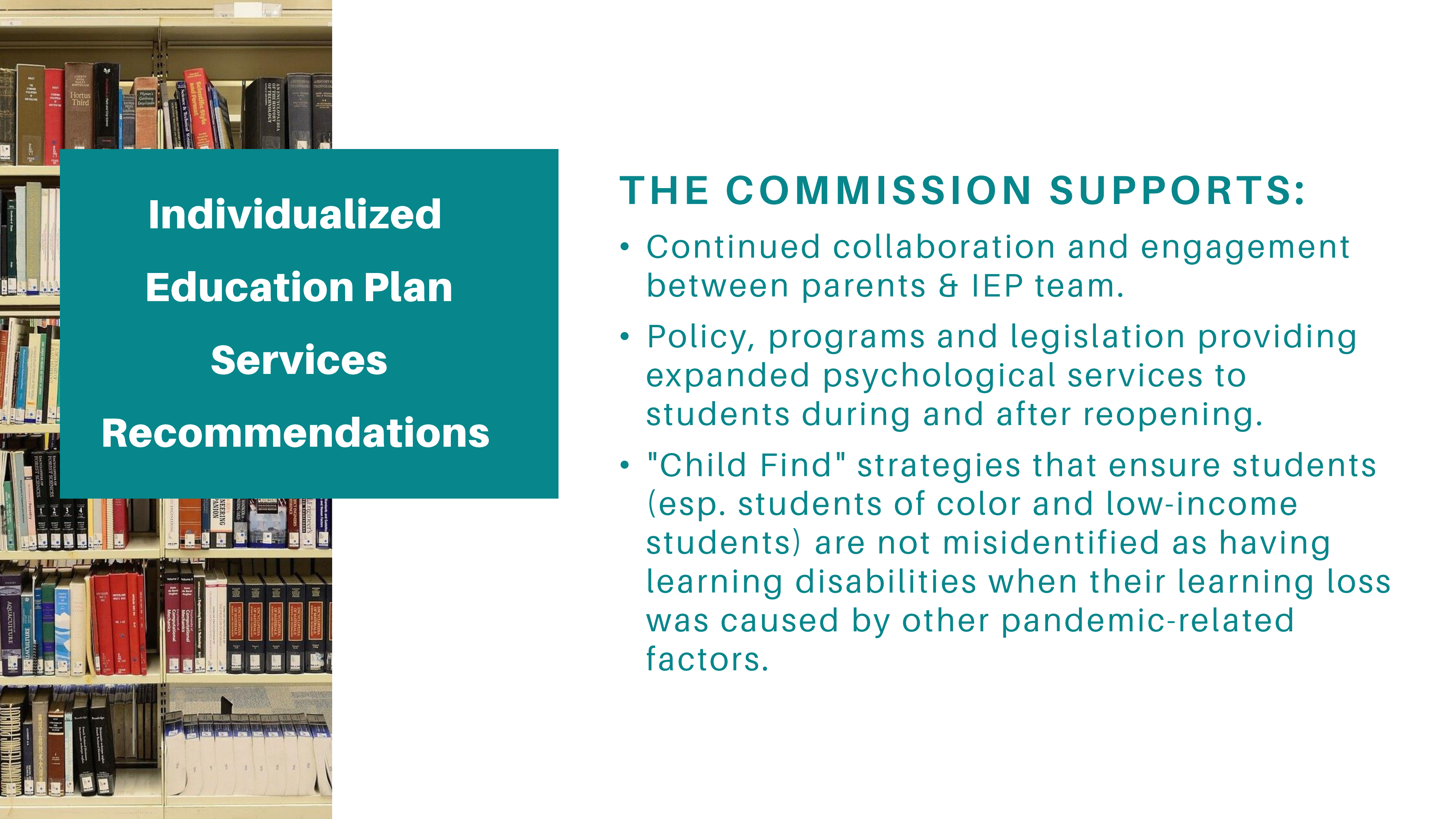
Individualized Education Plan Services

Challenges

- Larger school districts with students having higher service needs experienced more challenges
- Services and IEP goals during in-person learning were not necessarily effective during distance learning
- Difficult to preserve social/emotional wellbeing & progress on social goals
- Potentially disproportionate representation of students of color and low-income students identified as having learning disabilities because of socioeconomic & other factors impacting students' ability to learn.

Strategies and Successes

- Schools prioritized most at-risk students for cohorts and in-person services.
- Greater flexibility & communication about IEP adjustments to meet needs without impacting long-term services.
- Psychological services extended to all children.
- Schools sensitive to disproportionality & plan additional services for all students, with or without IEPs
- Senate Bill 98 requires IEPs to incorporate distance learning contingency plans to prepare for "Emergency Conditions"



Individualized Education Plan Services Recommendations

THE COMMISSION SUPPORTS:

- Continued collaboration and engagement between parents & IEP team.
- Policy, programs and legislation providing expanded psychological services to students during and after reopening.
- "Child Find" strategies that ensure students (esp. students of color and low-income students) are not misidentified as having learning disabilities when their learning loss was caused by other pandemic-related factors.

Challenges

- If compensatory services are scheduled during general education classes, this could lead to a more restrictive environment for the student.
- Parents are required to seek out compensatory services, but parents of students most likely impacted have fewer financial resources, time and information available to support undertaking the process.

Strategies and Successes

- Schools are proactively planning for provision of compensatory services.
- CDE could model Pennsylvania Department of Education's clear comprehensive guidance for provision of Compensatory Services for schools who need to provide compensatory services because of the pandemic
- Schools are considering alternatives to general education interruption for the provision of compensatory services such as extending school years and school days



**PROVISION OF
COMPENSATORY
SERVICES**



Recommendations for Compensatory Services

The Commission supports:

- Guidelines, policies, programs and legislation directing schools to proactively evaluate every student with a disability for compensatory services and allocating funds for the provision of these services.
- Compensatory strategies that either do not interfere with a student's placement (e.g., extending school years, school days, or age requirements for SPED services), or, if it becomes necessary to move a student to a more restrictive environment, requires that their IEP be amended as soon as possible.

PROVISION OF THE “LEAST RESTRICTIVE” ENVIRONMENT

Challenges

- Immunocompromised students with disabilities may need to continue distance learning
- Schools will need to be careful to avoid potential segregation of these students when developing re-opening strategies.

Strategies and Successes

- Distance learning provided educators with greater opportunities for inclusion than those possible in a brick-and-mortar setting.





“LEAST RESTRICTIVE” ENVIRONMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission Supports:

- Policy, programs and legislation providing for continuation of innovative inclusivity solutions developed during distance learning.
- Implementation of re-opening strategies that proactively avoid potential segregation of students with disabilities who continue to distance learn.

Challenges

- Parents were required to take on responsibilities previously undertaken by school and support staff.
- Reliance upon parent training/resources to compensate for school-provided services can be cost-prohibitive solution long-term.

Strategies and Successes

- Schools offered extensive parent training and resources on implementation of teaching sequences and helping children to work towards IEP goals
- Two schools report engaging with parents of students with disabilities when considering the best application of additional stimulus funding

PROVISION OF PARENTAL SUPPORT





THE COMMISSION SUPPORTS:

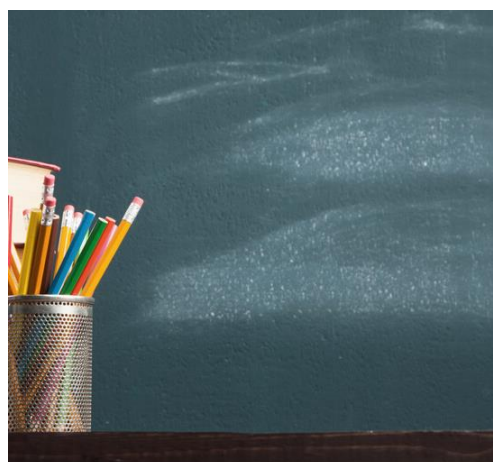
- Special Education Equity for Kids' recommendation that schools continue offering parent training and incorporate it into IEPs after the pandemic.
- Policy, programs and legislation aligned with the IDRA policies for “Ensuring Education Equity During and After COVID-19” which call for weighted student-based funding in school finance formulas
- Schools engaging with parents of students with disabilities when considering the best application of additional stimulus funding.

Parental Support Recommendations



CHALLENGES:

- Coordinating IEP and ELP (English Language Proficiency) goals during distance learning is integral for the success of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students with disabilities.



STRATEGIES AND SUCCESSES

- Schools with dually-identified students have been careful to ensure coordination between ELP and IEP staff to provide each student with the individualized support needed.
- Online platforms provide greater language accessibility with real-time translation built into the software, requiring no translation request.

**COORDINATING
SERVICES FOR
EAL STUDENTS**





THE COMMISSION SUPPORTS:

- Policy, programs and legislation that ensure the most coordination of ELP and IEP goals and services.
- Integration of online platform use into communication with EAL students with disabilities & their parents to provide free, real-time translation services and increase accessibility related to language barriers.

Coordinating Services Recommendations



Post-Secondary Institutions

Data Collection

- Informal interviews were conducted with disability resource center leadership at CSUMB, UCSC, SCU, and Cabrillo colleges
- Interviews allowed us to identify general trends while gathering additional detail on each institution's unique approach to the challenges

Five Key Areas of Interest

- Online testing;
- Asynchronous classes and webcasts;
- Faculty-related findings;
- Accommodation requests; and
- Financial and technical resources.

Challenges

- New proctoring software presented accessibility barriers including disallowing access to assistive technologies
- Algorithmically profiles some students with disabilities as exhibiting "suspicious" behavior.

Strategies and Successes


- Difficult-to-implement in-person testing accommodations (e.g., time-of-test, no distractions, etc.) are easily implemented in an online setting.

The Commission supports:

- Continued provision of remote testing for students when appropriate & useful.
- Individualized solutions to implementing limited distraction accommodations for students experiencing difficulty replicating the limited distraction environment in their homes.
- Continued provision of alternatives to invasive proctoring software when a student's disabilities require them.



ONLINE TESTING

A background image showing a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. A pink water bottle is visible on a wooden desk in the upper left. The person is wearing a watch with a brown leather strap.

ASYNCHRONOUS CLASSES AND WEBCASTS

Challenges

- Prior to the pandemic, some faculty expressed resistance to providing webcasts and asynchronous classes. However, out of necessity, faculty have universally acclimated to asynchronous classes and webcast recordings during the pandemic.

Strategies and Successes

- Asynchronous classes & webcast recordings of real-time classes improve accessibility for students with chronic conditions, students using assistive technology, & students with language barriers.

The Commission Supports:

- Continued provision of asynchronous classes & webcast recordings of real-time classes as needed for students when useful and appropriate.

CHALLENGES

- Faculty in STEM & certification/ licensing disciplines were most resistant to allowing accommodation.

STRATEGIES AND SUCCESSES

- All institutions have developed robust online training and resources to improve the accessibility of online course content and presentation.

THE COMMISSION SUPPORTS:

- Implementation of robust, well-funded, top-down approaches that ensure institutional support, instructor incentives and ample resources to improve accessibility of course content/presentation for both distance and in-person learning and increase faculty buy-in across disciplines.



Faculty-Related Findings



Accommodation Requests

Challenges:

- Incoming freshman students and community college transfers had difficulty navigating the transition because they often were not entitled to the same accommodations.
- Schools sometimes struggled with how flexible to be with documentation recency and accommodations around extensions.

Strategies and Successes:


- Online platform accessibility features (e.g., closed captioning, automatic transcription), resulted in fewer accommodation requests.
- Institutions had greater flexibility in documentation requirements and relied more upon student narratives.
- Less reliance on documentation helps address inequities created by socioeconomic circumstances and implicit bias inherent in the diagnostic process required to receive documentation

The Commission Supports:

- Policy, programs and legislation formalizing greater flexibility in documentation requirements for accommodation in education.
- Changes in Federal aid requirements allowing part-time students to receive aid.

The Commission Encourages Schools To :

- Provide free or affordable disability testing resources for students to offset costs associated with providing documentation for accommodation.
- Develop and communicate clear, reasonable extension parameters for full-time students with disabilities requesting extension accommodations.



**ACCOMMODATION
REQUEST
RECOMMENDATIONS**



FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES

Challenges

- Disparities in access to personal technology (e.g., working laptops & tablets) as well as technological infrastructure (internet speed and bandwidth)

Strategies and Successes

- Schools have used the institutional CARES Act awards to distribute emergency financial aid to students for tablets, laptops, and Wi-Fi hotspots.

The Commission Supports:

- Policy, programs and legislation developed to provide innovative solutions to digital poverty
- 100% high-speed broadband internet coverage provisions detailed in President Biden's "American Jobs" infrastructure plan