

Testimony of Kanika Littleton, Parent from Farmington Hills, MI**United States House of Representatives Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
Subcommittee Hearing****“Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities”****Thursday, May 6, 2021, at 2:30 p.m. (EDT)**

Good afternoon, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing, “Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities.”

My name is Kanika Littleton, and I am the parent of three children, ages 16, 14, and 5, with various disabilities, as well as the Director of Michigan’s federally funded Parent Training and Information Center, Michigan Alliance for Families.

As the world continues to navigate the wide-ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, families, and students have seen an educational system stretched beyond its capacity to fully serve all students. Countless students across the nation have experienced a significant loss in learning due to school closures necessitated by the health crisis and subsequent implementation of blended or fully virtual learning environments.

Unfortunately, the extent of learning loss is greater for students with disabilities and those from traditionally marginalized populations, including students of color, English Language Learners (ELL), and students living in poverty. This educational disruption will undoubtedly have negative effects on the long-term outcomes for these students, who were already at a disadvantage in terms of access to educational opportunities and exhibited higher achievement gaps in comparison to their white and more affluent peers. The idea of equity and inclusion for all students is not novel, however, the pandemic brought to the forefront, the need to invest in comprehensive education, innovative teaching strategies, professional development, and resources to adequately support all students during and after COVID-19.

As a parent of two children who receive special education supports and services, one with a Section 504 plan, and Director of Michigan’s Parent Training & Information Center (PTI) I have first-hand knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on students with disabilities, including those living with the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, poverty, and disability. In addition, my professional role has allowed for communication with other [Parent Center](#) staff across the country, who share similar experiences with their own children and the families they serve. Today, I will highlight some of those challenges and conclude with federal-level policy recommendations and actions.

I will discuss five areas of concern for students with disabilities, including: teacher shortages, health and disability related concerns, Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Section 504 implementation/evaluations, access to technology & resources, and family engagement.

Teacher Shortages:

Prior to the pandemic, Michigan was facing a critical teacher shortage, especially those certified in teaching special education. For several reasons related to the health crisis, the number of teachers

resigning has increased by nearly 42%.ⁱ The teacher shortage has forced Intermediate School Districts (ISD) and local districts, traditional public schools and public school academies, to rely on substitutes who lack the education, training, and pedagogical knowledge to educate and support students with the most significant academic, behavioral, and functional needs. This is an even greater concern for districts in rural and urban areas, which generally have less resources to invest in staff support and safety measures, or the ability to offer incentives to retain teachers. Additionally, remaining teachers often lack the necessary support to adapt to new virtual learning environments, teach multiple learning formats, and the ability to identify students who may need additional support while learning at a distance (virtual, remote learning); therefore, leaving students with existing IEPs/504 plans or those who may need to be identified for services at a greater disadvantage than their typical peers. Michigan has taken two significant steps to address this concern. The first is to offer temporary waivers allowing flexibility regarding appropriately certified and endorsed special education teachers in specific special education programs. This will allow ISDs and districts the opportunity to minimize the number of special education vacancies and reduce the use of substitute in special education programs. However, this is a temporary solution to what is anticipated to be a long-term problem.

Access to Technology and Resources:

Inequity in education resources has negatively impacted students with disabilities, especially students of color and those living in poverty or nontraditional home environments (i.e., foster care, group homes). These students are overwhelmingly educated in districts with less financial and human resources. These students have less access to books, materials, devices, and high-speed internet, which are essential to participating in remote learning. Additionally, they are subjected to larger class sizes, which can be difficult to manage virtually. Finally, these students often reside in homes with parents or caregivers who hold jobs which require them to continue working outside of the home during the pandemic or who may be less educated, therefore hindering their ability to assist with remote learning. Many districts in Michigan have prioritized providing devices to students who need them, as well as support families in navigating the different learning platforms used for virtual learning. Furthermore, local cable and internet companies have offered free or reduced rates for qualifying families. Districts in rural areas have used creative ways to make access to high-speed internet available, including setting up hot spots in school busses and parking lots. Still, the impact of such efforts is slow to reach all students in need. These strategies will certainly be important to maintain and bolster as many districts continue to operate under a hybrid learning environment.

Health and Disability Related Concerns:

A number of students with disabilities have medical and disability related challenges which are exacerbated by COVID-19 and its impact on instruction. For instance, some students have sensory or medical conditions which make it difficult to adhere to mask mandates or unsafe to participate in face-to-face or blended instruction. This negatively impacts the opportunity for these students to learn with typical, nondisabled peers. Additionally, students with attention-related disabilities often have challenges with executive functioning skills, including memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-control. These students often find asynchronous work, which is a major component of learning at a distance, to be challenging. My daughter with anxiety and inattentive ADHD is a prime example of this. Her inability to start and complete assignments without the oversight and support provided during in person schooling, led to several failing grades for her, which greatly impacted her emotional well-being. Studies

show that social-emotional health of students has declined since the onset of the pandemic. The effects have been even greater for students who have emotional disabilities. The greatest difficulties come from lack of face-to-face interaction with educators and peers, lack of concentration affecting online meeting attendance, lack of access to support services which are typically provided in person, for example, behavior supports, social skills groups, and other social work services. Finally, emotional well-being was adversely impacted by safety restrictions, loss of family/friends, and financial difficulties faced as a result of the pandemic. Some ways districts in Michigan are addressing this issue, include ongoing check ins with students and families, as well as opportunities to connect with others and learn strategies to support educators, students, and families during this unprecedented time.

Individualized Education Program Implementation/Evaluations:

Generally, all students experienced loss of learning since the initial school closures in March 2020. However, students with disabilities have greater losses. Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and Section 504 plans are written for the brick-and-mortar setting. IDEA does not provide rules or regulations on how to deliver special education programs and services during a major health crisis which requires long-term school/building closures. Therefore, many students experienced decreased access to specialized instruction and related supports and services which are typically provided in person. Often services were disrupted or denied altogether. Related services such as physical and occupational therapy proved to be difficult to deliver virtually, particularly without at-home parent or caregiver support. Transition age students with independent living and employment IEP goals were unable to progress in these critical skills which generally require face-to-face, hands on instruction and support. My teenage son with Autism is one such student who was impacted by the loss of community-based instruction, which focuses on teaching independent living skills to students with disabilities. With no innovative way to deliver these experiences virtually, many students suffered a decline in these skills. Furthermore, evaluations and reevaluations of students were often delayed due to the inability to perform assessments and observations virtually, many of which require providers and educators to be in the same room as the student. All of these issues prompted the Michigan Department of Education to encourage the use of Contingency Learning Plans, as well as access to recovery services. Unfortunately, districts who are heavily burdened with staff shortages and lack of financial resources, will find it difficult to provide these supports to students.

Family Engagement:

Meaningful communication with families and caregivers has proven to be critical while educating students during the pandemic. Parents and caregivers of students with disabilities often found themselves in the position of implementing components of their children's IEPs at home, including assisting with instruction and related services. Many parents found this to be extremely challenging, often lacking the necessary skills needed to support their students. Families have many barriers to supporting virtual learning, including lack of access to technology/devices and the needed academic competency to assist with assignments. Moreover, many found virtual learning to be invasive, or did not have the time to dedicate to assisting their child. With families dealing with many challenges, including loss of income, food and housing insecurities, and health concerns, the need to have ongoing communication with educators will prove to be more important than ever, particularly for students with disabilities and those from marginalized groups. It is crucial that educators and service providers work

with parents to mitigate the loss of learning experienced during the pandemic and accelerate recovery of skills.

Policy and Action Recommendations:

In February 2021, the National Center for Learning Disabilities, released a comprehensive report outlining several of the challenges I have discussed today. The report, titled, “Promising Practices to Accelerate Learning for Students with Disabilities During COVID-19 and Beyond”ⁱⁱ, includes a comprehensive list of recommendations Congress and the US Department of Education can do to address education of students with disabilities during and post-pandemic. **The full report can be accessed here:** [Promising Practices to Accelerate Learning for Students with Disabilities During COVID-19 and Beyond](#)

Some of the recommendations outlined in the report include:

- **Provide states and districts with additional federal dollars in response to the COVID-19 crisis.**
 - This increased funding would allow districts to hire more educators, curriculum experts, and support staff, as well as invest in high quality, evidence-based approaches to support recoupment and acceleration of learning for all students.
- **Increase funding for IDEA – including Part B, Part C, and Part D.**
 - This increased funding would go to support necessary supports such as training in interventions such as MTSS, PBIS, Technical Assistance for support staff and educators, as well as parent training.
- **Increase funding for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – especially Title I, Title II, and Title IV of ESSA.**
 - This increased funding would allow states and school districts flexibility to select and implement accelerated learning approaches that fit their particular needs and student population, including students serviced under Section 504 and IDEA.

While noting the needed additional funding to support students, I must acknowledge efforts which have already been made, including the following:

- \$13B Cares Act
- \$54B in Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSA)
- \$130B American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding for K-12 education, which schools can spend towards IDEA compliance costs. This funding included \$3 billion in funding for IDEA specifically, including \$2.58 billion supporting IDEA grants for school-age children with disabilities, \$200 million for IDEA preschool grants, and \$250 million in grants to support infants and toddlers with disabilities.

This funding has allowed states to address the critical needs of students with disabilities in multiple ways. However, more is needed to ensure our students, regardless of disability, race/ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have equitable access to a quality education and support during and after the pandemic.

ⁱ Slagter, Martin. 2021, April 25. "Pandemic, workload, burnout pushes Michigan's teacher shortage over the edge. Who will replace them?" *MLive*. Retrieved from: <https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2021/04/pandemic-workload-burnout-pushes-michigan-teacher-shortage-over-the-edge-who-will-replace-them.html> (Accessed April, 26, 2021).

ⁱⁱ National Center for Learning Disabilities. 2021, February 19. "Promising Practices to Accelerate Learning for Students with Disabilities During COVID-19 and Beyond". Retrieved from: <https://www.nclid.org/reports-studies/promising-practices-to-accelerate-learning-for-students-with-disabilities-during-covid-19-and-beyond/> (Accessed April 26, 2021).