

# The State of Special Education in LAUSD: Fall 2020

This report analyzes data from over 300 special education (SpEd) parents in LAUSD to identify challenges they continue to face with receiving services and support for their children via distance learning in the fall of 2020 during school closures.

By analyzing experiences from the first one and a half months of the current school year—and occasionally making comparisons to [our findings from the spring shutdown](#)—this report seeks to understand the experiences of SpEd students across the district and highlight changes to distance learning and service delivery that are needed to address issues of inequity in their education.

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The survey was hosted online and available to any parents visiting the link. The link was distributed via email to all SpEd parents in Speak UP's database, posted to multiple SpEd parent Facebook groups, and shared via the parent and SpEd advocacy organizations listed below who partnered with us on this survey. Responses were collected over a four-week period from September 23 through October 20, thus capturing a snapshot of student learning between one and two months into the fall semester.

Parents from every LAUSD board and local district were represented in the responses. Approximately 80% of the SpEd students whose parents responded attend in-district schools, 15% attend independent charter schools, and 5% attend nonpublic schools (NPS) or have transitioned to homeschooling due to the pandemic.



## Executive Summary

We asked over 300 SpEd parents about their children's learning and services this fall. Approximately 76% of parents said their children with disabilities cannot learn and progress their skills effectively via distance learning, and 74% of the parents surveyed reported regressive behaviors while learning from home.

Based on the data from our fall survey of parents of kids with disabilities, we recommend the following as the most urgent action items for LAUSD:

- 1) LAUSD must be proactive in communication and collaboration with all parents, both through central office staff, school site teachers and IEP teams.** Levels of trust in LAUSD were abysmal among the hundreds of parents who responded to our survey: About 60% of SpEd parents do not feel well supported by their schools to implement successful at-home learning for their children with disabilities, and just under 50% of parents report inadequate communication and support from their children's teachers and Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members. Furthermore, more than a third of respondents are not receiving the full set of services that LAUSD agreed to deliver in their IEPs. Of the parents who had participated in an IEP meeting by October, 72% left without a clear understanding of how their children's services would be provided virtually. And while it is not unusual that approximately 60% of parents had not yet attended an IEP meeting, the fact remains that the district has made no concerted effort to provide clarity for these parents on an accelerated schedule. All of these factors contributed to 80% of our respondents feeling unable to trust LAUSD to resolve any concerns about their children's special needs. The only way to bridge such deep divides is through open, consistent, and collaborative communication at both the school and district level.
- 2) LAUSD must make the options for accessing in-person and virtual assessments clear and immediately known to all parents.** LAUSD and UTLA [recently reached an agreement to offer in-person special education assessments](#). Half of our respondents would be interested in taking advantage of this opportunity, whereas the other half still prefer a virtual assessment option. Whether assessments are conducted in-person, via teleconferencing methods, or through observations and records submitted asynchronously by IEP team members, all options must be made available with clear explanations for all parents.
- 3) LAUSD must also find a solution to provide in-person SpEd services.** Approximately 59% of parents surveyed said they would return to campus for one-to-one services as long as health and safety protocols were followed. Additionally, less than 10% of parents with one-to-one behavioral aides reported that the district is permitting their aides to work in their homes to assist with distance learning, but we heard from a large number of parents begging for a return to individualized support with behavioral aides sitting with their children and providing redirection and assistance. UTLA has stated that it ["stands strongly against any physical return to schools unless it is safe to do so for our members, students and the](#)

[community we serve](#)". This continued resistance contradicts LA County Office of Public Health's assertion that schools can now be partially reopened safely and precludes the district from offering even small-group services for only the highest-need students. The district needs to facilitate direct and honest communications between parents and its labor partners so all parties can be involved in creating a satisfactory reopening plan for the highest-need students.

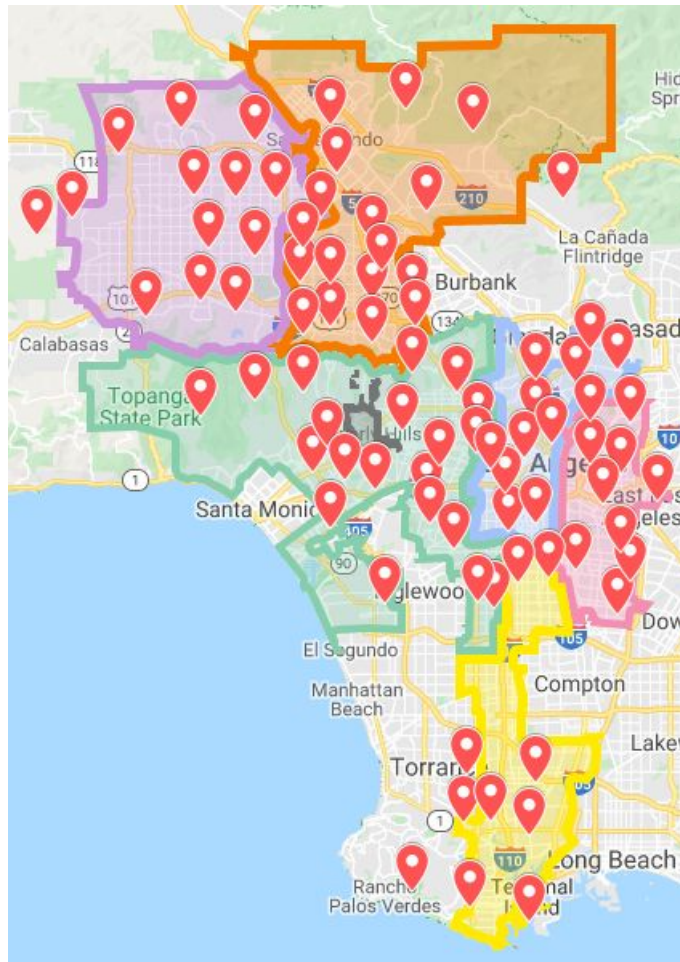
- 4) **LAUSD must provide training and support for teachers and parents of children with IEPs to successfully manage their in-home learning.** Even if schools reopen for in-person SpEd services, about half of our respondents indicated they would still be reluctant to return, even as the risks to their children's health were mitigated. Learning must be equitable for students in any track, which means that the delivery of services and accommodations must be improved virtually as well. Roughly 57% of parents indicated that the services they were receiving were not being delivered in a format suitable to their children's needs. LAUSD needs to establish and enforce a consistent and fair set of options for service delivery, including health and safety regulations that must be followed for in-person services at any location as well as an equitable virtual distribution of services that more closely approximates what students were receiving before the pandemic.
  
- 5) **LAUSD must proactively invest funds in supporting all special education stakeholders by engaging community partners to provide training in compliance and best practices.** According to [documents we obtained from LAUSD through a Public Records Act request](#), LAUSD spent \$22.6 million dollars in 2019-20 alone on due process reimbursements to resolve issues with equity and access for special education students. This is a \$15 million dollar increase since 2013-14. Instead of paying individually for arbitration and settling one family's concerns at a time, LAUSD must work responsibly and engage organizations, such as [Disability Rights California](#) and [the California State Council for Developmental Disabilities](#), to provide training in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and best practices to ensure regulations are met and equitable educational opportunities are available for all SpEd students in the district—not just those whose parents file due process complaints.

## Respondent Demographics

### Key Takeaways:

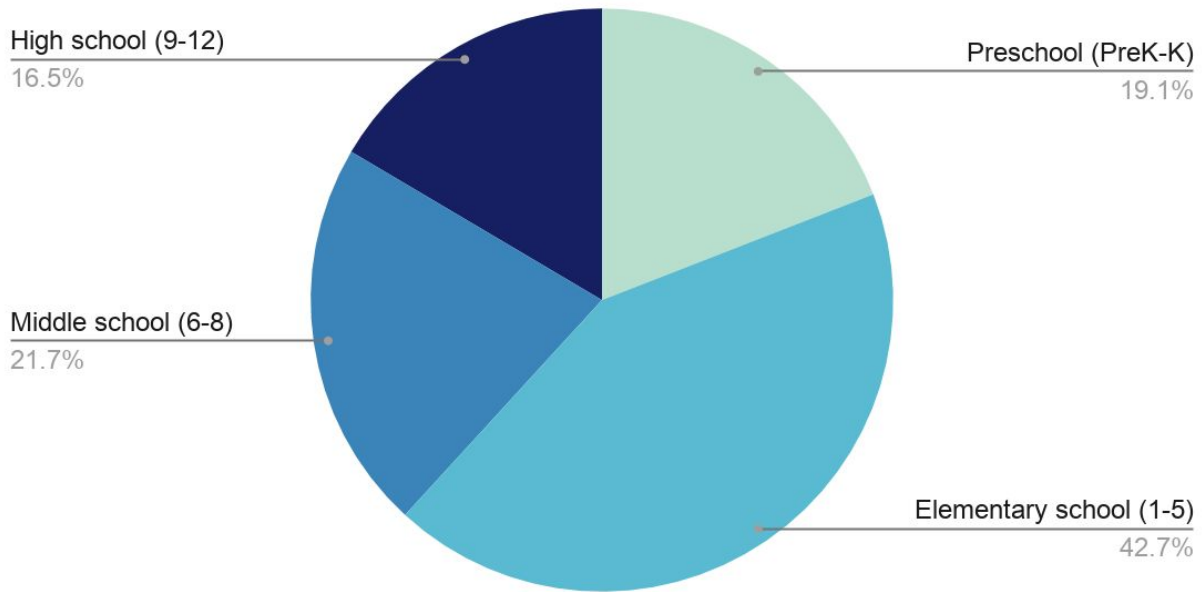
- Parents of students at every individual grade level responded to our survey, especially parents of younger students.
- We heard from parents at every school model in LAUSD, including traditional district schools, independent charters, magnet schools, nonpublic schools contracted by the district, and LAUSD's various special education centers and home hospitals.
- No race/ethnicity or income data were collected with this survey.

We heard from 313 parents of special education (SpEd) students from all over LAUSD. The map below shows aggregated responses by the ZIP code of their school:



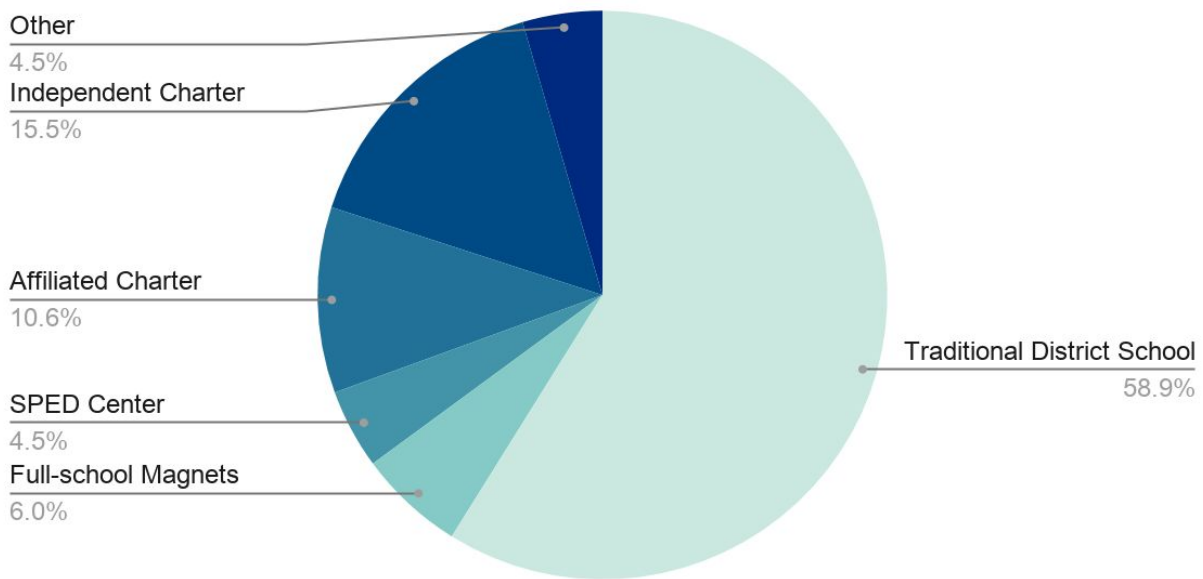
**Figure 1.** ZIP codes within LAUSD from which we received at least one response. Colored overlays represent Local District boundaries. An interactive map with survey data by ZIP code is available [here](#).

Parents of students at every grade level responded to our survey.



**Figure 2.** Responses received by the school level of the student.

We received responses from parents at 181 schools within LAUSD. This includes every type of school, from traditional district schools and charters (both affiliated and independent) to magnet schools and LAUSD’s various special education centers and home hospitals. We also heard from a small number of parents whose students attend nonpublic schools (NPS) through a contract for services with LAUSD. Respondents had the option to provide ZIP codes instead of school names if they were uncomfortable divulging their schools, so there are an additional 15% of respondents for whom we were unable to identify school type.



**Figure 3.** Responses received by school type. “Other” includes nonpublic schools (NPS) contracted by the district as well as students who were transitioned to home schooling during the pandemic.

Half of the parents reported their students attended general education classes, while the other half indicated that their children were enrolled in a special day class or combination class.

While the vast majority of our current respondents said they had adequate access to digital devices and Wi-Fi, 13% reported their connections were inadequate due to faulty hotspots or high bills. This is a slightly higher percentage than the 8% from our spring survey who reported inadequate connections ([p. 8](#)).

We did not collect information about race/ethnicity or income on this survey. The choice was made to exclude these questions to preserve respondents' options for anonymity and keep the number of demographic questions to a non-intrusive minimum.

## SpEd Services and Communication

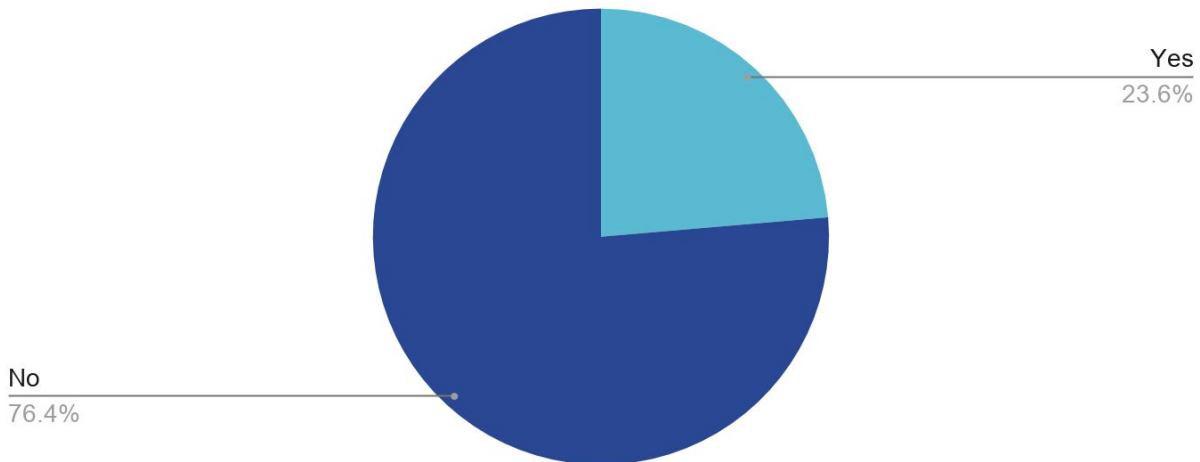
### Key Takeaways:

- SpEd students are distanced, but not learning: Approximately 76% of parents said their children with disabilities were not learning effectively, and 74% reported regressive behaviors and continuous loss of skills associated with the all-digital environment. However, LAUSD and UTLA still show no signs of bringing these high-need students back to campus, even under [LA County Department of Public Health](#) guidelines that permit them to do so.
- Almost two-thirds of SpEd parents do not feel well supported by their schools, and 36% reported their children were still missing one or more of the services required by their IEP. In this arena, it seems that very little progress has been made since [our spring survey of SpEd parents](#) despite the language prioritizing consistent delivery of services in [the fall agreement between LAUSD and UTLA](#).
- If proper COVID-19 safety measures were in place, approximately 59% of parents indicated they would be willing to send their children back to schools for one-to-one SpEd services or tutoring, and 46% were willing to return for small group services.
- Less than a third of parents who had attended IEP meetings this fall felt a clear plan for virtual service delivery was communicated to them, and 60% of respondents had not yet participated in an IEP meeting, making their chances of achieving clarity about their children’s services negligible at best. This is just one contributing factor to the 80% of SpEd parents who do not trust LAUSD to resolve concerns about their children’s needs.

### Student Progress During Distance Learning

One of the first questions we asked parents of SpEd students was whether their children were able to learn and progress their skills effectively via distance learning—and 76% of parents said no. Less than one in four respondents identified their children as able to achieve growth with their current level of support.

Is your child able to effectively learn and progress in their skills via distance learning with the current level of school support they are receiving?

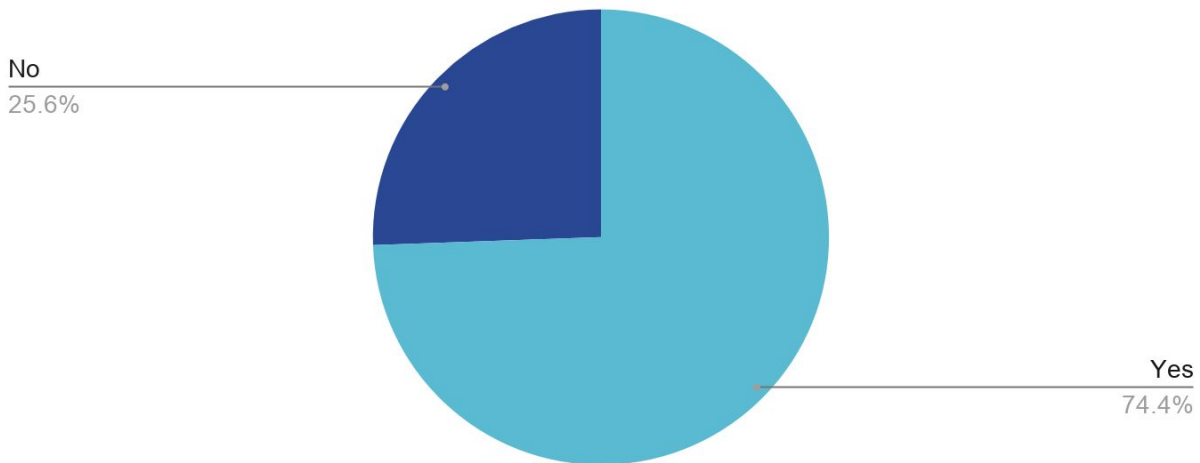


**Figure 4.** More than 75% of SpEd parents say their children cannot learn effectively with the current level of support they are receiving from their schools.

We also found a clear correlation between grade level and success with distance learning that suggests that virtual school may be significantly more difficult for younger students. SpEd students in preschool through first grade are more than twice as likely as high school students to be struggling significantly with distance learning.

Furthermore, 74% of the parents surveyed reported regressive behaviors while learning from home.

Has your child been exhibiting regressive behaviors or other signs of loss of learning and skills?



**Figure 5.** Almost 75% of SpEd parents reported regressive behaviors and learning loss this fall.

These behaviors included signs of learning loss, such as a first grader who is forgetting the alphabet, as well as behavioral issues, including meltdowns, injury to themselves or their parents, and falling behind on behavioral goals that had previously been met. Regressive behaviors were reported for approximately 70% of students at every grade level, from preschool through high school.

Parent comments that provide further insight into students' regression are provided below:

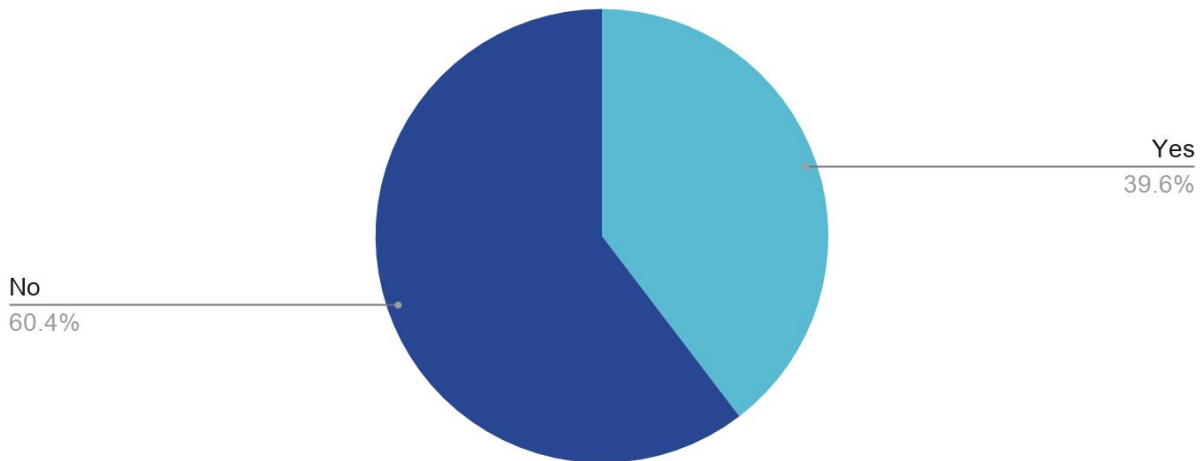
- "Child has daily meltdowns. Before school closed my child had no 1:1 aide, however now that we are on distance learning I have to sit with my child all day to make sure she is staying focused, logging into different platforms and completing assignments online."
- "Doesn't like to Zoom, avoids work. Parent has become 1:1 aide, which has led to a financial hardship."
- "He is having more meltdowns, self-injurious behaviors, hits me or himself, he is unable to work independently. He has become prompt dependent. His aggression has escalated. He is not using his words to communicate. So many behaviors."
- "She frequently cries, says she doesn't understand the work. She misses the interaction with friends in class. While I know her teacher is trying, my daughter isn't getting all her accommodations. Teacher is supposed to check for understanding and that's not happening. Work is supposed to be given visually and then auditory and that's not



happening. My daughter now has self esteem issues. She was already behind and I see her regression more.”

Eight months since the COVID-19 pandemic forced LAUSD to provide virtual learning, just over a third of parents feel well supported by their schools to ensure their children with disabilities can learn from home. In other words, 60% of SpEd parents feel their schools are failing them, and these findings suggest that little has changed since we surveyed SpEd parents last spring ([p. 6](#)).

Do you feel well supported by your school in implementing learning for your child at home?



**Figure 6.** Only 40% of SpEd parents feel well supported by their schools to ensure their children with disabilities can learn effectively at home.

It is clear from this data that many SpEd students in LAUSD are struggling inequitably with distance learning. Based on the needs of parents identified through this survey, we recommend that LAUSD focus on providing more support to families with SpEd students. However, UTLA may be the largest obstacle to providing this support.

[The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health](#) in early September gave Los Angeles schools permission to reopen their campuses for small cohorts of kids with disabilities and English Learners, as long as they do not exceed 10% of the school’s population on campus at one time. Nevertheless, [UTLA immediately said it was opposed to this](#) and disputed the Health Department’s contention that it was safe. As a result, LAUSD has not pursued this option even on a voluntary basis, even as other nearby school districts have begun serving high-needs kids.

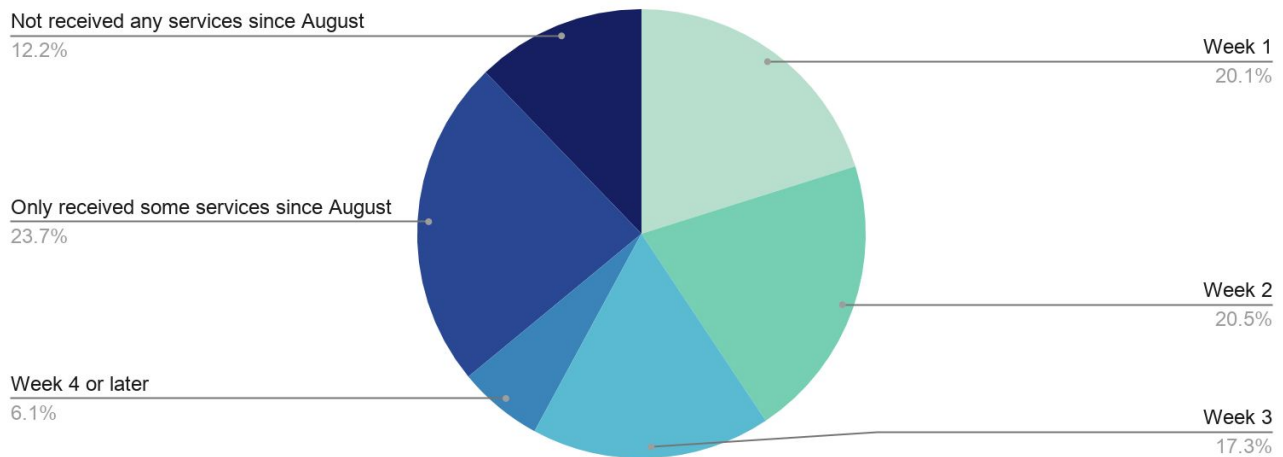
While LAUSD and UTLA are [permitting voluntary 1:1 tutoring on campus](#), this does not include the delivery of special education services, and LAUSD has not disclosed how many teachers on how many campuses have offered to provide tutoring. The impact at this point may be minimal. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health is also [allowing schools to reopen with a waiver for TK-2nd grade students](#), but LAUSD has not pursued this option either because it requires the support of staff.

LAUSD is also hampered by a fall distance learning agreement it struck with UTLA stating that no UTLA member may be required to return to campus until it is safe for *all* UTLA members to return (see [No. 1 under Compensation, Evaluation, Benefits and Leaves](#)). This limits LAUSD’s ability to reopen for small groups of high-needs kids, which Los Angeles County is allowing. LAUSD also operates with the understanding that a current majority of LAUSD Board of Education members were elected with the financial support of UTLA.

### Effectiveness of Virtual Delivery of Services

SpEd students receive a wide range of accommodations and services, including speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral therapy, all of which ensure they have equitable access to educational opportunities. These services are legally mandated by students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and guaranteed under federal law. When we surveyed parents a month or two into the fall semester—eight months since the transition to virtual learning—over a third of SpEd students were reported to be receiving only some or none of the services required by their IEPs.

Thinking about this fall, when did your child’s school begin delivering all of the SPED services outlined in their IEP?



**Figure 7.** Only 20% of SpEd students had their services at their disposal from the very beginning, and 36% are still missing one or more of their required services after two months.

While the majority of SpEd students began receiving their full set of services by the third week of school, over a third are still lacking the support they require to receive a fair and appropriate education. This seems to be in direct opposition to the fall agreement between UTLA and LAUSD that prioritizes service delivery for students with IEPs ([p. 4](#))

In addition to missing services entirely, many students who are receiving their services cannot take full advantage of them as they are delivered. Approximately 57% of parents shared that their children’s services were being delivered in a format that was not suitable to their needs, a strikingly similar figure to the 54% of parents who answered the same way in the spring ([p. 3](#)).

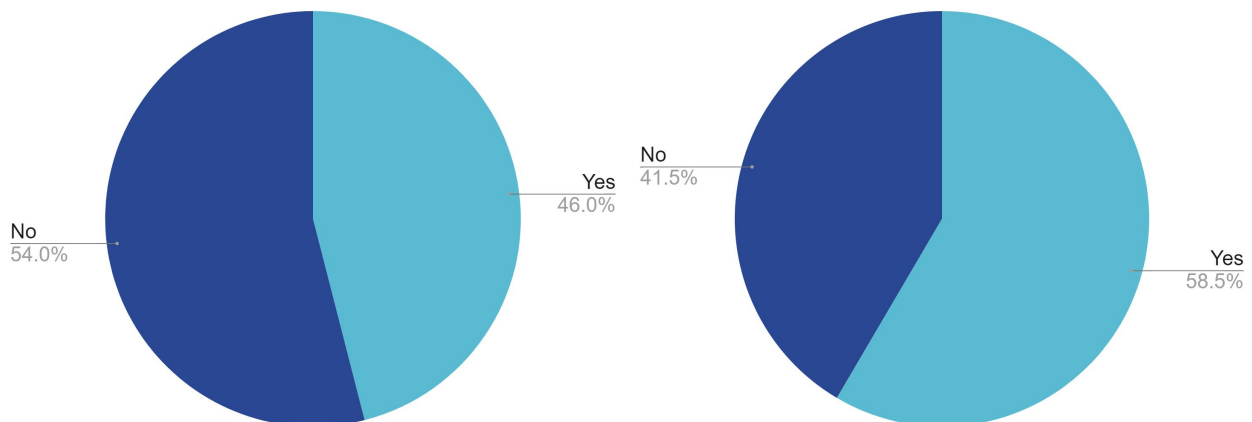
We highlight the following parent comments for additional understanding of ongoing issues with virtual service delivery:

- “In our IEP meeting to discuss our distance learning plan, the school AP [*assistant principal*] informed me that worksheets were acceptable forms of service delivery. If I didn't know that that is out of compliance with our IEP (and the law), then my son might end up with worksheets instead of essential therapy. I fear that many families are getting worksheets rather than therapy.”
- “I asked for an updated IEP and was refused.”
- “He can't follow the class properly at all. He constantly gets lost in class and depressed. He had someone sit with him and help him and right now all he has is speech and that's the least of his problems. My son is suffering and feels like a failure.”
- “My son needs 1:1 at home. I can't help him with his classes because I don't know how to explain it to him in English. Second, my son only works with someone at his side teaching him and redirecting him, that's the only way my son will work.”
- “RSP [*Resource Service Program*] is NOT providing full resource minutes. She groups the entire 1st-5th graders together for pull out minutes. Completely unacceptable!! I've reached out to local district and have yet to receive follow up.”
- “I did not accept any Zoom therapy for [my son] because his specific type of therapy can only benefit [him] one-on-one which is done in person. The speech therapist uses a hands-on approach and specific instruments to help [him] properly make the correct sounds to produce speech.”

Because of the challenges surrounding virtual service delivery for SpEd students, we also asked parents about the hypothetical of returning to in-person SpEd services under the condition that all students would be tested for COVID-19. Many parents who responded to our survey were willing to return to schools for services as long as stringent health precautions were followed. Approximately 46% of parents were willing to send their children back to schools for small group SpEd instruction or services, and 59% were willing to return for one-to-one services.

If LAUSD immediately offered small group instruction or group services on campus for high needs students, would you send your child back to school?

If LAUSD immediately offered 1:1 special ed services or tutoring on campus, would you send your child back to school?



**Figure 8.** Percentages of SpEd parents who would be willing to return to campuses for small group services (left) and one-to-one services (right).

Around 42% of our respondents' children had Behavior Intervention Implementation (BII) specialists assigned to them who provide one-to-one support during classes. For these students, only one in five BIIIs were capable of supporting them efficiently over a virtual connection. And whereas BIIIs would typically be sitting right next to the student to provide redirection and explanation, less than 10% of these assistants were currently permitted by LAUSD to work in the student's home. Aides from non-public agencies contracted by the district are also being blocked by the district from providing in-home support, even though they are not subject to union regulations.

Based on the many parents who want in-person BII support, we recommend that LAUSD find a solution for the challenges students without in-person support are facing:

- "I have asked and begged for his BII to be in home. The BII and company she works for are willing but LAUSD will not allow it. I cannot do this on my own and my son is not getting an education because of it."
- "My son's BII can only support him virtually. She has been available but he needs in-person support so I had to hire a respite worker to sit next to him 4-5 hrs a day to help him access the virtual services and school work."
- "BII virtual distant learning does not work for our son!!! I am sitting and working with my son 9-2 during distance learning to prompt, support, redirect, monitor written work, check for child's understanding and manage and deal with behavior outbursts particularly related to frustration."
- "We need our BII back in person. Either at our home or on campus. It's too overwhelming for parents."
- "BII services were not well planned and are not effectively working because of LAUSD restrictions."

Another component of the effectiveness of services is their relevance to the student's needs. Roughly 47% of parents surveyed indicated that their children need to be assessed for a disability or an updated IEP. Half of our respondents would accept remote assessments as an appropriate method of delivery, although the other 50% who would not should be encouraged by the [recent progress made by the district towards offering in-person assessments](#). However, LAUSD must still hold itself accountable for making the process for accessing in-person assessments clear and immediately known to all parents.

Unfortunately, the issues plaguing LAUSD's delivery of services are not all new. Parents in the district have been filing an increasing number of complaints about the suitability of services and quality of educational opportunities provided to their children with disabilities, and a handful of parents mentioned they were currently engaged in due process on our survey. According to [documents we obtained through a Public Records Act request](#), LAUSD spent \$22.6 million dollars on due process reimbursement just last year—almost three times as much as they spent only six years ago.

Fiscal Year	Due Process Reimbursement Budget
2014	\$7,592,202
2015	\$9,892,202
2016	\$12,242,202
2017	\$14,392,202
2018	\$15,192,202
2019	\$21,639,737
2020	\$22,590,739

**Table 1.** Annual budgets spent on due process reimbursement by LAUSD over the past six years. Information was obtained via a Public Records Act request filed by Speak UP with the LAUSD Office of General Counsel. We have made the relevant document publicly available [here](#).

Both our surveys and LAUSD’s ballooning due process expenditures suggest that the district’s special education services are only getting worse. Instead of retroactively paying for arbitration and individual settlements, LAUSD must proactively invest funds in supporting all special education stakeholders by engaging organizations, such as [Disability Rights California](#) and [the California State Council for Developmental Disabilities](#), to provide training in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and best practices.

### Communication with Schools

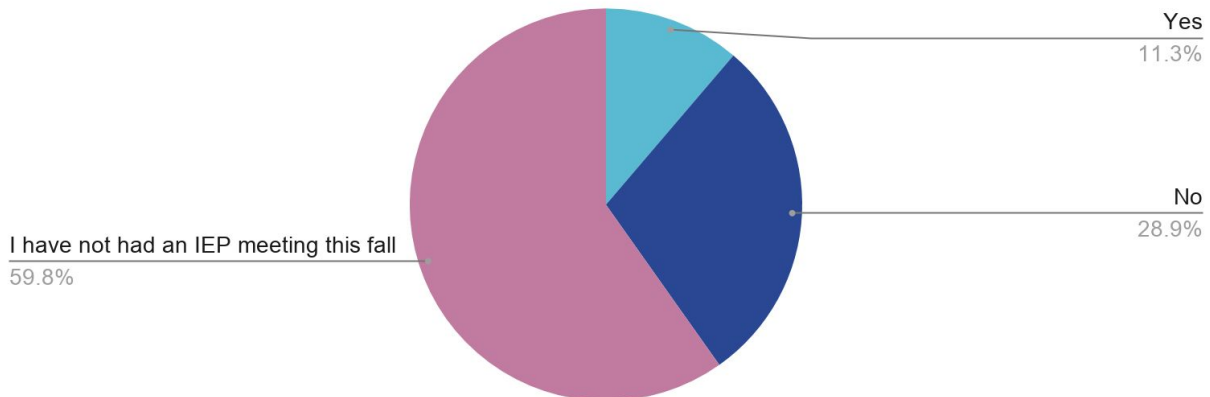
In our spring survey, about 20% of parents reported little to no communication with their children’s teachers, and over 70% reported insufficient communication with the team responsible for their children’s IEPs (p. 5). The current survey suggests that problems with communication continue to plague LAUSD schools: Around 48% of parents surveyed this fall have not received adequate communication from their teachers or IEP teams.

These comments from parents sum up the situation most appropriately:

- “I have not been contacted or received speech services since school started in August 2020.”
- “We had an IEP meeting last May, which was seemingly just an exercise of the admins asking us to just be ‘okay, just sign here’ with what they were giving and with no specificity on what else they could do post-COVID. They repeatedly ignore our concerns.”
- “We need better, clearer, consistent communication from the district, options for assessments, a basic sense that my son and his needs matter.”
- “I feel that the school only communicates with me in parent conferences or when it’s time to update IEP. I am the one to seek out; however during the IEP meeting I was offered webinars but the assistant principal never provided information.”

We asked about IEP meetings on our survey in order to learn more about how parents and schools are communicating about student needs. In this vein, we found two worrying data points: Firstly, about 60% of parents had not yet participated in an IEP meeting when they responded to our survey. While it is typical for many IEP meetings to be scheduled for later in the year, the district needs to be more proactive about scheduling IEP meetings in this atypical time to provide parents with more clarity about their options for services and formulate a plan that works for every student.

If you've held an IEP meeting this fall, was the purpose of the DLP well communicated to you?



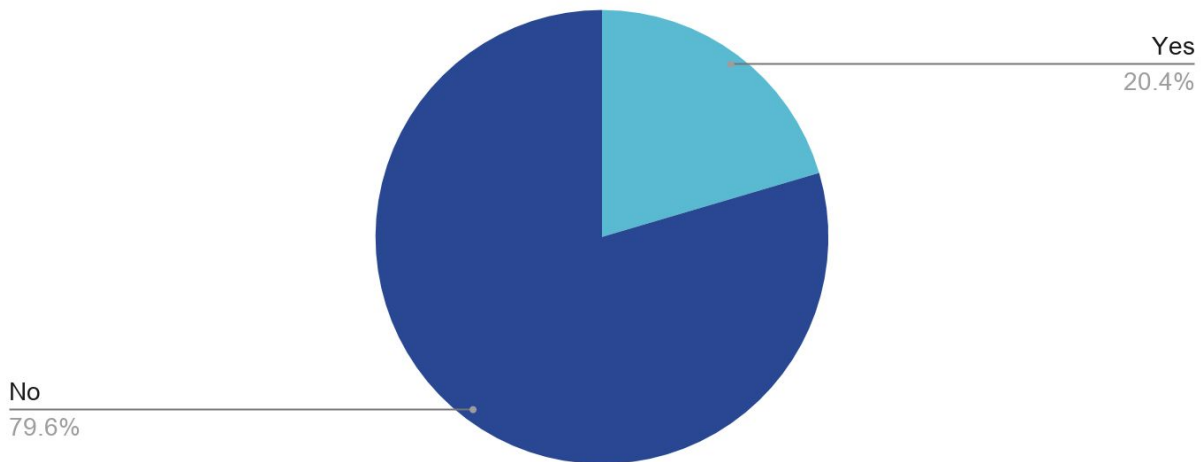
**Figure 9.** Around 60% of parents still have no clarity about their children’s IEPs after two months of school. Of the remainder who participated in a meeting, more than two-thirds felt they did not leave with a clear understanding of how services will be delivered virtually.

Secondly, as many as 12% of respondents shared that they had been asked to change their IEP to eliminate certain services or reduce service minutes to lessen the burden on their schools. While this is a relatively small share of parents, these experiences were distributed across all school types and 30 unique schools.

Of the parents who did already have an IEP meeting this fall, less than 30% told us that a Distance Learning Plan (DLP) had been clearly communicated to them. [California Education Code § 56345](#) requires that a student’s IEP be amended at the next meeting to include a DLP, or a description of how the IEP will be met under these emergency conditions (see California Department of Education’s [Special Education Guidance for COVID-19](#) for further explanation). The district is required to fully inform parents of both the IEP and the supplemental DLP in order to obtain consent. The overwhelming failure of schools to clearly communicate to parents any type of service agreement specifically modified for the pandemic equates to a failure to collaborate with parents and guarantee adequate and equitable services as required by law.

The aforementioned communication issues likely play no small part in parents’ lack of trust in LAUSD. At the end of our survey, we asked respondents whether LAUSD clearly communicates a system capable of addressing the needs of their SpEd children. About 80% of parents said no.

Do you feel that LAUSD offers and clearly communicates a system of being able to address and resolve concerns about your child's special needs?



**Figure 10.** Only 20% of SpEd parents believe LAUSD is capable of resolving their concerns about their children's needs.

Perhaps our most significant recommendation from this entire survey is this: LAUSD must proactively collaborate with and engage all parents. In our spring survey report, we recommended that the district mandate consistent and timely communication for parents and survey parents of students with IEPs themselves (pp. 6-7). To date, we have seen none of this realized. Without clear and open communication that builds trust and mutual understanding between parents, teachers, and district staff, LAUSD will continue to fail its students and families even beyond the current crisis.

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**Speak UP** is a grassroots organization of parents who want a more powerful voice in education policy. Kids don't have lobbyists, and kids don't have a union. Kids have parents, and parents are the only people whose sole interest is the success of kids. Learn more or become a member at [speakupparents.org](https://speakupparents.org)

Do you need free technology training for software such as Zoom? Does your child need a volunteer tutor to assist them during distance learning? Check out our iFamily program [here!](#)

The wide reach of this survey was made possible by our partner organizations who advocate for SpEd students' and parents' rights every day. Check out some of the amazing work they are doing at the links below:

- California State Council on Developmental Disabilities: <https://scdd.ca.gov/>
- Communities in Schools of Los Angeles: <https://www.cislosangeles.org/>
- Families in Schools: <https://www.familiesinschools.org/>
- Special Needs Network: <https://snnla.org/>