

Michigan's First Special Education Benchmark Report Reveals Statewide Gaps and a Path Forward

Findings reveal uneven access and outcomes across Michigan's special education system and establish a baseline for long-term progress.

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-- The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) today released the [2025 Michigan Special Education Benchmark Report](#), the first statewide analysis of

how Michigan's public education system is serving students with disabilities. The report provides a unified, data-driven baseline across preschool, K-12, secondary and postsecondary outcomes, and family engagement. Using more than 50 key indicators, it highlights where Michigan is making progress and where urgent improvement is needed.



Autism Alliance of Michigan Logo

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*Heather Eckner, Director of
Statewide Education, AAoM*

The report arrives at a moment when overall K-12 enrollment in Michigan continues to decline, while the number of students with disabilities steadily increases. This growing share of the student population underscores the need for sustainable funding, specialized staffing, and stronger supports for students and families.

“We cannot improve what we cannot see,” said Heather Eckner, Director of Statewide Education at the Autism Alliance of Michigan, and lead on the Benchmark Report.

“For the first time, Michigan has a clear baseline that shows where students with disabilities are being supported and where the system is falling short. This visibility is essential if we want to create schools that meet every child's needs.”

Findings reveal opportunities for Michigan to strengthen supports and outcomes:

- Preschool-aged children with disabilities are too often served outside of regular early childhood programs, limiting early exposure to inclusive environments.
- School-age students experience relatively strong inclusion rates (73 percent in Michigan vs. 68 percent nationally), yet academic outcomes remain among the lowest in the country.
- Students with disabilities graduate at significantly lower rates (60 percent in MI vs. 71 percent nationally) and drop out at more than twice the rate of their nondisabled peers (21 percent for SWDs vs. 11 percent for nondisabled peers).
- Discipline disparities persist, with students with disabilities representing a disproportionate share of restraint and seclusion incidents (77 percent).
- Funding continues to fall short of actual need, forcing districts to rely heavily on unequal local resources.
- While Michigan receives fewer formal special education complaints than the national average (12.5 complaints filed per 10,000 students for MI, vs. 13.1 nationally), a higher share of those complaints result in findings of noncompliance (6.6 findings of noncompliance per 10,000 students for MI vs. 4.9 nationally), underscoring the need for stronger transparency, accountability, and family partnership.
- Only sixty percent of Michigan families say schools meaningfully engage them in decisions about their child's education.
- Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and male students are substantially overrepresented in Michigan's special education population.

"These findings make clear that Michigan has a responsibility to ensure every student with a disability is supported, included, and prepared for the future," added Eckner. "This inaugural Benchmark Report gives Michigan a starting point for honest conversation and collective action, and reinforces that meeting the minimum legal requirements under IDEA is not the same as delivering equitable opportunities."

The Benchmark Report is designed to serve as a decision-making tool for policymakers, educators, and families. By disaggregating data across disability categories, race, economic status, and geography, it identifies where systems are working well and where improvement is most urgently needed. It also sheds light on areas historically hard to measure, such as how empowered families feel in the special education process and how often concerns lead to findings of noncompliance. The report presents a framework for tracking Michigan's progress toward equitable and effective special education through key indicators.

“This report shines a necessary light on the experiences of students with disabilities in Michigan,” said Alexandra Stamm, Education Policy Analyst at the Michigan League for Public Policy and a contributor to the report’s development. “The data make clear that while progress has been made, inequities persist across early learning access, academic achievement, graduation, and family engagement. By bringing this information together in one place, the Special Education Benchmark Report is giving the state an essential tool to guide policy decisions and resource investments. Michigan has a real opportunity to lead, and this report helps chart the path forward.”

The Benchmark Report’s release aligns with the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a landmark federal civil rights law guaranteeing students with disabilities the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education. The Benchmark Report offers a timely opportunity for Michigan to reflect on IDEA’s legacy and evaluate how well the state is fulfilling that promise today.

The report also coincides with the [2025 Special Education Advocacy Summit](#), hosted by the Michigan Parent, Advocate & Attorney Coalition (MiPAAC) and powered by AAoM. The Summit brings advocates from across Michigan to the state capitol to celebrate IDEA’s anniversary through a three-day program focused on action, collaboration, and direct engagement with state leaders.

Support from The Skillman Foundation helped make this work possible, funding both the Benchmark Report and the Special Education Advocacy Summit.

These efforts complement the momentum of the [Michigan Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint \(MI Blueprint\)](#), a comprehensive framework to modernize Michigan’s special education funding system, submitted to the Michigan Legislature on October 30. Together, the Benchmark Report, the Summit, and the MI Blueprint give Michigan the data, community voice, and policy roadmap needed to significantly improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

To access the Michigan Special Education Benchmark Report, [click here](#).

About the Autism Alliance of Michigan

The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) is a 501(c)(3) organization serving as a trusted ally and partner for thousands of families across the state. AAoM’s mission is to lead efforts to raise expectations and expand opportunities for people connected to autism across their lifespan. The organization’s Education pillar drives initiatives that address systemic barriers to education, focuses on student-centered advocacy, and educates families on related topics – working towards its goal to make Michigan a top 10 state for special education outcomes. More information about AAoM’s Education pillar can be found at www.autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives.

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