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CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

The Role of Place and Policy in the Pandemic's Impact on Students with Disabilities Graduation Rates

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades, significant legislative strides such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have aimed to guarantee students with disabilities (SWD) access to free and appropriate public education (FAPE). In the 2022-2023 school year, roughly 7.5 million students aged 3-21, representing approximately 15% of all public school students nationwide, qualified for special education services under IDEA. Despite these sustained policy efforts and the targeted educational supports such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and supplemental special education services to provide adequate support for individualized educational progress, graduation rates for SWD have historically remained well below those of their peers without disabilities.

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced an unprecedented educational landscape marked by disruption and adaptation in education. Interestingly, and perhaps counterintuitively, in the midst of this crisis, graduation rates for SWD increased notably, outpacing gains for nearly all other student groups.

This report explores this intriguing phenomenon, analyzing the notable increase in graduation rates of SWD during the pandemic using the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the school level data such as student demographics, funding, and locale information from the Common Core of Data (CCD) and the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (OCR CRDC), as well as the internet access data from the American Community Survey (ACS) data. By examining variations at national, state, and school district levels, this report seeks to unpack the complex factors behind these substantial and unprecedented increases. While temporary adjustments and policy waivers due to the pandemic undoubtedly contributed, they cannot fully explain the sustained nature and geographic variability of these gains.

Thus, this research delves deeper into the roles played by targeted state initiatives, local educational strategies, and district-specific factors. Employing both conventional and geospatially-focused regression analyses, alongside qualitative analyses of state and district initiatives, this report offers critical insights into how systemic interventions and localized contexts intersect to shape educational outcomes. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics provides essential lessons for educators, policymakers, and advocates committed to closing educational gaps and promoting equitable outcomes for SWD.

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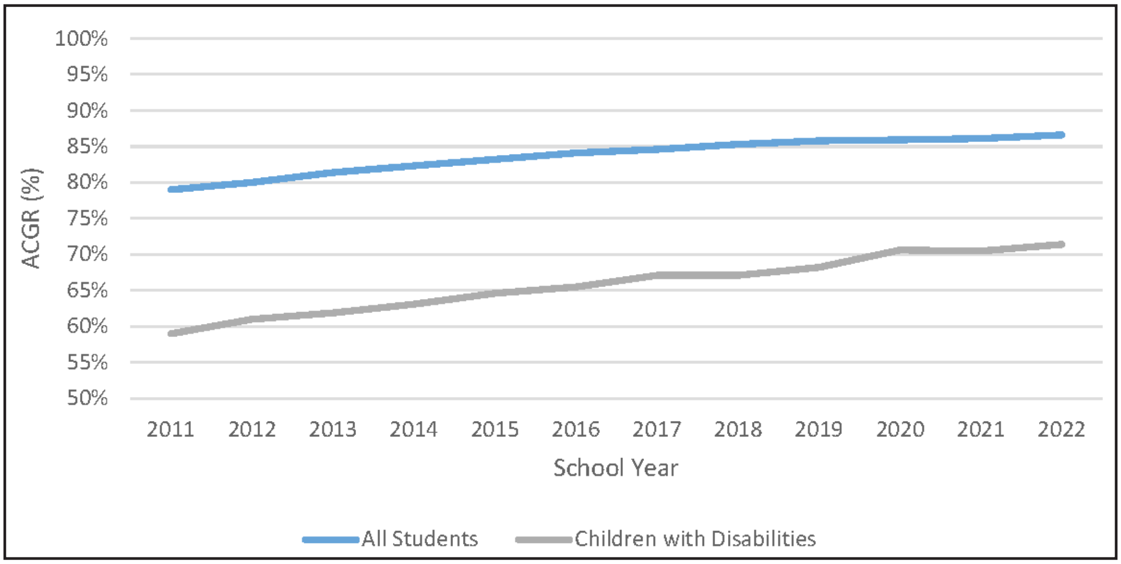
NATIONAL LEVEL

Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SWD experienced significant increases in their graduation rate, surpassing other student groups. Specifically, the ACGR for SWD increased by 3.2 percentage points between 2019 and 2022. In comparison, the overall national graduation rate rose only 0.8 percentage points, while students without disabilities saw just a 0.6 percentage point gain. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, this improvement narrowed the gap between SWD and the national average from a 20 percentage point difference in 2011, when ACGR was first reported, to a historical low of 15 percentage points by 2022. This positive development contrasts sharply with broader trends for disadvantaged student populations during the pandemic, which generally experienced exacerbated educational outcomes. In fact, students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, who already faced academic inequities, saw increased rates of chronic absenteeism and course failures during the pandemic period. However, despite the recent substantial gains, SWD continue to have the lowest average graduation rate among all student groups as of 2022. Both the substantial improvements in graduation rates for SWD and the continued reality that they remain the student group with the lowest average graduation rate point to an urgent need: to build on lessons from the pandemic and identify effective strategies for closing this persistent gap.

Table 1. ACGR by Student Subgroup from Pre-COVID (2019) to Post-COVID (2022)

	2019 (Pre-COVID)	2022 (Post-COVID)	Change
All Students	85.8	86.6	+0.8
Students with Disabilities	68.2	71.4	+3.2
Student without Disabilities	88.3	88.9	+0.6
American Indian/Alaska Native	74.3	73.9	-0.4
Asian/Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	92.6	93.7	+1.1
Hispanic	81.7	82.8	+1.1
Black	79.6	81.0	+1.4
White	89.4	89.8	+0.4
Economically Disadvantaged	80.0	81.3	+1.3
Limited English Proficiency	69.2	72.1	+2.9

Figure 1. Trends in ACGR for SWD Compared to All Students from 2010-11 to 2021-22



STATE LEVEL

At the state level, the changes in ACGR for SWD varied substantially. New Jersey had by far the largest decrease of any state in the country for SWD, dropping by 30.7 percentage points. This sharp decrease significantly outpaced the next most considerable reduction seen in South Dakota, at 9.7 percentage points. States such as Louisiana and North Dakota also experienced notable decreases of approximately 7 to 8 points. Several other states, including Iowa, Nebraska, Montana, Arizona, Nevada, Delaware, and Vermont, recorded smaller declines.

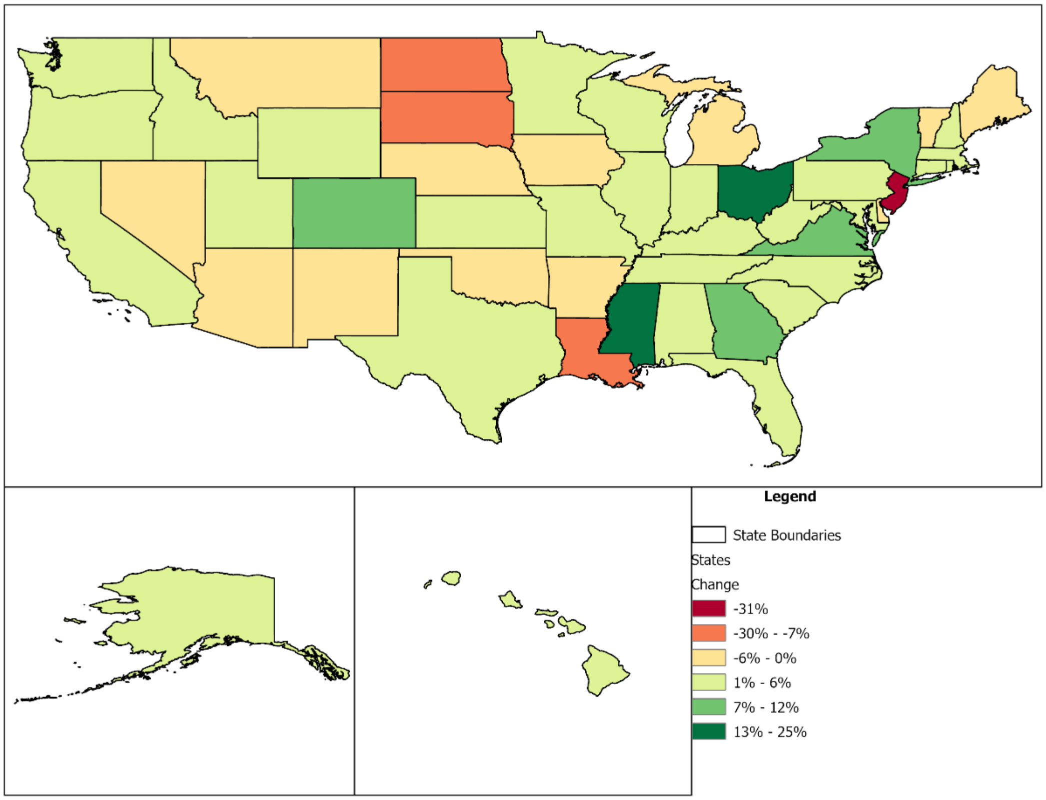
Conversely, Ohio and Mississippi showed remarkable improvements of over 20 percentage points in their graduation rates for SWD. Notably positive trends were also seen in Tennessee, Maryland, Indiana, California, Virginia, New York, Colorado, Georgia, and the District of Columbia, each of which experienced increases of five or more percentage points. Table 2 details these state-level variations.

Table 2. State-Level ACGR for SWD from 2019 to 2022 and Net Changes

ACGR	2019	2020	2021	2022	CHANGE
ALABAMA	69.6	68.9	73	73.5	3.9
ALASKA	60	59	59	61	1
ARIZONA	69	66.2	66	67.3	-1.7
ARKANSAS	82.6	84	83.1	82.9	0.3
CALIFORNIA	67.7	68.4	68.6	73.8	6.1
COLORADO	59.2	61.8	66.3	67.9	8.7
CONNECTICUT	67.8	68.1	68.6	69.9	2.1
DELAWARE	73	73	64	72	-1
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	51	56	60	63	12
FLORIDA	81	82.9	82.4	83.6	2.6
GEORGIA	62.9	70.2	70.2	72.5	9.6
HAWAII	63	65	66	66	3
IDAHO	56	59	56	57	1
ILLINOIS	69.9	-	-	71.9	2
INDIANA	71.4	79.1	75.1	77.2	5.8
IOWA	76.1	76.5	73.8	72.8	-3.3
KANSAS	78.4	81	81.7	83.2	4.8
KENTUCKY	75.5	78	78	79.7	4.2
LOUISIANA	64.7	68.6	69.2	57	-7.7
MAINE	73	74	73	73	0
MARYLAND	63.5	68.5	68.1	69.3	5.8
MASSACHUSETTS	73.9	74.9	76.6	78	4.1
MICHIGAN	57.8	59.3	57	58.1	0.3
MINNESOTA	63	65	63.9	65.6	2.6
MISSISSIPPI	42.2	55.3	59.8	67.1	24.9
MISSOURI	76.7	77.2	76.8	78.1	1.4
MONTANA	78	75	77	76	-2
NEBRASKA	69	65	65	65.8	-3.2
NEVADA	67.2	66	64.6	65.9	-1.3
NEW HAMPSHIRE	72	73	72	73	1
NEW JERSEY	79.2	80.4	67	48.5	-30.7
NEW MEXICO	64.7	66.3	67.9	-	-
NEW YORK	58.8	60.7	62.4	66.2	7.4
NORTH CAROLINA	69.8	72.2	71.3	71	1.2
NORTH DAKOTA	73	72	72	66	-7
OHIO	48	56.9	63.6	68.2	20.2
OKLAHOMA	79.1	88.1	82.9	-	-
OREGON	63.4	68	66.1	67.5	4.1
PENNSYLVANIA	70.7	72.8	73	73.6	2.9
RHODE ISLAND	64	63	65	66	2
SOUTH CAROLINA	54.4	55.8	56.7	57.9	3.5
SOUTH DAKOTA	72	69	60	63	-9
TENNESSEE	73.9	74.5	72.4	79	5.1
TEXAS	77.9	-	79.6	79.1	1.2
UTAH	72.4	73.3	73.2	73.5	1.1
VERMONT	71	69	70	70	-1
VIRGINIA	62.9	67.5	69.4	70.2	7.3
WASHINGTON	62.2	64.6	-	66.4	4.2
WEST VIRGINIA	78.7	84	83	83	4.3
WISCONSIN	69.8	69.7	69.2	72.8	3
WYOMING	59	63	65	63	4
UNITED STATES	**68.2**	**70.6**	**70.5**	**71.4**	3.2

Additionally, Figure 2 visually highlights the geographic patterns of these changes. Many states in the Midwest and Southern U.S. regions demonstrated substantial improvements, while states in the Northeast and certain Western regions experienced minimal growth or declines. These regional disparities underscore the influence of local policy responses and pre-existing educational conditions, emphasizing the need for geospatially-informed regression analyses to identify underlying factors.

Figure 2. Geographic Distribution of Changes in ACGR for SWD by State from 2018-2019 to 2021-2022



DISTRICT LEVEL

At the district level, extreme fluctuations in graduation rates were especially pronounced in Mississippi, New Jersey, and Ohio. Districts identified as statistical outliers[1] —showing notably large increases or decreases—were predominantly located in these three states. Specifically, out of the 77 districts nationwide that saw substantial declines in ACGR, 70 were from New Jersey alone. Conversely, 31 out of the 53 districts with significantly above-average improvements were from Ohio, and eight came from Mississippi. Such concentrated variations suggest that state-specific systemic factors, potentially including not only measurement differences or reporting practices but also state-level policies or practices, significantly influenced these district-level outcomes.

Nationally, districts experienced an average increase of 2.4 percentage points in graduation rates from 2019 to 2022 for SWD, driven primarily by approximately 45% of districts that achieved either modest or substantial gains. Specifically, 27% of districts reported considerable increases of 10 or more percentage points, and an additional 18% saw smaller gains of 1 to 9 percentage points. Meanwhile, 31% of districts reported no change, and 25% experienced declines in graduation rates for SWD. The median district change was zero, with the middle half of districts experiencing between zero and a 10 percentage point increase.

It is important to note that districts showing huge changes in ACGR for SWD could be coming from relatively small cohort sizes. In these cases, a shift of just a few students not graduating could be enough to move a district into the 'large gain' or 'decreased' category. In small cohorts, even modest changes – whether due to policy shifts, school-level interventions, or personal life circumstances – can result in large percentage changes in graduation rates. While these fluctuations are meaningful, they should be interpreted with an understanding of the underlying cohort size to avoid overgeneralizing their impact.

In addition, the volatility seen in small districts may also be amplified by cohort-specific conditions that are not repeated year to year. Changes in school leadership, teacher turnover, or fluctuations in family stability and student health can all impact outcomes for a small group of students in ways that are not sustained across cohorts. These context-specific factors mean that even small shifts in policy or practice can lead to outsized results in one year, which may not persist into the next. As such, patterns of large increases or decreases should be viewed not only through statistical trends, but also with consideration for the highly variable and localized experiences of students and schools.

Additionally, some of the large swings observed—particularly among districts with very low or very high ACGR in 2019—may also reflect a regression to the mean. This suggests that districts starting from unusually low graduation rates may show large increases in subsequent years simply because extreme values tend to move closer to the average over time. Similarly, districts with exceptionally high rates at baseline may experience declines or stagnation, not necessarily due to policy failures, but because their initial values were well above typical levels. While these trends do not diminish the importance of actual progress or setbacks, they highlight the need to consider statistical context when interpreting dramatic changes in performance.

[1] Outliers here are defined as districts who ACGR change from 2019 to 2022 was beyond three standard deviations from the average national change.

Looking at all districts by the rough quartiles defined above, we see in Table 3 how strikingly similar the student groups are in terms of student demographics, including ethnicity, special education status, English-language learner, and Free/ Reduced lunch status. Districts with no ACGR changes tended to be smaller, while districts reporting modest increases typically had larger enrollments. Interestingly, those districts experiencing declines between 2019 and 2022 were similar in size and locale to those experiencing substantial gains. However, declining districts started with the highest average ACGR in 2019 and ended with the lowest in 2022, whereas districts achieving large gains began with the lowest initial rates and ended with the highest. These findings strongly suggest that variations in graduation outcomes were driven more by policy decisions and educational practices rather than by differences in student demographics or geographic settings.

Table 3. District-Level Characteristics by Changes in ACGR for SWD (2019-2022)

	Decreased	No Change	Gain (1-9%)	Large Gain (>=10%)
N =	1,807	2,248	1,313	2,000
% of all School Districts	25%	31%	18%	27%
ACGR gain	-17.7	0	3.1	22.7
2019 ACGR	78.1	73.9	69.8	56.1
2020 ACGR	72.4	72.3	72.2	67.7
2021 ACGR	70.4	72.6	72.5	70.4
2022 ACGR	60.4	73.9	73	78.8
2019 Cohort	56	28	97	56
2022 Cohort	59	29	102	59
Cohort Change	13	8	2	17
2019 Non-Grads	14	7	29	24
2022 Non-Grads	22	8	26	15
Non-Grads Change	8	0	-3	-9
% Change in Non-Grads	143	8	-10	-44
Operational Schools	10	6	16	10
Student Enrollment	5,837	2,875	10,207	5,663
% Special Education	16.2	15.3	15.7	15.9
% ELL	5.6	5.6	6.4	5.6
% Native American	1.3	1.7	0.8	1
% Asian	3.4	1.8	3.6	2.6
% Hispanic	18.2	16	18.1	15.3
% Black	11.4	9.8	12.2	12.1
% White	61.9	67.3	61	64.9
% Pacific Islander	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1
% Multi-Racial	3.6	3.3	4	3.9
% FRL Eligible	43.6	46.7	44	44.8
% Chronically Absent (ALL)	27.5	27.4	28.3	29.2
% Chronically Absent (CWD)	34.8	35.2	36	36.7
City	14.7	11.7	15.7	13.2
Suburb	39.1	18.7	40.4	32.3
Town	21.9	23.8	20.6	25
Rural	24.2	45.8	23.3	29.6
Total Revenue	87,800,000	44,000,000	148,000,000	84,600,000
Federal Revenue	6,339,920	3,313,656	11,300,000	6,466,851
IDEA Revenue	1,193,758	679,226	2,112,663	1,172,002
IDEA as % of Total Revenue	1.3%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%

Table 4 presents the findings from both the univariate and multivariate regression analyses that examine the relationships between changes in ACGR and various district background characteristics.

In the univariate analyses, initial ACGR for SWD in 2019 emerged as a robust predictor. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the 2019 rate was associated with a decrease of 0.57 units in the subsequent ACGR change ($\beta = -0.570$, $r = -0.557$, $p < 0.001$). This relationship not only remained but was even stronger when other background characteristics were controlled for in the multivariate model ($\beta = -0.732$, partial $r = -0.640$, $p < 0.001$). As illustrated in Table 3, districts with lower graduation rates in 2019 were more likely to show improvements by 2022, while districts with higher rates in 2019 tended to experience declines. This pattern suggests a regression-to-the-mean phenomenon, indicative of considerable volatility in graduation rates among SWD. Essentially, the wide variability between individual cohorts means that even districts with strong cohorts in 2019 may experience a natural pull back toward the overall average in 2022, and vice versa. Such dynamics underscore the inherent instability in these rates, emphasizing that extremely high or low performances tend to moderate over time.

Other significant predictors in both analyses included demographic and educational factors. For instance, the percentage of white students was positively associated with ACGR change. In the univariate model, an increase in the percentage of white students corresponded to a 3.85-unit increase in ACGR change ($\beta = 3.854$, $r = 0.062$, $p < 0.001$). In the multivariate framework, after accounting for other variables, this effect nearly doubled ($\beta = 7.210$, partial $r = 0.118$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a stronger independent contribution.

Two additional predictors that reached statistical significance were the total enrollment and changes in the cohort sizes of SWD. Although their effects were small—total enrollment had a β of 0.000035 ($r = 0.035$, $p = 0.004$) and changes in the cohort sizes had a β of 0.012 ($r = 0.037$, $p = 0.003$)—these variables still provided statistically significant incremental predictive value.

In terms of funding-related characteristics, two key indicators were examined: the percentage of students classified as special education and IDEA as a percentage of total revenue. In the univariate analyses, a one-unit increase in the percentage of special education students was associated with a modest decline in ACGR change ($\beta = -3.795$, $r = -0.015$). However, when other district characteristics were controlled for in the multivariate model, the negative impact of this variable became considerably more pronounced ($\beta = -44.200$, partial $r = -0.124$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that districts with higher proportions of special education students tend to experience sharper declines—or smaller improvements—in graduation rates over time. In contrast, IDEA as a percentage of total revenue demonstrated a positive association with ACGR change. In the univariate model, an increase in this funding measure was linked to a 44.715-unit increase in graduation rate change ($\beta = 44.715$, $r = 0.036$, $p < 0.01$), and after adjusting for other factors, the effect remained significant and even slightly enhanced ($\beta = 50.520$, partial $r = 0.033$, $p < 0.01$). Together, these results suggest a complex relationship in which greater IDEA-related funding is associated with more favorable graduation trends, yet districts serving a higher proportion of special education students face additional challenges in improving their graduation outcomes.

Geographic location also played a role. The multivariate analysis revealed that districts designated as city or suburb were associated with lower ACGR change compared to the rural districts as a reference category. Specifically, being a city was linked with a 2.31-unit decrease ($\beta = -2.314$, partial $r = -0.038$, $p < 0.01$), and being in a suburb was associated with a 1.03-unit decrease ($\beta = -1.030$, partial $r = -0.025$, $p < 0.05$). The districts indicated as town did not reach statistical significance.

Finally, the percentage of the population who had an internet subscription at home in 2019 was significant in the univariate analysis (β = –0.127, r = –0.063, p < 0.001) but did not remain significant in the multivariate model (β = 0.026, partial r = 0.014, p = 0.262). This suggests that its apparent univariate relationship with ACGR change is largely explained by its shared variance with other predictors.

Table 4. Summary of Univariate and Multivariate Regression Results: Predictors of ACGR Changes for SWD (2019-2022)

	Regression (variables individually)		Regression (partial r)[1]	
	Coefficient	*Effect Size (Correlation)*	*Coefficient*	*Effect Size (partial r)[2]*
2019 ACGR	-0.570***	-.557	-0.732***	-.640
Total Student Enrollment	<0.01	.012	<0.01**	.035
% Change in ACGR cohort Size (2019 to 2022)	0.012*	.028	0.012**	.037
% Special Education	-3.795	-.015	-44.200***	-.124
% White	3.854***	.062	7.210***	.118
% FRL Eligible	0.874	.013	-	-
Total Revenue	<0.01	.003	-	-
Federal Revenue	<0.01	.012	-	-
IDEA Revenue	<0.01	.008	-	-
IDEA as % of Total Revenue	44.715**	.036	50.520**	.033
City	-0.419	-.008	-2.314**	-.038
Suburb	-2.905***	-.075	-1.030*	-.025
Town	1.122*	.026	0.026	.001
Rural	2.176***	.056	-	-
% Internet Access	-0.127***	-.063	0.026	0.014

* - statistically significant at p<.05 level; ** - statistically significant at p<.01 level;
*** - statistically significant at p<.001 level

In summary, the multivariate regression model explained approximately 42% of the variance in ACGR change (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.418$), with baseline 2019 ACGR emerging as by far the most influential predictor. Other factors—including racial composition, cohort change, and geographic locale—also contributed statistically significant, though smaller, independent effects. These results underscore the importance of considering both historical performance and demographic context when assessing changes in graduation rates. Moreover, the challenges faced by districts with higher proportions of special education students highlight the need to explore exceptions to this pattern.

[2] % FRL and % White, as well as %FRL and % Internet are highly correlated, and of the three, % White and % Internet were retained in regression models containing multiple factors as they were shown to have a stronger statistical relationship to the outcome of ACGR change. All three measures of revenue were highly correlated to total student enrollment, unsurprisingly as funding is based on the number of students within a district, and only total enrollment was included in the models given it is a causal precedent to funding measures.

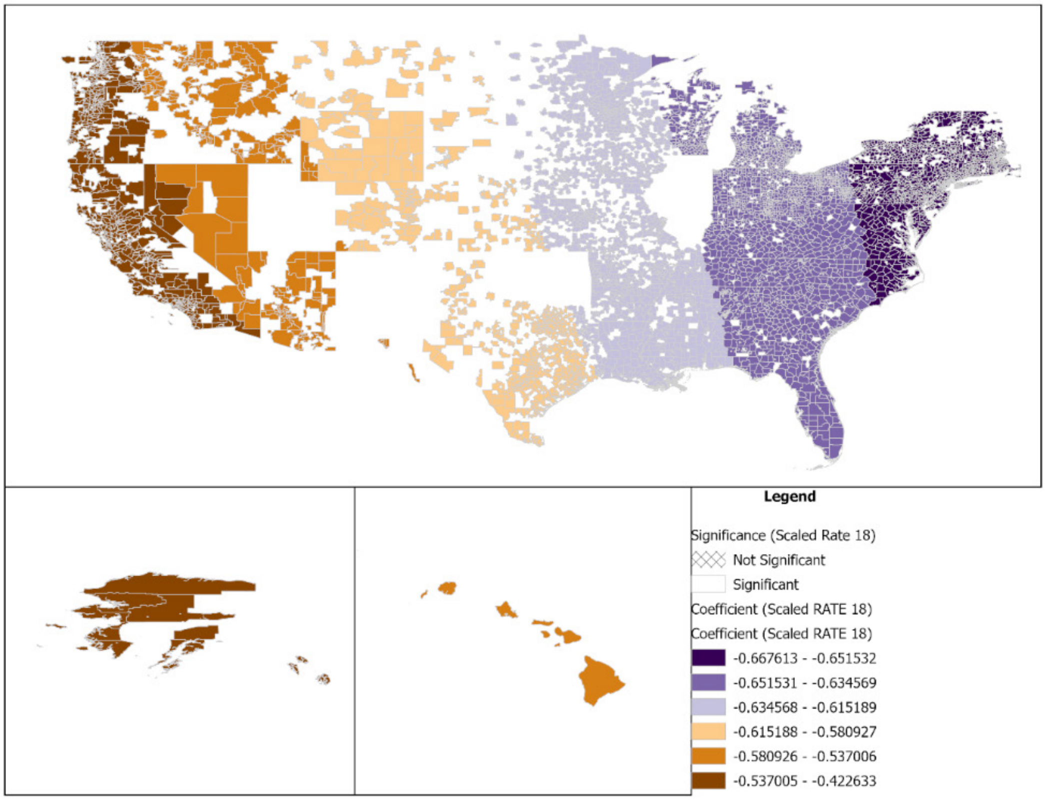
Regional Variations in Relationships

While the regression analysis described earlier illustrates general relationships between district characteristics and changes in ACGR across the U.S., it's important to recognize that states—and even districts—approach education for SWD very differently. Each locality uses distinct strategies, policies, and supports to boost graduation rates. Given these diverse contexts, Multiscale Geographically Weighted Regression (MGWR) helps us see beyond the overall pattern and understand how these relationships differ across various geographic regions, potentially explaining local and regional variations more clearly. For instance, an increase in the percentage of students receiving special education services might be associated with a decrease in graduation rates of SWD in one region, while the same increase could actually correspond with an increase in the graduation rates elsewhere. MGWR could indicate the spatially varying relationships between variables with different directions (negative or positive), as well as magnitudes across geographic regions.

The MGWR analysis included only variables that were previously found significant in the regression analysis. Specifically, the variables incorporated were the 2019 ACGR, total student enrollment, percent change in cohort size from 2019 to 2022, percentage of special education students, percentage of White students, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), IDEA funding as a percentage of total revenue, and percentage of households with internet access. Locale type was not included in MGWR because the geographic variation captured by MGWR already inherently accounts for differences related to regional contexts.

Figure 3 shows the MGWR results for the baseline ACGR in 2019 as a variable. The map shows both the magnitude and direction of the coefficient for the 2019 ACGR predictor, as well as the areas where this relationship is statistically significant. Overall, the MGWR result suggests a negative relationship between the baseline ACGR in 2019 and the changes in ACGR, but at varying magnitudes. As shown in the legend, the darker purple areas indicate stronger negative relationships, whereas the darker brown areas indicate weaker negative relationships. Districts that began with relatively lower graduation rates for SWD showed smaller decreases in ACGR. On the other hand, districts that initially had higher graduation rates showed relatively greater decreases. These stark regional differences highlight the importance of localized policies and interventions rather than uniform strategies, as factors influencing graduation rates for SWD vary significantly across geographic regions.

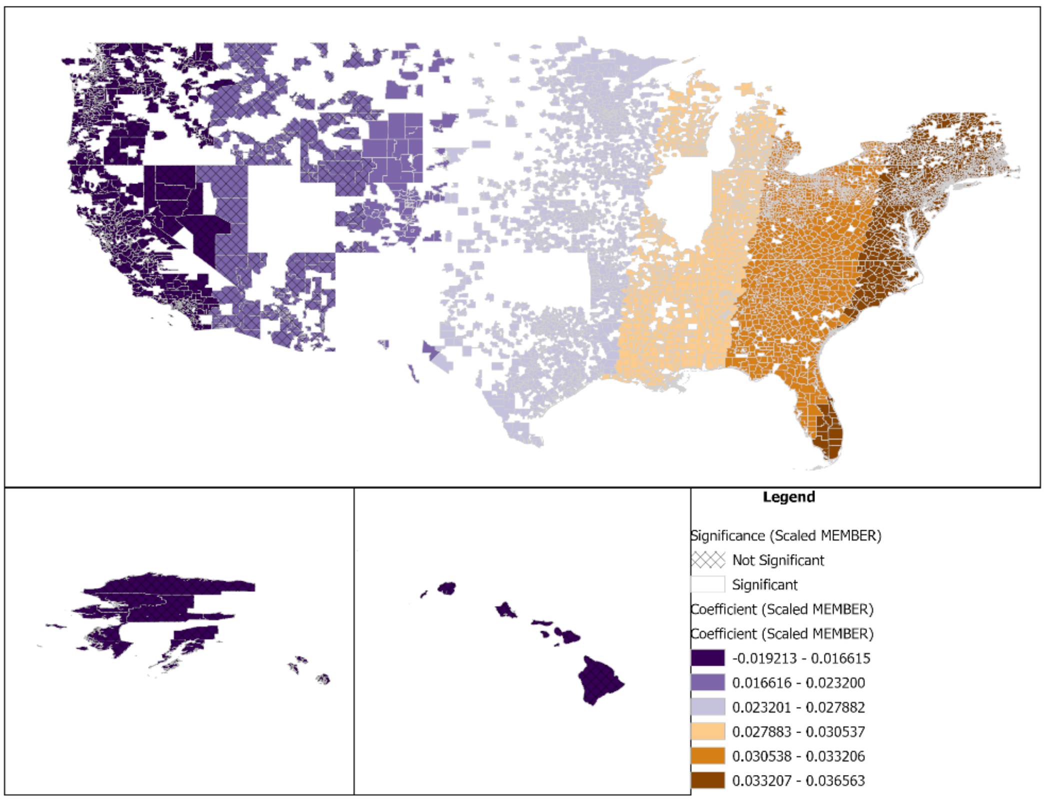
Figure 3. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Baseline 2019 ACGR[3]



[3] States with missing district-level data—such as Illinois, Maine, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Utah—were excluded from the analysis. These states appear as white (blank) areas on the map to reflect the absence of data.

Figure 4 maps the spatial distribution of the regression coefficient and significance for the total students enrolled. This visualization highlights the geographically varying relationships between enrollment size and changes in ACGR across states and districts. The coefficient's sign (positive or negative) indicates that in some regions, higher enrollment correlates with the increase in graduation rates, whereas in other regions, larger enrollment sizes are associated with smaller gains or even declines in ACGR. The accompanying significance levels indicate that the strength and direction of this association vary substantially across regions, reflecting localized demographic or operational differences. To be more specific, an increase in the enrollment size is associated with an increase in ACGR in the Midwest and South, as well as the Northeast. On the other hand, higher enrollment in these regions tends to be associated with weaker gains or even declines in ACGR on the West Coast.

Figure 4. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Total Student Enrollment



Moreover, Figure 5 shows the regional variations in the relationships between changes in the cohort size and ACGR. As shown, some regions in the Northwest and Northeast tend to have varying degrees of negative relationships. On the other hand, the regions from the Midwest and some of the mountain states in the West (closer to the Midwest and South) demonstrate either a weaker negative relationship or even a positive relationship. This geographic variability implies that changes in cohort size may impact ACGR differently depending on local resource availability that is accompanied by the cohort size or other context-specific factors.

Figure 5. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Cohort Size Change

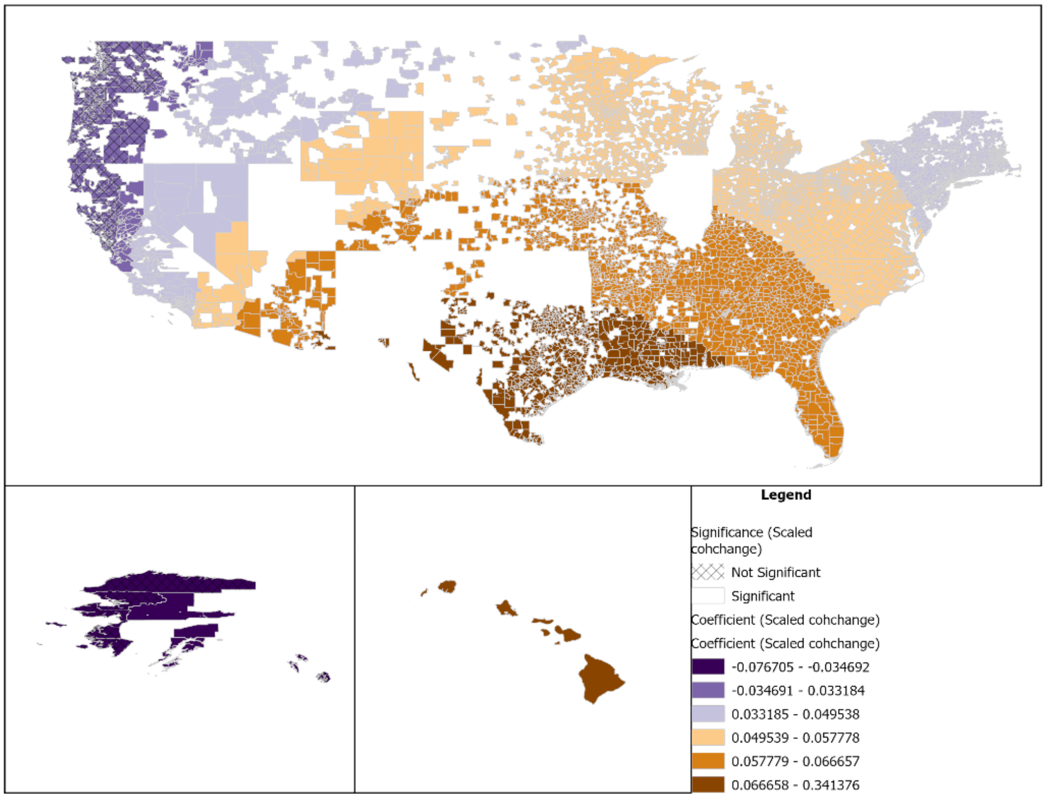


Figure 6 maps the relationship between the percentage of special education students within a district and the ACGR changes. The spatially varying coefficients indicate that in some areas, particularly around the Northwestern regions, a higher percentage of special education students is positively related to an improvement in graduation rates but not at a statistically significant level. The rest of the areas tend to have either not statistically significant or negative relationships at varying degrees. The degree of negative relationships gets stronger towards the East.

Figure 6. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Percentage of Special Education Students

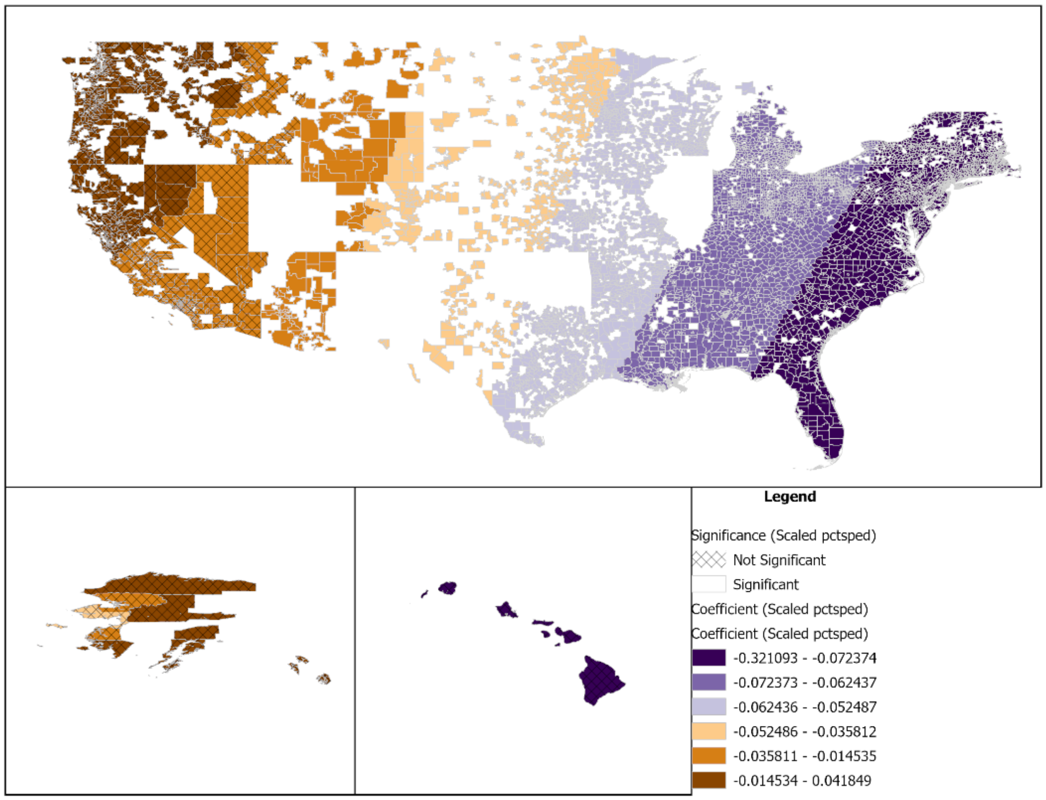


Figure 7 depicts the distribution of the geographically weighted regression coefficients of the percentage of White students in relation to the changes in ACGR. The map indicates that demographic composition plays a significant role in predicting changes in ACGR. A higher share of White students is significantly and positively related to graduation rate changes across the country, except for some areas in Alaska, at varying degrees. The positive relationship tends to be stronger towards the East, and weaker towards the West.

Figure 7. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Percentage of White Students

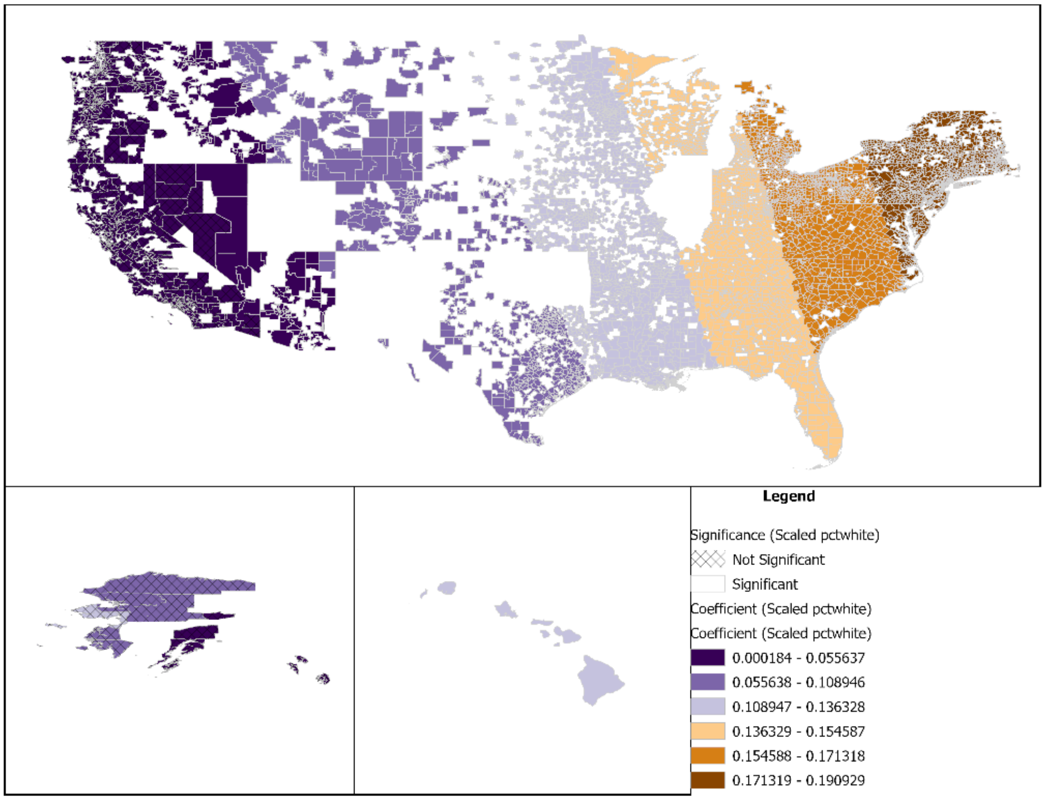
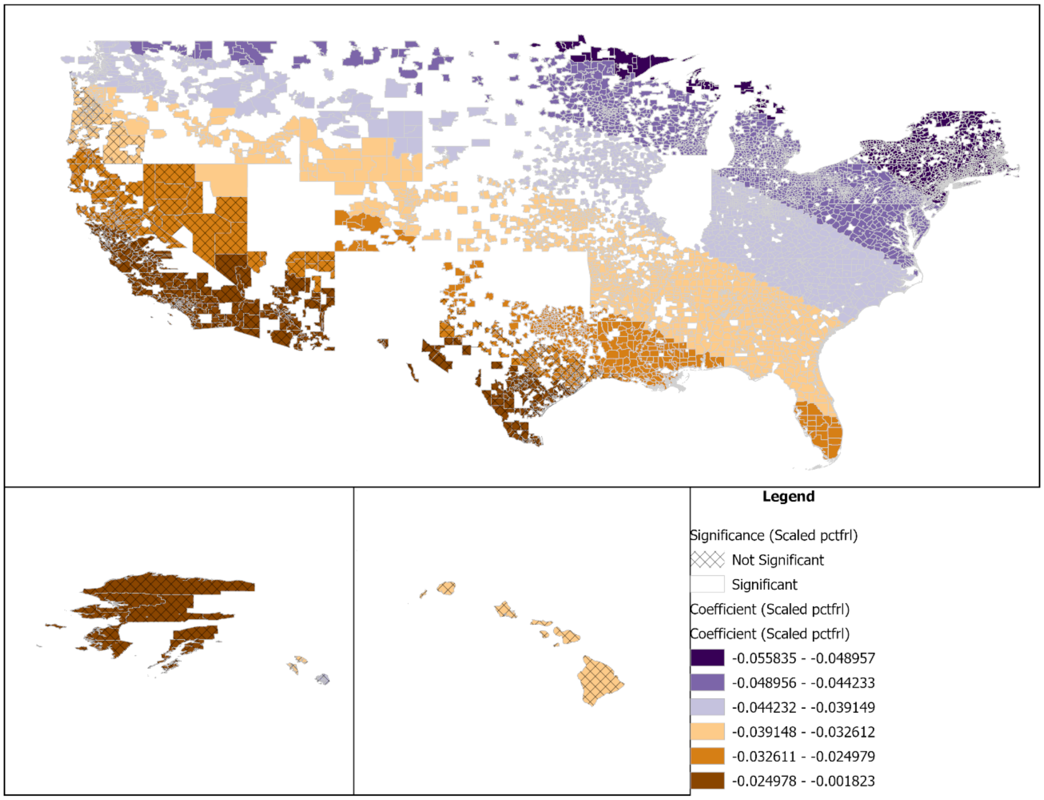


Figure 8 shows the geographically varying relationships between the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL) and the changes in ACGR. The map highlights that some regions on the West Coast and the South tend to have the weakest negative relationships but tend not to be significant. The negative relationships get stronger moving towards the Northeast, the regions with the strongest negative relationships. It is notable that the areas with a higher percentage of FRL tend to have stronger negative relationships.

Figure 8. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Percentage of Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch



In addition, Figure 9 illustrates the spatial variation in the relationship between the proportion of IDEA funding to the total revenue and ACGR changes. In regions where this coefficient is statistically significant, higher IDEA funding shares tend to be linked with increases in the graduation rates. A positive coefficient would suggest that greater investment in special education resources could contribute to higher ACGR improvements. Among the regions with negative coefficients, only a portion of Alaska is statistically significant, potentially indicating that increased spending in special education is associated with districts facing more challenges. The positive relationships get stronger as moving from the West towards the East.

Figure 9. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of IDEA Funding as a Percentage of Total Revenue

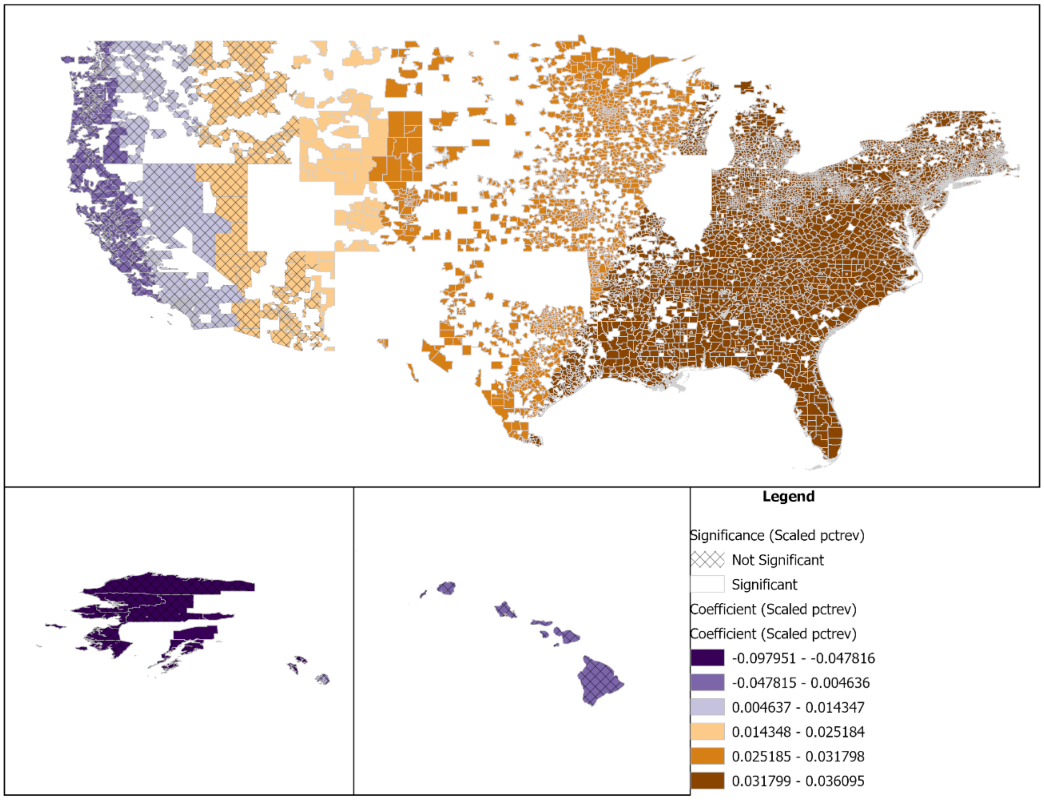
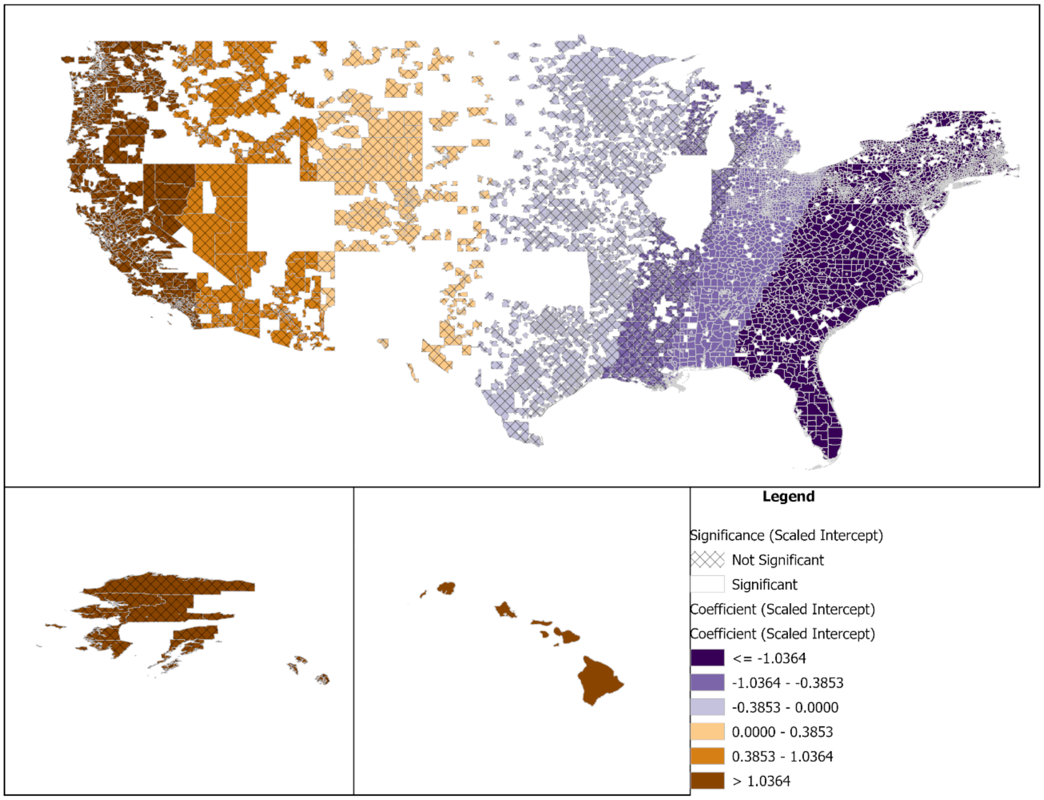


Figure 10 presents the geographically weighted regression results for the relationship between the percentage of households with internet subscriptions and the changes in ACGR. The map indicates that in Hawaii, better internet access is significantly associated with an increase in graduation rate. While the map also indicates positive relationships in the West and some parts in the Midwest, they are mostly not statistically significant. The regions with stronger negative relationships in the Northeast, as well as some regions in the Midwest and the South tend to have statistically significant coefficients.

Figure 10. MGWR Coefficients and Significance of Household Internet Subscription Rates



These maps (Figures 3–10) show that the factors affecting changes in ACGR during the pandemic are not uniform across all regions. In plain language, predictors like the baseline graduation rate, total student enrollment, shifts in cohort size, the percentage of special education students, overall demographics, socioeconomic factors, IDEA funding, and even internet access influence graduation rate improvements differently depending on the area. Using MGWR allowed us to capture not only the overall impact of these variables but also how local conditions can either enhance or lessen their effects. These insights are crucial for crafting targeted, region-specific strategies to sustain and further boost graduation outcomes for SWD.

STATE DRIVERS AND INITIATIVES

In this section, we focus on a qualitative analysis of states and school districts that experienced notable changes in the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for students with disabilities (SWD) during the pandemic—specifically, substantial increases in Ohio and Mississippi, and marked declines in New Jersey. By examining each state's education policies and approaches to special education during this period, we aim to identify the key factors that contributed to these contrasting outcomes.

STATES WITH SUBSTANTIAL DECREASES

New Jersey

First, it is critical to understand that most states implemented some form of flexibility or waivers for graduation requirements for SWD during the COVID-19 pandemic. Variations in these actions, however, likely do not explain, why New Jersey experienced by far the largest decrease in ACGR (-30.7). This decline was driven, at least in part, by changes in accountability policies that were not related to the pandemic. A new federal mandate beginning with the class of 2021 resulted in thousands of SWD being excluded from the official graduation count if their IEP exempted them from the exit test – even though they met all their IEP requirements and received state-endorsed diplomas (Education Law Center, 2023). By adopting a stricter definition of on-time graduation with a regular diploma for federal accountability purposes, New Jersey's graduation rate did not capture these students, further contributing to the observed decline (The Grad Partnership, 2024).

In New Jersey, another notable context is that approximately 30 New Jersey school districts asked parents to sign waivers releasing any claims of liability under IDEA as a condition of their children receiving special education services during the pandemic (Education Law Center, 2020). Although the state had issued a prohibition to school districts against conditioning special education on parents waiving their children's rights guaranteed under the IDEA (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020), it still highlights systemic issues in the delivery of special education services during the pandemic. It indirectly indicates that the level of support provided to SWD was potentially compromised, and if SWD did not receive the full range of special education services they were entitled to, it could have negatively impacted their academic progress as well as their graduation outcomes.

STATES WITH SUBSTANTIAL INCREASES

On the other hand, Ohio (+20.2) and Mississippi (+24.9) experienced the largest increases in ACGR for SWD.

Ohio

Recognizing the disruption caused by the pandemic on traditional testing and graduation procedures, Ohio enacted flexibility measures under House Bill 67 of the 134th General Assembly, including the Graduation Flexibility Course Grade Substitution. This measure allowed districts to substitute a student's final course grade in eligible subjects for the equivalent high school end-of-course exam score, accommodating students who could not complete state assessments due to COVID-related challenges (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, 2023). These flexibilities extended to SWD as well, likely contributing to the substantial increases in ACGR observed among SWD during the pandemic.

However, these temporary flexibility measures may not entirely account for the increased ACGR among SWD. Despite the state testing requirements being included again for classes of 2023 and beyond (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, 2024), the graduation rates of SWD remained increasing in 2023 (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, n.d.). Ohio's extensive initiatives specifically targeting learning experiences, educational outcomes, and graduation rates of SWD likely also played a significant role. At the close of 2019, the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce introduced a plan called "Each Child Means Each Child" in order to improve the learning environment for SWD. This comprehensive strategy outlines recommendations for boosting literacy skills, addressing disproportionality, supporting postsecondary success, developing inclusive leadership, and promoting high-quality instructional practices among educators serving SWD. The recommendations and strategies are organized around early intervention, ongoing professional development, and postsecondary planning (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, 2021).

On a related note, the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce also implemented Each Child on Track, a component of Ohio's State Systematic Improvement Plan (SSIP) specifically designed to increase the graduation rates and reduce dropout rates of SWD. This initiative primarily aimed to strengthen regional support networks, enabling districts to establish early warning systems capable of identifying high school SWD who are at risk of not graduating. Doing so, districts could promptly provide students with individualized support across key areas such as attendance, academic performance, and behavioral interventions. To facilitate these goals, the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce collaborated with regional State Support Teams to deliver training and coaching to five district cohorts over five years, helping districts effectively introduce an Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System. The initiative also encouraged districts to enhance local policies and practices by fostering shared leadership, implementing legislatively required supports (e.g., career advising and graduation policies), and offering specialized academic interventions. Such coordinated and sustained efforts likely contributed substantially to the notable increase in graduation rates for SWD observed in Ohio during the COVID-19 pandemic (American Institutes for Research, n.d.).

A few success stories from participating school districts—Centerburg, Columbia, Franklin, Portsmouth, and Woodbridge—as shared by the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, highlight that the Each Child on Track initiative has led to significant improvements. The initiative helped districts build the necessary capacity to implement early warning systems for identifying and supporting SWD at risk of dropping out (American Institute of Research, 2023a; 2024a; 2024b). These districts enhanced data use for informed decision-making, improved leadership team collaboration, and developed systematic processes to monitor interventions (American Institute of Research, 2023b; 2023c). Additionally, student and family engagement—especially regarding attendance—was strengthened, contributing to early signs of improved attendance, support structures, and overall student outcomes (American Institute of Research, 2023a; 2024b). These targeted improvements have begun yielding tangible benefits, including strengthened support structures and improved student outcomes.

Moreover, Ohio has given particular attention to education finance. After the passage of Senate Bill 310 in 2020, the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to identify best practices and estimate the costs associated with delivering special education services effectively. In particular, AIR's study evaluated best practices for providing educational support and assistive technologies, compared Ohio's current funding model with the estimated costs of implementing these practices, and reviewed funding approaches in other states and federal policy that shape state funding policies. This reflects Ohio's commitment to not only improving educational practices for SWD but also ensuring the practical feasibility of these improvements through adequate resources and funding.

Taken together, Ohio's multifaceted approach—including temporary flexibility measures during the pandemic, targeted initiatives such as Each Child Means Each Child and Each Child on Track, and focused efforts on understanding and adequately funding special education services—demonstrates a sustained and strategic commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for SWD. These coordinated, systemic efforts likely provided the necessary support structure and interventions that significantly contributed to the substantial increase in ACGR among SWD during the pandemic.

Mississippi

Prior to the pandemic, Mississippi had one of the lowest graduation rates for SWD in the country, trailing the national average by more than 26 percentage points (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This longstanding disparity prompted a series of state-level initiatives aimed at improving graduation rates for SWD.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mississippi also had waivers for passing requirements for high school end-of-year assessments in Algebra I, English II, Biology, and U.S. History in 2020-2021 due to the COVID pandemic, which affected the graduation rate to increase (Mississippi Department of Education, 2022). However, the impact of the waivers during the pandemic is seen to have diminished for the school year 2023-2024, which still saw an increase from the previous school years, meeting the state goal of reaching 70% of the graduation rate for SWD by 2027 (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

While the temporary waivers might have led to the increases in ACGR of SWD during the pandemic, the continued increase in the graduation rate even after the impact of waivers has diminished signals the need for a deeper look. Mississippi has specific state goals and a strategic plan for advancing SWD educational access and ensuring that they graduate from the school system. Mississippi Board of Education Strategic Plan 2016-2020 states a goal to provide every child with access to a high-quality early childhood program. As an outcome, the board expected to see an increase in the SWD participation in general education settings and a reduction in reliance on self-contained special education classrooms. Moreover, another critical objective involved preparing all students, including SWD, for successful high school graduation and readiness for next steps. The plan explicitly targeted improvements in all subgroup graduation rates and required comprehensive support for lower-performing schools to develop tailored intervention strategies for students at risk of not graduating within four years (Mississippi Department of Education, 2016). These structured statewide efforts likely contribute significantly to the continued growth in graduation rates for SWD.

Mississippi also invested in the Mississippi Teacher Residency (MTR) program to expand and diversify the quality teacher workforce. Partnering up with five state universities, the program supported up to 200 individuals specializing in elementary and secondary education. Participants in the MTR program committed to teaching in schools or school districts facing severe teacher shortages, especially those serving low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, and SWD, groups disproportionately impacted during the pandemic (Mississippi Department of Education, 2022). Investing in the teacher force with a particular intention of serving SWD disproportionately impacted by the COVID pandemic could have been a potential driver that led to an increase in ACGR of SWD.

Mississippi has also seen substantial gains in elementary literacy through targeted early literacy policies—improvements that may have contributed to the state's rising graduation rates for students with disabilities (SWD). Although the state had long performed below the national average, it made remarkable progress between 2013 and 2019. By that time, Mississippi had caught up to the national average in fourth-grade reading scores and had significantly narrowed the gap in eighth-grade reading performance, a turnaround often referred to as the "Mississippi Miracle" (Barnum, 2023, July 18).

In an effort to align its standards more closely with national benchmarks, Mississippi revised its state assessments in 2015 to better reflect the expectations of the NAEP. One of the state's cornerstone policies in this area was the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, passed in 2013, which aimed to ensure that every student reads at or above grade level by the end of third grade. Students who did not meet this benchmark were subject to retention unless they qualified for an exemption. The Act also provided broad support, including increased resources for teachers and principals in grades K–3, professional development in literacy instruction, the development of a statewide network of 80 literacy coaches, interdisciplinary curriculum training, and family-oriented tools such as reading plans and success guides (National Assessment Governing Board, 2018).

Importantly, these early literacy efforts also included students with disabilities. In alignment with statewide reading initiatives, the Mississippi Department of Education released fiscal guidance in 2016 to help school districts use IDEA, Part B funds to support the literacy development of SWD. This guidance emphasized the importance of early reading skills for SWD and offered districts practical strategies for using federal funds not only for students with disabilities, but also for non-disabled students in K–3 who required additional academic or behavioral support. The document provided specific examples of allowable, literacy-focused activities and encouraged integration with broader district reading efforts (Mississippi Department of Education Office of Special Education, 2016). These targeted, inclusive literacy strategies may have helped lay the foundation for the substantial gains in high school graduation rates later observed among SWD in Mississippi.

Among the districts that saw the most dramatic gains in ACGR for SWD, specifically those with increases exceeding 60 percentage points, several stood out for their consistent use of in-person instruction or their early return to in-person or hybrid models following initial school closures. Nationally, 77% of U.S. public schools shifted to online learning in spring 2020. By the following academic year, only about 52% had returned to fully in-person instruction, with the remaining 48% continuing with either hybrid or fully virtual models (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

In contrast, Aberdeen School District in Mississippi resumed in-person instruction as early as August 2020. While district leaders were still considering different instructional models into the fall (Van Dusen, 2020), a district update in June 2021 confirmed that Aberdeen had returned to full in-person learning (Clay, 2021, June 4). Beyond reopening classrooms, the district made substantial investments in student access to technology. Using $507,000 in CARES Act funding, Aberdeen provided iPads and Chromebooks for students and secured Zoom licenses for all teachers, supporting both in-person and remote instruction as needed.

Choctaw County School District also largely remained open throughout the 2020–2021 academic year, operating on a regular schedule with early dismissal every Wednesday (McKnight, 2020, July 14), with some hybrid distance learning models flexibly adopted.

New Albany Public Schools likewise resumed face-to-face instruction relatively early. A news release from July 30, 2020, announced the district's return for the 2020–2021 school year (New Albany School District, 2020, July 30). While the district briefly shifted to a hybrid model in August 2020 (New Albany School District, 2020, August 7) and again in January 2021 (New Albany School District, 2020, December 11), and transitioned to fully virtual instruction for two days in January 2022 (New Albany School District, 2022, January 13), it otherwise maintained hybrid or in-person learning throughout the pandemic. Additionally, New Albany partnered with a local internet provider to expand home connectivity for students, reflecting a proactive approach to bridging the digital divide (New Albany School District, 2021, February 1).

These Mississippi school districts with large gains in graduation rates for SWD shared a clear emphasis on maintaining consistent access to learning. Whether through early in-person reentry, flexible hybrid models, or expanded internet access, these efforts likely played a role in supporting student engagement and improving graduation outcomes during the pandemic.

LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC-ERA SHIFT IN GRADUATION RATES FOR SWD

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted nearly every aspect of education—but for SWD, an unexpected outcome emerged: a notable increase in high school graduation rates. This report examined the underlying dynamics of that shift through quantitative and qualitative analyses, leading to important lessons for policymakers, district leaders, and education advocates seeking to improve educational outcomes for SWD.

MULTIPLE FORCES AT WORK: WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

During the Pandemic, graduation rates for SWD improved most significantly in districts that began with lower baseline rates. There are two broad explanations for this, and likely both played a role. Districts with very low graduation rates for SWD had the most students who could potentially benefit from pandemic-driven changes in graduation requirements and grading policies. Analysis has shown that graduation rates, on average, increased in states that waived graduation test requirements, though only 12 states still had these at the time of the pandemic (The GRAD Partnership, 2024). There is also some evidence that the impact of chronic absenteeism, which is typically higher for SWD than other students, on high school graduation rates also lessened in pandemic years, as districts made it easier for students to make up work, and reduced or eliminated penalties for late assignments (Malkus & Hollon, 2025). Finally, a recent report by NCLD based on interviews of students with learning disabilities who dropped out of school and those who considered dropping out but did not, shows that for at least some SWD the in-person school day, could be challenging in both inter-personal and academic ways, and resulted in often counter-productive avoidance behaviors (Rodrigo et al., 2025, July 10). Remote and asynchronous learning opportunities during the Pandemic may have been better fits for some SWD. Removing exit exams, providing more opportunities to make up work, reducing penalties for late work, and providing students relief from negative interactions in school through remote learning opportunities may have benefited SWD in particular.

The second factor is that the presence of small cohort sizes of SWD in many districts amplified these shifts, showing how a change in outcomes for just a few students could tip a district into a "large gain" or "sharp decline" category. Volatility in learning opportunities, often shaped by changes in leadership, teaching staff, or family circumstances, highlights how even modest shifts in policy or practice can produce significant effects in small settings. Other factors, such as cohort changes, student racial demographics, and district locale, also showed smaller but significant relationships, highlighting the need to interpret changes within both historical, demographic, and geographic contexts.

Multiscale Geographically Weighted Regression (MGWR) deepened this picture by illustrating how the relationships between district characteristics and graduation rate changes were not uniform across the country. For example, the share of special education students was negatively associated with graduation gains in some regions but positively or insignificantly associated in others. Similarly, the impact of socioeconomic indicators, demographic composition, and funding levels varied depending on local context. These findings highlight the importance of tailoring actions to local realities, rather than assuming that one-size-fits-all policies will yield uniform results across states and school districts.

WHEN STATE-LEVEL STRATEGY MATTERS: LESSONS FROM OHIO AND MISSISSIPPI

The qualitative case studies brought to light another critical dimension: state-level leadership and coherence in education strategy mattered. In Ohio and Mississippi—two of the top-performing states in terms of SWD graduation gains—state education departments rolled out comprehensive initiatives before and during the pandemic. These included early warning systems, professional development, policy flexibility, and investments in literacy and teacher capacity. In Mississippi, where the ACGR for SWD had long trailed the national average, years of investment in early literacy for all students—including those with disabilities—laid a strong foundation. Likewise, in Ohio, initiatives such as Each Child Means Each Child and Each Child on Track worked in tandem with targeted funding studies and pandemic-era flexibility to bolster graduation supports.

By contrast, New Jersey's sharp drop in SWD graduation rates was not primarily due to pandemic disruptions, but instead stemmed from a federal policy shift that redefined who counts as a graduate. This change excluded thousands of SWD with state-endorsed diplomas from the federal ACGR measure, demonstrating how technical policy decisions can dramatically reshape data narratives.

LOOKING AHEAD: SUSTAINING PROGRESS AND CLOSING GAPS

The graduation rate increases among SWD during the pandemic are encouraging, but they also raise questions about sustainability. As flexibilities on graduation requirements expire and education systems return to pre-pandemic accountability standards, the risk of backsliding remains. At the same time, the persistent gap between SWD and their non-disabled peers continues to be one of the widest in education.

This report underscores that meaningful and sustained improvements will require more than reactive policies. The most promising gains were seen where states and districts had already invested in inclusive practices, data-driven supports, and infrastructure designed to adapt to students' needs. These lessons from the pandemic era inform a long-term vision for educational equity. These findings present an opportunity for policymakers, educators, and funders to strengthen efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

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