



AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN

Help. Hope. Answers. Today.

Autism Alliance of Michigan Public Comment State Board of Education June 10, 2025

Good afternoon board members, Superintendent, and department staff.

I'm Heather Eckner and I serve as the statewide director of education for the Autism Alliance of Michigan.

At the Autism Alliance, our Education pillar promotes a Whole Child vision for Michigan by catalyzing advocacy and engagement activities to move an equitable education agenda for children and youth with special education needs focused on **funding reform, appropriate identification, access to interventions, system accountability, and decreasing disparities.**

I am offering this public comment to elevate the voices of families of students with disabilities and to amplify critical advocacy priorities.

The Autism Alliance has consistently advocated for meaningful systemic change that ensures students with disabilities in Michigan receive equitable access to education, appropriate services and supports, and inclusive opportunities that are not only required by law but necessary for full participation and student success.

Michigan ranks near the bottom nationally in graduation outcomes for students with disabilities—an unacceptable reality that demands urgent attention.

One of the main drivers of this low graduation rate is the **high** rate of students with disabilities dropping out of high school.

In fact, as the map included with this comment clearly shows, Michigan's dropout rate (27 percent in 2021-22 SY) is one of the highest in the nation.

Put plainly, one in four Michigan high schoolers with disabilities is dropping out.

This is a devastating statistic with long-term consequences for thousands of families in our state.

Other states with similar numbers of students with disabilities – including Massachusetts and Virginia – have drop out rates that are **half** the rate in Michigan.

<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/>

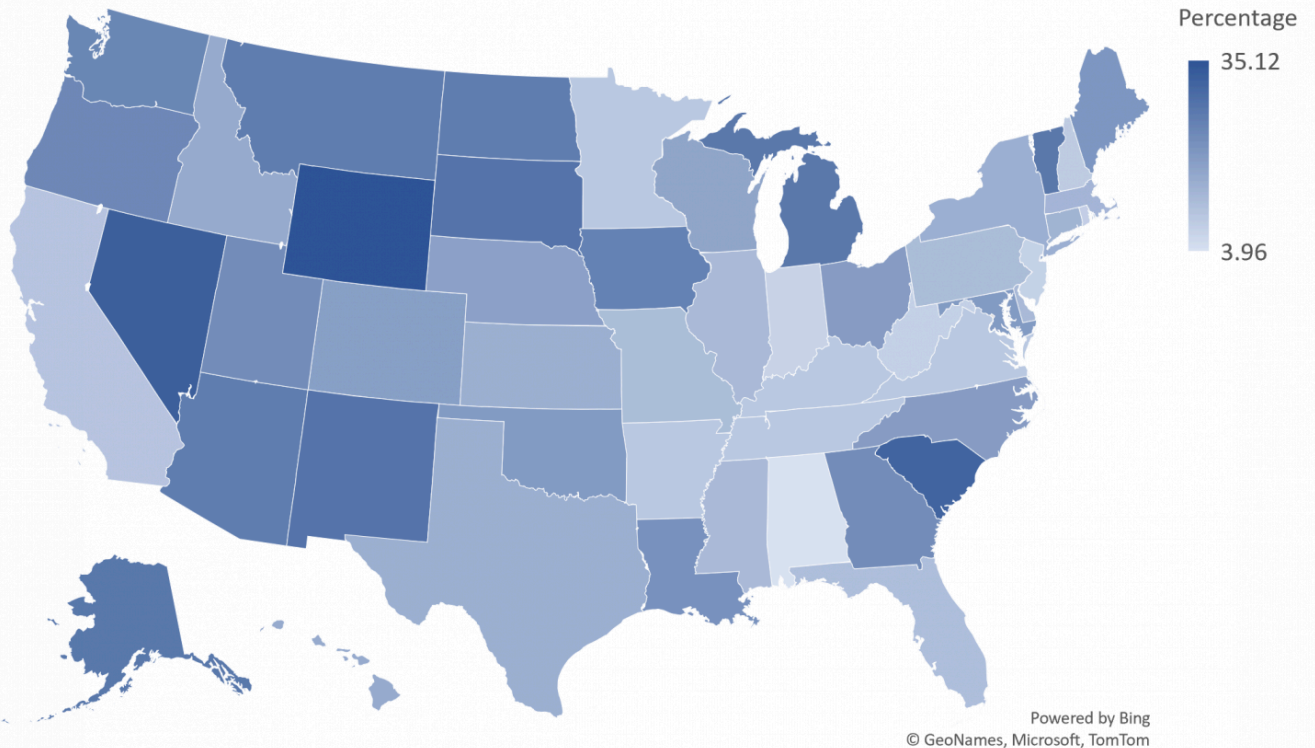
elevating lived experience, identifying system barriers, and amplifying voices of parents & students with disabilities



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Indicator B2: Percent of youth with IEPs who exited special education due to dropping out.



Source: <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/part-b-spp-apr-indicator-2/>

The recent **Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey**¹ conducted by the Autism Alliance found common reasons for dropping out were:²

- Lack of relationships with fellow students;
- Dislike of school experience;
- Lack of appropriate curriculum; and
- Poor relationships with teachers and/or school staff.

¹ <https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>

² <https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/copy-of-aaom-assessmentgraduationdrop-out-2.pdf>



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There are many negative effects of high school dropout on students including:

- lower earning potential;
- higher unemployment rates;
- increased risk of poverty;
- limited job opportunities;
- higher likelihood of substance abuse;
- poorer mental health and physical health;
- increased crime rates; and
- reduced civic engagement.

Essentially, dropping out can significantly hinder a person's future prospects in employment, personal well-being, and societal participation. These negative effects can be amplified for students with disabilities, who already face challenges in school and lifelong success as a result of many systems barriers in every aspect of daily life.

The annual targets set in the [Michigan Department of Education's State Performance Plan³](#) are far too high and fail to result in any serious improvement.

A target dropout rate of 20 percent in 2025 is unacceptably high.

The Autism Alliance calls for these targets to be revised downward.

Several [resources⁴](#) exist to assist states in addressing high school dropouts.

The Autism Alliance encourages the Michigan Department of Education to take advantage of these evidence-based resources which provide effective strategies to reduce dropout rates.

We call for the Department to undertake an aggressive and urgent initiative to dramatically reduce the dropout rate of Michigan's students with disabilities.

Thank you for your attention to this significant issue.

Michigan must do better and we must do it now.

The data is clear. The stories are real. The urgency is undeniable.

We urge the Board to lead with boldness, transparency, and compassion for our most marginalized learners.

³ <https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/special-education/data-and-reporting/spp-apr> | Michigan's FFY 2023 Part B SPP/APR

⁴ <https://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/>



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The Autism Alliance is working toward our vision for education that will move Michigan from the bottom toward becoming a Top 10 state in preparing students with disabilities for the most independent life possible through accessible, high-quality, and inclusive education opportunities.

We appreciate your time and consideration.

Heather Eckner

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Autism Alliance of Michigan
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Addendum

School Year 2021-2022 SWD Percent Drop Out Rates

STATE	SWD Drop out Percent	Number SWD Exited ages 14-21	Number SWD Dropped out
MI	27.2	13,548	3,682
AK	27.2	1,217	331
AZ	25.9	9,632	2501
CA	10.0	56,424	5,667
FL	11.9	27,403	3,251
IL	12.5	19,756	2,471
MA	13.5	12,183	1,651
NJ	7.4	16,764	1,245
NV	32.6	4,288	1,399
NY	14.9	34,260	5,090
OK	19.2	7,204	1,384
PA	12.0	23,902	2,869
SC	31.5	6,049	1,905
SD	27.8	954	265
UT	24.6	5,474	1,223
VA	9.7	12,728	1,239
WA	23.9	7,948	1,903
WY	35.1	877	308

School Year 2021-2022 SWD Percent Drop Out Rates - comparison

STATE	SWD Drop out Percent	Number SWD Exited ages 14-21	Number SWD Dropped out
MI	27.2	13,548	3,682
CA	10.0	56,424	5,667
FL	11.9	27,403	3,251
IL	12.5	19,756	2,471
MA	13.5	12,183	1,651
NJ	7.4	16,764	1,245
NY	14.9	34,260	5,090
PA	12.0	23,902	2,869



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Learn more about how AAoM is elevating the lived experience, identifying system barriers, and amplifying the voices of parents and students with disabilities connected to the special education system in Michigan to inform our collective advocacy efforts:

- **Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey: Report to the Community**
bit.ly/AAOM-SEE

Learn more about how AAoM is looking toward a broader vision of system transformation with the aim of increasing high-quality, inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities while improving educational outcomes through special education finance reform that will serve to re-imagine how our system serves kids with disabilities Pre-K through post-secondary:

- **Funding Our Future: The Call for a New Framework in Special Education Finance**
<https://tinyurl.com/AAOM-Funding-Our-Future>

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. For help finding resources, providers, and information contact our MiNavigators at 877-463-2266 (AAOM) or email at navigator@aaomi.org. More information about AAoM's Education pillar can be found at: <https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/>.