



## **AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN**

*Help. Hope. Answers. Today.*

# **Autism Alliance of Michigan Public Comment**

## **State Board of Education**

**January 14, 2025**

Good afternoon board members, Superintendent, and department staff.

My name is Heather Eckner - I serve as the statewide director of education for the Autism Alliance of Michigan.

The Autism Alliance is a statewide nonprofit that engages in bipartisan advocacy on behalf of our mission and core constituents. Under the Education pillar of the organization, we drive initiatives that address root causes of systemic barriers to access, opportunity, and outcomes in education while supporting increasing acceptance that leads toward the preparation of a safe, successful, and inclusive life for children and youth with disabilities.

While we are an autism organization, our work in the education space is disability-wide and system-wide.

I am here before you today to provide public comment on the findings of the **Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey** which was conducted in 2023 and released to the public through our ***Report to the Community*** in Fall 2024. [bit.ly/AADM-SEE](https://bit.ly/AADM-SEE)

The Special Education Experience Survey represents the collective voice of students with disabilities and families across the state of Michigan.

It is a stakeholder survey aimed toward elevating lived experience, identifying system barriers, and amplifying the voices of parents and students with disabilities who have engaged with the special education system in Michigan to inform collective advocacy efforts.

With a statewide survey capturing nearly 900 responses, the last effort of this kind was nearly a decade ago under the focus of the Special Education Reform Task Force led by Fmr. Lt. Governor Brian Calley.

The findings of the Special Education Experience Survey clearly show the disparities and challenges students with disabilities and their parents experience while navigating Michigan's education system.

Michigan's public education system is meant to provide a pathway for ALL students, including those with disabilities. Our report shows that, in many cases, that is not happening the way that it should.

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

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The families and individuals who completed this survey deserve to be heard. Our *SEE Survey: Report to the Community* reveals the frustrations and even trauma they have experienced as part of their efforts to acquire, or help their children to acquire, fundamental skills through public education.

As the first survey since the Special Education Reform Task Force issued recommendations for changes and improvements to the special education system in 2015, the SEE Survey shows there has not been improvement in key areas over the past nine years.

The report identifies top concerns for students with disabilities and their families which include:

- School funding and resources are not adequate and equitable.
- The special education workforce shortage is affecting our most vulnerable students.
- Students with disabilities are not spending enough time with nondisabled peers in the least restrictive environment.
- Schools are not identifying disabilities early enough, preventing students from becoming eligible for special education services as early as possible.
- Schools are not engaging sufficiently with parents and their students.

Through this public comment and the materials I have provided you today, the Autism Alliance - on behalf of parents and students - calls for members of this board to become informed of the challenges being experienced across our state. We want Michigan to move from the bottom to the top in special education access, opportunities, and outcomes. In order to do that, we all must confront difficult realities of our current education system for marginalized children and youth with disabilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Heather Eckner

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