



## AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN

Help. Hope. Answers. Today.

### Autism Alliance of Michigan Public Comment State Board of Education April 8, 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.

The Autism Alliance Education pillar advances 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 here to provide public comment this month on Michigan's annual application submitted to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in order to be eligible to receive IDEA Part B Federal funds.<sup>1</sup>

States are required to make their IDEA Part B applications available to the public and accept public comment prior to submission to ED's Office of Special Education Programs.

Through these applications, states must make a number of "assurances" regarding compliance with the IDEA including ensuring a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is available to all identified students with disabilities, that services are provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent practicable, as well as identifying and addressing significant disparities among other areas of focus.

This morning, the Autism Alliance of Michigan submitted our public comment to the Michigan Department of Education. (MDE)

The focus of our comments centered on the poor performance of students with disabilities in Michigan which calls into question whether Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are addressing all areas of student needs that arise during the course of an academic year.

Specific data that point to these areas of concern include:

- **Graduation rates** - Michigan has one of the lowest graduation rates for students with IEPs in the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/special-education/spotlight/ff25-partb-app>



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- **Dropout rate** - Michigan has one of the highest dropout rates for students with disabilities of any state in the nation. **Currently, 27% - 1 in 5 students - are dropping out of school.**
- **Suspensions** - Michigan also has one of the highest rates of students ages 3 through 21 served under the IDEA, Part B, who are suspended out of school or expelled for more than 10 days during the school year.
- **Attendance / Absenteeism** - Michigan's students with disabilities are chronically absent at a much higher rate than students without disabilities.

Additional areas of concern include assurances that impact transparency and dispute resolution for families.

The Autism Alliance of Michigan calls upon the MDE to make IDEA state complaint investigation reports publicly available.

The lack of access to decisions makes it difficult for parents, their advocates, and organizational complaints to assess whether and how to use the state complaint procedures effectively. The lack of access to these decisions also prevents the public from monitoring the MDE performance of its supervisory responsibilities.

Another area of assurance related to students with disabilities being included in all general State and district-wide assessment programs.

Michigan has consistently exceeded the limitation on the use of alternate assessments established by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

We have provided you all with our full public comments that were submitted to the department.

Again we make our call to action - Michigan must do better for students with disabilities.

We need strong leadership in our state willing to confront honest information about the evidence of outcomes for ALL students in our public schools. And, we need the courage to act with a sense of urgency.

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.



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Thank you for your time and consideration.

Heather Eckner

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### 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](mailto:navigator@aaomi.org). More information about AAoM's Education pillar can be found at: <https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/>.

*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**  
[bit.ly/AAOM-SEE](https://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>

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

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