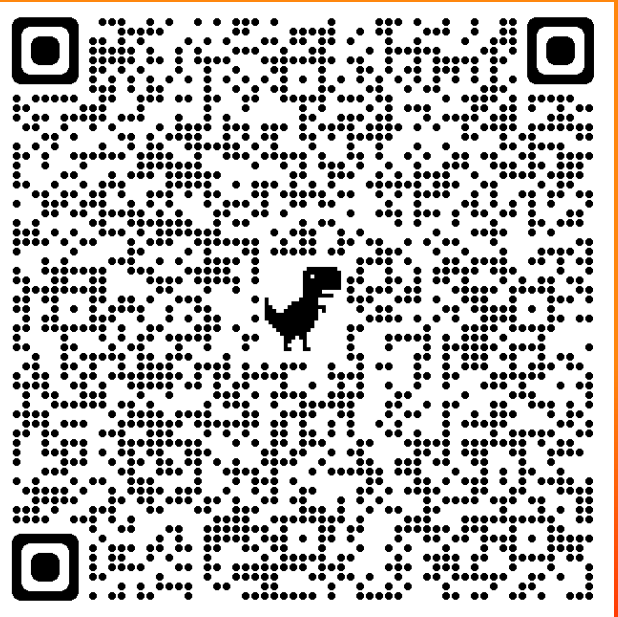# Emerging from the Virtual: Academic & Behavioral Effects Post-COVID-19

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Introduction

- This presentation explores the ongoing post-COVID-19 academic and behavioral challenges faced by students with educational disabilities.

- COVID-19 has left its mark on global education, disrupting traditional methods of teaching and learning, and has significantly impacted student achievement and behaviors (e.g., Fisher et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2021; Townsley, 2020).

- The pandemic necessitated a hasty pivot to virtual learning, posing challenges like the digital divide, lack of personal interaction, and the struggle to adapt to a new educational paradigm (Hertz et al., 2022; Oster et al., 2021). This disruption amplified existing achievement gaps and behavioral challenges in the U.S.' educational system, particularly among students with educational disabilities (Bendeck, 2022).

- The immediate educational impact of the pandemic has been widely recognized (Stone et al., 2023). However, the persisting effects of these changes, even after the return to in-person learning, are less understood. While many students are experiencing these continued challenges (Kuhfield et al., 2020), they again are more pronounced in students with educational disabilities. As such, teachers are having to identify innovative, inclusive, and compassionate pedagogical strategies to support their students' unique academic and behavioral needs.
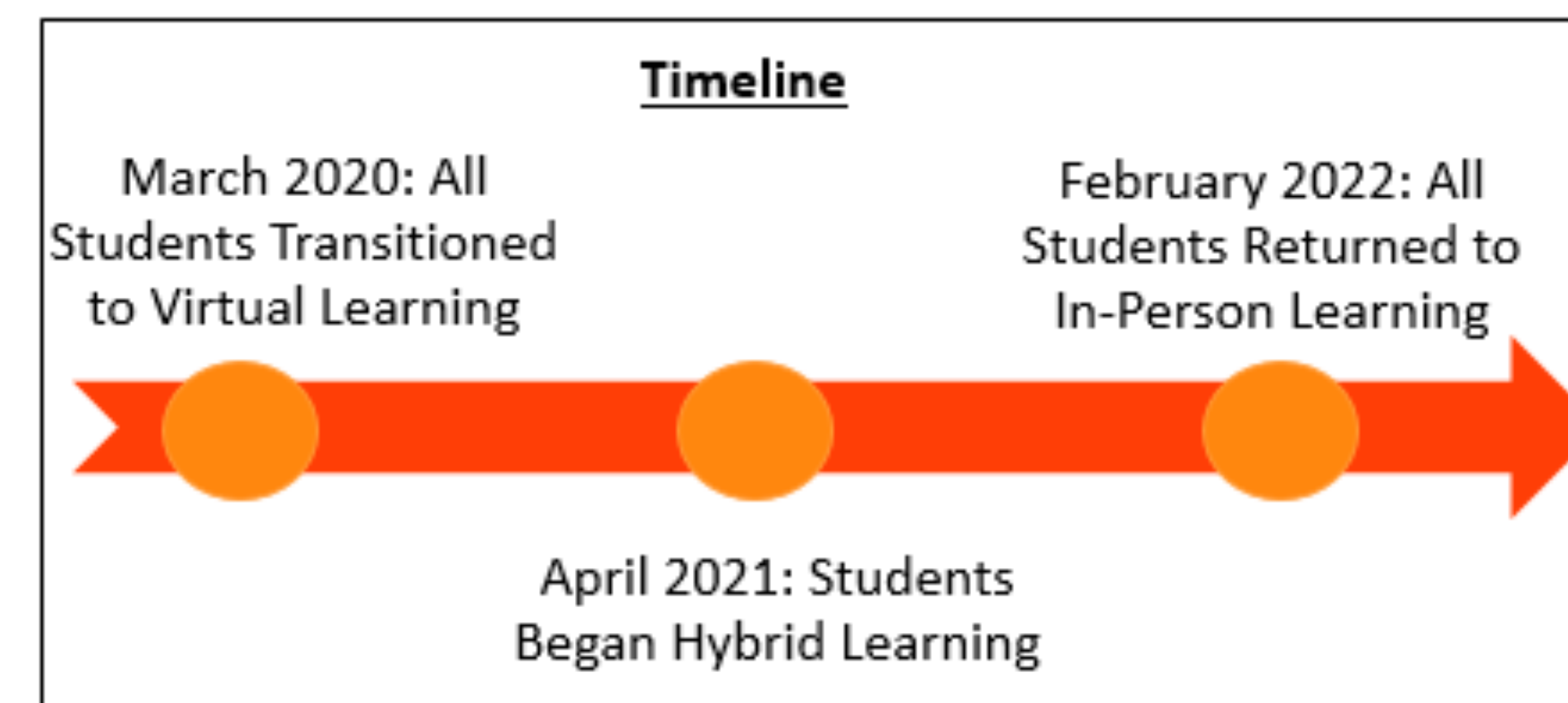
Research Questions:

1. **What academic and behavioral challenges following COVID-19 reportedly continue to be experienced by special education students since returning to in-person learning?**

2. **Are the academic and behavioral challenges currently being experienced more pronounced in special education students versus typically developing peers? Has this pattern changed since returning to in-person learning?**

3. **What strategies are being used by teachers to support their special education students with these challenges?**

Method

Participants:

- *N* = 7 special education elementary (K-5) school teachers in a MD school district

- Demographics:
  - All Female; 3 Black/African American, 2 White, 2 Asian
  - Highest Educational Level: 4 M.A., 2 M.Ed., 1 Ed.D.
  - Years Teaching: *M* = 15
  - Method of Service Delivery: 3 Inclusion, 1 Pull-Out Only, 3 Pull-Out and Push-In

Method

Timeline

March 2020: All Students Transitioned to Virtual Learning

April 2021: Students Began Hybrid Learning

February 2022: All Students Returned to In-Person Learning

Measures and Procedures:

- The data for this pilot-study come from qualitative interviews conducted at 12 months and 24 months after all students in this district returned to fully in-person learning (January '23 and '24).
- These educators shared their experiences, observations, and strategies for addressing these gaps.

Sample Questions:

In your opinion, are your special education students still experiencing negative academic and/or behavioral effects of COVID-19? How so? Please provide specific skills or areas in which they continue to be impacted.

Do you believe that your special education students are experiencing greater levels of academic/behavioral impacts from COVID-19 than their typically developing peers? How so?

What specific strategies are you currently using with your special education students to support their continuing academic/ behavioral weaknesses?

- Teachers' responses were reviewed and key themes were noted.

Results

Research Question 1: What academic and behavioral challenges following COVID-19 reportedly continue to be experienced by special education students since returning to in-person learning?

January 2023:

Academically, teachers reported that students...

- Had lost skills they had pre-COVID-19 in math, reading, and writing and required re-teaching.
- Displayed big gaps in writing because it was not used as much or in the same way during virtual learning.

"There has definitely been a fall back on the basic skills. I had to reteach certain basic skills that I knew they could do pre-COVID but lost the consistency of the skill (such as decoding certain word patterns, add/subtract with regrouping)."

Results

"Students' writing skills have been challenging because they don't know how to write since they were asked to type all their answers during virtual learning which means they were using their keyboards. Also, a lot of activities during virtual learning did not even require writing, but rather drag and drop type movements. So now that we are back in-person, these students do not know how to form letters correctly using pencil and paper. I had to start all over again when they came back."

Behaviorally, teachers reported that students...

- Had more behavioral challenges, with most notable difficulties in students who had Autism Spectrum Disorder.

"These students come back to school and it is not what they knew it to be. So speaking of two of my students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder, I frequently observe these two students playing by themselves – and it isn't parallel play – it is more like because they are used to playing alone."

"It also has taken my students a while to get used to the rules and routines of the structured environment of school. For example, virtually, I didn't have to tell you to go to bathroom because at home mom says when you have to go, you go but now you have to get permission."

January 2024:

Academically, teachers reported that students…

- Continue to struggle a lot with the mechanics of writing. Other areas of struggle include decoding, reading comprehension, math calculation, and math problem-solving.

"Some of my third grade students still cannot do simple addition which they should have learned or been exposed to in kindergarten or grade 1. For example, when asked what is 12 + 0, 3 +4 students answers were 10, 6 respectively. They did not even use their fingers to help them count.

Behaviorally, teachers reported…

- Older students had fewer behavioral challenges than in January 2023.
- Younger students who had not been to school before COVID-19 had significant behavioral challenges.

"A lot of the kindergarten students are demonstrating behavior problems this year. These students were not in school prior to COVID. I wonder if this is the impact of them not having the same day-care and socialization opportunities before kindergarten because of the pandemic."

Results

Research Question 2: Are the academic and behavioral challenges currently being experienced more pronounced in special education students versus typically developing peers? Has this pattern changed since returning to in-person learning?

Teachers reported...

- Special education students continue to experience more academic struggles in reading, math, and writing than typically developing peers.
- Writing continues to be the most pronounced difference between special education students and their typically developing peers, likely because of limited paper and pencil activities during virtual learning.
- Behavioral challenges are no longer as pronounced among older students in special education but do continue to be more pronounced in younger students in special education.

Research Question 3: What strategies are being used by teachers to support their special education students with these challenges?

- Lots of pictures/models/ manipulatives
- Think-alouds
- Real life examples
- Break down a process into steps
- Increase parent involvement via texting and email, providing packets for practice

"A lot of presenting information in a way that they can relate to BEFORE completing any classroom tasks (numerous examples and modeling with subject matter to which they can relate). Also using their bodies (for example, when teaching the word cautiously, I asked them to go into the hallway and enter the classroom cautiously)."

Discussion and Implications

- Early schooling plays a critical role in children's academic and non-academic development (Morrison et al., 2019).

- The present study suggests that students in special education continue to experience more pronounced academic effects.

- Interestingly, behavioral challenges are present in younger students in special education who had not begun school during COVID-19.

- Future research needs to investigate whether the themes and trends identified in the current sample are present across different geographical locations and ages.

- Practical implications:
  - Continue exploring additional teaching strategies and educational programming to assist students with COVID-19 related challenges.
  - Policy makers and educators need to consider the immediate and long-term impact of not attending daycare/pre-school or having typical socialization experiences due to COVID-19 before entering kindergarten.