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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted educational systems for young students, especially students with disabilities (SWD). Delayed enrollment into special education, problems with virtual service delivery, and postponed Kindergarten entry caused many students to miss out on the early intervention and early school-aged services to which they were entitled. Minoritized and economically disadvantaged SWD were disproportionately impacted by pandemic-related disruptions

METHODS

Data Sources

Mixed method data collection:

- 1) State of Indiana Child Count Data 2014-2022**
- 2) SIS Data:** Three years of student-level SIS data from a large, diverse school corporation in the state of Indiana. This data is collected and de-identified by INsite (Indiana Student Information to Empower), which is a partnership between a IU's School of Education and K-12 school districts. INsite uses the Ed-Fi data standard. Student-level data includes demographic information, race, ethnicity, grade level, disability type, disciplinary data, and NWEA math and reading scores (when applicable).
- 3) Qualitative Interviews** with teachers and administrators from one school corporation asking: What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student behavior and how have current conditions effected the district's ability to support SWD?

Research Questions

- 1) How did pandemic circumstances impact the identification of SWD and their consequent enrollment into special education?
- 2) Were specific subgroups of SWD disproportionately affected by pandemic-related disruptions to educational services?
- 3) Was there an increase in disruptive behavior (or disciplinary outcomes) as SWD (re)enter school?

Disproportionality Concerns

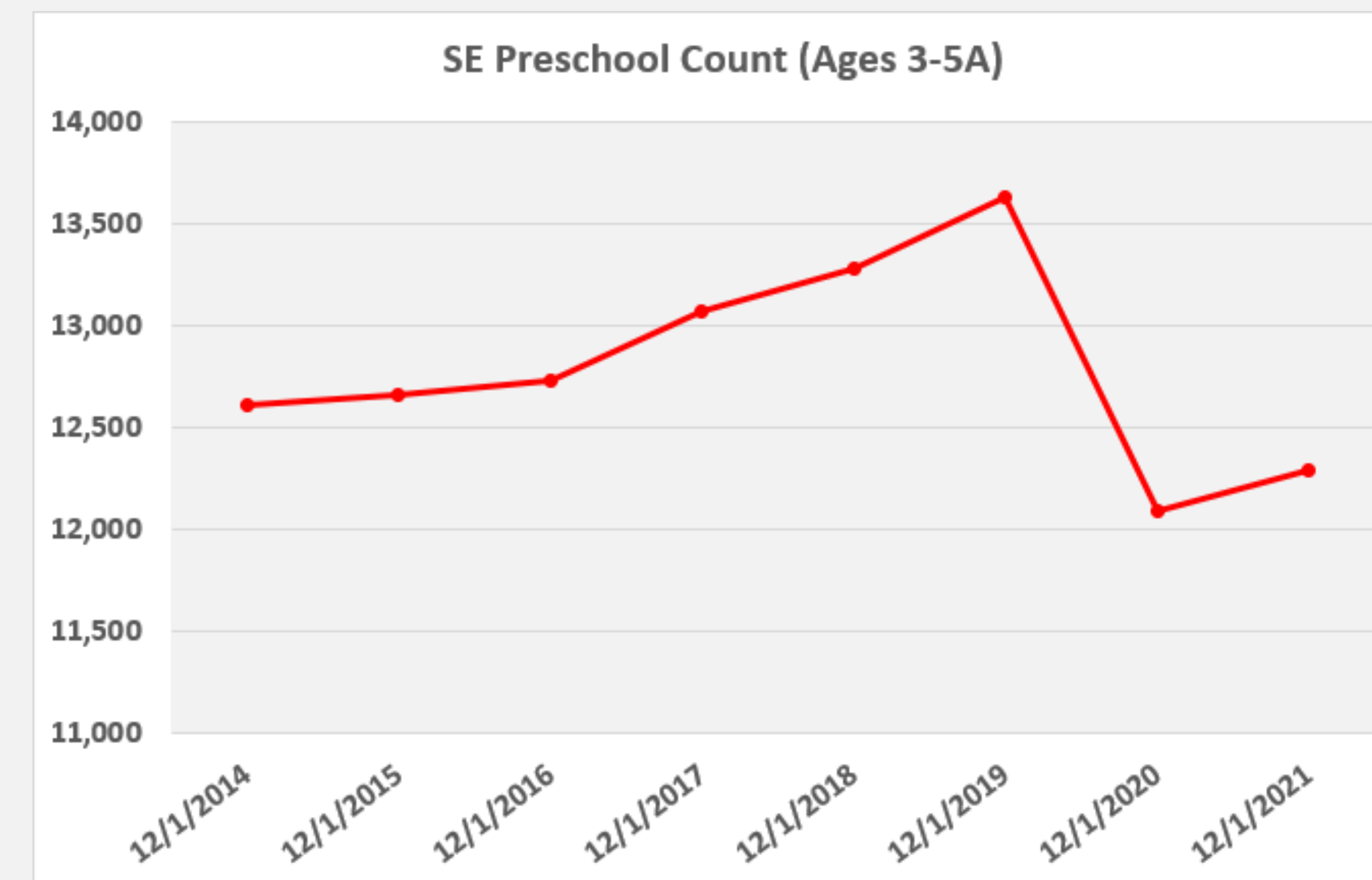
- The pandemic did not equitably impact all students and families.
- SWD from minoritized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds were underserved
- Wealthier families paid for private therapies, set up learning pods, or requested admission to special programs.
- Other families were unable to access resources due to transportation, work conflicts, and internet connectivity issues (virtual First-Steps, virtual therapy sessions, and e-learning, were not accessible or effective for these families)

RESULTS

Child Count

Child Count Data from the State of Indiana

Number of preschoolers identified as having a disability dropped significantly between 2019 and 2020. This number is beginning to increase as assessments have resumed.



Specific Learning Disability

Number of Students with Specific Learning Disability (SLD) 2019-2021

Elementary SLD numbers in this district dropped dramatically, from 327 to 174 students

This is county-level data from a large, diverse school corporation in Indiana
SLD is focus here because it is the largest disability category in Indiana

	2019			2020			2021		
	SLD	Total	%	SLD	Total	%	SLD	Total	%
First grade	22	1565	1.41%	6	1423	0.42%	3	1316	0.23%
Second grade	30	1491	2.01%	22	1428	1.54%	14	1297	1.08%
Third grade	73	1473	4.96%	34	1388	2.45%	35	1315	2.66%
Fourth grade	84	1547	5.43%	74	1351	5.48%	42	1280	3.28%
Fifth grade	118	1560	7.56%	85	1453	5.85%	80	1265	6.32%

Qualitative

- Teachers report feeling overwhelmed
- Special education teams are understaffed, including trained teachers and paraprofessionals
- Teams have been operating in crisis response mode for almost 2 years
- Mental health concerns and reports of students exhibiting behavior issues are high
- Teacher burn-out and severe staffing shortages mean that schools can not provide the services that SWD deserve
- Administrators report shortening the school day for some SWD who have persistent behavior problems

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that students with disabilities were under-identified from March 2020 - currently.

- Significant drop in numbers of preschoolers identified as having any disability
- Fewer elementary students identified with Specific Learning Disability
- These students missed out on 1-2 years of early intervention and special education services to which they would otherwise have been entitled

Underserved students from minoritized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic

- Had difficulty accessing virtual special education services
- Now require additional academic and behavioral supports, including mental health services
- Post pandemic recovery efforts are especially important for SWD from minoritized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Unexpected Findings

The post-pandemic "rebound" has been much more limited than expected, at least in part due to the unprecedented staffing crisis

- SpEd teacher and specialist shortages means that schools do not have enough staff with expertise to work with SWD
- The remaining teachers feel burned out
- Students are not getting the support they need

Examples:

- Some students have been placed on shortened school days when no staff are available to manage their behavior problems
- Increased incidents of school discipline as over-strapped teachers send students to the office more frequently.
- Special education identification services are backlogged
- Special education supports are in limited supply

NEXT STEPS & FURTHER QUESTIONS

This study will examine IEP enrollment, academic (NWEA), and disciplinary data from the 2021-2022 school year to assess the long-term impacts of pandemic delays in enrollment and disruptions to service delivery for SWD.

Can the current educational system deliver the services that SWD deserve and are entitled to by IDEA?

Are there ways that policymakers, administrators, and educators can address the social, emotional and behavioral concerns we are seeing, especially for students who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic?