

## **Examining the Erasure of Disabled Students from K-12 School Shooting Responses**

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### **Introduction**

On April 20, 1999, America experienced the unthinkable: two teenage gunmen entered a school with the intent to murder their fellow students in a shooting now marked in history as The Columbine Shooting. In the 23 years that have passed since Columbine, 330 more school shootings have occurred, and those occurrences are increasing at a terrifying pace. As of July 2022, there have already been 27 school shootings which, according to the United States Government Accountability Office are defined as “Any time a gun is fired on school grounds, on a school bus, or during a school event (such as sporting practice or event, school dance, school play) during school hours or a school event or immediately before or after school hours or school event.” (United States Government Accountability Office, 2020). Despite the national outrage at each of these tragedies, America's only response has been to prepare students for the realization that the unthinkable is possible.

As a result of Columbine, each school year students nationwide take part in active shooter drills, exercises meant to prepare students for the threat of an active shooter. While these drills are not mandated by federal law, these drills are incredibly common in the current educational landscape, with more than 95% of schools across America implementing the procedure. Moreover, research does show that lockdown drills effectively empower students for an emergency, making them invaluable preparation for an emergency. However, these lockdown drills are only accessible to certain groups of students. For disabled students, active shooter drills are overwhelmingly not inclusive of their needs to safely survive a school shooting. This leaves them only one option: accept that due to systemic failures, their disabilities could serve as death

sentences in the case of a school shooting. This doesn't have to be the reality that disabled students confront every time the school door shuts behind them. Yet, due to a complete lack of data around preparing for the needs of disabled students during a shooting, it is the reality they live in. Conducting the first of its kind research, the authors of this whitepaper set out to see why disabled students are seen as afterthoughts when preparing for shootings. They will also examine where legislative review is needed to support disabled students during a shooting. The goal of this whitepaper is to provide pragmatic, research informed, solutions that solve the problem of the erasure of the needs of disabled students from school shooting preparations.

## **Methods**

To inform this whitepaper, the named researchers utilized a “Mixed Method” approach to data collection. Rather than utilizing solely quantitative (numbers based) or solely qualitative (words based) data, the authors elected to employ both types of data to best serve their multifaceted research question. The researchers set to find out whether disabled students A) were aware of whether plans for their safety in case of a school shooting were included in the educational supports given to them as disabled students and B) if, included, whether those specific safety plans adequately accommodated their needs as disabled students. It is important to note that the educational supports mentioned in the prior sentence come in two forms: an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a Section 504 Plan (504). While similar in their goals to ensure an equal and supportive education for disabled students, an IEP and 504 have key differences. An IEP, created in the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) is an educational plan developed by a disabled student’s support team if that student receives specialized instruction or services, typically overseen by a school’s special education department. However, a 504 plan, which was

created in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (specifically Section 504, given the name) is broader in whom it serves. Rather than services, a 504 plan requires that students with disabilities are given accommodations that ensure a free and appropriate education. An accommodation present in a 504 plan differs from a service given in an IEP in one key way: an accommodation is meant to make it easier for a student to participate in “regular” classroom activities, while services like behavioral plans are meant to help the student themselves “improve”, rather than improving the activities for disabled students. In some cases, a student can have both an IEP and a 504 plan if they meet the criteria for each plan. To create and disseminate the quantitative survey, the researchers utilized a web-based survey tool called *QuestionPro*. When selecting the criteria for preparation in the quantitative survey, the researchers elected to offer participation to students in grades K-12 who self-identified as disabled. While the researchers do follow the legal definition of disability set forth in the ADA, they also recognize that disability is a part of the human experience (an assertion supported by the US Congress) and chose to include those who recognize disability as a part of their human experience in the representation of their data. The quantitative survey questions were a mix of traditional multiple-choice questions and those that followed the Likert scale, ranging from 1-5 data points and 1-10 data points. Quantitative student respondents were interviewed between April 12th to May 8th, 2022. The quantitative survey was geographically diverse, fielded in the United States and loosely representative based on the 2020 Census. In total, 397 interviews were collected. Concurrently with the quantitative survey, the researchers also conducted 247 qualitative interviews from educators and administrators across the nation. The respondents were sourced and incentivized through P3 Technology. The interviews were structured and consisted of specific queries developed by the lead researcher, Anja Herrman. Each quantitative interview took on average roughly 5

minutes to complete. All qualitative interviewees were asked to answer 12 open-ended questions (excluding implementing categorical demographic information such as age and job title.) Those interviews took on average around 15 minutes to complete and occurred between June 4th through June 6th, 2022.

## **Findings**

Below is a sampling of the researcher's quantitative findings. These findings are in line with the above methodology and are responses from students who identify as disabled and are under 18 years of age. The first table shown below asks respondents if they have an IEP plan.

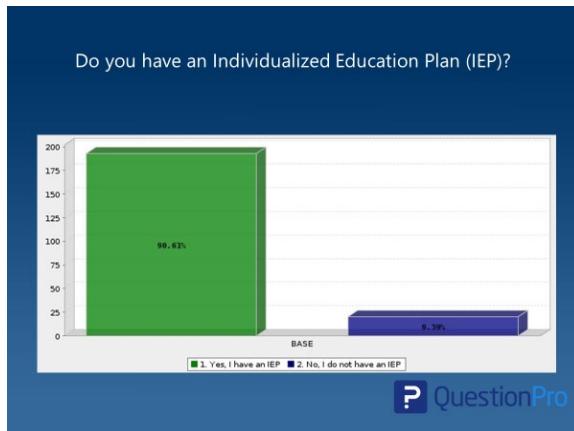


Figure 1

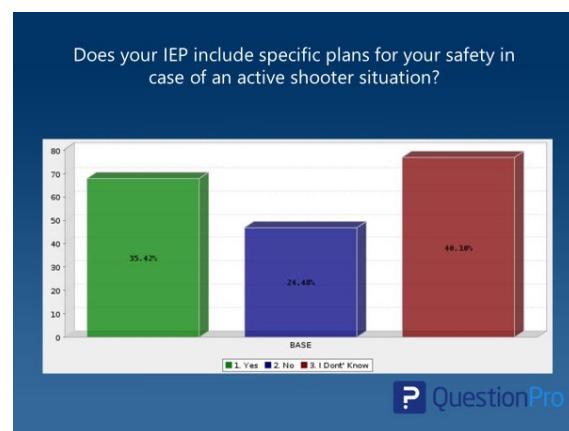


Figure 2

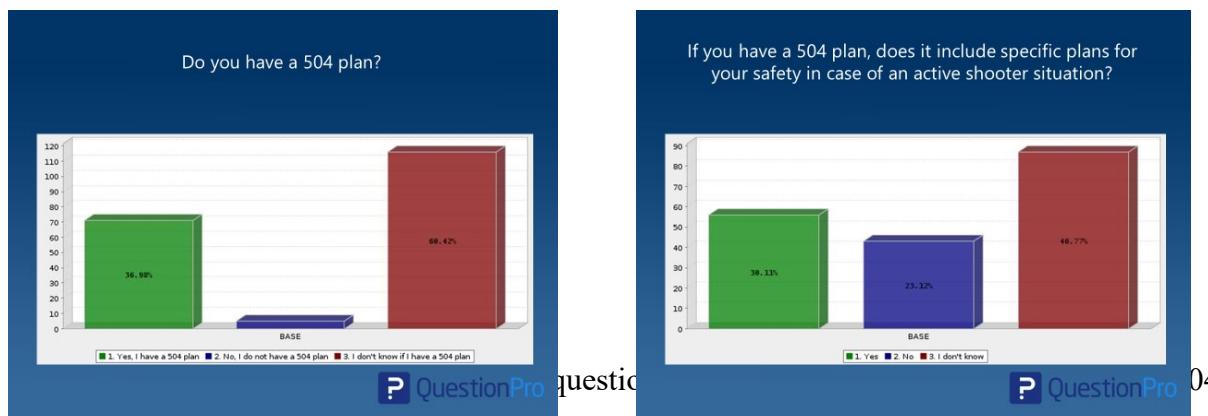
As shown by the green bar chart, 90% of survey respondents answered yes to the question. Next, the survey asks the respondents who answered yes to having an IEP if their IEP includes specific plans for their safety in case of a school shooting . (Figure 2) As shown in Figure 2, 40% of students are completely unaware of if safety plans are included in their IEPs.

In regards to students with 504 plans (also surveyed here), the lack of knowledge is similar to respondents who have IEPs. In fact, the lack of knowledge around 504s extends to whether students know if they have a 504 (Figure 3). When looking at the red bar, it is clear that nearly

70% of respondents simply are unaware of if they have this support. This unawareness compounds further when respondents are asked about school shooting plans in their 504 plans (Figure 4).

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included specific safety plan, a finding that is consistent with the IEP data. The next question posed by the researcher aimed to gauge how worried students were about the possibility of an active shooter situation at school. The responses that scored the highest were neutral, followed by “more worried”, as seen in Figure 5.

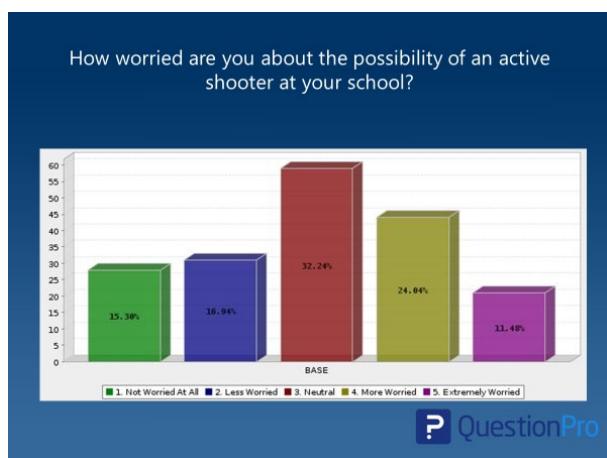


Figure 5

The final two questions asked in the researcher's survey aims to find out if students have practiced active shooter drills at their schools, and whether the existing drills given by their school were inclusive of their needs in regards to their disabilities. In response to the first inquiry, 74.9% of the students answered "yes" to having practiced active shooter drills in school, while the majority of them again "neutral" on the inclusivity point, with the next highest percentage being "less inclusive" as shown in Figure 6.

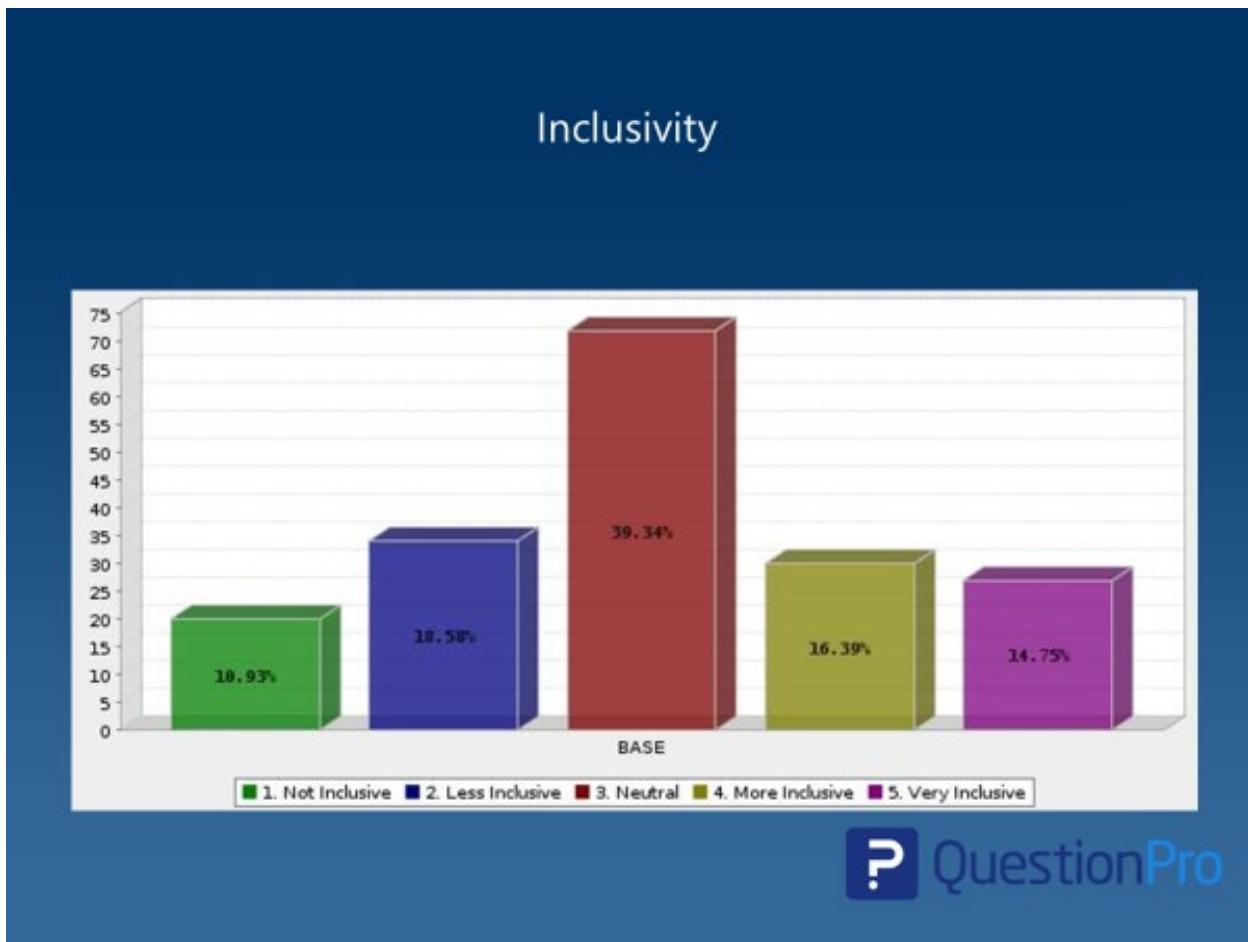


Figure 6

The researchers are interpreting these responses to address the issue of inclusivity in all facets of active shooter situations (not just false alarms) since every student who completed the survey answered this question.

Moreover, the researchers surveyed over 200 educators across all types of schools to get their perspectives on how prepared they felt to support disabled students during a school shooting. While responses were gathered from all types of schools and across all grade levels, one startling thing becomes apparent: teachers are inadequately prepared to support their disabled students during what will undoubtedly be one of the most terrifying things they ever experience. Over 60% of teachers surveyed indicated that they felt unprepared to adequately support disabled students in a shooting, as indicated by a Likert scale response between 1-4 in question number 5 of the survey. On a scale of 1-10 Regarding how prepared she was to support disabled students in an active shooter situation, Haley C., who teaches kindergarten at a Pennsylvania private school indicated that she was a “1”

To give respondents perspective on the relativity of preparedness, when asked how prepared she was to support disabled students in case of a fire, and other natural disasters (such as earthquakes or tornadoes), Haley answered “5” and “3”, respectively. These two numbers, while not demonstrating extremely high levels of preparation, both show a demonstrable increase when compared to preparation during a shooting. When prompted to explain her previous answers, Haley shared, “I do not at all feel prepared for school shootings. I try my best to take proactive measures, but I do not feel as if the administration has spent enough time training us. Natural disasters are the second lowest-rated event I am comfortable with. I rated it this way because sheltering in-place means that my disabled and neurodivergent students are more likely to be anxious and panic due to remaining in the same environment. I would be most prepared for a fire

because the evacuation is straightforward and I believe my kids would do best with it and they would be allowed to leave.” Haley is aware of her school’s school shooting policies- broadcast a “code word” over the speakers to indicate an emergency and direct students to sit in predetermined places while giving instructions on how to cover themselves-, but feels that “No, the policies do not at all take into account the needs of my disabled students.”. Elaborating on if she feels that current school policies could ever support disabled students, (even those in the future) Haley was adamant that they could not. “No. The policies require that the children—who are already Kindergarteners in the first place—must act completely neurotypical and perfectly behaved. This expectation does not serve disabled kids now, and would not serve them in the future either.” Lastly, when asked to summarize her overall sense of preparedness, Haley makes note of her own neurodivergence, saying “I feel somewhat prepared. Being neurodivergent myself, I do have a stronger connection with that population of my classroom. However, you cannot always rely on that connection during a crisis. I feel that I am somewhat, but mostly not, prepared to support them in case of a school shooting for that reason.” However, as Haley notes, not all teachers possess that connection– making it harder for them to support their disabled students. Jasmine W, a private school teacher in Texas also feels the most unprepared to support the disabled students in her classroom during her shooting (“1”), and during a natural disaster (“1”), compared to a fire (“3”), which has a 2-point increase. When asked if she was aware of any school shooting policies her school may have put in place, she shared that “Literally we have no policy about it. I work at a small private school. In this small community, school shootings sound so far away. However, with it happening much more often nowadays, I get more and more concerned about what will happen here. We have no idea how to handle it. We definitely need to address it and get something in place now.” Jasmine’s sense of urgency in the need for a policy

response to handle these shootings further compounds when disability is introduced. Asked if her school's existing school shooting response adequately supports the disabled students that she teaches, Jasmine answered "Not only [do] I feel the school policy regarding school shooting is not enough for disabled students, it is not even sufficient for normal students at where I teach."

She does note that she feels the policies could one day support future disabled students, especially since administrators are raising alarm bells to this very issue. "My school doesn't have a school shooting policy in place, but we are aware of that. Some staff members (including me) have raised this issue at the meeting, and the administration is in the process of working on it.

That way I feel it has the potential to adequately address the needs of future disabled students.

However, I'm not sure about it till the final report comes out." Aware of current support (or the lack thereof) from her school, Jasmine closed her interview by sharing that, overall "I don't feel adequately prepared to support my disabled students in case of a school shooting, because 1. we don't have a concrete school policy about it; 2. I was not trained in any orientation/info session about it." As students age, their teachers become more concerned with the "big picture" realities of a shooting, considering how prevalent they are today. Ista E., who teaches 12th grade at a

Massachusetts private school rated her preparedness for a fire as a "6", while only a "1" for a shooting, marking a staggering 5-point drop. Ista categorized her preparedness for a natural disaster as a "0" but since the question was on a 1-10 scale, the researchers are treating that answer as a "not applicable". Explaining her ranking, Ista shared "quickly in case of a fire. In the case of a school shooting or natural disaster, it is less predictable, and the lack of preparedness makes me feel uncomfortable." Ista is aware of her school's policies: "Hide out: Lock the door, block the door with heavy furniture, silence your phone, Evacuate students and staff via a pre planned evacuation route to a safe area (Main building to chapel)", but feels that currently, they

don't support disabled students. Ista did note that she feels the policies could be improved to support disabled students, as "there are plans to have ramps in addition to stairs". Despite these plans, Ista feels unprepared to support disabled students because "I don't feel adequately prepared for a school shooting overall". One group of teachers that overwhelmingly feel more prepared to support disabled students during a shooting are those who work in special education. Faren C., an 8th grade special education teacher rated her preparedness as a "5" for both a fire and a natural disaster, but only a "3" for shootings, saying "Gun violence isn't something I've been trained in. I know procedural rules, to secure an area but I don't know what it would take to keep my disabled students calm and how to get them to safety quickly and out of harm."

Additionally, Faren is unaware of her school policies around school shootings and doesn't believe that current policies could ever support future disabled students. Further, she feels unprepared to support disabled students because "There is no protocol that is geared toward my disabled students." At public schools, the sentiments are similar across the board. Mahamadou J, a 12th grade teacher in New York gave the highest ratings for fire and natural disasters (6 and 7, respectively) but in keeping with an established trend, that preparation dropped a shocking 5 points for a shooting. Explaining his ratings, he said "Despite the countless number of drills we have for shootings, I do not feel prepared for a real shooting because I worry I will not be able to control the panic of my students. With panic, students with physical disabilities are at a disadvantage." Moreover, David took geographic locations into account when describing his school's school shooting policies, "It is dependent on whether or not the shooter is in or out of the building. If the shooter is in the building, we go through a hard lockdown. In the case of a shooting outside of the building, we have a soft lockdown/shelter in.". With knowledge of these plans, he feels that current policies don't support disabled students and that "I don't think the

policies in place are actually realistic. There are lots of holes in the policies that will almost always lead to panic and chaos. Panic and chaos will put students with disabilities in even more danger.” To close his interview, he answered if he, overall, felt prepared to support disabled students during school shootings. “I do not. Within our plans, there isn’t specific language regarding students with disabilities”

### **Discussion/ Implications**

From this data, one thing is abundantly clear: the education system is not prepared to support disabled students during an active shooter situation. Given student data that indicates the majority of disabled respondents are unaware of existing supports that are provided to them by federal law, the education system needs to do more to empower disabled students, giving them agency and control over their own educational futures. A future where disabled students fear death in the back of their minds every day at school is not a future at all. Given the data from students that indicate the majority is “neutral” to “worried” about the possibility of a shooting, action needs to be taken now. Using this data as evidence, the researchers suggest two possibilities to Congress. The first recommendation is a federal policy mandating that every student with a 504/IEP plan must have an individualized educational lockdown plan of which they help design and that every faculty member at the school is aware. This last point is extra poignant given the responses from teachers—the majority of them feel wholly unprepared to support disabled students. Special education teachers were shown to have the highest levels of preparedness, however this ignores the fact that not all disabled students are in special education classrooms. Most students with disabilities, in fact, spend much of their time in general education classrooms as part of school inclusion programs. Additionally, having these plans will put teachers and students at ease as they have specific plans—and are educated on them—to ensure

student safety. Lastly, this solution is in line with academic works on the subject. In the works “Keeping Our Students Safe” and “Supporting Students With Disabilities During School Crisis: A Teacher’s Guide”, the authors call for these plans—which they call individualized educational lockdown plans—to be added to prior documents. Moreover, in *Keeping*, the author shares their view of useful components of a plan.

The authors present their second solution: a mandate that funds from the Dept. of Education go toward continuing research on this issue. This research should be conducted and presented in partnership with regional school bodies to ensure the unique needs of students at all schools are met. A mandate will ensure funding allocated to achieve these goals.

### **Conclusion**

Since 1999, school shootings have terrified generations of students. Slow progress towards change has occurred, especially in the wake of more recent tragedies, but who is left out of these responses? Overwhelmingly, disabled students. The authors of this paper firmly call upon Congress to adopt one or more of the solutions proposed in this paper—whether that be federally mandated policy, or broad-reaching research and funds to achieve change on the local level to stop disability from becoming a death sentence in school shootings once and for all.

## **Appendix 1**

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Hello:

You are invited to participate in our survey on school preparations for disabled students during school shootings. In this survey, approximately 400 people will be asked to complete a survey that asks questions about your experience. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any point. It is very important for us to learn your opinions.

Your survey responses will be strictly confidential and data from this research will be reported only in the aggregate. Your information will be coded and will remain confidential. If you have questions at any time about the survey or the procedures, you may contact Timothy Cornelius at 504.812.2277 or by email at the email address specified below.

Thank you very much for your time and support. Please start with the survey now by clicking on the **Continue** button below.

Tim Cornelius

[Timothy@p3technology.io](mailto:Timothy@p3technology.io)

\* Do you identify as having a disability?

- Yes
  - No
  - Prefer not to answer
-

\* Which of the following, if any have you been diagnosed with?

- Parkinson's
- Speech and Language Disability - IE Laryngectomy or Aphasia etc.
- Asthma
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Learning Disability
- Alzheimer's Disease
- Dementia
- Dystonia
- ALS
- Huntington's
- Neuromuscular Disease
- Epilepsy
- Stroke
- Cerebral Palsy
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Mental Illness
- Intellectual disability
- Dwarfism
- Locomotor Disability
- Deaf
- Hard of Hearing

- Low Vision 1 - visual acuity not exceeding 6/18 or less than 20/60 upto 3/60 or upto 10/200 (Snellen) in the better eye with best possible corrections
- Low Vision 2 - limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of less than 40 degree up to 10 degree.
- Blind
- ADHD
- Not Applicable
- Other

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Do you use an accessibility device (screenreader, wheelchair etc)? If so, what kind?

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\* What grade are you in?

- K-5
  - 6-8
  - 9-12
  - Post-12/Transition
-

What state do you live in?

- Alabama
- Alaska
- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- Florida
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Maine
- Maryland
- Massachusetts

- Michigan
  - Minnesota
  - Mississippi
  - Missouri
  - Montana
  - Nebraska
  - Nevada
  - New Hampshire
  - New Jersey
  - New Mexico
  - New York
  - North Carolina
  - North Dakota
  - Ohio
  - Oklahoma
  - Oregon
  - Pennsylvania
  - Rhode Island
  - South Carolina
  - South Dakota
  - Tennessee
  - Texas
-

- Utah
  - Vermont
  - Virginia
  - Washington
  - West Virginia
  - Wisconsin
  - Wyoming
  - District of Columbia
- 

\* What type of school do you attend? (If you have graduated, please select the type of school you attended while in high school.)

- Public
  - Private
  - Charter
  - Other
- 

\* Do you have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

- Yes, I have an IEP
  - No, I do not have an IEP
- 

\* Does your IEP include specific plans for your safety in case of an active shooter situation?

- Yes
  - No
  - I Dont' Know
-

\* Do you have a 504 plan?

- Yes, I have a 504 plan
  - No, I do not have a 504 plan
  - I don't know if I have a 504 plan
- 

\* If you have a 504 plan, does it include specific plans for your safety in case of an active shooter situation?

- Yes
  - No
  - I don't know
- 

\* On a scale of 1-10, how worried are you about the possibility of an active shooter at your school?

Row 1



\* How worried are you about the possibility of an active shooter at your school?

- Not Worried At All
  - Less Worried
  - Neutral
  - More Worried
- 
- Extremely Worried
-

\* Have you practiced active shooter drills in your school?

- Yes
  - No
- 

\* Have you experienced an active shooter situation in your school?

- Yes, there has been an active shooter in my school
  - No, but I have experienced a "false alarm" situation (there was the potential of a shooter but no actual threat occurred)
  - No, I have never experienced any type of active shooter situation
- 

\* During the false alarm, was the school's response inclusive of your needs as a disabled student?

Inclusivity



## **Appendix 2**

### Teacher Survey Questions

1. What grade do you teach?
2. What kind of school do you teach at?
3. What percentage of your students have disabilities?
4. Approximately what percentage of your students have IEPs?
5. How prepared do you feel to support your disabled student(s) in case of the following emergencies, 1 not being prepared, 10 being extremely prepared.
  - . School Shootings
    - a. Natural Disasters (flood, earthquake, tornado)
  2. If your answers differ between disasters, please explain.
  3. Do you know what your school's policies are regarding school shootings? If so, what are they?  
Please briefly describe.
  4. Do you feel that your school's policies regarding school shootings adequately address the needs of the disabled students that you teach?
  5. Do you feel that your school's policies regarding school shootings could adequately address the needs of any future disabled students that you teach? Why or why not?
  6. Do you feel adequately prepared to support your disabled students in case of a school shooting?  
Why or why not?

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