



SPECIAL EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Supporting Students Through the Pandemic

June 2020

On April 27, 2020, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos clarified that although COVID-19 school building closures create significant challenges for the special education community, she would not recommend any waivers affecting the core tenants of IDEA, which guarantees a free, appropriate public education to students with disabilities.

As the [nation's seven million students with disabilities](#), their families and schools transition to distance learning, [parents are deeply concerned](#) about the educational progress of their children, and advocates are troubled by the lack of equity among students receiving special education services.

ExcelinEd spoke to students with disabilities, parents, teachers, disability-rights advocates and national organizations to inform this resource guide, which offers solutions and best practices to education policy leaders to meet the challenges the special education community faces during the pandemic.

CHALLENGE: SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN REMOTE LEARNING

Across the nation, families are struggling as they adjust to distance learning with varying levels of success. The challenge is even greater for parents of students with disabilities as they take over the role of not only the primary educator but also the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team - teacher, aide, therapist, interventionist and specialist.

ConnectED recently surveyed Washington, D.C., parents about the impact of COVID-19 on their child's education. The [survey found](#) that nearly half of families of children with IEPs think their children will not receive appropriate services.

This worry was shared by many of the parents and advocates ExcelinEd interviewed. However, it is important to note that although challenged and overwhelmed, the parents we spoke to still expressed commitment to their child's educational progress.

“We are looking at 10 weeks of lost instruction on top of summer learning loss, which I can't allow. We are not giving up the gains we've worked so hard to achieve.”

Parent of two students with disabilities

Leaders can support that goal by partnering with families of students with disabilities to create a comprehensive plan for students' distance learning, paired with the technology and resources they need to fulfill that plan.

BEST PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

Create system-wide understanding of what special education instruction and services can be provided during closures, how they will be delivered, to whom and when.

Many parents spoke about a lack of direction and coordination from their student's schools and educators during the transition to distance learning. This easily leads to misaligned instruction and learning loss. As part of a COVID-19 response, districts and education departments in states like [North Carolina](#), [Minnesota](#), [Georgia](#), [Tennessee](#) and [Indiana](#) took quick action and created comprehensive guidance for the delivery of special education services during the pandemic.



Common Guidelines

Encourage collaboration by a student’s IEP (Individualized Education Program) team to translate IEP goals and 504 accommodations to the new distance learning environment.

Most of the abovementioned state plans lay out clear instructions for how districts and schools should go about creating distance learning plans for their students, including checklists of responsibilities by role, e.g., district leader, school leader, case manager, teacher, etc. By articulating a plan and individual responsibilities, educators can help parents be informed and partners support their schools to deliver instructional services.

These plans clarify that IEP teams can meet virtually, and they provide lists of online instructional tools, contact information for district officials and specialists and templates for creating strong IEPs.

“Translating accommodation supports and 1-1 support to an online system feels impossible.” – Disability-rights advocate and parent of a child with special needs

Establish regular, clear communication with parents and families.

Parents are a school’s greatest partner, so ensuring that parents have a clear understanding of their student’s distance learning plan and accommodations, as well as the tools and resources needed to execute that plan, is key.

An ongoing survey by the Learning Disabilities Association found that only 39% of parents they surveyed had been contacted by their school to check on their student during remote learning.

As parents step into this new role, frequent check-ins with education professionals will allow parents to ask questions, adjust lesson plans or delivery of instruction and home in on what works best for each student.

Districts and education departments in [North Carolina](#), [Minnesota](#), [Georgia](#) and [Tennessee](#) created protocols for communicating with parents, as well as templates for documenting conversations.

The [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#) (NCLD) echoes this recommendation for strong communication and partnership between parents and teachers/schools, saying that “parent-teacher communication is critical

to ensuring that the needs of students with disabilities are met during the COVID-19 crisis. Now more than ever, consistent and clear communication is essential.”

NCLD highlights the [Connecticut Department of Education’s guidance](#) as an example of this policy in action:

Develop a protocol to communicate proactively with parents and guardians regarding their child’s IEP services during a closure taking into consideration the parents’ preferred method of communication.

Include the input of parents or guardians and the student, as appropriate, when discussing the plan. Allowing parents to provide feedback provides parents, and ultimately, students, a voice in the process, rather than simply notifying them of the result.

This communication should be ongoing throughout the implementation of the plan so that the educators delivering and/or overseeing the services can adjust the plan when appropriate.



Children and families retain all of their rights under federal law during this time of distance learning, but instruction and services may be delivered differently.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act are the federal laws that govern how schools must serve students with disabilities. These laws allow flexibility in determining how to meet the needs of students. By clarifying that schools must provide services to students *to the greatest extent possible*, schools and leaders can focus on immediate student needs and, where necessary, address the need for additional services in the future.

Leverage Technology and Available Resources Thoughtfully

Parents of students receiving special education services expressed being overwhelmed by the number of different online instructional platforms they have been asked to manage for their students. At the same time they are underwhelmed by the content and actual instruction their students receive on these platforms.

By carefully selecting, streamlining and deploying online learning technology that best supports each student and their IEP goals and accommodations, school leaders can ensure that students get the most out of the often-limited time they have for learning each day.

For example, the Texas Education Agency launched a speech-language teletherapy initiative designed to assist students working to develop expressive language skills, articulation and social skills during the pandemic. In its [Speech-Language Therapy Guidance](#), the agency lays out how IEP teams can access and leverage this service for their students.

“The technology is there to make learning tasks more engaging and interactive.”

Special education teacher and parent

It’s also important to help the families of students with disabilities adjust to this new mode of learning.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities offers [A Parent’s Guide to Virtual Learning](#). Additional resources can be found at the [Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities](#), the [Educating All Learners Resource Library](#) and the [Council for Exceptional Children’s Resources for Families](#).

The National Down Syndrome Society offers a video guide to [Preparing Homes for Learning](#).

Focus on Mastery of Concepts and Skills

Ensure assignments, worksheets and lesson plans are customized to the student’s academic and IEP goals.

As educators and families work to align distance instruction to student IEP and academic goals, advocates offered a framework for instruction known as [universal design for learning \(UDL\)](#), and pointed to the benefits of a systematic shift to [competency-based learning](#). Both approaches to education acknowledge that each learner is as unique as their fingerprint.

UDL is based on research about how we learn, guided by three main principles: representation, action and expression, and engagement.

Representation speaks to the importance of offering information in more than one format - visual, auditory and/or hands-on. Action and expression speak to giving learners more than one way to interact with instructional material to demonstrate their learning, such as giving students the choice between taking a paper test, giving an oral presentation or participating in a group project.



Engagement speaks to creating multiple ways to motivate students, such as creating lessons and assignments that are relevant to students' lives. More resources on UDL instructional design can be found at the [UDL Guidelines](#) provided by CAST, an education research nonprofit.

“Teachers need to design lessons that touch on these (IEP) goals. We need to be realistic and focus on maintaining, if not progressing. We can’t allow regressing.”

Special Education Advocate and Former Teacher

In a post on the Aurora Institute’s (formerly iNACOL) *CompetencyWorks* blog, [Opportunities for Personalized Learning in the Pandemic](#), author Ann Hawden, a curriculum specialist at a public school district, highlights how the pandemic has caused her district to more urgently embrace elements of a competency-based education system.

“The truncated school year and the elimination of dedicated class time will require teachers to make critical curricular decisions about content and skills. It isn’t possible to cover everything or to expect students to complete every project, essay, experiment, report or other course requirement.”

The Oklahoma State Department of Education’s [Distance Learning Guidance for Special Education](#) highlights the importance of student agency in determining appropriate educational content and activities.

“Create opportunities for students to demonstrate progress and receive feedback related to assignments and IEP goals” and “use student interest to inform lessons and activities” are just two of the recommendations listed.

By centering student ability and agency in lesson planning and student assessment, educators and parents can design lessons and homework that best engage students and advance their educational progression.

ExcelinEd has [resources and sample policies](#) that create a “flexible path and pace to achieve mastery” and empower students to direct their own learning.

Distribute Classroom Tools and Resources to Students

Allow educators to retrieve items needed to enhance their instruction from their classroom and distribute assistive technology and other hands-on & sensory materials to students.

Both the Tennessee and Minnesota guidance listed above made provisions for teachers to access the tools and resources they use in normal classroom settings and to distribute them to families, setting them up for the strongest possible instruction and learning while school buildings remain closed.

Recommendations include:

- Announce allowable building activity to teachers for the preparation of student work that will be sent home (e.g., device check out, assigning of books, packaging school materials, etc. Any gatherings within school facilities should comply with applicable social distancing guidance as well as health safety recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Provide resources to support sensory needs of children and ways for parents to support a child’s dysregulation at home during the closure (e.g., sensory activities, calming spaces, visual supports, etc.)

“We were briefly allowed back into our classroom, and I bundled items for hands-on activities and delivered those packages to each of my student’s home mailboxes.”
Special education teacher



- Consider delivering instructional materials to students through the school bus transportation routes.

NEXT STEPS

As education leaders across the nation plan how and when school buildings will reopen, most students with disabilities will continue their learning over the summer and into the fall, either at home with their families or distance learning provided by their schools. Below are recommendations for ensuring all students, especially those with special needs, receive the best continuous instruction possible.

ExcelinEd provides further considerations for re-opening schools, which can be found at [Reopening Schools After COVID-19 Closures: Considerations for States](#).

Assess Students to Get a Clear Understanding of Instructional Loss or Progression

After welcoming students back into classrooms and ensuring their physical and emotional well-being, schools will need to assess student instructional needs. To design instruction that meets students with disabilities where they are and builds on their educational progress, diagnostic assessments of student skills and knowledge are necessary.

“This summer slide is likely the worst we will ever see, and I fear that it will be worse for students with disabilities.”

Disability Rights Advocate

The [Collaborative for Student Success](#) recently conducted a nationwide survey of educators to better understand their perspective on how schools can “come back” from lost academic instruction time.

According to the survey, a majority of participants agreed that a “high-quality assessment should be administered at the beginning of next year to help understand the amount of learning loss incurred.

To measure student progress, the [Texas Education Agency](#) (TEA) launched a free assessment that students can take. According to the TEA, “The optional end-of-year assessment gives parents and educators access to a powerful tool that shows what their students have learned and where they can improve their knowledge and understanding of key subject matter heading into the 2020-21 academic year.”

TEA noted that the optional test does not take the place of the state’s annual assessment, which was cancelled due to COVID-19.

The Data Quality Campaign’s recent blog, [The Role of Data in Understanding the Current COVID-19 Crisis](#), also highlighted the need for a “quick assessment of students’ progress”:

On the one hand, there will obviously be a desire to get teaching and learning started right away. On the other hand, starting instruction without seeing at what level students are returning to schools will set instruction up for failure and leave schools less able to identify and target specific students who may need more or less support next year.

Ensure Educators Have Robust Training in Distance Learning

Teaching in a distance learning environment has just as many challenges, if not more, than a traditional classroom. To minimize these challenges, all educators, especially those who provide special education services, should have access to comprehensive training in distance learning.



“Districts are trying to replicate the classroom online, including schedules and classwork. Instead, they should be taking advantage of the flexibility.” – Virtual Learning Leader

To address educator training, the [Florida Department of Education](#) partnered with the state’s online public school - [Florida Virtual School \(FLVS\)](#) - to offer student support and teacher professional development tailored to the online learning environment. The department also offered \$200 stipends to teachers who complete the training.

The [Georgia Department of Education](#) released a free introductory course for all teachers that covers strategies to support students receiving special education services and to implement accommodations in the online environment.

The [Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative](#), through a continued partnership with the Vermont Department of Education, has expanded its free online offerings to help teachers implement best practices for distance learning.

The Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute offers a resource on [Supporting Students with Disabilities in K-12 Online and Blended Learning](#).

A recent webinar by the national nonprofit Future of School highlighted the qualities of great online teachers as well as the need for training: [Distance Learning + Special Education: Strategies for Success. The webinar](#) also focused on orienting families to a new distance learning environment.

The Council for Exceptional Children provides resources for teaching remotely. <https://www.cec.sped.org/Tools-and-Resources/Resources-for-Teaching-Remotely>

Conduct a Special Education Services Audit

Determine which special education services can be effectively delivered remotely, and create a plan maximizing these resources and new partnerships for future school years.

As state and local leaders plan for the upcoming school year, health experts are encouraging education leaders to prepare for continued disruptions for students attending brick and mortar schools. To ensure the continuity of services for students with disabilities, education leaders should consider auditing and expanding the special education services that can be effectively delivered remotely.

The [Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit newsroom focused on education, recently highlighted the prevalence of teletherapy in K-12 schools prior to the pandemic and how it may continue into the future. “At the very least, teletherapy can maintain a level of continuity in children’s lives during a time of upheaval.”

A [fact sheet](#) from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association cites Bureau of Labor Statistics Projections shows an increasing demand for Speech Language Pathologists. Maximizing teletherapy could be one way for districts and states to handle the growing demand.

“My son was getting speech therapy, but the district just stopped it. Online school students are still receiving services.”

Mother of children with special needs

Supporting teletherapy, where appropriate, could also help students with disabilities who may face both unusual disruptions in services like school closures and more typical issues like illness and/or medical events. Teletherapy may also be appropriate in serving students in rural areas, those at the greatest risk of inequitable access to services and those who can continue with their current provider through this practice.



The [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#) also documents how states already provide teletherapy and other services in state law, rules and guidance.

An effective audit should also examine what community partnerships can be created or enhanced to support students with disabilities and their families.

CONCLUSION

Education leaders can consider the recommendations articulated in this resource guide to better partner with parents and help students with disabilities thrive in remote learning environments.

These recommendations underscore the systemic expectation that all students can learn and make academic progress even in this challenging environment. They have the power to galvanize action that is coordinated, creative and informed by frequent communication with parents, helping them to provide the needed services and accommodations their students with special learning needs must have to succeed.

By insisting on collaboration between IEP teams and families, equipping parents with the tools they need to manage their students' distance learning and carefully preparing for students' return to school buildings, education leaders can help ensure our nation's seven million students with disabilities receive the support they deserve throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

ExcelinEd thanks the parents, educators, advocates and leaders whose feedback grounded this resource guide.