



National
Center for
Learning
Disabilities

Parent Advocacy Toolkit

Using Resources to Help School Districts Serve Students With Learning and Attention Issues During COVID-19

This toolkit can help you advocate for students with learning and attention issues during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Using these recommendations, you can encourage decision makers in your state and school district to use funding and resources in ways that will address the needs of students with disabilities.

Table of Contents

- 3** Introduction
- 4** FAQ: COVID-19's Impact on Education and on Student and Parent Rights
- 5** Ensuring Equitable Funding
- 6** Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child
- 7** Improving Distance Learning
- 9** Assessing and Accelerating Learning
- 11** Facilitating the Transition From High School to College or Career



Introduction

The novel coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) plunged families into a difficult situation. Many parents are now supporting their child's instruction at home while also balancing work and other responsibilities. Families of students with learning and attention issues often feel these challenges acutely as they try to provide specialized instruction and support.

The impact of COVID-19 will live on past this school year. And it's forcing schools to rethink education. This will have a unique impact on students with learning and attention issues. Parents like you have an important role to play. You should be at the table to help schools provide a quality education for all students while supporting families.

This toolkit addresses five specific issues that you can advocate for:

- **Ensuring equitable funding** so students whose needs have gone unmet will receive the appropriate supports and services
- **Meeting the needs of the whole child**, including physical, mental, and emotional needs during this traumatic time
- **Improving distance learning** so students can stay connected and receive high-quality learning experiences even when they're not in a traditional classroom
- **Assessing and accelerating learning** to determine how much education students have missed out on and help them get back on track
- **Facilitating the transition from high school to college or career** to ensure that students are not denied opportunities for success after high school

Parents and advocates can use this toolkit as they advocate with decision makers in their school districts. This includes staff from the central office, the superintendent, the local school board, and the school principal.



Together, we can help ensure that districts address the needs of students with learning and attention issues—and their families—as they design policies and direct funding during COVID-19.

For each issue, the toolkit describes:

- The importance of the issue
- What's at stake for students with learning and attention issues
- Questions and recommendations parents can use to engage with school district policy makers

FAQ: COVID-19's Impact on Education and on Student and Parent Rights

Are school districts still required, despite school closures, to provide an appropriate education for my child who has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 plan?

Yes, school districts must continue to serve students with disabilities. They must provide the services that are outlined in each child's IEP. Congress has not granted the secretary of education the authority to grant waivers of federal special education law. And the secretary did not recommend any substantial waivers to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.¹ Even though it might be difficult for schools to serve students with disabilities, districts must continue to provide the services they're able to.²

Does the federal relief package provide funding to improve instruction for my child during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes. Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Stimulus (CARES) Act to respond to COVID-19. It allocates roughly \$31 billion to states and school districts. This money can be used to adjust instruction and school services during the closures. States and districts have flexibility in how they use those funds, though. The federal government did not require that any of this funding be spent specifically on students with disabilities. Many organizations, including NCLD, are fiercely advocating for states and districts to reserve a portion of the funds to serve students with learning and attention issues.

What impact does COVID-19 have on parents' rights, and how can we make the biggest difference right now?

If your child has an IEP under IDEA, your rights remain intact. However, as schools have adjusted to deal with the effects of COVID-19, some have struggled to communicate with and support parents. It may seem like you haven't been included in important conversations and decisions that were made about special education. But your voice matters—now more than ever. Students are relying on parents and advocates to speak up, ask questions, and hold decision makers accountable. Federal funds have been distributed to states to help soften the blow of COVID-19, but the hard work is just beginning. We must work together to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities and other marginalized students are front and center for local decision makers.



Issue 1: Ensuring Equitable Funding

As a result of the recent economic downturn due to COVID-19, states will have to make difficult budget decisions. To support state and local efforts to respond to COVID-19,³ Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Stimulus (CARES) Act. This bill allocates roughly \$31 billion to states and school districts. They can use it to help shift learning to online settings and to provide educational services. However, there's no requirement that any portion of it be spent on students with disabilities. States and districts are now deciding how to use the additional funds.

What's at stake for students with learning and attention issues?

Even before COVID-19 led to school closures, students with learning disabilities were falling far behind their peers without disabilities.⁴ Students with learning and attention issues need more individualized attention and specialized support to reach grade-level standards. But when schools closed in the spring of 2020, many of these students received little or none of the specialized instruction and support provided in their IEP. Schools will need more money to provide instruction and services to help students catch up. And if closures continue, schools will need additional funds to develop new, online delivery models for specialized instruction.

To ensure that resources are distributed equitably and are used to support students with disabilities, you can ask these questions:

How is the school district using the additional funds it has received through the CARES Act? How will those funds support the needs of students with learning and attention issues?

Recommendation: School districts should ensure that a specific portion of the funding they receive from the CARES Act is spent on students with disabilities.

If the district is forced to reduce the budget next year, how will it decide which services, supports, or activities will be cut?

Recommendation: Districts should preserve funding for instructional support personnel (including service providers and paraprofessionals) and increase the capacity of schools to provide individualized supports tailored to student need.

Tip: Discuss with your school how a school psychologist or interventionist can significantly improve your child's education. Discuss why school leaders should increase the capacity of these service providers.



How will you engage parents in the budgeting process?

Recommendation: As districts set budgets for the 2020–2021 school year, parents must be part of district and school committees that are making decisions.

How will you publicize your budgeting decisions?

Recommendation: School district and school budgets should be accessible to parents and the community, including those with disabilities and non-native English speakers.

Issue 2: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child

Due to the pandemic, many families are experiencing greater stress at home. More households are facing economic hardship. Caregivers are balancing work, caring for friends and family, and supporting distance learning. Also, school closures have disrupted critical services that schools traditionally provide. These include meals for hungry students, medical screening, and social, emotional, and behavioral supports.

What's at stake for students with learning and attention issues?

COVID-19 is taking an economic toll on many families and communities. Children who were or are now living in poverty may also be experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, or related challenges. Also, most children are experiencing disruptions in their routines. Many have lost connections to friends and caring adults in their schools. Some are even experiencing the death of family members, friends, caregivers, or educators as a result of COVID-19.

Additionally, research shows that trauma and poverty can impact brain development. This includes the neurological processes that contribute to learning.⁵ As a result, the pandemic may exacerbate challenges or increase the number of students struggling with learning and attention.

To ensure that schools meet the needs of the whole child, you can ask these questions:

How do you plan to support students experiencing acute trauma as a result of COVID-19, now and once schools open?

Recommendation: School districts should ensure that families have access to health care, including medical, mental health, and behavioral health services. School staff can attempt to offer the services virtually during school closures. Or school districts can identify other community partners that can provide similar services to families at no cost. These supports must be a key component of all school re-entry plans. They must be prioritized as highly as academic instruction and supports.

How will the school district ensure that free meals are available to children who need them?

Recommendation: School districts should continue to make free meals available to all students throughout the summer and the 2020–2021 school year. Meals should be available to any student, even those who were not eligible in the past due to family income levels.

How will the school district ensure that all students feel safe and welcomed?

Recommendation: Students will re-enter schools in the fall of 2020 with varying social and emotional needs. Schools must provide universal screenings for social and emotional health and expand their programming to provide evidence-based interventions. This includes connecting students and families with community-based service providers. School personnel should receive professional development that will allow them to be culturally responsive, to effectively communicate with families, and to support students and families.

Issue 3: Improving Distance Learning

When schools closed their doors, many students were offered distance learning—or learning that happens even though students and teachers are not in the same place. This might include “online learning” or “virtual learning,” where instruction and content are delivered through the internet. For some students, though, it meant learning at home through worksheets and materials, but without a teacher.⁶

The transition to distance learning was abrupt and unprecedented. Most schools had to quickly transition to digital learning systems and develop plans for instruction. They also had to come up with electronic devices to ensure that families could connect with teachers from home.

It's possible that schools will remain closed next school year, or that schools will use a blended learning approach (where students learn online some of the time, but also have in-person lessons). School districts must improve how they provide distance learning. They must make thoughtful choices about which platforms to use and how best to provide supports and services in an online setting. They should also ensure that parents are involved in the process and have an opportunity to share what has worked for their children—and what hasn't.

What's at stake for students with learning and attention issues?

Parents know that many students with learning and attention issues have had a rocky transition to distance learning. Many districts found it hard to provide the individualized instruction required in a student's IEP. Some districts discontinued interventions and supports like 1:1 or small group instruction or speech therapy, despite laws and guidance calling for them to continue. And some districts did not customize general education instruction for students' needs. As distance learning continues, the needs of students with learning and attention issues must become a priority. Educators must receive professional development and resources to effectively teach each learner.

To improve instruction for students with learning and attention issues in a distance learning setting, you can ask these questions:

How are you selecting or adapting digital learning platforms and devices to ensure access for all students? How are these platforms and devices accessible to students with various disabilities?

Recommendation: School districts should provide devices and internet hotspots for any families that do not have access.

Recommendation: Schools should consider various platforms or devices that can supplement printed text with audio, audio with printed text, and written description of pictures. Platforms should allow for both real-time and online discussion to give students more time to process.

Tip: You may want to describe a struggle that your child has had with the current platforms and share suggestions about what would help fix that issue.



What specialized services can and will be provided virtually this summer or in the event of another school closure next school year?

Recommendation: Where there are restrictions on in-person interactions between school professionals and students, school districts should provide services over video whenever possible.

What professional development will educators receive to ensure that they can provide the supports and services in IEPs through distance learning?

Recommendation: Educators should receive training on how to use the virtual platform, provide accommodations for students, or integrate assistive technology with the platform.

What supports and resources will be available to parents and caregivers who are supporting students with distance learning?

Recommendation: Teachers and other specialized instructional support personnel (speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, counselors, and psychologists) should be available to consult with interested parents and caregivers to discuss how to adapt online instruction to meet their child's needs.



Issue 4: Assessing and Accelerating Learning

While most districts have been offering distance learning in some form, it has not been as intensive as in-person instruction. In addition, many students could not fully access the material for various reasons. These include lack of access to devices, limited internet access, or not enough adult support at home. Many students, especially those with disabilities and other historically marginalized students, are losing ground academically. These students will re-enter school far behind grade level. They may struggle to make up for the learning losses for years.

Schools must find a way to extend learning time and reimagine instruction to accelerate learning—or allow students to catch up on all that they missed. But first, schools need a plan to immediately begin providing high-quality instruction in core academic areas. Instructional strategies must be supported by evidence and provided with fidelity to ensure that students receive the greatest benefit. In addition, schools will need a method of assessment to determine where students are academically, the types of interventions they need, and whether they need support to manage stress from the upheaval of their everyday life. Many students may need social and emotional support to process the changing world or the losses they've suffered due to the pandemic.

What's at stake for students with learning and attention issues?

Schools have struggled to provide specialized instruction through distance learning. And COVID-19 may exacerbate learning gaps for students with disabilities. It's likely that students with learning and attention issues will need additional support to help them stay on track to meet grade-level standards and keep pace with their peers. Teachers and parents will need to know where a child is performing academically at the start of the new school year. Then they can begin tracking progress, adapting supports, and adding services as needed.

To ensure that schools prioritize quality instruction, assessment, and acceleration of learning for students with disabilities next year, you can ask these questions:

How will you ensure that educators have the resources, skills, and time to provide evidence-based and high-quality instruction to students with disabilities?

Recommendation: Schools should hire additional specialists and instructional support personnel. These personnel can provide professional development to general educators, can provide scaffolding to help students access grade-level content, or can provide direct services and intensive support to help accelerate learning.

How will you assess student progress when students return to school? How will the results of those assessments inform instruction and placement?

Recommendation: Schools should administer frequent and ongoing assessment that educators can use to inform instruction and determine appropriate interventions. Those initial assessments should not be used to determine placement or for any other high-stakes decisions.

How will you communicate student progress with families throughout the school year? How can I set up a conversation with my child's teacher to discuss the results of the assessments?

Recommendation: Schools should share with parents the results of initial and ongoing assessments to evaluate student progress (in an accessible method and language) and discuss how to address the child's needs.

How will you handle referrals or open evaluations for special education that began last year?

Recommendation: Schools should have a plan in place to begin immediately providing high-quality and evidence-based instruction to all students to help them make progress. The school should use instructional data and measures of the child's progress as part of the comprehensive evaluation process.

Tip: Share any observations you made while your child was learning at home. Schedule a time to discuss your child's strengths and challenges over the last few months.



What additional services will be available to my child to make up for the specialized instruction missed in the spring of 2020?

Recommendation: Schools should have a plan to assess each student's needs when they return to school and to provide additional services as appropriate.

Tip: You can keep a list of the services that your child did not receive during the school closures. This list can inform your conversation with the school about what your child might need when school resumes.



How will you adjust the in-person school schedule to make up for lost time due to school closures?

Recommendation: Schools should develop plans to offer free summer instruction for all or some students if social distancing policies loosen up. Schools may also implement an earlier start to the next school year.

How do you plan to make up the content students missed during the 2019–2020 school year while also providing grade-level curriculum for 2020–2021?

Recommendation: This can be a challenge. Each district will have its own unique plan. Schools should share any updates to the curriculum frequently. Educators should communicate when a child is pulled into small group or 1:1 instruction to learn knowledge or skills that other students mastered in previous years.



Issue 5: Facilitating the Transition From High School to College or Career

School closures are especially disorienting for students scheduled to graduate from high school in 2020. States and school districts have largely found ways to ensure that students who were on track to receive a diploma will still graduate on time. But schools have not provided adequate support to students who are transitioning to college or the workforce. If a second wave of the virus shuts schools again in the 2020–2021 school year, next year’s graduating class will be in a similar situation. Schools will need to consider whether changes must be made to graduation requirements or transition plans.

What’s at stake for students with learning and attention issues?

Federal law requires that schools work with students with disabilities who are graduating or aging out of high school to ease the transition. Schools must work with students to create a plan for after high school and set up supports to achieve those goals. Schools would typically provide college counseling to help students find a school that can accommodate their needs. They also assist in finding internships to build skills for students going into the workforce. COVID-19 interrupted many of those programs. Students are left wondering whether and when they’ll receive those services.

To ensure that school districts prioritize the transition from high school to college and career for students with disabilities, you can ask these questions:

How are you providing counseling and transition planning to students virtually? Will students have opportunities for workplace learning this summer or next fall, even if schools remain closed?

Recommendation: Schools should develop and share plans to fulfill their obligations in transition plans for students with disabilities, even virtually.

What types of credit recovery programs exist to help students stay on track to graduate despite challenges with distance learning programs?

Recommendation: Schools should present parents and students with opportunities that will allow students to fulfill their graduation requirements.

Tip: Review your child’s transcript with a school counselor to determine if your child is on track to graduate on time.



How are you coordinating with institutions of higher education to ensure that students will have the documentation necessary to access accommodations in postsecondary coursework?

Recommendation: School districts and counselors should have a plan in place to support students with disabilities who are transitioning to postsecondary programs. They should be prepared to provide all necessary documentation for accommodations and services in college.

Tip: Ask the postsecondary institution that your child will attend in the fall what documentation it needs to provide necessary accommodations. You can then request that information from the high school.



¹ <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/cares-waiver-report.pdf>

² For a resource you can provide to your school's principal or superintendent about how to meet their obligations under the law, see NCLD's resource: <https://www.nclld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Part-1-Providing-a-Free-Appropriate-Public-Education-FAPE.D3.pdf>

³ <https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/Coronavirus--Aid%20Letter%20II.pdf>

⁴ In recent years, 96% of students with learning disabilities were not proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

⁵ <https://www.readingrockets.org/articles/researchbytopic/33823>

⁶ To learn more about distance learning and other related terms, you can visit NCLD's resource on the topic: <https://www.nclld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Key-Terms-Regarding-Online-Learning-and-Education-Technology-A-Resource-for-Educators-and-Parents-During-the-COVID-19-Disruption.04012020.pdf>

About This Toolkit

This toolkit was designed to help parents advocate for equity at a local level in response to COVID-19. It's a companion to "Recommendations for Prioritizing Equity in the Response to COVID-19," published by NCLD and 13 partner organizations. You can learn more at <https://all4ed.org/coronavirus-and-the-classroom-recommendations-for-prioritizing-equity-in-the-response-to-covid-19/>.

For more information on COVID-19 and resources to support parents, educators, and advocates, go to www.nclld.org/covid19.

For tools and strategies to help educators serve students with disabilities and complex learners, go to www.educatingalllearners.org.

About NCLD

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) is a Washington, DC-based national policy, advocacy, and research organization that works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues—by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities.

