

# School Policy Maker Primer: Responding to Rapid Increases in Ed Tech Demand, Serving Students With Disabilities



The current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of the education enterprise in ways that have not been seen in almost a century. Weather events and other natural disasters have at times disrupted school operations, but not on the scale and for the length of time that is today's reality. The lack of preparation for a complete and sustained shift from brick-and-mortar to online instruction has resulted in enormous challenges regarding equity and access. It has, albeit in hindsight, highlighted the need for comprehensive planning and coordination at the federal, state, and local levels to ensure that high-quality instruction can be delivered via technology tools and systems in ways that prevent, or at least minimize, disruptions in student learning.

While addressing the demand to create and implement virtual learning programs, decision makers must take into account the needs of students with disabilities, whose protections and entitlements are not negated during these unusual and difficult circumstances. The provision of specialized instruction and supports, appropriate accommodations, and needed compensatory services should be addressed to ensure that these students continue to have access to high-quality learning experiences.

As states and localities make decisions during out-of-school COVID-19 times, NCLD reminds decision makers to consider the following ways to safeguard student rights and maximize student learning:

## Vision

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Schools should address the immediate need to deliver high-quality instruction and support to all students, as well as create plans to address the likelihood that the school building will be closed, in whole or in part, for the foreseeable future. Schools, districts, and states should articulate how changes will impact students with disabilities, and they must include plans to ensure timely and ongoing communications and engagement with families of students with disabilities.

## Accessibility

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It's critical that learning management systems and education technology tools be accessible to all student populations, including those with disabilities. Ensuring access for diverse learners requires that systems be able to support products and practices that are designed using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as defined by CAST. Decisions about procurement and adoption should be guided by [best practices](#) established by leading organizations in the special education and ed tech communities.



## Staffing

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To the greatest extent possible, virtual education should be facilitated by educators who know childrens' needs from having served them in school-based settings. School staff working remotely should maintain consistent communication with families and related service providers. Provisions should be made to facilitate collaboration within teams and with students and families, so that needed changes in instruction and support can be made quickly, without compromising students' rights or delay in the timely provision of needed interventions.

## Accountability

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School and district leaders should prioritize the purchase and implementation of platforms and services that ensure maintenance and sharing of student performance data for the purpose of subgroup accountability. This is especially important if utilization is contracted through private intermediaries. District leaders must require that school personnel continue to collect data and monitor student progress, determine whether subgroups of students are struggling to achieve learning goals, and identify steps to enhance accessibility to needed services and supports.

## Resourcing

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While new discretionary spending will certainly be needed to keep schools afloat, funds should also be prioritized to meet the foundational needs of the most disadvantaged learners, including those with disabilities. Resource deployment should include addressing the nutritional, social-emotional, and mental health needs of learners, regardless of family circumstances, location, and documentation status. Addressing trauma and meeting the needs of the whole child must be prioritized, as these issues are sure to disproportionately affect students with disabilities and other traditionally marginalized students. Spending targeted to educators will also be needed to ensure that they have the training and support essential to providing instruction and coordinating wraparound services.