The Next Step:
What Educators Need to Know and Do to Support Students With Disabilities as They Transition to Online Education

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of students are at home rather than in their schools, and teaching and learning have shifted online with little or no planning. While this shift to virtual learning environments impacts all students, those with disabilities are impacted in ways that pose special challenges for educators, related service providers, and school administrative personnel.

NCLD shared some initial steps that educators could take to serve students with disabilities during this crisis. As we anticipate many more weeks and months of distance learning for all students, a number of key issues should be considered and actions taken to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, can continue to grow academically and maintain meaningful connections with their community of teachers and peers.

1 **Pedagogical challenges and inaccessibility.** While online learning features can create opportunities for greater accessibility (e.g., embedded read-aloud features), other features such as real-time chats, pauses in communication, and inability to observe nonverbal cues make teaching students with disabilities in this medium more challenging.[1] Despite the huge surge in online engagement, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate for which students and in what ways virtual instruction is effective. There is also a dire need to invest in better preparing educators to deliver online instruction, engage with students, and manage the complexities of teaching and assessment in virtual environments.[2]

Educator action: Rather than retrofitting instruction for students with disabilities, English language learners, and other learners who traditionally face challenges accessing content, instruction should be designed and targeted to meet the needs of these often hard-to-teach students. All students will benefit, and students with disabilities will be better able to both master content knowledge and interact meaningfully with their peers. It's also important to keep in mind the difference between providing physical vs. pedagogical access to content. Educational technology makes it possible for educators to present content to millions of students simultaneously online. What is uncertain is whether students have the supports they need to understand and master the content presented or even use the technology effectively due to cognitive, physical or sensory limitations. Finding the right balance is key to marrying the art and science of high-quality teaching and learning. Grade level and subject teachers as well as cross-disciplinary and schoolwide teams may have to experiment with sharing responsibilities and implementing different staffing models for virtual instruction to ensure that all students are receiving the individualized support they need to succeed. Best practice suggests that students should also be given multiple access points and scaffolds for materials as needed.

2   **Educational responsibility.** While parents have always played a significant role in supporting children's learning, the sudden and dramatic shift to home-based online learning has resulted in the need for deeper collaboration. This is true for all parents of students engaged in virtual learning and is particularly pronounced for parents of students with disabilities, given their children's more complex needs. Parents are now fulfilling multiple roles, which requires a significant investment of time and the mastery of new skills.[3] In the past, critics have warned that these expectations de-professionalize the craft of teaching and ask more of most parents than they can reasonably provide.[4] The importance of close parent-teacher collaboration cannot be overstated during these uncertain times.

Educator action: Now that families have had a few months to experience home-based online learning, check in with parents (and students) to see how they're faring with such things as allocating time, accessing needed materials and equipment, and balancing other commitments. Review students' IEPs and 504 plans and identify any needs that are not being met by service providers who interacted with students when school was still open. If needed, reach out to these providers and facilitate connections with students and their families to discuss ways to continue addressing goals. And create a shared plan for following up to ensure that progress is ongoing and that each student's needs will continue to be met over time.

3   **Tracking data.** This is an area where protocols are seriously lacking. Whether by private virtual schools or in online instruction delivered by public schools, processes for disclosing a disability and procedures for collecting data and monitoring progress are often not well established. In some instances, companies contracted to deliver virtual instruction may not collect or retain student progress data. Or, given the proprietary nature of the company, access to these data may be restricted or withheld from parents and home school districts.[5] A lack of data coordination could impact the provision of appropriate services now and once the COVID-19 crisis is over.

Educator action: Convene a meeting to discuss how student data will be collected, shared, and evaluated among members of the school team. Be sure to include school professionals who can ensure that adjustments to the district's learning management system are made so that student data is easily collected, stored, and retrieved by educators and others who rely on these data to deliver differentiated instruction.

4 **Lack of policy oversight.** To date, there has been a serious lack of oversight for online programs. A 2016 analysis by the Center for Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) highlighted these issues:

- **Vendor applications.** Of the 55 states and territories, only 21 had state-mandated vendor applications for online providers that specifically mention serving students with disabilities.
- **Child Find.** Only 24 percent of states provided information on how Child Find (the IDEA legal requirement that schools identify children with disabilities) was being overseen and how the provisions of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in online programs were being administered.
- **Special education services.** Thirty-eight states did not have any clear guidance/policy regarding who would provide special education services in a virtual/online school setting.
- **IDEA items.** Approximately 75 percent of states and territories had *Unclear*, *No with Evidence*, or *Nothing Found* in six of the nine items most closely aligned with IDEA.[6]

It's an open question whether or how these issues are being addressed during the COVID-19 crisis.

Educator action: Reach out to district staff and urge them to ensure that online programs, whether delivered by the school district or by outside vendors, clearly outline how students' civil rights to a FAPE will be protected and how students with disabilities will receive needed services and supports. Speak out on behalf of students when it becomes apparent that they are not receiving the protections to which they are entitled under law.

Endnotes

1   Coy, K. (2014). Special educators' roles as virtual teachers. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 46*(5), 110–116. **https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059914530100**

2   Rice, M., & Carter Jr, R. (2015). "When we talk about compliance, it's because we lived it": Online educators' roles in supporting students with disabilities. *Online Learning, 19*(5), 18–36. Retrieved from **https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1085761.pdf**; Martin, S. (2006). *Special education, technology, and teacher education. Special Education Technology Practice, 2*(1), 21–36.

3   Smith, S., & Carter Jr, R. (2016). Changing practices in special education: Shifting roles and supporting student social development. In Equity Matters 2016: Digital & Online Learning for Students With Disabilities. Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities, University of Kansas. Retrieved from **http://www.centerononlinelearning.res.ku.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EquityMatters2016Final.pdf**

4   Ortiz, K., Rice, M., Smith, S., & Mellard, D. (2017). Roles and Responsibilities of Parents of Online School Students With Disabilities. Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities, University of Kansas.

5   Connell, M., Johnston, S., Hall, T., & Stahl, W. (2017). Disconnected data: The challenge of matching activities to outcomes for students with disabilities in online learning. *Journal of Online Learning Research, 3*(1), 31–54. **https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148588.pdf**

6   Basham, J., Stahl, S., Ortiz, K., Rice, M., & Smith, S. (2015). Equity Matters: Digital and Online Learning for Students With Disabilities. Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities.