Specialized Support for Students with Diverse Learning Needs Engaged in At-Home Learning

As more classrooms shift to virtual learning, vulnerable students—including English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students with learning and thinking differences—will need specialized, differentiated support. This guide provides recommendations and resources to ensure online learning environments meet all students’ needs.

Support for Students with Disabilities

When faced with a prolonged closure, we urge schools to identify students who are most at risk of significant regression and work closely with families to minimize learning loss. The highest priorities among those most at risk are students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) who are receiving special education and/or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Not only is this approach educationally sound, it is also an important part of any legal defense related to IDEA or Section 504 complaints.

- **Schools/districts** should convene IEP teams (virtually, in accordance with federal and local social distancing orders) before changing student placements (e.g., to fit a distance learning model).
- **Schools/districts** that close and/or move to remote instruction may need to:
  - Provide appropriate technology and access to all students, keeping the principles of Universal Design for Learning in mind.
  - Provide wi-fi access and/or pay for it for Title I eligible families.
  - Ensure students have required assistive technology needs met/provided by the school.
  - Provide [certain] services at home, when appropriate.
- **Accommodations, modifications, or other supports** guaranteed under Section 504 must be provided in distance learning plans.

The US Department of Education stipulates:

- **If an LEA closes its schools to slow or stop the spread of COVID-19, and does not provide any educational services to the general student population, then:**
  - An LEA would not be required to provide services to students with IEPs during that same period.
  - IEP teams may, but are not required to, include distance learning plans in a child’s IEP that could be triggered and implemented during a selective closure due to a COVID-19 outbreak. Such contingent provisions may include the provision of special education and related services at an alternate location or the provision of online or virtual instruction, instructional telephone calls, and other curriculum-based instructional activities, and may identify which special education and related services, if any, could be provided at the child’s home.

- **If an LEA continues to provide educational opportunities to the general student population during a school closure, then:**
  - The school must ensure that students with IEPs, receiving special education and/or related services under IDEA also have equal access to the same opportunities, including the provision of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
  - State Educational Agencies (SEAs), LEAs, and schools must ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, each student with a disability can be provided the special education and related services identified in the student’s IEP developed under IDEA, or a plan developed under Section 504.
- **To be clear:** ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction.

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1 US Department of Education: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON PROVIDING SERVICES TO CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 OUTBREAK
Guidance & Resources

In the initial planning stage, TNTP can provide thought partnership and guidance in accordance with federal and state mandates, as they develop. We encourage open lines of communication and collaboration structures that include leaders and teachers focused on special populations of students (specifically students with IEPs receiving special education and/or related services under IDEA, and English Language Learners), so that their needs are addressed proactively, instead of reactively.

We encourage district partners to:

- **Establish communication plans and collaborative structures that include Special Education (SpEd) and English Language Learner (ELL) Administrators.** Curriculum/instruction and academic staff are not always connected to SpEd and ELL staff; now is a great time to start to forge those connections!
  
  Consider the following questions:
  
  o Which schools have our highest populations of vulnerable students?
  o How do we ensure that the needs of families in vulnerable populations are heard and addressed?
  o How might we prioritize support and resources to address the needs of identified schools?
  o How can we share successes and expertise that might provide solutions to our most critical challenges threatening vulnerable populations?
  o Are we considering all voices and needs, or are there special populations who are not represented in our collaborative structures? How will we include and represent them?
  o How are district SpEd and ELL Administrators communicating respective guidelines to school leaders?

- **Ensure SpEd Administrators have access to the latest resources from nationally vetted sources.** This includes, but it not limited to:
  
  o **US Dept. of Ed FAQ & Updates**
  o **US Dept. of Ed - Office of Civil Rights Fact Sheet & Supplement 3/21/20**
  o **Council of Administrators of Special Education Considerations**
  o **Council of Exceptional Children**
  o **National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools Guidance**
  o **IDEA**
  o **California Dept. of Ed Special Education Guidance for COVID-19**
  o Updates from Respective State Departments of Education

We encourage school partners to:

- **Establish communication plans and collaborative structures that include building-level leaders of Special Education (SpEd) and English Language Learners (ELL).** SpEd and ELL staff are not always included on the front lines; now is a great time to re-think inclusive representation on the instructional leadership team! Consider the following questions:
  
  o Who are our most vulnerable students?
  o How do we ensure that the needs of families in vulnerable populations are heard and addressed?
  o How will we connect with the families of our most vulnerable populations?
  o How might we prioritize support and resources to address the needs of our most vulnerable students?
  o How can we share successes and expertise that might provide solutions to our most critical challenges threatening vulnerable populations?
  o Are we considering all voices and needs, or are there special populations who are not represented in our collaborative structures? How will we include and represent them?
  o How will the inclusive leadership team receive SpEd- and ELL-specific guidelines from the district, and share them with staff?

- **Ensure Special Education leaders follow the latest updates and have access to the latest resources from the district, as well as from nationally vetted sources (above).**
• Help SpEd leaders, case managers, and IEP teams—including parents, teachers, and other service providers, such as Occupational Therapists, Speech Language Pathologists, and Psychologists—follow district guidance and design distance learning plans for their students on IEPs.

• Help ELL leaders and teachers proactively plan for virtual learning solutions that address the needs of ELLs.

Virtual Learning Resources

The following resources have been curated to support the design and implementation of virtual learning for students with diverse learning needs. Additional resources will continue to be added as needs are further assessed.

Students with Disabilities

• National Center for Learning Disabilities: COVID-19 Resource HUB
• Diverse Learners Cooperative: COVID-19 Resource HUB
• Understood.org COVID-19 Resource HUB
• Pedagogical Considerations for designing Virtual Learning

English Language Learners

• ELD Distance Learning Support

Students with Learning & Thinking Differences

• Planning Protocol for Supporting Diverse Learners During School Closure
• Best Practices for Online Assignments
• Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
• Tips for Implementing UDL in distance learning