



Special Education and the Pandemic

Three Things Parents of Kids with Special Needs Need to Know

by Rich Weinfeld

THIS IS A DIFFICULT TIME FOR ALL OF US. Teachers and school administrators are making great efforts to meet the needs of all students, including students with special needs. Now, more than ever, parents, advocates, and school staff should do their best to work collaboratively in the best interest of each student.

The following is guidance for parents, so that they can effectively advocate for their children who have special needs during distance learning, and in the time to come, as we return to school buildings.

Parents need to know three important things during this time of distance learning:

1. Parents have the right to request an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting during distance learning.
2. There may be the need for some new accommodations, supplementary aids and behavioral plans that go beyond what the student has needed during traditional education.
3. When we finally get back to traditional in-school learning, the student may be entitled to compensatory services.

Let's explore each of these areas.

1 Parents have the right to request an IEP meeting during distance learning.

It is important to note that, despite the new distance learning plans that are developed, the student's "traditional" IEP still remains in place. Schools are now either sending parents a Distance Learning Plan (DLP) or contacting them to schedule a "quick call" regarding the DLP. For students with special education needs, these options may not be enough to inform parents/guardians about specifics regarding distance learning, such as the delivery of instruction, accommodations, and expectations. It is also incumbent upon school staff to explain how the IEP is being implemented during distance learning.

Parents should come to IEP and distance learning meeting with prepared questions. Questions that parents and their advocates may want to pose to the IEP Team include:

- How will my child's IEP goals be addressed?
- How and when will the services on my child's IEP be implemented?
 - Will it be through whole class, small group, and/or 1:1 with teachers and related service providers?
 - How will the reading, writing, and math interventions continue during this time?
 - How will specialized instruction areas such as social skills, executive functioning and social-emotional functioning continue during this time?
- How will data be taken on my child's current levels and progress?
- How are each of the supplementary aids and classroom accommodations being implemented and is there a need for anything different?
- Will you be sending home differentiated materials based on my child's IEP present levels and goals?
- How will Assistive Technology (AT) be provided and is there a need for different or additional AT so that my child can access the online lessons?
- Is there a need for a behavioral plan or changes in a current plan based on the student's behavior during distance learning?
- What regular school-home communication needs to be agreed to and implemented during this time?

We suggest reminding the school team that we will be looking at compensatory education when this crisis is over and that we will judge the need for compensatory services based on progress on IEP goals, progress in the general education curriculum, and the amount of services that have been provided during distance learning. We will need to have good data on the child's levels now and data

about progress achieved, as we move through distance learning. It is important to note that the discussion of compensatory services is not meant to be adversarial. Most school districts acknowledge that, despite best efforts, distance learning cannot provide what in-building learning offers. Therefore, there will be gaps, that need to be closed, when in-building learning resumes.

Before closing the meeting, parents should consider the following:

- Sharing your concerns and questions and documenting them in the summary of the meeting, called the Prior Written Notice (PWN).
- Scheduling a follow up meeting.

2 There may be the need for some new IEP accommodations, supplementary aids, and behavioral plans that go beyond what the student has previously needed during traditional education.

For many students with special needs, learning at home presents obstacles that go beyond the typical obstacles that may exist in the classroom. To work effectively with the school in determining the need for more accommodations, supplementary aids, and behavioral plans, parents can tally the number of times that the child displays behavior related to ADHD during a specific lesson and at what time, in the lesson, the behavior is observed. CHADD's Teacher Card gives a great summary of the behaviors you may see, and you can use this to tally what you see during an observation by making check marks next to each bulleted description. Find the card at <https://chadd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FinalTeacherCard2019.pdf>.

- Also on the Teacher Card you'll see both the description of behaviors above, as well as suggested interventions from CHADD for teachers to use. Parents can use these same interventions as they support their children at home, during distance learning.
- Students may need additional assistive technology (AT) services and training, in order to access the online lessons.

Students may need a new or different behavioral plan in order to work effectively in the home environment. Earning tokens that can be traded for a reward may work well for some children. For older students, this could take the form of a contract between parents and students that specifies what a student can earn in exchange for completing an agreed upon number of assignments.

Students may require other supplementary aids that parents can provide at home, such as previewing content vocabulary, clear behavioral expectations before beginning



each assignment, previews of what will be done academically in the lesson, alternating answering on the computer with answering on paper, providing fidgets such as a doodle pad or hand-grip to squeeze, and providing movement breaks including an alternative seat to which the student can move and still see the computer. An agreed-upon time where the student takes a break from the computer may also be needed. Chewing gum, eating protein for energy, and doing “hard or heavy” work before class are also proven ways to improve focus. Parents should work with teachers to determine which of these supplementary aids may be effective.

Schools should also consider some supplementary aids that would result in altering the lessons. Those adjustments could include calling on the student more often, adjusting the work load, using alternative methods of presentation, offering alternative ways to demonstrate understanding, and providing more time for students to pursue enriching activities that include lessons related to the student’s individual interests. Schools should refer to the CHADD Teacher Card to choose other evidence-based strategies.

It is important to note that parents may need special training from school staff in order to effectively support their child’s special education during distance learning. A description of this training should be included in the student’s IEP.

3 When we finally get back to traditional in-school learning, the student may be entitled to compensatory services.*

In order to evaluate whether the student has made the type of

progress we would expect, when all students return to the school building, it is important for parents and school team to keep good data that includes the starting levels of their child, samples of the work that the child has created during the distance learning time, and the final levels the child has achieved at the end of distance learning.

Data can include samples of work done independently and with support (note the amount of support provided) and video clips of your child working on a given task.

Some other considerations for returning to the building include what priority will be given to special education students, as plans are made to phase in the return of students to their schools. Because of the increased difficulty that many students with special education needs have had with their learning during the pandemic, it should be a priority to have them be among the first to return.

Of course, the health and safety of the special education students as well as the staff that works with them, and the family members they all return to each evening, will be of paramount importance. Special consideration will need to be given to the training of students so that they can adhere to the safety procedures, such as the wearing of masks and the keeping of appropriate social distance. The learning profile of the individual student will need to be considered, and, just as when teaching the student an academic lesson, care will need to be given to providing instruction that is multisensory, experiential, chunked, previewed, and reviewed. Some students will need techniques such as role playing and social stories to understand the needed safety procedures.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a special set of challenges for a population of students who already had obstacles in their education. Collaboration between staff and parents is especially important as we all work to avoid an interruption in education during COVID and also provide for the possibility of closing the gap created by the pandemic once we return to the school buildings. Together we can ensure that the education of this generation of students with special needs does not become an additional casualty of the pandemic. 

*The National Center for Learning Disabilities provides excellent and timely resources, including discussion of possible options for compensatory services, for educators (<https://www.nclld.org/covid-19-educator-resources>) and for parents (<https://www.nclld.org/covid-19-parent-resources/>).

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