



ARTICLE

Supporting Students With Learning Disabilities During School Closures

Experts from the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence offer recommendations for supporting students with learning disabilities through the coronavirus pandemic.

By Teaching Tolerance Staff | April 22, 2020



Topic: Ability

Last month, as schools across the nation began to close, Teaching Tolerance reached out to our community to learn what you needed to support your students and their families through this crisis. One response that we received again and again a call for guidance about how to serve students with disabilities after transitioning to distance learning.

To provide that guidance, we reached out to our friends at the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence with a series of questions. We're grateful to Dr. Judy Elliott and Dr. George Batsche for their answers.

1. Across the nation, schools are moving to distance learning. What recommendations do you have for educators managing this transition for students with learning disabilities?

These are unprecedented times. The national education system is having to totally reimagine how to educate all students, including students with disabilities. The

shift to distance learning presents several challenges and concerns for students with learning disabilities, starting with the loss of a daily structure for learning. In the coming weeks and months, educators should focus on the most immediate needs and goals of students with learning disabilities.

Here is where we recommend educators begin:

REVIEW IEP GOALS.

Review students' IEPs and identify the goals that you can adapt most quickly to your school or district's distance learning program, whether that is paper packets, online learning or a hybrid model. Many students with learning disabilities will have related service supports (e.g., speech or language therapy, counseling, or occupational therapy), which are critical to their educational success. It is imperative that educators review each student's IEP to determine who they'll need to collaborate with (e.g., social workers, school psychologists or speech therapists) to best meet their students' IEP goals.

PRIORITIZE COLLABORATION.

The current shift to distance learning has created a loss of teacher and support staff collaboration, but collaboration between general and special education teachers and support staff is critical. The team can review a student's IEP together to ensure that each educator understands which goals fall under their responsibility. They should determine how they'll communicate in the future to discuss learning plans, student support and more. Finally, the team should decide who will coordinate services with caregivers.

ESTABLISH A SYSTEM OF COMMUNICATION.

Now is a time to communicate often with both students and with caregivers. This can occur in multiple ways (e.g., online through a school platform, email, texts or FaceTime), but educators should establish a consistent schedule of communication, and patterns of contact should be predictable in the same way that interaction with educators in school is predictable.

LEARN ABOUT THE ACCOMMODATIONS FEATURES OF YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT'S DISTANCE LEARNING PLATFORM.

Students with learning disabilities will need multiple ways of accessing curricular content (e.g., speech to text software or other auditory methods for students with reading fluency difficulties). Accommodations also often include alternative ways to demonstrate academic achievement. Educators will need to learn to utilize the accommodations features within the distance learning platform or other online instructional tools provided by their schools.

Finally, educators should be sure to **document current levels of performance, all contacts, accommodations and lesson plans completed and delivered.**

How can educators center the emotional well-being of students with learning disabilities? How can they continue to offer support now that schools are closed?

The impact of this crisis on all students is significant, and it will alter their learning trajectories. The impact on students with learning disabilities is greater and will alter their learning and development trajectories even more. But there are several ways to provide support.

SOLICIT INPUT AND FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS.

Educators can ask students what they need to be successful, honor those needs and provide supports aligned with them. It's best not to assume that we know what students will need—no one has been in this crisis situation before. We can learn from each other, together.

PROVIDE HIGH RATES OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK AND STRUCTURE ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES FOR SUCCESS.

Educators should avoid asking students with learning disabilities to engage in tasks for which they do not have the supports they might have in the classroom. Ensuring student success is more important than completing a checklist of learning goals for students with learning disabilities.

CHECK STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND EXPECTATIONS.

Educators can interact with students online or over the phone to provide instructional support (e.g., re-teaching) when needed. They can also pre-teach and read content over the phone (or another device) to support students.

ACCOUNT FOR ANXIETY.

Educators can understand that this change in the learning environment will alter patterns of engagement and attention to the learning process for students with learning disabilities. Anxiety over the COVID-19 crisis and home response to that crisis, a change in how teaching and learning are conducted, the potential loss of student supports and the loss of friend and teacher relationships must all be considered.

Now that many families and caregivers are supporting students at home, do you have any recommendations for supporting families during this time?

Caregivers are now effectively “co-teachers.” Nurturing and supporting these new co-teachers will increase their capacity to become partners in the teaching and learning process. Caregiver self-efficacy can be strengthened by interaction with educators who can reinforce the work that they are doing and give them strategies and supports to improve that work.

We recommend educators begin by establishing a preferred method of communication (e.g., online through the school platform, by email or by text). That way, educators and caregivers have a way to get in touch in between scheduled communications. Caregivers will be less anxious when a regular schedule exists for communicating with educators (many schools have a predictable schedule already) and if they know that they can communicate when they need support to resolve a problem. The preferred method of communication should be established for each educator who has responsibility for IEP and related services goals (e.g., teachers, psychologist, counselor or speech therapist).

Educators can also consider sharing a weekly “newsletter” that connects caregivers and communicates helpful information. The focus of the “newsletter” could be on those things that educators could share with parents as a group instead of communicating individually. For example, educators might share strategies to increase student success or share online resources to support the content that is the focus of instruction. They can also share helpful ideas or recommendations for supporting students with learning disabilities more generally—a simple “tip of the week” format would suffice.

Educators can further support caregivers by helping them create a positive learning environment at home. That includes a daily “school” schedule, complete with breaks (which are very important for students with learning disabilities). They can recommend alternating academic activities with creative activities (like art or music), scheduling virtual “field trips” related to educational activities and planning physical activity breaks. They also can encourage caregivers to provide consistency for students with learning disabilities in daily routines at home—mealtime, chores and bedtime, for example.

Educators can offer practical recommendations for supporting student learning, including recommending tasks students can complete independently. For example, students who have difficulty writing could use the speech to text option on a tablet, create a collage, draw pictures, video a speech or create a PowerPoint. Educators can also help caregivers to take a more active role in student work, providing a protocol to assess student performance and note areas of concern. These areas could be shared with the general education or special education teacher in an online session or phone call.

Educators can assure caregivers that they may need to reinforce the reason for this shift to distance learning, reminding their children that this abrupt change in schooling is to keep them all safe. They can encourage parents to recognize that this is a dramatic change for all, especially students with learning disabilities, and provide ways for their children to express their feelings and stay socially connected to friends through various outlets like art, music, letters to friends, emails, phone calls and FaceTime.

Finally, educators can recognize that, given this new role on top of other family responsibilities, it is critical for caregivers to stay attuned to their own feelings and stress levels. They can remind caregivers to take care of themselves, as well.

Are there any resources you would recommend to help educators better support students with learning disabilities in the coming weeks and months?

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) has created “Resources and Tools for COVID-19,” a collection that includes

- A collection of resources for caregivers tailored to the current moment, ranging from recommendations for supporting online learning to information about their children’s rights and how to advocate them.
- A collection of resources for educators including guidance about protecting students’ civil rights and recommendations for supporting all learners during school closures.
- Resources for young adults that might be shared with older students and include first-person accounts of managing remote school and work.

The NCLD’s guide *Personalized Learning: Policy and Practice Recommendations for Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities* may also be useful during this time.

The Resource Library from Educating All Learners includes links to a wide array of useful information. Educators can explore the resource library themselves to quickly find practical resources like

- This article about supporting students with disabilities through distance and blended learning.
- This article about speech therapy during school closures.
- This collection of ed-tech tools and technology selected with students with learning disabilities in mind.

The American Institutes for Research have also developed several helpful resources, including

- An article (in English and Spanish) for caregivers that will help them create positive home learning environments.
- A webinar for teachers about shifting to virtual teaching.
- A podcast episode for educators with recommendations for building communities of practice.

“Accessibility ideas for distance learning during COVID-19,” may be helpful for educators whose districts rely on Google tools for distance learning.

And ChooseLoveToThrive offers daily activities caregivers can complete with their children to foster social and emotional learning during this crisis.

For more on maintaining equitable learning environments through distance learning, visit TT’s resource collection “Supporting Students Through Coronavirus”



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