

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY & CORONAVIRUS: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

As state leaders continue to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, public schools across New York State remain closed and might not reopen for weeks or even longer. We know that school closures exacerbate the existing inequities in our education system—presenting the most significant challenges to students and families who are underserved in normal circumstances, including students with disabilities.

In the 2018-19 school year, New York’s public schools educated more than 467,000 students with disabilities—representing nearly one in five students in the state. Students with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate public education. With many schools transitioning unevenly to distance learning—and no public information about whether and how they are providing specialized instruction, related services, and accommodations to students with disabilities—this period brings enormous risks for these students and the civil rights for persons with disabilities that have been fought for and secured over decades.

Schools must work to ensure that students with disabilities have all the support they need for meaningful instruction, including the structured guidance and support they receive while in a classroom. As state, school district, and school leaders continue to plan for and respond to these uncertain times, they must prioritize the services and support students with disabilities need.

Like all students, students with disabilities need instructional continuity and access to school meals during this period of uncertainty. These are described in greater detail in Ed Trust–NY’s policy brief, [Educational Equity & Coronavirus](#). In addition, to ensure that prolonged school closures do not deepen educational inequities, here are 6 specific steps that the state should ensure that school districts take to promote instructional equity and preserve student well-being for students with disabilities.



1

Adhere to IEP requirements and continue to provide special education services

School districts should develop remote learning plans for all students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to state how they will provide special education supports and services during school closures.

Related services should continue to be provided via teleconference and other distance learning means where clinically appropriate. In addition, IEP teams should determine whether any additional supports, services, or accommodations are needed in order to support students with disabilities during school closures.

Schools should be prepared to hold IEP meetings remotely and must continue to involve parents in the IEP process. This includes providing parents with copies of all documents in their preferred language (via mail or email) that will be discussed before the meeting and creating equitable transition plans. Schools should also be prepared to complete, wherever possible, special education evaluations for students whose evaluations were in process prior to school closure. For new evaluation requests, schools should communicate with families and make a mutually agreeable plan to accomplish them, given school closures.



2

Ensure equitable access to learning materials

Students with disabilities should have access to instructional materials that are tailored to their specific needs identified in their IEP while schools are closed.

If a school relies on distance learning, it must both ensure that all students have access to required materials—such as computers/tablets and internet connections (including through hotspots or internet service providers)—and the accommodations, scaffolds, or assistive technology outlined in their IEPs.

Schools should also communicate with parents about specific learning outcomes, expectations, and resources available, and provide them with training and assistance, recognizing that many parents will not have access to personal leave or sick days to work with their children.

3



Work closely with teachers and counselors to provide support

Schools should engage teachers in preparing instructional materials to continue students' learning. This can include providing grade- and instruction-appropriate periodicals, texts, links to instructional videos, and take-home activities.

Schools should also work with school counselors to anticipate and meet the needs of students who rely on school counselors and psychologists for socio-emotional support.

Given that students have different abilities and needs, schools must provide mandated counseling and psychological support in the manner written in student IEPs. The school should work to provide the services using a remote tool (such as video or phone) to ensure no gap in socio-emotional support.

4



Coordinate with trusted community partners

Schools should work with community-based organizations, faith communities, after-school providers, and other trusted partners including Family and Community Engagement Centers to ensure clear and consistent communication to students and families about accurate coronavirus information and the resources and supports available.

Schools should also connect with local organizations that may offer programming or other services for students when schools are closed (including virtually), consistent with guidance from health officials, and make resources available through these partners.

All communications and outreach should be in multiple languages and include visuals to meet the community's needs.

5



Connect families to other services they may need

While schools cannot be expected to do everything, they are a vital and trusted hub for students and their families in a time of uncertainty. Schools should work with their local government partners so that they are able to point families to health, housing, legal, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, and other resources—recognizing that this may be a period of additional economic hardship for families.

All communications and outreach should be in multiple languages and include visuals to meet the community's needs.

6



Start planning now for when schools reopen

Schools should allocate resources—including staff, time, and materials—for extended learning time during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year based on student need, ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support and opportunities to catch up and advance academically. These preparations should specifically address the needs of students with disabilities, including compensatory services.

Schools should also prepare to provide intensive training to teachers and other school personnel and revisit curriculum before the 2020-21 school year in order to address learning gaps resulting from school closures while helping all students meet grade-level academic expectations. This preparation must recognize the trauma that students have experienced and address their socio-emotional needs.



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