

Shifting Special Needs Students to Online Learning in the COVID-19 Spring

Challenges for students, families, and teachers

By Julie Young and William Donovan

Educating students with learning disabilities or other special needs requires additional school services ranging from providing a full-time specialist for assistance to simply seating a student closer to the teacher. It can mean helping a hyperactive child to focus, devising a calming routine for someone with autism or providing assistive technology to help a student work around a disability.

The forced closure of schools this spring from the coronavirus, known as COVID-19, separated more than seven million students who receive special services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)¹ from the support they are given in the classroom. Most of these students have continued their education virtually, as have millions of students in the general population. In some cases online learning works well. The pace of online instruction can be slowed as needed when students need more time to master the material. Children who have trouble remaining in one place for prolonged periods can leave their seats and move around without disturbing other students. Students with a range of challenges, including some forms of autism, specific learning disabilities, or ADHD, can do well online if the environment is supportive, the pacing flexible, and the curriculum paced and segmented clearly with built in and human support.

Online instruction, however, can be especially difficult for some special education students. Students who have severe cognitive disorders, severe autism, or brain trauma are unlikely to have their needs met through online learning. Their conditions may be complicated by difficulties self-regulating, following a routine, or staying motivated, and some may simply need higher levels of physical support.

The most obvious change in the online environment is that students who need extra attention normally work with a teacher or specialist, either individually or as part of a group, at school. Now, they receive that guidance through a computer while relying on a parent or caretaker to help carry out instructions.

Fortunately experts in this area of education say that online learning can be appropriate for most students requiring special services. Success is less dependent on the student's disability and more on the approach of the school team and the presence of someone at home with the student.



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“It has to do with the creativity and quality of the teacher in front of the child and, for kids with more significant disabilities, more support in the home,” says Janet Holt, director of special education at Arizona State University Preparatory Academy and ASU Digital Prep in Arizona. “Students can be successful if we have the adults around them doing the right things.”²

Therein lies the challenge for teachers and parents alike. Special education teachers are facing unprecedented obstacles as they shift to home-based digital instruction that must be tailored to their students’ individual needs and not a more general whole-class, or face-to-face lesson plan. Parents carry a significant burden, often playing the role of teacher *and* parent while also holding a full-time job in or outside of the home.

Under the IDEA, eligible children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education, as well as special education and related services. School districts are required to design a plan, the individualized educational plan (IEP) that spells out the needs and objectives for each student including their present level of performance, their education goals and the special education services they require.

The U.S. Department of Education is allowing flexibility to districts as they try to comply with the law and meet the objectives in a student’s IEP,³ but otherwise the requirement to provide free appropriate education has not changed during the pandemic. The Department of Education issued an advisory stating that if a local education agency (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 that LEA would not be required to provide services to students with disabilities during that same period of time. But once school resumes, “the LEA must make every effort to provide special education and related services to the child in accordance with the child’s individualized education program or, for students entitled to a (free appropriate public education) under Section 504.”⁴ The DOE later issued a clarification that not providing services to any students due to inequity would not be advised and that educators should do the best they could with special ed services. Not providing services was not an option.⁵

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So how does it work? How can students who need assistance under traditional classroom conditions continue their education when the environment is completely changed? Following the extraordinary shift of students from brick-and-mortar classrooms to digital learning, this brief looks at the challenges of instructing special needs students in an online environment and includes best practices and solutions. Interviews were conducted with special education authorities, and research included materials and resources used with special needs children.

The Critical Teacher-Parent Team

Much has been written about the pressure that has been placed on moms and dads to act as parents and teachers for the general population of students now at home, while also being employed. For parents of children with special needs, that situation is magnified. They’re expected to execute a specific learning plan for their child. Some kids, perhaps with emotional needs, physical disabilities or who are on the autism spectrum, may require the sort of professional help that parents aren’t qualified to give, even when guided by a professional.

It’s critical that teachers and parents act as a team. Students who don’t have someone to interact with them personally will struggle. The more severe the disability, the more critical it is to have someone at home to help. Some ways the team can work best include:

Communication

- Special needs educators should be in regular contact with families. It prevents parents from thinking they may be on the wrong track. Many need continuous guidance, so teachers should check with them by phone, video conferencing, or email to make sure they feel supported.
- Teachers could create an instructional video for parents on how to set up for successful learning.
- Review the IEP together by phone or video. While teachers are still leading the instruction, parents should be aware of the particulars of the plans. They include accommodations and modifications that will make learning more likely and the lesson more successful.
- The two sides should determine if the instruction and services students have received in school, such as gross motor or behavioral therapy, can be offered in a home-based setting or through digital resources.
- Assess together assistive technology in the home. What is available in terms of computers, software, communication devices, speech-to-text apps, closed-captioning and other specialized technology?

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Some special needs issues can be exacerbated online.

The problems that special needs students have at school can be worsened by distractions at home. The job of capturing a student’s attention so they’re able to learn becomes harder online. Issues such as self-regulation and the need for structure become pronounced.

Self-regulation

Students who can self-regulate know when they aren’t paying attention. They know how to readjust themselves when they need a break. They know how to think about their thinking.

Students with self-regulation problems in the classroom where a teacher or teacher's aide is present, may be more distracted at home.

Kelly Grillo, a special education consultant who has worked with groups such as the Council for Exceptional Children in Virginia, says students who self-regulate do better online than those who don't. For students whose self-regulation challenges require an IEP, coaching and training in self-regulation is needed.

"There is a lot of research around executive functioning, how to stay organized, how to keep a timer, how to write down your to-do list," says Grillo. "Our kids with IEPs are very challenged with those very things. They're easily overwhelmed and prone to give up."⁶

One approach to assist those students is to include prompting systems in the IEPs. For students who aren't attending to task, Grillo says plans could include a certain number of prompts given within specific time intervals. If the student is more challenged with self-regulation the prompts could come at shorter intervals.

Need for structure

Many special needs students thrive with a set schedule and the structure of their school. That includes being in certain places at specific times during the day. At home that framework is different. For some students distractions are greater, focus is harder and the work becomes more difficult.

One way to provide structure for the students is to create a daily list of activities that follow a similar order to the schedule students had at school. Many students with special needs respond well to visual cues. Some teachers use a schedule board with images of activities that prompt students what to do and when to do them. Others suggest using a kitchen timer, which reminds students of a bell schedule at school.⁷

Reliance on assistive technology

Assistive technology works both ways for students with learning issues. Many students have difficulties being on a video chat for the length of a lesson. To assist them, some teachers are recording short videos and conducting read-alongs. Others are sending paper and pencils to more tactile learners.

Yet, technology is helpful for students who have problems with reading comprehension and decoding. Screen readers provide a solution for those students. The computer will read to them whatever is on their screen.

Rather than do the decoding for each individual word, students can listen to the assignments on the screen or the story or passage. Read Along by Google is an example,

but not an endorsement, of an app that provides assistance when young readers struggle.

Digital learning has placed some special education students at a disadvantage because they don't have the assistive technology at home that they use in school. Grillo worked with a visually impaired student who brought home a Braille book and other materials, but the student did not have a tool to create new Braille. The lesson there is to write into a student's IEP that he or she uses assistive technology, to document the reliance on that technology and ensure that it is available across all settings. During the COVID-19 crisis different agencies have made equipment available to schools, including the Easter Seals, United Cerebral Palsy and the University Centers for Excellence on Disabilities (UCED)

A sudden learning curve for teachers

The teacher is the key to success for special needs students online. They're leading the team with parents, evaluating the student progress and ultimately determining if online is working for each student. Special education teachers in particular are facing unparalleled challenges as they make the leap from the classroom to home-based, digital instruction. But they're required to develop individual plans for every student that fit within their IEPs versus one online lesson plan for entire class.

This rapid transfer of school work from the classroom to the online world has placed many teachers into an unfamiliar environment in which they are not fully prepared. Rather than finding help online, they've been swamped by a significant amount of materials and information that has emerged on social media.

"Every teacher is an expert of their content, but they aren't an expert in the online teaching tools," says Grillo. "There's a mismatch of certain educator skills because they never thought they would be teaching from a distance. If they don't have the baseline level of skills they're at a loss."

Proactive teachers who are searching online for ideas to improve their remote teaching run a privacy risk with new technology they might not have been concerned about in the past. Pre shutdown, a school's technology infrastructure was managed by its information technology staff. Those experts would review apps for tools for school use. But in the new pandemic time, many for-profit companies made their online services available for free for a limited time or usage. The risk is that personal student data could be collected by those companies without the teacher's knowledge. Steps need to be taken to ensure the personal privacy of students is protected and respected.

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Summary

A new normal is expected to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. What it will look like is still to be determined. But digital learning is sure to play a larger role in K-12 and college education. For students with learning disabilities or special needs, as well as their parents and teachers, the goal will be to find what works best and for which students.

Unquestionably the teacher/parent partnership will continue to play a role, though under more manageable and less stressful conditions. Open communication and involvement in a student's IEP, crucial before the health crisis, will continue to be imperative after.

Lessons are also being learned about the ways in which digital learning can be made accessible to children with autism or ADHD. New thinking is occurring about how services for special needs students will be delivered, should teaching remain online. Creative ideas are being

explored and weighed, including home visits, localized neighborhood support, or partnerships with volunteers and community groups. In addition, special ed teams will play a vital role in reviewing and providing input in online learning ecosystems, both to coach parents and to provide insight to developers on improvements.

There is great optimism for the future based upon what has been learned during this pandemic. Special education teachers are reflecting on this experience and looking at how to include more online instruction for their students, even while back in traditional school buildings. They are planning new lessons on executive functioning skills (organizational skills, problem solving, time management) to address challenges unearthed during this experience. They will teach differently after the health crisis and special education services will be possible in a distance learning environment.

Endnotes

- 1 “The Condition of Education: Children and Youth with Disabilities,” National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp, viewed May 8, 2020
- 2 Telephone interview with Janet Holt, May 5, 2020
- 3 U.S. Department of Education, “Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities,” March 21, 2020, https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=, viewed April 23, 2020.
- 4 U.S. Department of Education, “Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak,” March 2020, https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/qa-covid-19-03-12-2020.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=, viewed April 29, 2020
- 5 U.S. Department of Education, “Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities,” March 21, 2020, https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=, viewed April 29, 2020
- 6 Telephone interview with Kelly Grillo, PhD, May 6, 2020
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