

Considerations for Teachers Providing Distance Learning to Students with Disabilities

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This brief provides guidance and resources to help educators support students with disabilities – ranging from mild to low-incidence¹ – through distance learning prompted by the coronavirus crisis. Many of the structures and supports for students with disabilities that were in place in the classroom will likely look different in the distance learning environment. Because students with disabilities, like all students, have a range of needs, teachers will need to consider how best to support each student's unique situation. This brief will help teachers consider key areas that are imperative to teaching and learning for students with disabilities.

Specifically, the brief begins with questions for teachers to ask themselves in order to understand each student's immediate learning and social-emotional needs. The brief then provides suggestions and resources to address several important areas of teaching and learning: supportive distance teaching and learning environment, student engagement, lesson design and instructional resources, social-emotional support, and executive function capacity. For each of these five areas, the brief identifies what teachers should minimize or avoid as they transition from classroom to distance learning (i.e., "Teaching and Learning Should Avoid...") and what teachers should try to incorporate into their practice (i.e., "Teaching and Learning Experiences Should Evolve to..."). The questions and suggestions in this brief are not intended to address legal compliance or accessibility mandates; rather,

they are intended to provide teachers with ideas, resources, and strategies to consider as they strive to implement distance learning for all students, particularly students with disabilities.

Many of the recommendations and resources in this brief are widely applicable to the range of diverse learners in every classroom, including advanced learners, students at grade level, students who are struggling, and students with disabilities. Many of the resources and tools include accessibility features that are essential for some students with disabilities, but will also benefit other students. For example, providing audio versions of complex text is essential for students with visual impairments or reading disabilities, but can also benefit students who struggle with comprehending complex text. Suggestions and tools that are specifically designed for students with low-incidence disabilities will be identified as such.

¹ Low-incidence disabilities include hard of hearing, deafness, visual impairment, orthopedic impairment, and deaf-blindness.

U.S. Department of Education Statement on Distance Learning for Students with Disabilities

On March 21, 2020, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services issued a Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf>). That document says:

Although federal law requires distance instruction to be accessible to students with disabilities, it does not mandate specific methodologies. Where technology itself imposes a barrier to access or where educational materials simply are not available in an accessible format, educators may still meet their legal obligations by providing children with disabilities equally effective alternate access to the curriculum or services provided to other students... Consider practices such as distance instruction, teletherapy and tele-intervention, meetings held on digital platforms, online options for data tracking, and documentation. In addition, there are low-tech strategies that can provide for an exchange of curriculum-based resources, instructional packets, projects, and written assignments. (p. 2)

Questions for Teachers to Address About Supporting Students with Disabilities via Distance Learning

Certain broad questions about distance learning — such as which learning platform will be used and how all students will get access to computers and the internet — will need to be addressed by school and district leaders. But teachers can ask the following specific questions in order to determine how best to address the equitable learning needs of each of their students with disabilities via distance learning. The answers should be informed by each respective student's IEP, and when possible, by input from the student and their family.

1. How can the special education teacher support general education teachers to continue to provide access to learning as an inclusive practice via distance learning?
 - If the student was in a co-taught class, and received push-in or pull-out support, what can be done to continue educating the student in a general ed class?
2. At what level will the accommodations and supports provided for the student at school be able to be replicated at home for distance learning?
3. How do the accommodations and supports provided for the student at school need to be different or adjusted for distance learning?
4. How will the student benefit from synchronous or asynchronous learning opportunities, or a mixture of both, based on how their disability impacts their learning and communication needs?
5. What is the student's main mode of communication, both for receptive and expressive communication (e.g., American Sign Language, braille, Picture Exchange)?
6. What is the student's current level of competence with the mode of communication (e.g., beginning learner, proficient, fluent)?
7. What is the parents'/families' home language?
8. If the student was provided with assistive technology at school, can that be provided at home?

9. What are the student's social-emotional needs that may be heightened at this time? Is there a behavior improvement plan in place?

10. What are the student's executive function needs?

Supportive Distance Teaching and Learning Environment

When creating distance learning for students, consider how practices were implemented with in-person teaching and what shifts will need to be made in order to transition to distance learning. Because students will not have the structure and supports that are typically provided through the brick-and-mortar school setting, it is important for teachers to intentionally develop an online learning environment that supports students' diverse learning needs. Creating a structured distance learning environment is particularly important for many students with disabilities who think and learn differently than their typically developing peers. The recommendations and resources in this section focus on creating flexible and realistic teacher and learner schedules, narrowing the focus for distance learning, and exploring no- and low-tech distance learning opportunities.

Teaching and learning should avoid...

Do not attempt to simply recreate classroom experiences at home. Teachers should generally avoid:

- » Assuming a strict "school day" schedule
- » Requiring special materials (e.g., lab materials, other materials not commonly found at home)
- » Continuing to use the same pacing guide and scope for teaching that was in place prior to moving to distance learning

- » Assigning readings for students to stay "caught up"
- » Assigning packets of worksheets and busy-work

Teaching and learning experiences should evolve to...

Provide flexible schedules and structures for learning

When designing at-home learning, be sure to provide:

- » Extended time for learning and reflection
- » Realistic schedules for distance learning

Provide realistic schedules, such as the Khan Academy school closure schedules for preschool through grade 12 (https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSZhOdEPAWjUQpqDkVALJrF-wxxZ9Sa6zGOq0CNRms6Z7DZNq-tQWS30hu-VCUbh_-P-WmksHAzbsrk9d/pub). These sample schedules incorporate physical and mental breaks, fun activities such as virtual field trips and backyard scavenger hunts, and the recognition that the traditional school day cannot be replicated at home.

- » ADDitude, an organization that provides information and resources on supporting students with ADD and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) for parents and professionals, created a sample home learning schedule for elementary school students with ADHD. This sample schedule is available at <https://www.additudemag.com/learning-at-home-resources-schedule-elementary-school-adhd/>.

Select essential standards and learning targets

Narrow the focus of the content and curriculum by selecting essential academic standards to teach and, for each of those standards, identifying priority or learning goals for students' distance learning. Teachers have a baseline to start from — where were students when schools closed? Start with that baseline and develop the most critical learning targets for each standard, with a focus on keeping students connected and engaged. When selecting the essential standards to teach, educators can use the following common selection criteria to guide them:

- » Endurance (which standards are foundational and built on year after year?)
- » Leverage (which standards provide students with the most essential knowledge and skills?)
- » Readiness (which standards prepare students to be ready for the next level?)²

These criteria can still apply to emergency remote learning, with a narrowed focus on what is most essential and achievable within a distance learning model.

Consider low-tech opportunities to support distance learning

Teachers may want to include low-tech strategies and opportunities in their plans to support distance learning. For instance, teachers can:

- » Make phone calls home to conference with students and parents.

² Clayton, H. (2016). Power standards: Focusing on the essential. *Making the Standards Come Alive! V(IV)*, 1–6. <https://justaskpublications.com/just-ask-resource-center/e-newsletters/msca/power-standards/>

- » Provide packages or boxes of materials for families to pick up from school or a common pick-up/drop-off location. These materials can include tactile tools, crafts materials, notebook paper, and other learning materials that students may not have at home.
- » Create weekly learning schedules that integrate PBS educational television programming. Resources and programming schedules from the California Public Education Partnership — including a schedule of KQED Plus TV programming and digital resources aligned by grade level and subject area — are available on the At-Home Learning Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic webpage: <https://www.kqed.org/education/athomelearning>.
- » Make audio recordings of text material that can be dropped off or picked up.

Student Engagement

Student engagement can be a challenge in classrooms, and distance learning may heighten those challenges. Students with disabilities are often disengaged when content is not accessible to them due to their disability. This disengagement can, in turn, foster low personal expectations and lack of self-confidence as a learner. Engaging students when teaching remotely requires new teaching skills, multiple ways to provide purposeful teacher-student interactions, tools to make distance learning accessible for all students, and ways to provide meaningful feedback.

Learning experiences should avoid...

Instruction should not be solely teacher-centered. Teachers should be conscious of limiting the following:

- » Holding virtual lectures/classes that all students must attend synchronously
- » Delivering one-way information and assignments
- » Relying on teacher instruction and feedback as the primary mode for facilitating learning

Learning experiences should evolve to...

Foster purposeful and diverse teacher–student interactions

Teachers should provide multiple opportunities for students to connect with teachers and peers that are a balance of synchronous, or real-time, instruction and asynchronous learning, in which materials are accessed by students at different times. Ideally, all students should receive both types of learning opportunities, regardless of technology access.

Staying in contact with students may be one of the most critical needs for teachers to address right now. Accordingly, teachers may want to:

- » Send notices about the assignments for the coming week, either using a recorded robo-call system from the district or school, or apps/programs that allow teachers to send texts or make calls but keep their private number hidden, such as the Remind app (<https://www.remind.com/>) or ClassDojo (<https://www.classdojo.com/>). The TalkingPoints app (<https://talkingpts.org/>) allows teachers to send home messages in multiple languages, and allows parents to respond in their home language and have it translated into English.
- » Record a webinar or series of short webinars and include links to videos from Khan Academy (<https://www.khanacademy.org/>), TED-Ed (<https://ed.ted.com/>), or edpuzzle (<https://ed-puzzle.com/>) that students are able to watch to support their learning.
- » Set a time to meet with all students virtually as a whole group or in smaller groups.
- » Use tools like Google Forms or other formats to collect student survey responses about how students are doing because, in the absence of body language, it can be hard to determine students' level of engagement and to know whether they might be struggling.

Ensure content and text are accessible for all learners

It is challenging for students to be engaged in the content if they are not able to access it. Whether using Zoom, Google Docs, SeeSaw, Schoology, or another content-delivery platform, explore the accessibility features it has available. For example, many teachers and students already use Google Docs and Google Slides, but they may not know about the many accessibility features available, such as a screen reader, braille display with document editors, and speech-to-text and text-to-speech functions. Google Slides also provides live closed captioning for PowerPoint presentations. And Khan Academy has accessibility features for students with low vision or colorblindness, students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and students who are sensitive to animations.

Resources for making texts accessible:

- » Websites with difficult reading levels: If the content on a website that students need to

explore is too difficult for them, they can enter the website URL in the free program found at rewordify.com and the content will be reworded to a more accessible Lexile level. Text can also be copied and pasted into the text generator for the same purpose.

- » Engaging podcasts and listening to text: Not all text has to be read in order to build comprehension. Listenwise.com provides audio texts that support several content areas for all grade levels, and Common Sense Media has curated “The 25 Best Podcasts for Kids” (<https://www.common-sensemedia.org/blog/the-best-podcasts-for-kids>) and “10 Must-Listen Podcasts for Tweens and Teens” (<https://www.common-sensemedia.org/blog/10-must-listen-podcasts-for-tweens-and-teens>).

Provide coaching, feedback, and encouragement

Students are not able to reflect on their own learning without receiving timely and meaningful feedback from teachers. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* created an advice guide titled “How to Give Your Students Better Feedback with Technology.”³ The guide’s first piece of advice is to explore the options for feedback that an online platform being used may already have available. The guide provides several recommendations and examples of education technology tools to use for audio or video feedback and peer feedback; it also offers guidance on when to stick to written feedback.

3 Fiock, H., & Garcia, H. (2019). How to give your students better feedback with technology [Advice Guide]. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20191108-Advice-Feedback>

Lesson Design and Instructional Resources

Designing instruction and selecting instructional tools for distance learning will be different from how teachers engaged in lesson planning for in-person classroom teaching. The recommendations and resources in this section focus on providing guidance for lesson design and resources to support distance learning instruction.

Teaching and learning should avoid...

Teachers should try not to feel pressured to keep up with a pacing guide and provide assignments simply to “get through” content. Similarly, teachers should try to minimize:

- » Emphasizing rote memorization of content or “checking off” tasks on lists
- » Asking students to solve contrived or hypothetical problems or complete design projects that value form over function
- » Trying to cover content through a high volume of work and assignments without providing students time to apply their new learning and reflect on it
- » Quickly moving from topic to topic without providing students with application and processing time

Teaching and learning should evolve to...

Have reasonable curriculum expectations

Rushing through content risks leaving students behind. Focus on the essential learning goals and avoid the temptation to simply fill time.

Foster authentic learning in the home setting

Connect learning to household-based activities, such as cooking, fixing things, gardening, backyard scavenger hunting, measuring the walls in a room to determine how much paint is needed, redesigning a room, or designing clothing. Common Sense Media has curated a collection of education technology tools and apps that help connect classroom learning to the real world: <https://www.common-sense.org/education/top-picks/top-picks-for-connecting-the-classroom-and-real-world>.

Cultivate student-centered learning

To encourage student-centered learning, teachers can:

- » Ask students to identify relevant problems in their lives and engage students in questioning and thinking to address those problems. For help with identifying issues relevant to students' lives, teachers can explore the following resources:
 - TED Talks for Students: <https://www.weareteachers.com/ted-talks-students/>
 - NPR's Student Podcast Challenge: <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/15/650500116/npr-student-podcast-challenge-home>
 - Current events through News-2-You, which provides news in an engaging way, designed specifically for students who learn differently: <https://www.n2y.com/news-2-you/>
- » Encourage project-based learning and passion projects (i.e., projects in which students are able to select and focus on a topic they are passionate about) for students to explore their own interests.

- » Consider ideas for project-based distance learning. Common Sense Media developed a webpage of "Tools for Project-Based Learning": <https://www.commonsense.org/education/top-picks/tools-for-project-based-learning>.
- » Build student autonomy by providing choices for how students learn new information and how they express their learning and growth. Choice boards and learning menus — such as those found at <https://www.smores.com/z12ay-tic-tac-toe-choice-boards-menus> — can help with this.

Choose appropriate curriculum and technology for distance learning

Follow district and school guidance, when provided, on curriculum and materials to be used for distance learning. When guidance is flexible or supplemental materials are needed, consider using open education resource materials for curriculum, such as:

- » Collections of kindergarten through high school resources and courses on the K–12 Remote Learning page of the Open Educational Resources Commons website: https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/k12?utm_source=ISKME+Master+List&utm_campaign=9a445c9a7d-The_Creativity_Behind_Duolingo_Code_org_3_10_2016_&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d1e-a4eec61-9a445c9a7d-21860885.
- » Lesson plans for English language arts and math, as well as guidance on integrating accessible technology at Power Up What Works: <https://powerupwhatworks.org/page-puww/powerup-your-classroom>.

Several organizations provide curriculum specifically designed to address learning needs for students

with disabilities, including DynaMath, Do2Learn, Power Up What Works, and The Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities.

Curriculum and instruction resources specifically for students with low-incidence disabilities

- » The Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center provides learning modules and a guide for educators who are teaching students who are deaf or hard of hearing, which can be found at: <https://www3.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/learning-opportunities/online-learning/educating-students-who-are-deaf-or-hard-of-hearing-in-general-education-settings.html>.
- » The National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes hosts a frequently updated webpage of guidance and resources: <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/covid-19-information>.
- » Educational videos made for students who are deaf or hard of hearing are available for pre-school–grade 12, in core content as well as life skills, wellness, and creative arts, at <https://elearningfordeafkids.com/>.
- » ObjectiveEd.com creates digital curriculum for students who are blind or visually impaired, available at <https://www.objectiveed.com>.
- » Communication Service for the Deaf (CSD) has links to guidance resources for teaching students who are deaf or hard of hearing, as well as spreadsheets of DHH accessible e-learning resources at <https://www.csd.org/coronavirus/>.
- » The National Federation of the Blind’s website at <https://www.nfb.org/resources/distance-education-resources> provides guidance on and resources for providing distance learning to students who are blind or visually impaired.

Social-Emotional Support

Social-emotional learning helps children work on skills such as coping with feelings, setting personal goals, reflecting on their behaviors, and seeking help from others. Social-emotional learning also helps with interpersonal skills such as working collaboratively with a partner or in teams and resolving conflicts. Some students with disabilities may struggle more with social-emotional learning than others, but all students benefit from explicit opportunities to develop and practice these skills. The recommendations and resources in this section focus on addressing students’ social-emotional needs.

Connections with students should avoid...

In order to provide appropriate social-emotional support, teachers should minimize the following:

- » Jumping straight into learning without first ensuring both students and families are physiologically regulated and feeling safe and supported
- » Connecting and communicating only about academic learning
- » Expecting students and families to have the capacity (e.g., time, skills, tools) necessary to replicate school at home
- » Expecting students and families to be able to focus their energy, time, and resources to engage in distance learning

Connections with students should evolve to...

Provide multiple options for how students and teachers can connect

How can teachers transfer some of the social-interaction activities that took place in the classroom to distance learning? Teachers may still want to,

for example, hold a morning meeting or “circle of friends,” share good news, lead an online version of show-and-tell, or hold a daily talent show. Teachers may also want to:

- » Take into consideration students’ and families’ possible anxiety and other concerns. Focus more on maintaining a positive connection to the student and family than worrying about learning content right now.
 - » Play online games with students that are not connected to academics — something students feel confident about — in order to provide an opportunity for fun social interaction and connection.
 - » Consider other non-academic positive ways to connect with students, such as practicing simple breathing exercises together by watching a GoNoodle meditation video together (<https://app.gonoodle.com/>).
 - » Connect with students in warm, empathetic ways about topics they care about; these should be non-academic in nature.
- When students feel safe and grounded, they are better able to share and be open about their feelings, anxiety, and concerns — which, in turn, gives their brain the room to learn, recall, reflect, and communicate knowledge and thinking.

Resources for teachers to support social-emotional learning

- » The Deaf-Hearing Communication Centre has created a series of informational videos about communicating relevant information regarding COVID-19 in American Sign Language at <https://dhcc.org/covid-19-coronavirus/>.

- » Common Sense Media provides a toolkit of lessons and materials for teachers that covers a range of social-emotional learning topics, such as empathy, self-control, courage, and humility, available at <https://www.common sense.org/education/toolkit/social-emotional-learning>.
- » Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (AFIRM) provides many resources to support students with autism, including an article and packet titled “Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times,” available at <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/supporting-individuals-autism-through-uncertain-times>.
- » Perkins School for the Blind eLearning has curated many resources, including an e-book, at the webpage “Conversations: Connecting and Learning With Persons Who Are Deaf-blind,” found at <https://www.perkinselearning.org/videos/webcast/conversations-connecting-and-learning-persons-who-are-deafblind>.
- » PBIS Rewards provides an article focused on teaching social-emotional learning in the classroom, including suggestions and practices for teachers to implement, available at <https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/sel-in-the-classroom/>.
- » LD Online provides an article with background information to help understand social-emotional learning and students with disabilities, available at <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6292/>.

Executive Function Capacity

Executive functions are a set of mental skills that include organization, working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. We use these skills every day to learn, work, and manage daily life. Trouble with executive functions can make it hard to focus,

follow directions, keep up with assignments, plan to meet long-term goals, and handle emotions, among other things. The brain manages executive functions in a similar way that a music conductor provides direction in order for all the separate musical components to harmonize together. For some students with disabilities who struggle with executive functions, the music conductor is unable to manage all the different musicians at the same time to create a unified sound.

The recommendations and resources in this section focus on suggestions for addressing challenges with organization, structure, planning, and new schedules due to distance learning. These logistical areas are important for teachers to address because some students may have difficulty with their executive function capacity if there is not a clear organization and structure in place for distance learning.

Learning experiences should avoid...

Students who struggle with executive function skills often find it challenging when work is not prioritized and delivered in an orderly fashion, and when routines and processes are not consistent. Teachers should try to avoid:

- » Rushing to cover a long list of learning standards
- » Providing unclear expectations about student work
- » Assigning big packets of work that will take hours to complete
- » Assigning work without taking into consideration other course work the students may already have

Learning experiences should evolve to...

Understand the role of executive function capacity in distance learning

The structures of schools and classrooms — with schedules, bells, specific locations for certain activities, procedures, routines, and lots of reminders — provide the external organization for students who need it. Distance learning can pose some challenges for students who need more direct support for their executive function capacities, such as organizing school work, prioritizing what is most important, managing time, measuring effort, and categorizing tasks.

To support students' executive function capacity, teachers should:

- » Chunk instruction and materials, giving students an opportunity to focus on one new learning task at a time.
- » Give suggested time frames, while also being flexible. For example, a task may typically take 30 minutes, but understand that some students may need more time. Providing suggested times can be helpful for students who may spend four hours on a task that does not need that level of depth.
- » Provide organization and structure within the daily and weekly schedule. Work with the family and student whenever possible to create a realistic schedule that includes physical activity, mental breaks, and fun breaks. The schedule should also take into account the family's relevant needs and obligations, such as siblings that also have to learn online and parents that have to maintain their work schedules.

- » Provide visual schedules, use calendar reminder features, and help students set up reminders on their smartphone.
 - » Give time and space for students to adjust to the new organization and structure of distance learning.
- Resources for teachers to support students' executive function needs*
- » Understood has created a plethora of resources for teachers and families to help understand executive function at <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/what-is-executive-function>.
 - » Common Sense Media has curated a list of programs and apps that improve and support executive function at <https://www.commonsense.org/education/top-picks/best-apps-and-sites-for-improving-executive-function>.
 - » The Autism Awareness Centre Inc.'s website provides suggestions and resources to create visual supports and schedules for autism: <https://autismawarenesscentre.com/visual-supports-best-way-use/>.
 - » The Teaching Space explains on its blog how to use the Pomodoro Technique to help students manage time: <https://www.theteachingspace.com/blog/pomodoro>.

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