



200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201

# Technical Assistance Bulletin

MarylandPublicSchools.org



## Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services | Bulletin # 20-07

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Date: Issued April 2020, Revised October 2020

### Providing Continuity of Learning for Students with Disabilities who require Extensive, Intensive, Individualized Instruction and Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### Purpose

The MSDE, Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services (DEI/SES) has created this Technical Assistance Bulletin (TAB #20-07) to guide the provision of continuity of learning for students (1) with significant cognitive disabilities, (2) that require extensive, intensive, individualized instruction and support, and (3) the use of alternate or modified curricular in a virtual and/or distance learning environment during extended school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This document includes:

- Legal Drivers
- Continuity of Learning
- Special Considerations for Behavior
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Resources

The document is a supplement to Technical Assistance Bulletin (TAB) #20-01, *Serving Children with Disabilities under IDEA during School Closure due to the COVID-19 Pandemic* and TAB #20-03, *Providing Continuity of Learning to Students with Disabilities during Extended School Closure due to the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Please refer to these TABs for additional information and guidance on the provision of special education services to students with disabilities during this unprecedented time.

#### Legal Drivers

Each student with a disability must be provided, to the greatest extent possible, the special education and related services identified in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) that was developed according to the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (34 CFR §§ 300.101 and 300.201 (IDEA), and 34 CFR § 104.33 (Section 504)). This includes the provision of supplementary aids and services, program modifications, and accommodations required to meet the student's individual goals.

In order to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) during this unprecedented time, the student's instructional team first reviews the IEP to determine if the IEP services can be implemented remotely, preventing regression and promoting progress toward achievement of IEP goals. They contact the parent/guardian and discuss proposals for how the IEP can be implemented, and how they will communicate with the student and family over the course of the distance learning period.

Questions for the school staff to discuss with the family include:

- Given that the IEP goals remain the same, how can the services in the IEP be delivered to promote student progress?
- If the services cannot be delivered, or the amount of time specified to receive special education and related services will change, how does the IEP need to be amended to reflect the realities of remote learning?
- Are there any new educational or functional learning needs that have resulted from the requirement of distance learning and require an amendment to the IEP?
- For students with significant cognitive disabilities, what supports do parents need to partner with the service providers to ensure delivery of specially designed instruction as outlined in the IEP?

If the team members believe that the IEP needs to be amended, they must obtain parental agreement, provide prior written notice, and provide a copy of the amendment to the family and service providers. If the parent does not agree with the amendment, then the IEP team, including the parent, must meet through remote means to revise the IEP to develop challenging and ambitious goals that can be met through remote delivery of specially designed instruction (SDI). If the parent cannot participate in an IEP meeting, then the IEP team must implement the services currently on the IEP, which can be reasonably provided in a virtual environment and which do not change the program or placement.

### **Continuity of Learning**

As Maryland continues to implement continuity of learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school staff should consider the steps outlines below when reviewing students IEPs to make implementation decisions for the accommodations, modifications, supplemental aids, and services needed to support learning in a virtual and/or distance learning environment.



### **Step 1: Review**

Review the student's current IEP with a focus on goals and services.

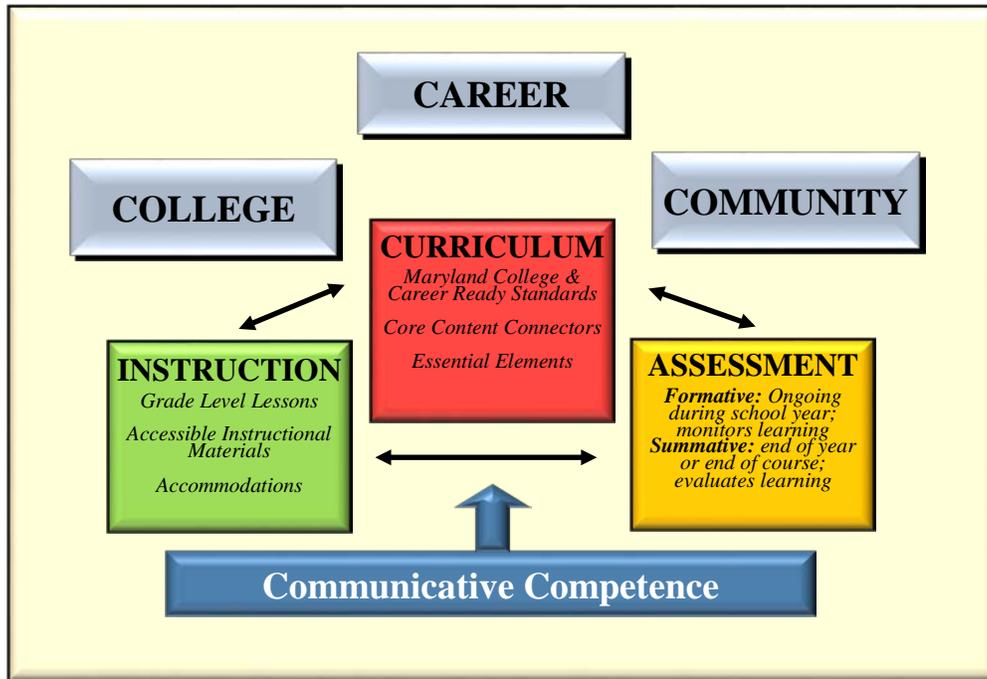
*It is important to note that amending the IEP does not require an IEP Team meeting. Participants in the amendment process should include the student, parent(s), special education teacher and/or case manager, and other service providers as appropriate.*

With a focus on the individual student's strengths and learning needs, school staff may consider:

- the student's disability and individual needs as defined in the IEP;
- the model of distance learning available and appropriate for the student;
- how to provide systematic and evidence-based interventions in a virtual and/or distance learning environment;
- accommodations and modifications, supplementary aids and services, related services, and supports that can be provided in a virtual environment; and
- access to technologies that that may influence the delivery of special education and related services during this period of extended remote learning.

Note: For students who are being instructed and/or assessed through Maryland's Alternate Academic Standards, considerations to the *Alternate Education Framework* should be made.

## The Alternate Education Framework



Adapted from the *National Center and State Collaborative Instructional Framework*

Please see the MSDE, DEI/SES Technical Assistance Bulletin # 19-07:  
[Improving Outcomes for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Eligibility, Instruction, and Assessment](#)  
 for more information about the alternate education framework.

### Step 2: Develop

Identify and document the necessary amendment(s) required to deliver IEP services through a virtual and/or distance learning environment.

School staff identifies and documents the necessary amendment(s) to deliver specially designed instruction (SDI) in a virtual and/or distance learning environment. This provides an opportunity to enhance collaboration with the family and assist them in support of their child at home, connecting the family with the team to achieve common student goals. School staff may:

- Identify the barriers and possibilities for the student to learn at home through support to the family or direct interaction with the student. Develop written procedures for **who** will provide specially designed instruction (special educator, paraeducator, related services provider, parent), **how** SDI will be delivered (virtual learning software, interaction with the instructional team online, parental interventions with school staff support), and the **timing** of SDI (when and how long).
- Identify the instructional strategies and supports that are new to any team members and if there is *training* needed for school staff (e.g., teacher, related services, paraprofessional) and parent (as appropriate) to support virtual and/or distance learning and the implementation of in-home supplementary aids and services to promote student progress and prevent regression.
- Consider *technology* that might assist the student's learning while using the learning platform that is available and appropriate to meet the student's needs. Determine whether the

technology supports or interferes with the student’s learning and consider alternatives when necessary.

- Identify opportunities for the student to maintain and develop *communication skills* to enhance communicative competence and use of alternative and augmentative communication systems at home.
- Identify the best way to determine the student’s communicative initiations and responses when interacting *online*.
- Develop a *schedule* for the student that considers attention, stamina, pacing, physical comfort, and other environmental or personal support needs that will enhance learning and progress.
- Consider the student’s *physical education or adapted physical education* needs. Identify TV, web-based, and internet-accessible activities in which the student can engage in with *peers or family* to routinely sustain fitness.
- Use the *natural environment* of the home and the wealth of the *natural learning opportunities* to pair academic skills to home routines, e.g., follow a morning schedule along with a template or adapted list, apply math (measurement) in preparing a meal or setting the table (counting), identify household items by name (reading labels).
- Consider participation in routines and grade-level *opportunities with peers* in general education through the virtual learning platform provided to all students (e.g., Google Classroom), consistent with the student’s IEP for participation in general education.
- Identify how *instructional methodologies* used in the school environment could translate to home instruction. These could include direct instruction provided by a family member, descriptive teaching, learning or communication prompt hierarchies, adequate “wait time,” repeated and deliberate practice, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) procedures, first/then routines, time delay, and scheduled delivery of reinforcement.
- Design a strategy to provide *training to the parent* if needed and consider how to provide ongoing parental support.

### Step 3: Agreement

Obtain parent agreement to the individualized amendment(s) to the current IEP.

It is essential that the family contribute to, understand, and agree with an amended IEP. Before any proposed amendments can be implemented, the parent(s) must agree to the amended IEP, as well as the data to be collected to monitor progress. Following the parent’s agreement, the amendments to the IEP need to be shared with the appropriate teacher(s) and related service providers, as well as the parents, prior to implementation. Prior written notice must also be provided consistent with the September 28, 2020 OSEP Q&A Guidance Document.<sup>1</sup> If the parent(s) is not in agreement, an IEP Team meeting should be convened with the family, to revise the IEP for implementation in a remote learning environment.

### Step 4: Implement

Implement the current, amended, or revised IEP in a virtual and/or distance environment.

Implementation considerations:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/qa-provision-of-services-idea-part-b-09-28-2020.pdf>  
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- Provide a visual schedule or three-dimensional schedule for the student (transmitted by postal mail or electronically) to promote predictability and routines for the student.
- Develop social stories or other supports to assist the student in understanding the changes resulting from COVID-19 and the necessity to learn remotely.
- If appropriate, develop methods for the family to collect data on the student's demonstration of skill in the instructional routine at home as well as in other natural home environments.
- Model instructional and communication strategies when interacting remotely with the student to deliver direct instruction.
- Collaborate with other educators and service providers to maximize the student's opportunity to interact with peers in the remote general education platform when and if possible.
- Design supports for peer interaction, if possible, to maintain inclusive social and communication opportunities consistent with the student's IEP.
- Incorporate expressive, receptive, and pragmatic communication strategies within all instructional activities and interactions with the student.
- Develop and/or use instructional materials that incorporate visual cues and characteristics to enhance understanding and skill acquisition.
- Consider accessibility features of the online platform and how visual and aural sensory input affects student initiations and responding.
- Assist the student in feeling connected to the school community with news and information about classmates and other school activities.
- Provide supports for the development of new skills needed by the student to use the available and appropriate remote learning environment.
- Align learning activities *with the student's mode of communication and preferred response modes*. Acknowledge successive approximations towards a learning goal.

## Step 5: Evaluate

Frequently monitor IEP implementation and student progress toward IEP goals.

It is beneficial that access to, and achievement of, learning standards and IEP goals be documented on a regular basis and reviewed to determine if there is a need for adjustment to the supports and services being provided. Strategies may include the following:

- Engage parents and the student, when possible, in the assessment of progress and identification of learning targets.
- Use data collection tools that are easy to implement and routinely monitor student performance and progress. If possible, use strategies consistently and already in place for the student. If appropriate, use data collection tools that are family friendly.
- Monitor environmental concerns that promote or interfere with learning so they can be modified, if possible, or documented to understand student performance.
- Document frequency and duration of services provided, the goals that are addressed, as well as the effectiveness of supports and services.
- Record the student's response to instruction and services.
- Use data to adjust the delivery of services, as appropriate.
- Collaborate with parents/family members to understand student performance and influence on student progress.
- Maintain and store data for consideration by the IEP team, when schools resume normal operations.

### Special Considerations for Behavior

Children with disabilities may struggle to adjust to restrictions to stay at home, away from friends and teachers, and changes to routines with low predictability. Students with significant cognitive disabilities may have limitations to their understanding of the life changes that they are experiencing, making the requirements to stay at home even more stressful. When a student acts out their frustration, it is important for school staff to support the student and family to understand these behaviors and to identify supports for the student. Below are some strategies/suggestions to support students with significant cognitive disabilities who are experiencing behavioral or emotional expressions resulting from having to stay at home and participate in a distant learning environment.

- Use materials and routines that are familiar to the student.
- Identify ways to teach and embed behavioral self-regulation or maintaining student and family safety, calming strategies, social stories that explain the current and future situations
- Identify ways to celebrate student success frequently
- Use a variety of social narratives to clarify challenging situations and possible responses through modified text, photos, or the use of technology.
- Increase opportunities for positive reinforcement for participation in routines, engagement in learning tasks, completing remote school activities, etc.
- Use visual supports and routines to prompt the student's known strategies for coping and calming.
- Ensure that positive behavioral expectations (represented by an object, picture, icon, or text) are posted, practiced, and reinforced within the home learning environment. Ensure that parents have access to these, and all other behavioral visual supports used in school for use at home.

- Identify and share with all members of the school staff the words, phrases, gestures, or body language that are familiar to the student and communicate reinforcement of positive behavior, persistence, patience, and engagement.
- Acknowledge and address barriers and/or contributing factors that may impact behavior in a virtual and/or distance learning environment.
- Amend an existing Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) to meet new behavioral challenges in the virtual or distance learning environment, if needed. Implement the BIP to the greatest extent possible. If amendments are made, document changes, reasons for the change, and parent agreement.
- Be available during scheduled “office hours” by email or phone as necessary to support the student.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: *How can my prior instruction of the standards in the classroom move to home instruction/distance learning?***

**A:** Consider sending home materials (digitally or in take-home mailed packets) for learners to use during instruction. Record small videos or hold live video conferences with students to teach and demonstrate learned and new skills. Incorporate the use of familiar tools and strategies into the distance learning structure. Scaffold instruction by beginning lessons with a connection to previously taught material. Select materials/manipulatives that might be available at home or send materials to families in a resource toolkit. Share enough resources and information to set families up for success, but not too much that might overwhelm them. In keeping with educational best practices, break activities into small chunks that can be completed over multiple days in small segments of time (i.e., no more than 15 minutes).

**Q: *How can I utilize the expertise of a paraprofessional in support of SDI in the distance learning environment?***

**A:** Instruction by paraprofessionals can be supplemental to the remote instruction provided by teachers and related services staff in a virtual and/or distance learning environment. If supplemental instruction is to be provided by a paraprofessional, it should primarily focus on:

- practicing already acquired skills with a focus on accuracy, quality, response rate, latency;
- minimizing educational regression; and
- strengthening the maintenance and generalization of learned skills. (Giangreco, 2020)

It is important to setup a method of consistent and regular communication with the paraprofessional through the most available online platform and accessible means (e.g., phone call, video chat, email, text-chat). Consider setting up a structure contacts (e.g., success in student progress/performance, review of student data, questions, upcoming lessons, next agenda). The paraprofessional may be able to access the chat area or video conference application of the distance learning platform to reinforce learning concepts, provide prompts, and visual reminders to the student. If the student participates in an online content area class, the paraprofessional could preview the lesson, review lesson vocabulary, or provide instruction on communication strategies to use in that lesson. The paraprofessional could also provide instruction (designed by the special educator) in how to use a behavioral regulation strategy (e.g., five fingers strategy for calming) and have the student practice the technique. The paraprofessional could also modify materials or create supplemental materials at the teacher's direction and send them to the teacher(s). Any direct instruction provided by the paraprofessional should be guided by written plans developed by the special educator, including a data collection component.

**Q: *What strategies can be used to help families and students maintain emotional health during the time at home?***

**A:** Increased emotional stress during this period may result from limitations in social connections and a lack of resources. When possible, any effort to connect students to their peers, neighbors, and friends will increase their sense of belonging and minimize loneliness. If a family needs mental health resources or assistance with food, connect with your school administration or counselors to identify if there are opportunities for the family to get relief. And the most important thing an educator can do is listen; family members will feel more at ease when they know that their child's teacher cares and is there to provide support.

**Q: *What is the role of the parent in a virtual and/or distance learning model for students with significant cognitive disabilities?***

**A:** Close and regular communication between the teacher and the primary family member will result in a more successful implementation of the student’s IEP during the extended school closure. While the responsibility of instruction rests with the teachers, the parent may play a key role in supporting instruction within the home, when appropriate. Consideration should be given to support parents as they help support the organization and routines at home. Keep in mind that change is often difficult for many students with significant cognitive disabilities; asking the family to further change their routine and add on home-schooling may be impossible. If the parent is working from home, maintaining child care and support, they may not be able to add in home-schooling. Consider the following factors for parent engagement in the instructional process:

- Students will see their parents as their greatest cheerleaders and coaches, knowing that their parents are their greatest advocate.
- Parents control the learning environment by setting the pace, building a physical space intended for learning, and continue to encourage in the absence of daily face-to-face interactions.
- Parents may help their child set goals; connect with and learning activities; practice with the material, and understand mistakes. The less independent the child is as a learner, the more time and energy the parent will spend in instructional activities.
- Parents work with the instructional team to identify training needs, resources, and/or related supports for the implementation of specially designed instruction, use of technologies, and development of schedules for learning success in the home environment.

**Q: *Can Medicaid be used to pay for related services included in IFSPs and IEPs?***

**A:** Yes. Many related services received by students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy, may be provided via video- or teleconferencing. Amended IEPs will document how services will be delivered (timing, methodology), as well as any services that cannot be provided through virtual or distance means. To support the delivery of related services in a virtual and/or distance learning environment, the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) has issued guidance expanding the use of telehealth, including licensing reciprocity for out-of-state providers and expanded eligibility for Medicaid billing.

## Resources

The following resources are offered to enhance, support or augment distance instruction for teachers and parents. Each local school system makes determinations as to the appropriateness of any tool or resource to be used or shared by the system. These resources are specific to the complex learning needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities.

### Assorted General Curriculum Projects Adapted Texts

<https://access.uncc.edu/parent-teacher-and-educator-resources/assorted-general-curriculum-projects-adapted-texts>

Similar to Tarheel reader, this site contains classic and typical read grade-level texts that have been chunked, shortened or made much less complex. Some of the texts use Writing with Symbols to support AAC users.

### Distance Learning for Special Education

<https://sites.google.com/view/distance-learning-specialed/home?authuser=0>

A collection of resources from educators and families around the world to support special education distance learning, including students with significant cognitive disabilities. It includes online resources for all age ranges in academics, transition, behavior and communication supports, motor activities, social-emotional supports, and more. Collected in conjunction with the Kansas Department of Education and University of Kansas, this site also contains tips for families and professionals.

### Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) Familiar Texts

[https://dynamiclearningmaps.org/erp\\_ie](https://dynamiclearningmaps.org/erp_ie)

DLM alternate assessments use specific "familiar texts." These books include fictional stories and informational text. The books are organized by grade level. They can be read in Tar Heel Reader or Tar Heel Shared Reader if a student needs communication support.

### DLM Science Instructional Activities

[https://dynamiclearningmaps.org/sci\\_resources](https://dynamiclearningmaps.org/sci_resources)

These science activities support teachers who are using DLM science Essential Elements during instruction. Model activities for each grade band (elementary, middle, and high school) are included and can be adapted for use at home.

### Free Boardmaker Activities

<http://teachinglearnerswithmultipleneeds.blogspot.com/2008/02/free-boardmaker-boards-and-activities.html>

For AAC users who use the Boardmaker symbol system, this site offers activities and materials that have already been translated into Boardmaker. Much of the focus is on younger students.

### Modified Lessons for Students with Disabilities

[https://www.livebinders.com/b/2522900?fbclid=IwAR0BVLEIMd\\_s3U99X9aUdc7OiRA7E05LQfGiZ6U6bUoHrZgGk-zub2EXG6s](https://www.livebinders.com/b/2522900?fbclid=IwAR0BVLEIMd_s3U99X9aUdc7OiRA7E05LQfGiZ6U6bUoHrZgGk-zub2EXG6s)

A set of math lessons that have been modified from grade-level content to scaffold instruction for students with intellectual disabilities.

### National Library of Virtual Mathematics

<http://nlvm.usu.edu/en/nav/vlibrary.html>

A site dedicated to providing virtual math manipulatives to support student understanding of concepts. It includes algebra tiles, base ten blocks, graphing support, etc.

### Praacticalaac

<https://praacticalaac.org/practical/how-i-do-it-digital-connections-with-families-to-support-aac-users/>

While Praacticalaac always has excellent ideas for working with students who use AAC, this particular post has some ideas and directions for distance learning for AAC users.

### The Sherlock Center

<http://www.ric.edu/sherlockcenter/wwslist.html>

This page has many classic and popular books that have been modified for complexity or length.

### Tar Heel Reader

<http://tarheelreader.org>

Tar Heel Reader is an online collection of free, easy-to-read, and accessible books on a range of topics. Each book can be read using built-in speech synthesis and accessed using multiple interfaces, including touch screens, switches (1-3), and eye-gaze. Read books without registering.

### Text Compactor

[www.Textcompactor.com](http://www.Textcompactor.com)

Place written text into the online form, and it will summarize texts. You are able to modify the length and complexity of the text. Review results before using as sometimes important information is lost.

### TIES Center Distance Learning Resources

<https://tiescenter.org/resources?topic=distance-learning>

Resources specifically designed to help educators, families, and administrators who work with students with significant cognitive disabilities support ongoing academic, social, and IEP engagement in a distance learning environment. New topics are posted each week. Published by TIES Center, a national technical assistance center on inclusive practices and policies, its purpose is to create sustainable changes in kindergarten–grade 8 school and district educational systems so that students with significant cognitive disabilities can fully engage in the same instructional and non-instructional activities as their general education peers while being instructed in a way that meets individual learning needs.

## References

Giangreco, M. F. (2020). *Remote Use of Paraprofessional Supports for Students with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, Center on Disability and Inclusion.

For more information, call 410-767-0249  
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