



Fall 2020 Back to School Preparations: An Advocacy Perspective

Article by Amy Guthrie, Achieva Disability Advocate

As advocates, we often hear from families across the region whose children have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and, like the parents of children without disabilities, are concerned both about their safety and about their educational progress.

During the school closure in the spring, IEP teams were directed to meet and discuss whether there were services/supports in the IEP that could not be delivered or were not applicable during the closure, and to note that in the document. We had mixed reports from families, and frequent frustration, particularly for students with more significant learning challenges.

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In general, concerns often included:

- Difficulty having the student engage/ focus on curriculum via the remote platform, especially for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities
- Difficulty navigating different platforms, spending hours trying to complete activities, only to get kicked off of the platform due to technical issues, and having to redo all of that work
- Having very little time with the teachers
- Lack of social engagement with peers
- Difficulty with technology hardware- some districts issue a tablet or laptop to every student, but for those that don't, if there is more than one child in the family and they have to share devices, this is another challenge.

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Some examples of individualized support include:

- More 1:1 instruction (either delivered remotely, or even by meeting in-person with an instructor).

- Or, if the district is doing a hybrid model with students coming to the building 2/5 days per week, the IEP team can decide that their particular student needs to be in the building 5/5 days per week.
- IEP teams can be as creative as they need to be.

Federal and state guidance has been issued in order for IEP teams to determine whether the student qualifies for COVID-19 Compensatory Services, based on a lack of progress or loss of skills due to the closure.

The Education Law Center has more information on this: <https://www.elc-pa.org/>.

In terms of types of scheduling, we have been seeing these plans from districts: face-to-face with social distancing, 100 percent remote, or a hybrid of the two, each obviously with their pros and cons, in terms of both health and safety, as well as access to the curriculum.

The pros and cons will vary regionally, depending on the spread of the pandemic, as well as on individual needs and preferences (e.g., families where the parents have to work outside the home, or have people who are medically at-risk).

Once the schedule is determined, then IEP teams can figure out how to meet the needs of individual students.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer.

Achieva disability advocates provide information, technical assistance and individual advocacy on issues that impact children and adults with intellectual disabilities and autism and their families. We also work with state and federal legislators and policy makers to ensure that the human, civil and legal rights of people with disabilities are protected and that they are afforded services to assist them to be included in their communities. We will provide guidance, information and technical assistance to the best of our ability. Achieva advocates are available to answer questions specific to your situation. Please contact us at 412.995.5000 x486, 888.272.7229 x 486 (Toll-Free) or log onto www.achieva.info/contact-advocacy.