

## Questions and answers on providing services to children with disabilities during a CoVid-19 outbreak

View a seven-minute video from the U.S. Department of Education on the requirement of online learning to be accessible: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCMLk4cES6A>

*Condensed from U.S. Department of Education document released March 2020 and a supplemental*

During an outbreak of COVID-19, local educational agencies (LEAs) and early intervention service (EIS) programs will need to collaborate with their state educational agency (SEA), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), or local public health department, as appropriate, to address questions about how, what, and when services should be provided to children with disabilities. It does not create or confer any rights for or on any person. This Q & A document does not impose any additional requirements beyond those included in applicable law and regulations. The responses presented in this document generally constitute informal guidance representing the interpretation of the Department of the applicable statutory or regulatory requirements in the context of the specific facts presented here and are not legally binding. The Q & As in this document are not intended to be a replacement for careful study of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II), and their implementing regulations. The IDEA, its implementing regulations, and other important documents related to the IDEA can be found at <http://sites.ed.gov/idea>. For more information on the requirements of Section 504 and Title II, and their implementing regulations, please consult <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/ocr/disabilityoverview.html>.

### **A. Implementing Part B of the IDEA and Section 504 during a COVID-19 outbreak**

**Question A-1:** Is an LEA required to continue to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities during a school closure caused by a COVID-19 outbreak?

The IDEA, Section 504, and Title II of the ADA do not specifically address a situation in which elementary and secondary schools are closed for an extended period of time (generally more than 10 consecutive days) because of exceptional circumstances, such as an outbreak of a particular disease.

1. If an 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 an LEA would not be required to provide services to students with disabilities during that same period of time.

If a child does not receive services during a closure, a child's IEP team (or appropriate personnel under Section 504) must make an individualized determination whether and to what extent compensatory services may be needed, consistent with applicable requirements, including to make up for any skills that may have been lost.

2. If an LEA continues to provide educational opportunities to the general student population during a school closure, the school must ensure that students with disabilities also have equal access to the same opportunities, including the provision of FAPE. (34 CFR §§ 104.4, 104.33 (Section 504) and 28 CFR § 35.130 (Title II of the ADA)). SEAs, LEAs, and schools must ensure

that, to the greatest extent possible, each student with a disability can be provided the special education and related services identified in the student's IEP developed under IDEA, or a plan developed under Section 504. (34 CFR §§ 300.101 and 300.201 (IDEA), and 34 CFR § 104.33 (Section 504)).

**Additional information** from March 21, 2020 Supplemental Fact Sheet, U.S. Dept. of Education

The Department understands that, during this national emergency, schools may not be able to provide all services in the same manner they are typically provided. While some schools might choose to safely, and in accordance with state law, provide certain IEP services to some students in-person, it may be unfeasible or unsafe for some institutions, during current emergency school closures, to provide hands-on physical therapy, occupational therapy, or tactile sign language educational services. Many disability-related modifications and services may be effectively provided online. These may include, for instance, extensions of time for assignments, videos with accurate captioning or embedded sign language interpreting, accessible reading materials, and many speech or language services through video conferencing.

Finally, 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. For example, if a teacher who has a blind student in her class is working from home and cannot distribute a document accessible to that student, she can distribute to the rest of the class an inaccessible document and, if appropriate for the student, read the document over the phone to the blind student or provide the blind student with an audio recording of a reading of the document aloud.

The Department encourages parents, educators, and administrators to collaborate creatively to continue to meet the needs of students with disabilities. 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.

**Question A-2:** Must an LEA provide special education and related services to a child with a disability who is absent for an extended period of time because the child is infected with COVID-19, while the schools remain open?

Yes. If a child with a disability is absent for an extended period of time (generally more than 10 consecutive school days) because of a COVID-19 infection and the school remains open, then the IEP Team must determine whether the child is available for instruction and could

benefit from homebound services such as online or virtual instruction, instructional telephone calls, and other curriculum-based instructional activities, to the extent available. In so doing, school personnel should follow appropriate health guidelines to assess and address the risk of transmission in the provision of such services. The Department understands there may be exceptional circumstances that could affect how a particular service is provided.

If a child does not receive services after an extended period of time, a school must make an individualized determination whether and to what extent compensatory services may be needed, consistent with applicable requirements, including to make up for any skills that may have been lost.

**Question A-5:** May an IEP Team consider a distance learning plan in a child's IEP as a contingency plan in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak that requires the school's closure?

Yes. IEP teams may, but are not required to, include distance learning plans in a child's IEP that could be triggered and implemented during a selective closure due to a COVID-19 outbreak. Such contingent provisions may include the provision of special education and related services at an alternate location or the provision of online or virtual instruction, instructional telephone calls, and other curriculum-based instructional activities, and may identify which special education and related services, if any, could be provided at the child's home.

## **B. IDEA Part C and COVID-19**

**Questions B-1:** Must a state lead agency or the EIS program continue to provide early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities during a COVID-19 outbreak if the offices are closed?

If the offices of the state lead agency or the EIS program or provider are closed, then Part C services would not need to be provided to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families during that period of time.

If the offices remain open, but Part C services cannot be provided in a particular location (such as in the child's home), by a particular EIS provider, or to a particular child who is infected with COVID-19, then the lead agency must ensure the continuity of services by, for example, providing services in an alternate location, by using a different EIS provider, or through alternate means, such as consultative services to the parent.

If offices are closed for an extended period and services are not provided for an extended period (more than 10 consecutive days) the IFSP team must meet under 34 CFR § 303.342(b)(1) to determine if changes are needed to the IFSP and to determine whether compensatory services are needed to address the infant or toddler's developmental delay. Extended period is defined as more than 10 consecutive days.