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COVID-19: Special Education During Public School Closure A Guide for Parents, Part 1

****Adapted from an article originally published by The Arc of Fort Bend County, Texas****

Since the March 2020 outbreak of the Corona Virus (COVID-19) in the United States, businesses and public schools have closed across the country. Nationwide school closures have left parents wondering how their children will learn and complete the current school year. Parents who have a child receiving special education services in public school have additional concerns about how their child's special education program and their learning will be impacted. How will the public school provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and meet their child's unique education needs? The response to this question will be as distinct and individual as each child.

This guide is intended to help parents as they plan for how their family will proceed during this unprecedented event. There is no one right answer; only tips and strategies for parents as they develop what their child's special education program will look like in a post-COVID-19 world. As Part 1 of this guide is being distributed on March 25, 2020, during the COVID-19 outbreak, some information may become outdated. Additional parts to this guide may be released later as additional information and suggestions develop.

The Arc of Union/Cabarrus is committed to securing for all people with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to choose and realize their goals of where and how they learn, live, work, and play. Even though our staff are working remotely during this time, we are still available to support parents, families, and self-advocates via phone calls, emails, video conferences, and social media.

My child's public school is closed. Now what?

In response to public school closures, on March 12, 2020, the Department of Education published a document titled *Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children With Disabilities During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak (March 2020)*. This FAQ document describes the State's responsibilities to infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities and their families, and to the staff who serve these children. The full FAQ document is available here: <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/q-and-a-providing-services-to-children-with-disabilities-during-the-coronavirus-disease-2019-outbreak/#Q-A-1>

If your child's public school is not providing education services to the general student population, then the school would not be required to provide services to students with disabilities during that same period of time.

If your child's public school 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 a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). The school must ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, your child can be provided the special education and related services identified in their IEP and/or 504 plan.

What does providing FAPE and implementing my child's IEP look like when schools remain closed?

The Department of Education released a Supplement Fact Sheet on March 21, 2020 titled *Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities*, which offered more specifics on this issue. The full document is available here: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf>

Schools may not be able to provide all services in the same manner they are typically provided. It is important to note that federal disability law allows for flexibility in determining how to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The determination of how FAPE is to be provided may need to be different during this unprecedented national emergency.

As an example, schools may not be able to provide certain IEP services to your child in-person, such as hands-on physical therapy or occupational therapy. However, many disability-related modifications and services may be effectively provided online. These may include: 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.

Also, although federal law requires remote instruction to be accessible to students with disabilities, it does not mandate specific methodologies (how the instruction is done). Teachers 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 student with visual impairment 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 with visual impairment, read the document over the phone or provide an audio recording of a reading of the document aloud.

Will my child's scheduled IEP meeting still happen even though schools are closed?

Probably not. The Department of Education states that IEP teams are not required to meet in person during school closure. However, if the school district starts providing remote instruction and is therefore providing education services, the IEP meeting could potentially happen in a virtual format. We have not yet received guidance on this issue from our local school districts.

My child had an evaluation scheduled, but now schools are closed. What now?

If your child's evaluation requires a face-to-face assessment or observation, the evaluation would need to be delayed until school reopens. Evaluations and re-evaluations that do not require face-to-face assessments or observations may take place while schools are closed, so long as you – the parent - consent.

What should I do now to support my child's education during the school closure?

Get organized and keep notes.

A. Prepare to Communicate with the School

With the NC Governor's announcement on March 23, 2020 that all public K-12 schools will remain closed for in-person instruction through May 15, 2020, school districts are working on plans for remote instruction. Each district may roll out their plans on different dates and plans may look different from district to district. Stay connected to your district's announcements to find out when you should expect to receive specific information for your child's level (elementary, middle, high) and/or school.

B. Create a Class/Teacher/IEP Chart

- 1) Get a copy of your child's class schedule with subject and teacher names and a copy of your child's current IEP. Make a chart of all subjects and track the following:
- 2) Does your child receive any special education supports or services in this class? Teacher's Aide? Any modifications to instruction? Accommodations?
- 3) Are there IEP goals for this specific subject? What are those goals?
- 4) Does your child have related services such as Speech, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Counseling, etc.? If so, make each of these related services an additional "class" on your chart. Check the duration and frequency of these related services in your child's IEP, so you can note the days/hours of services your child typically received each week before the school closure.
- 5) Once remote instruction in your school district begins, you can also use this chart to keep track of communication between you and your child's teachers and other related service providers.

C. Self-Reflection and Planning Questions

While Waiting for School District to Roll Out Remote Instruction Plans

- 1) What would a typical "school at home" day look like for me and my child?
- 2) If parents are working from home, where is the parents' work space? Where is the child's schoolwork space?
- 3) How can I engage my child in setting up/organizing their special schoolwork space?
- 4) What enrichment activities can I do with my child during school closure? Most school districts have posted activities; The Arc of Union/Cabarrus is also sharing resources online, as are educational companies such as Scholastic.

Once You Receive Remote Instruction Plans from the School District

- 5) What learning resources will be available for my child? Will the school post video instruction, email worksheets, provide physical books/workbooks or online books?
- 6) If my child experiences difficulty with a subject, who will be available to help me? How will I contact those school support people?
- 7) How comfortable am I helping "teach" certain subjects? Are teacher notes or guides (with answers to questions) available from the school?
- 8) How will my child learn to manage their time/schedule, focus and behavior throughout the day? Does the school use a visual schedule, manipulatives, and other supports to help my child in the classroom? What are those supports and how can I duplicate them at home?

- 9) What communication systems are in place for teachers and parents to discuss and monitor progress? Are school counselors available, if needed?
- 10) Create a “school at home” schedule to help provide consistency for your child. Consider keeping your child’s school subject schedule in roughly the same order. Even if you are only doing school in the mornings for a few hours, consider having your child work on their subjects in the same order that they would have completed them while at school. This may help your child keep a sort of usual routine, even if it is at home and not going throughout the typical 7-hour school day.

D. Stay Connected.

Read all correspondence from your child’s teachers, school and district. Follow their social media sites. Reach out to other parents for suggestions, ideas, or just to talk with someone who is facing your same situation. Follow The Arc of Union/Cabarrus on Facebook and check our website for resources and guidance. Contact The Arc’s advocacy staff with any specific questions.

www.thearcisthere.org/contact-us

E. Breathe

Take one day at a time. You know your child best. You are your child’s number one advocate. We are here to support you!

Important Links

Cabarrus County Public Schools

www.cabarrus.k12.nc.us

Kannapolis City Public Schools

www.kcs.k12.nc.us

Union County Public Schools

www.ucps.k12.nc.us

Department of Education Coronavirus Information and Resources

<https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus?src=feature>

Disability Rights North Carolina

<https://disabilityrightsnorthcarolina.org/>

Exceptional Children’s Assistance Center

<https://www.ecac-parentcenter.org/>

The Arc of Union/Cabarrus

www.thearcisthere.org

The Arc of Union/Cabarrus Facebook page

www.facebook.com/thearcisthere