



Key Considerations for Special Educators and the Infants, Children, and Youth They Serve as Schools Reopen

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Introduction

Despite the many pressing stressors placed on special education professionals and families during the pandemic, countless programs, schools, and districts have actively strived to serve students with exceptionalities amid closures. And as states begin to ease social distancing measures, planning for the upcoming year has begun. Among those impacted by the closures of programs and schools are 7.1 million students ages 6-21 who are eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and over 700,000 students with 504 plans in public schools. Nearly 775,000 children ages 3-5 attend preschool under IDEA and over 400,000 children ages 0-3 are served in programs under Part C of IDEA. These children, along with their families and educators dedicated to their success, must remain a vital priority within our public education system.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is committed to ensuring that infants, children, and youth with exceptionalities are afforded their right to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) and appropriate services as required by IDEA. To ensure this occurs, educators and other personnel at the program, school, and district level who support students with disabilities must be considered vital as states and districts develop plans and begin to reopen programs and schools. No plan to reopen can succeed without the input and partnership of the program and school community, which includes professionals dedicated to the success of infants, children, and youth with exceptionalities.

The health and safety of anyone who serves children and families in the home, community, or school is an essential consideration. Thus, CEC strongly recommends that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for health and safety of students and school/district personnel guide any plans for re-entry. In addition to following all safety protocols, we offer additional recommendations:

Key Considerations for School Reopenings

Ensure equity for all students. Programs and districts must ensure that reopening plans are designed to include ALL infants, children, and youth in planning and implementation discussions and initiatives. If programs and schools cannot meet the guidelines for all infants, children, and youth – including those most vulnerable (i.e., with the most extensive needs) – then returning to business as usual for any young child or student would be discriminatory. Additionally, programs and schools must prioritize in-person services and schooling for young children and students with disabilities with the most intensive learning and behavioral needs while also factoring in their health and safety.

Protect and prioritize special educators and their teams. During the Great Recession, 120,000 teaching positions were cut. This history, combined with the fact that special educators represent the highest shortage area nationwide, shows that the pandemic has the potential to exacerbate this significant gap in key school and district personnel. Special educators serve approximately 16 percent of the population aged 0-21 and are a critical part of every program, school, and district staff. Special educator positions must be preserved and provided additional support to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the young children and students they serve. Therefore, states and districts must work together to:

- Protect existing resources and personnel by maintaining existing jobs and avoiding expanded caseloads
- Provide targeted and meaningful professional development responsive to the program or education environment, community needs, and changing regional and/or state circumstances
- Protect and support the physical and mental health of all program and school personnel, including special educators
- Provide and support the physical and mental health of all young children and families as appropriate



Create innovative ways to shore up program, school, and district teams so students have access to the instruction and related services they require (e.g., colleges/universities could partner with schools to allow teacher candidates to provide tutoring or remote instruction with supervision by the school team lead).

Protect the integrity of the IDEA. CEC was a leader in 1974 during the drafting of the landmark IDEA. We deeply understand the progress that has been made for children with exceptionalities in the last 46 years. Any school reopening plan must uphold the right of children with exceptionalities to FAPE and ensure that all eligible infants, children, and youth remain an equal priority within our public education system by:

Establishing and reinforcing data-driven practices to guide teams in making updates to outcomes for infants and toddler on the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) and student goals on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) – as these goals are the backbone to providing FAPE and services as required by the IDEA

Recognizing the vulnerability of infants, children, and youth with exceptionalities in our system so that programs and schools must plan to provide the intensive supports and services needed to meet their educational, behavioral, and social-emotional needs.

Addressing the gaps in distance learning: As distance learning has unfolded across the nation, CEC members have pivoted quickly to support students. While many complex factors continue to impact how early intervention, special education instruction, and/or related therapies are provided to infants, children, and youth with disabilities, we wish to emphasize the ongoing needs and gaps that states and districts must address so that remote learning can be as successful as possible, as various situations may demand in the coming year.

Great inequities exist in remote learning for young children, students, and families, including access to technology, individualized supports to access virtual learning, and educators who need training and technical support to achieve technology literacy for their virtual visits and classrooms. In particular, we know that students with significant cognitive or intellectual disabilities, severe behavior disorders, and who are deaf or blind have not been well served during distance learning. Infants, children, and youth with medical complications will need specific considerations because these students may still be learning remotely due to medical conditions that place them in the high-risk category, even after the return to in-person instruction. Finally, we remain extremely concerned about the infants, children, and youth that have not been reached since programs and schools closed. To remedy these problems, we recommend:

A meaningful investment in access to Internet and technology, including assistive technology, so that all infants, children, and youth and their families can access their virtual services and classrooms when learning is remote
Training and technical assistance for educators so they can fluently navigate technology and education delivery in a virtual setting

Training and technical assistance for families of young children so they can fluently navigate technology and support their children, in partnership with educators, in a virtual setting.

About Us

The Council for Exceptional Children is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

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