



A Union of Professionals

COVID-19 School Closures

Supporting Students with **Disabilities**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation, and ensures special education and related services to these children.

The IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. The challenges of the global COVID-19 pandemic are many and have forced school districts across the nation to take necessary steps not only to protect the health and safety of students, but also to address the academic, and social emotional needs of our most

vulnerable students. Although distance learning quickly became the default solution for the more than 54 million students displaced by school closures, it is not the most accessible choice for the nearly 7 million students identified as students with disabilities under IDEA.

Recent guidance ([bit.ly/33S5GTd](https://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2020/04/20200408-idea-guidance.pdf)) by the U.S. Department of Education and the department's Office for Civil Right (OCR) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) sought to clarify guidance and information to state and local education agencies on the legal obligations to provide a free and appropriate public education required by IDEA.

Key Points

- State and local education agencies must ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act which should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction.
- School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those providing education, specialized instruction and related services to students with disabilities. OCR and OSERS do recognize that exceptional circumstances may affect how all educational and related services are provided, therefore the Education Department ([bit.ly/33Mckue](https://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2020/04/20200408-idea-guidance.pdf)) will offer flexibility where possible.
- The federal guidance does provide flexibility; however, it does not specify methodologies:
 - As appropriate, special education and related services can be provided through distance instruction virtually, online or telephonically;
 - Certain services to some students may be provided in person if feasible and safe;
 - Utilization of disability-related modifications—closed captioning, embedded sign-language interpretation, etc.
- Individualized education plan (IEP) teams are encouraged to employ virtual platforms to collaborate “creatively” to support students, adding practices such as:
 - Teletherapy;
 - Online options for data tracking and documentation; and
 - Meetings on digital platforms.

Resources

These resources and recommendations can help special educators, support personnel and specialized instructional support personnel, as well as parents and caregivers.

Note: *These lists are provided as a service to our members. They are by no means exhaustive, nor does inclusion imply any product endorsement.*

- **Parent Center Hub**
bit.ly/39lcmdN

The hub includes 100 parent training and information centers as well as centers for community/ parent resources in the United States and U.S. territories. These centers perform a variety of direct services for children and youth with disabilities, families, professionals and organizations that support them. Some of the activities include:

- Working with families of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, birth to 26;
- Helping parents participate effectively in their children's education and development; and
- Partnering with professionals and policymakers to improve outcomes for all children with disabilities.

Apps for Children with Special Needs

Educators and families are encouraged to choose apps that provide teacher-made materials, video tutorials, lesson plans, and extension activities. In addition, look for apps that provide free trial periods; try before you buy!

- **My PlayHome**
www.myplayhomeapp.com/

is a free app that gives children and youth a digital doll family of up to 15 dolls with a variety of skin tones with whom the children can explore, play and share stories. These shared stories help to increase student verbalizations, provide a place for social and emotional learning, and teach necessary early language skills.

- **SoundingBoard**
[/bit.ly/2UkZYpR](https://bit.ly/2UkZYpR)

is a free mobile augmentative and alternative communication app designed for students who are nonverbal or who have limited speech to help them communicate. To meet the needs of this particular population, the app comes with preloaded boards

using symbols with recorded messages. Students select and press images on the board to prompt a verbal message.

- **LetterSchool**
www.letterschool.org/

encourages early literacy and numeracy skills by guiding children to tap, touch and trace colorful animations. Children learn letter formation, letter sounds and names, spelling, counting and other preschool and primary skills. This app, which offers a free trial, also does an excellent job of developing fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination.

- **Birdhouse for Teachers**
bit.ly/2UjHfeg

is an organizational tool that gives special education teachers, parents and other caregivers one place to share information about a student's behavior and progress.

- **Common Sense Education**
bit.ly/2UHDeiZ

uses Seeing AI a combination of technologies to narrate text, people, objects and scenes for blind or visually impaired kids. Main channels include a short text reader, document reader, scanner, and person identifier. Experimental channels include the scene, color and handwriting readers.

- **CAST UDL Book Builder**
bookbuilder.cast.org/

allows users to create, share, publish and read digital books that engage and support diverse learners according to their individual needs, interests and skills.

- **Prism**
bit.ly/3bldCz0

is an online-based game that follows the story of Fox, who meets several animals on his quest to save the forest from a flooded river. The game puts the player into the shoes of students with autism and assists players in empathizing with the lives of kids who experience differences from their peers.

- **Accessibyte**
bit.ly/2UI0fzV

makes fun, funky, fully accessible apps for users who are blind, visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, dyslexic or have other reading difficulties. Accessibyte wants kids (and adults) to have fun options when it comes to assistive technology.

Find more information at AFT at **www.aft.org/coronavirus** and at Share My Lesson at **sharemylesson.com/coronavirus/support-disabilities**.

Websites

Educators, families, and caregivers are encouraged to check with these sites and others to learn which apps, platforms, and other resources are recommended by their peers, families and industry leaders.

- **Common Sense Media**
bit.ly/2WKS2zW
- **Edutopia**
www.edutopia.org/
- **Moms with Apps**
bit.ly/3dyhv5C
- **Ivy Panda**
bit.ly/2vReYIT
- **One Place for Special Needs Apps**
bit.ly/2xnO6KT

Digital Modification

In addition to apps, digital modifications will be essential to remote learning for students with disabilities. There are different types of assistive technologies that enable students with differing abilities to access text. Text-to-speech (TTS) is a type of assistive technology that reads digital text aloud and is compatible with almost all digital devices:

- **iPad**
- **computer**
- **phone**
- **tablet**

Also, most web pages and many types of text files can be converted into audio with TTS software. All devices come with accessibility features and can improve student engagement with the modifications. These features are designed to facilitate access for those who are blind or have low vision, deaf or hard of hearing, and many others.

- **Android—Settings > Accessibility > Text-to-Speech Output**
bit.ly/2WM2Duw
- **Chromebook—Settings > Accessibility**
bit.ly/2y35q83

- **Mac/iPad—Settings > Accessibility**
apple.co/39pRbXP

- **Windows—Control Panel > Ease of Access**
bit.ly/2xtiB1I

Speech recognition or dictation is another critical tool, found on most devices, that helps students to express themselves by simply talking without editing what they are saying. Dictation software is available on most devices in the settings menu, and it helps students improve their writing skills and achieve different levels of success.

Webinars

- **Center on Technology and Disability Webinar Café**
bit.ly/2QOfiJt
- **Assistive Technology—What It Is and How to Use It**
bit.ly/2R3c7xR
- **Tecnología de Asistencia: Vista de un Profesor**
bit.ly/2WKUtCI
- **I Can Read That! Supports for Struggling Readers**
bit.ly/2QN6JyB
- **CAST Professional Learning**
bit.ly/3bmWuc2

Podcasts

Working as a special educator requires patience and dedication, and the right podcasts can help anyone succeed in this demanding profession. Many teaching podcasts are specifically geared toward special education professionals who work with students who have learning disabilities as well as with at-risk students from under-resourced communities.

- **The Cult of Pedagogy Podcast**
bit.ly/3alq0Pv

The Cult of Pedagogy is a podcast dedicated to effective teaching strategies, classroom planning, education technology and special education. Jennifer Gonzalez, a former middle school teacher, is the host of the podcast.

- **Angela Watson's Truth for Teachers Podcast**
apple.co/2UDB0px

Angela Watson is an instructional coach and former educator who hosts the weekly Truth for Teachers podcast, which gives special education teachers a valuable perspective of the challenges and rewards involved in educating children with disabilities and special needs.

- **The Inclusion Podcast**
bit.ly/2JjMS5P

Julie Causton shares everything happening in the exciting world of special education and school inclusion.

- **What's New in Adapted Physical Education**
bit.ly/33LkyTw

This podcast aims to provide an insight into the profession of adapted physical education through interviews with a variety of panels of APE professionals. The podcast is an attempt to provide an untapped means of easily receiving updates and best practice information in regard to APE.

Recommendations

Challenges for this nation's educators and school personnel are unprecedented. Yet, we are rising to the occasion. More than 60 million children, including private school numbers, are no longer attending school and it appears unlikely they will return this school year. Most of these children will access some form of learning via a distance learning program or some iteration of remote learning. For students with disabilities, this may not be an option. For special educators, other support personnel and specialized instructional support personnel who provided (and will continue to do so) critical academic, related services and education to this population of students, remote learning or teletherapy is now the anchoring tether for more than 7 million students with disabilities.

Our recommendations suggest you:

- **Stay safe!** Follow the recommended Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Guidance for Schools
bit.ly/3buCYuo
- **Stay informed** of your state and district policies and guidelines.
- **Monitor local news** for updates on closures, curfews and essential assembly ordinances.

- **Check your email appropriately**—if you have contractual or work requirements governing the number of hours or how often you should check work email, please adhere to those guidelines.
- **Know work expectations** if you have any. If you are responsible for supporting students with disabilities, consider the following:
 - How many can you reasonably support?
 - What does internet access look like for these students?
 - What does your access look like? Keep a record of the time you are working each day and what you are doing.
 - What are the accommodations supports for the students you are supporting?
 - Which students are you unable to support? What does offline support look like for these students or students for whom an online platform is not appropriate? How will this material be provided to these students?
 - What will work measurement look like over time?
- **What is the record-keeping mechanism** for this transition period?
- **How will this information be articulated** to other team members?
- **Establish a routine for yourself** that includes taking breaks for personal care, meals, physical activity, and emotional well-being.
- **Connect with other practitioners as appropriate**—grade-level peers, related service providers, community/advocacy agencies in online communities to exchange/share ideas; however, confidentiality must be maintained at all times.
- **Engage parents virtually** in the same way you would physically—set up an email address to be used for communications with students and families, limit person-to-person contact, and require them to schedule a virtual appointment; in other words, maintain boundaries.
- **Inform your parents and peers of your "working hours"**; this may be established by your district, however, an email communication may be needed to remind others of your availability.
- **Take advantage of the many free virtual learning opportunities** currently offered by colleges, universities, technology companies and other entities, many of which are offering badges, certificates and "freemium" access to technology products.

Find more information at AFT at www.aft.org/coronavirus
and at Share My Lesson at sharemylesson.com/coronavirus/support-disabilities.