An Educator's Guide to Virtual Learning: 4 Actions to Support Students With Disabilities and Their Families

During the past decade, virtual learning has increasingly been integrated into student instruction and classroom environments across the country (and throughout the world). It would be unusual to find a school where some level of online or blended learning was not being offered to students. But the reality of COVID-19 turned even the best of what we know and do in the virtual learning space on its head!

Every student (including those with identified disabilities), every subject, every teacher has been impacted. There are complexities when figuring out how to provide mandated specialized services and supports, testing, and accommodations. And new procedures are needed for communicating with students, parents, and school colleagues. Ramping up these activities with barely any notice while ensuring that all students receive the high-quality instruction and support to which they are entitled can seem overwhelming.

States, districts, and schools are working 24/7 to make timely decisions about how to keep the "virtual school doors" open to all students. It is essential that the needs of students with disabilities be considered throughout all decision-making and planning processes. It's the law, and even (or perhaps especially) in times like these, we need to safeguard these students' rights to a free and appropriate education.

Here are four things you can do right now to position yourself and your students with disabilities for success during this transition to online learning.

1   **Communicate early and often with students and parents.** Send separate messages to your students and their parents. The two groups need different types of reassurance from you:

- **For students:** All students, especially those with disabilities, will need clear directions about your expectations for online learning. Be specific about how they need to engage with you and with peers, work alone or with parent oversight, and submit work. And offer different options for communicating with you when they're struggling.

- **For parents:** Many parents of students with disabilities are hearing rumors that their children will be denied the services and supports they need to succeed. Set them at ease by stating your commitment. Share with them the best ways to communicate with you when their children are struggling. Let them know how you'll provide their children the accommodations and assistive technologies they need to succeed.

- **For both:** Setting reasonable expectations for both learning and communication, and ensuring that there are multiple ways to communicate (e.g., email and video chats) can help ease the tension that everyone feels during these uncertain times. Be open and honest about what's working and what needs to be adjusted. And reassure students that "this too shall pass." Acknowledging solidarity and a shared commitment to inclusion, even during these times of uncertainty, will go a long way toward building the kind of relationship that will support your students now and in the future.

2 **Establish communication with your school principals.** This has likely already happened, but amid the tumult of transition to online learning, there are key issues that the families of students with disabilities are most concerned about. These might include curricular accessibility, the provision of assistive technologies, and assessment accommodations. Importantly, you will also need to plan for providing compensatory services to prevent disruptions in student learning, and have a plan to effectively implement a student's IEP and/or 504 plan.

3 **Contact special educators and related service providers.** Families will likely be reaching out to multiple individuals who provide educational and therapeutic services to their child. Create and share a plan to ensure ongoing communication, and determine who the point persons will be so expectations are met and messages from the school are consistent and clear. Build and communicate procedures for effective communication between and among general and special educators, case managers, paraprofessionals, counselors, and administrative personnel, and clearly articulate how each of these individuals will engage with families and students. Set up and establish ongoing channels to share both challenges and successes with service providers and members of your teams.

4 **Begin implementing best practices in online special education.** Most of the best practices in online instruction are the same as for in-person, in-school instruction. This includes using multiple ways to present content, assess progress, provide feedback, and engage students (the hallmark of Universal Design for Learning). Students will still need explicit instruction, and providing what amounts to virtual 1:1 or small group instruction to so many students will take creativity, planning, and flexibility. Here are some helpful resources:

- **CEC's High-Leverage Practices in Special Education**
  https://highleveragepractices.org/about-hlps/

- **Implementing Universal Design for Learning**
  http://www.cast.org/

- **Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities**
  http://www.centerononlinelearning.res.ku.edu/publications/