



Managing Virtual Learning for Students with Special Needs

This post was authored by attorney [Amy C. O'Hara, CELA](#) of [Littman Krooks, LLP](#), New York. Amy focuses her practice on special needs planning, elder law, trusts and estates, and personal injury settlement consulting. She serves on SNA's Board of Directors.

If the pandemic has been difficult for student learning, the situation has only been more difficult for students with special needs. From a disruption in teaching styles and formats, to newfound challenges learning in a virtual or hybrid environment, to increased isolation, students with special needs require more attention and consideration as they navigate virtual learning.

For parents struggling to help their children, it is imperative that they connect with their teachers, formulate a plan and discuss their child's difficulties at the next IEP meeting. The pandemic has caused a shift in planning so parents should not hesitate to discuss their child's learning challenges at the next IEP meeting and ask for needed accommodations or modifications in the IEP or in a separate virtual individualized learning plan.

Students with Special Needs all Entitled to Free Appropriate Public Education

The [United States Department of Education \(USDOE\)](#) has emphasized that all students with special needs must continue to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) during the pandemic—whether a student is learning in-person, virtually or in a hybrid setting. As school districts are so overwhelmed, advocacy can be essential to make sure the student receives individualized support in the pandemic and still has the chance to meet challenging objectives, in the least restrictive environment. The USDOE has recognized that learning and services may look different in the virtual or hybrid environment, but students must receive their IEP services to the maximum extent possible.

Keep Realistic Expectations

While ensuring an appropriate education is important, maintaining perspective is equally important, as virtual or hybrid learning cannot replace the full-time in-person experience, particularly for students with special needs. Unrealistic expectations may create undue stress for all, in these challenging times.

The difficulties are substantial. Some students may have communication or listening difficulties which prevent them from accessing the virtual learning environment. Almost all students in a virtual or hybrid environment will have executive functioning difficulties in managing all the electronic demands. If students are fully virtual, they will miss the peer

interaction and support staff at school. For example, a student may have had small classes and two teachers plus an aide, and now parents and caregivers may be managing this learning at home, which can be very challenging. While a teaching assistant may still assist a student with virtual work, the 1:1 interaction will not be the same. To emphasize, to the extent possible, all students should have all the services listed in the IEP, but the services may look different in the virtual or hybrid environment. For example, if an occupational therapist cannot work directly with student, she will provide a worksheet and a virtual lesson for the student to follow, with a parent or caregiver supervising.

Making a Virtual or Hybrid Learning Environment Work

Finding a system that works for both the student and the teachers will result in a better learning experience for the student, in addition to maintaining a positive relationship with the teachers, support staff and the school counselor. This requires regular and honest communication, check-in meetings over the phone or computer, and added flexibility as teachers attempt to replicate the in-person experience as much as possible.

Parents should consider asking for or doing the following:

- Ask for weekly meetings with teachers to assess the student's progress and make adjustments as needed.*
- Keep open email communication to address any changes with the student's environment or concerns from the student or parent.*
- Ensure on getting input from the student's pediatrician, therapists and health care providers on needed recommendations and share with school providers.*
- Ask the school guidance counselor for updates on missing work or progress reports.*
- If home with student, parents should endeavor to replicate the same structure of the school day and provide emotional and physical support.*
- Ensure regular breaks and times for the student and caregiver to decompress on virtual days.*
- Be sensitive to the anxiety and stress the student might be feeling, particularly if the assigned work is challenging. At the IEP meeting, ask the school psychologist or social worker for any needed emotional support as more students may need counseling.*
- Ask for help when and wherever needed.*

- *Depending on the situation, consider utilizing the services of a special education advocate or attorney to help navigate virtual learning and ensure the student receives a FAPE and gets any needed makeup services.*

Parents can also consider contacting various nonprofit organizations and if possible, the local Special Education Parents Teachers Association (SEPTA). These organizations can provide invaluable support for students with special needs and their parents.

As parents and caregivers navigate this new reality helping their children, remaining realistic about what the student can accomplish should be part of an ongoing conversation with the teachers and staff. It might become necessary to recalibrate the learning goals and consider a more realistic learning plan that does not provide additional stress on either the student or the parent/caregiver.

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