

April 3, 2020

COVID-19, Special Education and Children with Mental Health Needs



What Important Information and Guidance Do We Have from the Federal and State Governments?

The most recent guidance from the federal Department of Education (DOE) and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) make clear that school districts must provide special education students with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) during Covid-19-related school closures. The guidance from DOE and DESE replaced older, now-invalid policies that initially indicated school districts were not required to provide special education services during school closures, if they were not also providing general education services.

The current DOE guidance clarifies that students must be provided with FAPE during school closures, which “may include, as appropriate, special education and related services through distance instruction.” Some important key points from the DESE guidance include:

“School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students.” – U.S. DOE March 21st 2020

Referrals to MHAP for Kids may be made to the intake line:

(617)275-2919

- Districts should make every effort to provide special education instruction and services.
- Education, enrichment and activities offered to general education students **must** be made accessible to students with disabilities.
- School closures will impact evaluation timelines. DESE encouraged parents and Districts to discuss and agree whether an extension for an ongoing timeline is appropriate. This should be a collaborative decision.
- Expired IEPs will remain in effect until a new IEP is developed and accepted.
- If an IEP Team meeting needs to occur, Districts should convene IEP Team meetings virtually or on the telephone.

What Could Special Education Services Look Like?

- Special instruction and related services (speech/language and counselling) may be provided by either sending resources and supports to students or online or on the telephone.
- Forms of specialized instruction may include accessible reading materials, speech and language services through video conferencing and videos with accurate captioning.
- Districts may continue to implement many of the accommodations found in a student’s IEP, such as extended time, speech-to-text and other assistive technology tools.

What Can We Expect for Students with IEPs When School Returns?

- Once schools re-open, your child's IEP team **must** reconvene to discuss how the closure impacted your child and make an "individualized determination" about the need for **compensatory services**.
 - Compensatory services are special education services provided to make up for services the student missed out on, with the goal of getting the student back to where they would have been without any disruption to their education.

Tips for Parents with Children in Mental Health Crisis

- Disruptions to routine can be destabilizing for all children, and especially so for those with pre-existing mental health needs. Watch for any changes and alert the mental health professionals working with your child with concerns.
 - Important changes could include physical/verbal aggression, different sleep patterns, hygiene refusal, poor appetite, struggling to concentrate or suicidal thoughts/statements.
- Many mental health professionals are providing clients with telehealth options. If your child is receiving services such as individual therapy, in-home therapy, or therapeutic mentoring, try to have video chats or phone appointments as often as you would normally.
 - Ask your child's mental health providers to help you document in writing any changes in your child's behavior. These professionals should be noting changes within their case goals and progress notes, as well.
- If your child receives **counseling as a service through his IEP**, reach out to his school counselor via e-mail and ask about how this service will be provided during the school closure.
 - Consider starting an email chain with their school counselor and the outpatient providers.
- **Mobile Crisis Intervention** is available to help parents whose children are at immediate risk of hurting themselves or someone else. Find the number for your local Mobile Crisis Intervention provider by calling **1-877-382-1609** and entering your zip code.
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has published a guide that includes examples of behaviors children may exhibit and how a parent can respond: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019>