

## **Supporting Learning While Social Distancing : Companion Document for Families of Children with Disabilities**

Being the parent of a child with a disability presents many joys, challenges, hopes and dreams. That's true for all aspects of life, school being one of them. Some families might be new to navigating the world of special education and some may be very familiar with it. One thing most parents/guardians are new to during this pandemic is supporting their child's learning at home. This document will help families know what to expect from their child's teachers and what is reasonable to ask for. We're all in this together.

### **What Parents Can Expect from Teachers and Special Educators**

#### **Consistent Contact**

- A member of your child's team should be in touch with you and/or your child on a consistent basis. Some days, that connection might come from a classroom teacher, other days from their special education case manager. You may also hear from related service providers like speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school counselors, behavior interventionists and paraprofessionals.
- These people are not available to come to your home during this pandemic, but aside from that, they can contact you in the best way that works for you: phone calls, emails, video chats, etc.
- Some teachers might have regularly scheduled "office hours" or check-in times when they are available to answer questions and provide support. Parents should work with their teachers and special educators to find times that fit within the parent's schedule.

#### **Materials to Meet your Child's Learning Needs**

- Supplies, equipment or materials your child needs to complete their schoolwork can be provided to you by the school if you do not have them. This can include anything from checklists, to sensory tools, to computers that are equipped with the assistive devices your child uses at school (if your child's school is using virtual learning only).

#### **Assignments Matched to your Child's Abilities**

- Classroom teachers and special educators are responsible for making sure that the learning activities your child receives are matched to their level of skill. This means that some of the activities should be fairly easy, so your child can practice the skills they already know. This should also build their independence and self-esteem. Other

#### **Contact Information:**

If you have questions about this document or would like additional information, please contact Ana Kolbach at [ana.kolbach@vermont.gov](mailto:ana.kolbach@vermont.gov) or Tracy Harris at [tracy.harris@vermont.gov](mailto:tracy.harris@vermont.gov) .

assignments should be just difficult enough to challenge your child and to move them forward in their academic skills.

- For each activity, you and your child should be able to know what the goal of the assignment is and what is expected from your child.
- Assignments given during this time should be able to be completed in different ways using easily obtained materials.
- Your child's special education case manager and/or their classroom teacher should have times when they are available, or a way for you to contact them to answer any questions you might have about your child's assignments.

### **Special Education Services and Related Services**

- Schools should make every reasonable effort to provide your child with the services outlined in their IEP. This is new learning for everyone, including teachers, speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists. Because we are not allowed to work with your child in person, those services will have to work differently. See the last section of this document on IEPs, for further information about this.
- In-person supports may be available for health and safety reasons, though those will likely be coordinated and provided by other healthcare agencies and professionals rather than schools.

### **Parent Training as Related Service**

- Schools should be considering and including Parent Counseling and Training in their IEPs. It is an appropriate service (under IDEA 34 CFR § 300.34(c)(8)) that should be utilized in this time and is intended to benefit the child by helping them to make greater gains toward meeting their IEP goals and objectives by training parents. In some cases, this may involve helping the parent to gain skills needed to support IEP goals and objectives at home.
- As a parent you can expect schools to:
  - Assist in understanding the educational needs of your child,
  - Provide information about child development,
  - Provide support and basic information about your child's initial placement in special education, and
  - Provide contact information about parent support groups, financial assistance resources, and other potential sources of information or support outside the school system.

## **Keeping Track of your Child's Progress**

- Teachers and special educators are responsible for knowing at what level your child was functioning before school closed, and for tracking and documenting their progress regularly until the school doors open again.

## **Reporting on your Child's Progress**

- As often as you typically receive reports on your child's progress (ex: report cards, rubrics, proficiency scales), you will continue to receive updates on how your child has been doing with their schoolwork.

## **Parent Education**

- The learning activities planned for your child should be matched to their ability. Some students need extra supports to stay focused, motivated, etc. Some students need special tips on how to use equipment, suggestions of exercises to keep their fine motor and gross motor skills from regressing, etc. If you do not have the skills to provide those extra supports, you may ask for parental training or advice on how to do so.

## **Social Connections**

- Your health and wellbeing and that of your child are of utmost importance to educators. That includes everything from having nutritious meals (which are available to all students during the school dismissal, regardless of need), promoting exercise, and connecting with others.
- If online opportunities are available for your child and others in their school, this might be accomplished by setting up "homeroom" times when the teacher and classmates are all online together on a visual meeting platform. Teachers might create Facebook Groups, where classmates can stream live educational videos together, have discussions, or simply stay updated on important dates and reminders. Class blogs are also useful for students to share information, assignments, projects and photos with others.
- If online opportunities are not available, making and keeping social connections is more difficult, but not impossible. Teachers can offer ideas or even structure activities that will allow your child to connect with others while still maintaining the social distance that is required at this time.

## **Counseling or Mental Health Supports, if Needed**

- If your child has been receiving support from a school counselor or a behavior interventionist at school, those people may be able to check in regularly with you and/or your child

- If your child was on a behavior plan at school or receiving supports for social and emotional learning, the appropriate staff member should be able to work with you on how to apply those things in your home.

### **Individualized Education Program Amendments**

Your child's IEP will be amended or modified to reflect the fact that their educational environment is now Home, and that the way their specialized services are delivered has changed.

If you agree to what the school is proposing, you will be sent a document that describes those changes. The school will need some way of documenting that you are in agreement. That can be done through email, text message, US mail, etc.

If you do not agree to the school's proposed changes, the school will schedule an IEP meeting that will be conducted virtually or by phone. Further disputes can be filed through the [Dispute Resolution process](#) at the Agency of Education

The changes that will need to be made to your child's IEP are not meant to deny them of the free, appropriate public education (FAPE) to which they're entitled. The changes simply reflect the current reality. When your child returns to school, you and the IEP team will review what progress your child made and/or what setbacks they've had in terms of their learning. It may be useful for parents to document services and meeting times as they occur to bring to that discussion. There will be a process for calculating what, if any, services need to be made up in order to restore their educational benefit missed during the school dismissal.

### **Additional Information on Behavior, Routines, Learning Environment**

For considerations and resources for how to structure your child's school day at home and how to deal with challenging behaviors, the Agency of Education has developed the following documents:

- [Continuity of Learning: Guidelines for Families and Guardians of PreK-5 Students](#)
- [Continuity of Learning: Guidelines for Families and Guardians of Students in Grades 6-12](#)
- [Responding to Challenging Behaviors of School-Aged Children at Home and Childcare Settings](#)

You can ask your child's special education case manager to forward any additional information to you as it becomes available.

## Questions and Contact Information

For additional questions and guidance please refer to the Agency of Education's [COVID-19 Guidance for Schools](#) page, reach out to us with questions at [AOE.SpecialEd@vermont.gov](mailto:AOE.SpecialEd@vermont.gov) or (802) 828-1256, or contact Vermont Family Network at [info@vtfn.org](mailto:info@vtfn.org) or 802-876-5315.