



# A Parents' Guide: Navigating Special Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

April 2020

## Background

The *Parents' Guide: Navigating Special Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic* has been created by the Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services (MSDE) to assist parents with understanding how special education services will be determined and provided to their child during the extended closure of school buildings which have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It also offers information and suggestions for families and school professionals, working together, to ensure that the delivery of special education instruction, services and supports continues to be designed to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities in Maryland, even during these challenging times.

## The Pandemic Reality

The pandemic has created an unsettled and uncertain time for everyone. It has tremendously impacted all of our day-to-day lives and caused great concern for the health and well-being of our families, friends, and community. It has also raised many concerns for the future.

*For families, this includes figuring out how to continue to ensure that their children are provided with opportunities for meaningful learning even though they must remain at home. As a parent of a child with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), you may be faced with additional challenges when addressing your child's daily educational programming needs.*

Therefore, it is critical that you feel empowered to work with your child's school team so that they will be able to understand your concerns and do their best to provide the educational support that you and your child may need during this challenging time.

## Guiding Principles for Successful Collaborative Relationships

Special education law reflects the importance of both parent input and involvement in their child's education and expects parents to have a critical role in the educational decisions that are made for their child. This has not changed, even in this time, with its unique and challenging circumstances.

With this extended closure of school buildings, your 'hands-on' role in the supervision, oversight, and assistance with the day to day delivery of your child's instruction has changed dramatically. Now more than ever, local school system staff will rely upon you to work together with them in new and different ways. Your child's educational progress and learning experience depends on this enhanced partnership. Therefore, keep these guiding principles in mind as you move forward together:

- Regular and ongoing communication is critical to creating positive relationships;
- Effective planning and implementation require flexibility, creativity, and an open mind; and
- Agreeing on roles and reasonable expectations of everyone involved, including you, your child, and school staff, will lead to successful collaboration.

## Questions and Answers: Determining and Implementing Your Child's Special Education Program

- ***What is the Local School System's (LSS) obligation to my child during the COVID-10 pandemic?***

Your child's school system continues to be required to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). FAPE must be provided consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education services to these students. When the Local School System (LSS) provides educational services to the general student population, such as through distance learning, it must provide comparable opportunities to students with disabilities, tailored to their individual needs, to the greatest extent possible.

- ***Will my child's IEP have to be amended or changed?***

In many cases, special education instruction, supports and accommodations, such as extended time and or frequent breaks, can still be provided, but using a different method, such as through an online classroom instead of face to face in the classroom. This would not require a change to the IEP. In some cases, services may need to be provided in ways other than described in the IEP, such as on a one-on-one basis through individualized telephone or video conferencing instead of in a group setting. This may mean that temporary amendments will need to be made to the IEP until schools re-open.

It is also possible that there are specific goals or objectives that cannot be addressed at this time. It will be important to make sure that the school staff documents which, if any, goals cannot be addressed so that you can focus on how your child's skills in these areas were affected when schools reopen. Any amendments made will only be in effect until school resumes after the COVID-19 pandemic.

- ***How can we make changes to the IEP if we are not allowed to meet in person?***

The IDEA and State law regarding special education allow parents and school personnel to agree to amend an IEP outside of an IEP meeting except when the purpose of the IEP meeting is to conduct an annual review of the IEP.

- ***How will the IEP amendments be determined?***

You will be contacted by your child's IEP case manager or another member of the IEP team to discuss the services and supports, goals and objectives in your child's current IEP. Together, you will determine whether and how each of the parts of the IEP can be implemented during the school closure and in light of the current Statewide restrictions that have resulted from the Governor's Stay at Home Order. It is possible that the services provided and the frequency of the services may change from how they were delivered when schools were in session.

Your input is very important in this process. The IEP can be amended outside of an IEP meeting with your agreement. Once you agree, the IEP may be implemented immediately. You will not be required to provide written consent when you agree to amendments outside of an IEP meeting. You have the right to request a formal IEP meeting if you are uncomfortable with the informal discussion for any reason.

- ***Does the school have to provide related services like speech, occupational therapy, or counseling?***

Students remain entitled to the related services in their IEP. Your IEP case manager or other member of the IEP team should discuss with you whether and how these services can be provided virtually, and whether the IEP needs to be amended. For example, if the services need to be provided with a different frequency or in a different setting than it was provided before, then the IEP will need to be amended to include these changes.

- ***How will these amendments to the IEP be documented?***

There must be a written document developed that explains any changes that are made. The school staff who participated in the agreement must ensure that the IEP team, including you, receives a copy of the document.

- ***What if I don't agree with the proposed amendments to the IEP?***

This will be a collaborative effort and amendments to the IEP cannot be made unless you agree. Therefore, it is important for you to ask questions, share concerns, and make suggestions during this discussion.

If, for any reason, an agreement cannot be reached, the IEP amendments will not be made and the proposed changes to the IEP will not be implemented. In that case, if the school-based members of the IEP team have the data needed to make decisions, an IEP team meeting should be held by teleconference or other means to address your concerns and your child's needs and revise the IEP so that it can be implemented, to the maximum extent

possible, during the extended school closure. If an IEP meeting is held, it is important to understand that no changes in services can be implemented, even if you ultimately agree to them at the IEP team meeting, until a reasonable time after the school system provides you with written notice (prior written notice) of decisions made through the IEP team process.

- ***What if it is time for my child's annual review?***

If the team believes that they have enough data and information to review and revise the IEP, if appropriate, the IEP team, including you, should meet by teleconference or other means to complete the process. If the team does not have access to the data necessary to conduct the annual IEP review, the IEP team should document this and the meeting will need to be delayed until school reopens.

- ***What happens if the school cannot provide all of the services, goals or objectives in my child's IEP or they regress during the closure of school buildings?***

Once schools reopen, your child's IEP team, which includes you, will need to meet to determine whether, and to what extent, compensatory services will be needed. The IEP team, including you, will determine if there was a decline in skills or a lack of progress in the general education curriculum or on the IEP goals during the extended school closure.

- ***What if my child was in the process of being evaluated before school buildings closed?***

If the evaluations can be done remotely the team may continue to complete them and move forward with determining eligibility if you provide written consent. Be prepared that the process may have to be delayed until school can resume. If assessments are needed that require face-to-face interaction with your child and there is not enough data to determine eligibility without those assessments, the team should note this and complete the process once schools reopen.

- ***What do I do if my child's circumstances have really changed (e.g., new behaviors?)***

You should share your concerns with your child's IEP case manager or other school staff that is working with your child. If you and the school staff agree to make additions or changes to the IEP to address the child's needs, that can be done through an amendment.

If necessary, an IEP meeting can be called to address these concerns during this time if you and the school staff cannot agree on how to amend the IEP. In addition, when school resumes the IEP team, including you, will meet to discuss any concerns you have including any changes or additional needs your child may have developed during the time that school buildings were closed.

- ***My child attends a non-public school. Do these questions and answers apply to us?***

Yes, these questions and answers apply to all students receiving special education services in Maryland regardless of their placement.

- ***Where can I get help if I have more questions?***

Each local school system and the MSDE have a family support services office. See the attached listing of contacts provided at the end of this document.

## **Strategies for a Successful Partnership**

It is very important that you remain engaged with your child's team so that they will understand your concerns and do their best to provide the educational support that you and your child may need during this challenging time. In order to fully participate in these important conversations, please consider the following ideas and questions for discussion.

### ***Review your child's IEP and feel comfortable asking questions, such as:***

- When and how, specifically, will instruction be offered?
- What if my child misses a class as the result of illness or internet issues?
- How will work be collected and how will feedback be provided?

### ***Understand that your child may learn and respond differently when learning at home rather than at school. You may ask:***

- How will information or data be collected so that we know if my child is making progress on their IEP goals?
- What types of notes, video, photos, or work samples would be beneficial for me to collect?
- With whom and when can I share this information, especially if my child is beginning to struggle?

### ***Be both honest and realistic about how you will be able to assist you your child with their learning activities. You may wish to discuss:***

- How your situation, or your family's situation, impacts how you are able to support your child's learning, including your work schedule and other family obligations.

### ***Distance learning requires access to and knowledge of technology that not everyone has. You may ask:***

- If necessary, how can you borrow the assistive technology devices that your child will need to participate in distance learning?
- How can you access the training or support you may need for your child to be able to fully participate in instruction?

### ***Request a communication schedule and a way to stay in touch with your school contact. You may discuss:***

- Who will be your LSS contact person for you to share your child's progress, successes and any concerns?

- Will we have a regular schedule for communication to share strategies, concerns, and successes?
- What if I have questions for someone else like the speech therapist or occupational therapist?

*And finally, please remember that we are all in this together. We all want to see your child be successful at home and we all look forward to their successful return to school.*

## Resources

- [SERVING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES UNDER IDEA DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, TAB 20-01](#)
- [Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak \(March 2020\)](#)
- [Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities](#)

For more information, contact the Maryland State Department of Education Family Support Services Specialists in the Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services at 410-767-0255 or 410-767-7770.

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*Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services  
Family Support Services*

200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201 | MarylandPublicSchools.org



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## Appendix: Maryland Local Family Support Services

Jurisdiction	Contact Name	Contact Phone	Contact Email
<b>Allegany</b> Birth -5	Janie Bucy	240-920-6829	Janie.bucy@acpsmd.org
<b>Allegany</b> 5 -21	Gena Fairall	240-920-6829	Regena.fairall@acpsmd.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> Birth – 5	Christa Bellanca	410-222-6911	cbellanca@aacps.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> 5 - 21	Leanne Carmona	410-222-3805	lcarmona@aacps.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> 5 - 21	Kathy Flaherty	410-222-3805	kmflaherty@aacps.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> 5 - 21	Chris Ostendorff	410-222-3805	costendorff@aacps.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> 5 - 21	Aretha Perry	410-222-3805	aperry1@aacps.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> 5 - 21	Estefania Holler	410-222-3805	eholler@aacps.org
<b>Anne Arundel</b> 5 - 21	Holly Willis	410-222-3805	hwillis@aacps.org
<b>Baltimore City</b> Birth – 5	Davon Wilson	410-396-1666	Davon.wilson@baltimorecity.gov
<b>Baltimore City</b> Birth – 5	Tody Hairston-Fuller	410-396-1666	Tody.hairston-fuller@baltimorecity.gov
<b>Baltimore City</b> 5 – 21	Michelle Grant-Thornton	443-642-3848	pfs@bcp.k12.md.us
<b>Baltimore</b> Birth - 5	Debbie Page	410-809-9696	Dpage2@bcps.org
<b>Baltimore</b> 5 - 21	Ellen Galvez	410-887-5443	egalvez@bcps.org
<b>Calvert</b> Birth – 3	Robin Sanders	443-550-8406	sandersr@calvertnet.k12.md.us
<b>Calvert</b> 3 - 21	Sue Ralowski	443-550-8375	parentconnections@calvertnet.k12.md.us
<b>Caroline</b> Birth – 21	Cynthia Brummell	410-479-3609	Brummell.cynthia@ccpsstaff.org

Jurisdiction	Contact Name	Contact Phone	Contact Email
Carroll Birth - 21	Tammy Chisholm	410-751-3955	tlchish@carrollk12.org
Cecil Birth - 21	Mary Amerman	410-996-5637	mfamerman@ccps.org
Cecil Birth - 21	Katie Seymour	410-996-5637	kfseymour@ccps.org
Charles Birth – 21	Debbie Gilley	301-934=7456	dgilley@ccboe.com
Dorchester Birth - 21	Bonnie Kinsey	410-901-6915	kinseyb@dcpsmd.org
Dorchester Birth – 21	Carmen McCroy	410-901-6915	mccroy@dcpsmd.org
Frederick Birth - 5	Julie DeRoner	301-600-1617	jderoner@frederickcountymd.gov
Frederick 5 – 21	Cara Phillips	240-236-8744	Cara.phillipsfcps.org
Garrett Birth - 21	Sondra Tasker	240-321-2085	Sondra.tasker.2@garrettcountyschools.org
Harford Birth – 5	Carie Sadowski	410-638-3823	Carie.sadowski@hcps.org
Harford 5 - 21	Caroline Bond	410-273-5579	Caroline.bond@hcps.org
Howard Birth - 21	Ann Scholz	410-313-7161	Ann_scholz@hcpss.org
Howard Birth - 21	Lisa Richer	410-313-7161	Lisa_richer@hcpss.org
Kent Birth – 21	Nancy Martin	410-778-5708	nmartin@kent.k12.md.us
Maryland School for the Blind Birth – 21	Renee Kirby	410-444-5000	reneek@mdschblind.org
Maryland School for the Deaf Birth - 21	Cheri Dowling	443-277-8899	Cheri.dowling@msd.edu
Montgomery Birth – 5	Tyese Dillard	240-777-4881	Tyese.dillard@montgomerycountymd.gov
Montgomery 5 - 21	Mary Rose Catena	240-740-3880	Maryrose_catena@mcpsmd.org
Prince George’s Birth – 5	Rachel Dabney-Rice	240-521-5054	Pg_rachel.dabneyrice@pgcps.org
Prince George’s 5 - 21	Beth Diaite	301-431-5675	Beth.diaite@pgcps.org
Prince George’s 5 - 21	Cohinta Velarde	301-431-5675	Coh.velardehernandez@pgcps.org
Prince George’s - 21	Marsie Torchon	301-431-5675	Martha.torchon@pgcps.org
Queen Anne’s Birth – 5	Laura Oesterling	443-786-0626	Laura.oesterling@qacps.org

Jurisdiction	Contact Name	Contact Phone	Contact Email
Queen Anne's 5 - 21	Jennifer Doege	410-758-2403 x 135	Jennifer.doege@qacps.org
Somerset Birth – 21	Joy Hale	410-999-1016	jahale@somerset.k12.md.us
St. Mary's Birth – 5	Kristen Paul	240-237-3751	kapaul@contracted.smcps.org
St. Mary's 5 – 21	Robyn Roberts	240-309-4113	partnersforsuccess@smcps.org
Talbot Birth – 21	Stacey Behrens	410-822-0330	sbehrens@talbotschools.org
Washington Birth – 21	Marlene Powell	301-766-8221	powelmar@wcps.k12.md.us
Wicomico Birth – 21	LaVon Adkins	410-677-5250	laadkins@wcboe.org
Worcester Birth – 21	Jessica Tawes	410-632-5234	Jtawes@worcesterk12.org

For more information, contact the Maryland State Department of Education Family Support Services Specialists in the Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services at 410-767-0255 or 410-767-7770.

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