



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

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Dear Families and Guardians:

During this period of extended school closure, we recognize this is a difficult time for families, guardians, and caregivers. We understand that one of your concerns is how your children with disabilities will continue to receive support and services from schools while they are closed due to the public health emergency related to COVID-19. During this unprecedented time, we appreciate that families and educators will work together to provide the best possible access to special education instruction and services.

In this letter, I want to share important updates about what schools are doing to support your child during this time. The accompanying Family Resource Toolbox provides some helpful information about resources and strategies for families.

On March 21, the U.S. Department of Education issued a [fact sheet](#) clarifying that schools must continue to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities while protecting the health and safety of students, educators, and service providers. In these extraordinary circumstances, special education services will be provided differently than they are when school buildings are open and fully operational. Remote special education services should start immediately. You do not need to provide consent for remote services to begin. You should receive a plan about how the school will provide remote services.

In Massachusetts, remote learning for all students, including students with disabilities, should be provided using both:

1. **Supports and resources** for independent learning that can include academic content and homework packets and project-based learning opportunities, with the accommodations your child needs.
2. **Instruction and services** that can be delivered remotely in whole group and small group settings or individually. Instruction and services can be provided by using online programs, television, or the telephone.

Here are a few key ideas to keep in mind.

Ongoing and regular communication between educators and families is important. Your child's teacher and related service providers will be in regular contact with you. You and your child's teachers and related service providers should decide how often and what method of communication works best for you, discuss your child's individualized instruction, IEP goals and service needs and plan for how services can be provided remotely. Let your school team know what issues you are most concerned about for your child and tell them the best way to connect with you, whether it is by email, telephone, or other means.

Your child may not receive individualized instruction and services the same way as they do when school is in session. You and your child's teachers and school team can be creative in designing ways to provide remote learning opportunities, special education instruction and services. It may not be possible to provide hands-on or face to face therapies or instruction, given the public safety order for social distancing. Specialized instructional opportunities and related services can be modified or provided remotely for your child to receive FAPE. The

school should provide you with a remote learning plan, so you know the plan and schedule for your child to receive instruction, services, and other learning opportunities.

Your child's IEP lists the supports and accommodations that help them succeed at school and you can also use them during daily activities at home. The school will ensure that your child can access remote opportunities through appropriate accommodations. Review your child's IEP with your child's teacher to find your child's accommodations and understand how to use them at home. If you do not have a copy of the IEP, contact your child's teacher to arrange to have a copy sent to you or set up a time to discuss your child's IEP with your child's teacher on the phone.

You can use assistive technology. Examples include computers, software, communication devices, calculators, speech-to-text apps, and Closed Captioning, and other specialized equipment to help your child learn at home. Your child's teacher and school leaders should contact you to work together about the best ways to incorporate these devices and technologies into your everyday life. If your child's specialized equipment is still at school, you can talk with your school leaders about how to get access to them.

IEP Meetings can be held virtually while schools are closed. Virtual IEP meetings are a good solution to comply with social distancing rules. You can participate in virtual IEP meetings by phone or video conferencing.

- If your child's annual IEP is due, we encourage you to work with your child's team to decide if it's possible to hold a virtual IEP meeting.
- When school resumes, your child's teachers will review your child's progress and hold an IEP meeting with you as necessary to determine the best next step.

Contact your child's teacher or school leaders if you are having technical problems accessing remote instruction and resources. Utilizing on-line resources is new for many families, and we recognize that parents may need technical support. Let the school know if you have questions or need assistance.

If your child's approved private special education school is closed, educators from the approved special education school will reach out to you to determine how the school will continue to provide special education services remotely. The approved special education school should provide you with a remote learning plan, so you know the plan and schedule for your child to receive instruction, services, and other learning opportunities.

If your child has a 504 plan, your child's teacher and/or 504 Coordinator should be in contact with you about how to provide accommodations or services as outlined on your child's 504 plan. Your child's teacher should explain how to access the accommodations that your child needs on school assignments. If you have any questions, please contact your child's teacher or the 504 Coordinator for your school.

Schools and districts have been identifying different ways to reach students and families. During the coming weeks, your child's teachers and school leaders will continue to develop and expand ways to provide remote special education services.

We encourage school leaders, teachers, and families to work together to find the best ways to support each child during this challenging time.

Sincerely,



Russell D. Johnston, PhD
Senior Associate Commissioner

FAMILY RESOURCE TOOLBOX

FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

U.S. Department of Education (USED) issued a [fact sheet](#) clarifying that schools must continue to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities while protecting the health and safety of students, educators, and service providers. In these extraordinary circumstances, special education services will be provided differently than they are when school buildings are open and fully operational. Remote special education services should start immediately. You do not need to provide consent for remote services to begin. You should receive a plan about how the school will provide remote services.

This document provides you with some resources and tools that you may find helpful and will be updated regularly.

COVID-19 RESOURCES:

Many state agencies and national organizations are providing information and resources to support families and their children during this extended school closure period.

If you have questions, concerns or need additional information, you can contact:

- Your IEP Team/point of contact (always reach out to your district first)
- Your local Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC)
- Information and support lines:
 - Federation for Children with Special Needs (FSCN):
 - Email: info@fcsn.org
 - Online Intake Form: <https://fcsn.org/ptic/call-center/call-center-intake-form/>
 - Website: www.FSCN.org
 - Toll free: (800) 331-0688
 - Chinese: (617) 399 8358
 - Haitian Creole: (617) 399 8366
 - Portuguese: (617) 399 8316
 - Spanish: (617) 399 8330
 - Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC):
 - Website: www.massadvocates.org
 - English: (617) 357-8431, ext. 3224
 - Spanish: (617) 357-8431, ext. 3237
 - Department of Public Health (DPH) Community Support Line for Children with Special Health Needs at (800) 882-1435

Massachusetts State Agencies update information and resources frequently:

- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/>
- Department of Early Education and Care: <https://www.mass.gov/lists/early-childhood-education-resources-for-families> and https://eeclead.force.com/apex/EEC_ChildCareEmergencyFAQParents

- Department of Public Health, Early Intervention: <https://www.mass.gov/alerts/ei-telehealth#undefined>
- Department of Public Health, Division for Children & Youth with Special Health Needs: <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/division-for-children-youth-with-special-health-needs>
- Department of Mental Health: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-information-about-dmh-programs-and-services>
- Department of Developmental Services: <https://www.mass.gov/lists/coronavirus-resources-for-dds-families-and-individuals> and <https://www.mass.gov/lists/resources-for-individuals-at-home>
- Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing: <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-commission-for-the-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing>
- Massachusetts Commission for the Blind: <https://www.mass.gov/lists/covid-19-resources-for-the-mcb-community>
- Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/coronavirus-updates-from-mrc>
- **Massachusetts Department of Children and Families:**
 - **DCF COVID-19 updates:** <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/dcf-covid-19-resources-and-support>;
 - **Family Resource Centers:** <https://www.frcma.org/>

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES:

This is a stressful time. It is important to take care of yourself and ask for help when needed. Many agencies are providing families with resources and supports during the COVID-19 crisis.

- The [Parent Support Program](#) offered through the Home for Little Wanderers offers support and group discussion for families who are caring for children with behavioral and mental health needs.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics has put out an [advisory for parents facing stressors over COVID-19](#) to practice self-care, to reach out to others for support.
- [Family Aid Boston](#) offers resources for families worried about or experiencing homelessness.
- The [Child Mind Institute](#) offers phone consultations, video chats and other resources for families dealing with the stress related to COVID-19.
- Parents Helping Parents: <https://www.parentshelpingparents.org/>.
- Parental Stress Line 24/7 (PSL) multi-lingual confidential and anonymous hotline 1-800-632-8188.

Hotlines:

Domestic Violence: If you or someone you know is quarantining in a home where they do not feel safe, help is available.

- **Safe Link is a 24/7 hour multilingual hotline.** Advocates can help with safety planning, and finding resources for shelter, domestic violence support groups, and many other needs.
 - Safe Link 24/7 Crisis Hotline: **(877) 785-2020; TTY: (877) 521-2601**
- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline** is offering assistance and safety planning 24/7. Call **1-800-799-7233** for live support. If you're unable to speak safely, you can log onto thehotline.org to chat online, or text **LOVEIS to 22522**

Child Abuse: Please call immediately if you know of, or suspect, an incident of child abuse or neglect.

- During regular business hours (8:45 a.m.-5 p.m. M-F) call the [Department of Families and Children \(DCF\) area office that serves the city or town](#) where the child lives.
- Nights, weekends, and holidays dial the Child-at-Risk Hotline at [\(800\) 792-5200](#).

NO INTERNET AT HOME?

- Comcast is offering initiatives to help families obtain access to the Internet. [View more information on this offer from Comcast.](#)
- In Boston, the Mayor has shared information and resources on [connecting to the Internet and accessing technology resources](#).
- [Vroom](#) offers free, easy-to-use learning tips for children 5 and under, delivered daily directly to your phone.
- Several programs are available to offer tips and resources for families that support learning through text messages (Message and data rates apply) and Apps using your cellphone.

SUPPLEMENTAL LEARNING DURING SCHOOL CLOSURE:

There are many informal ways to keep your child engaged in learning beyond supporting school assignments. When in doubt, read, read, read! Reading is one of the most important activities that supports overall learning. There are also a variety of learning games online. Anything that engages your child, stimulates their curiosity, and exposes them to new things will be valuable.

- [Unite for Literacy](#) provides free digital access to picture books, including a variety of fiction and informational text, for students to read. There is also an option for the text to be narrated.
- [National Center on Improving Literacy's toolkit](#) helps families understand and practice recommended literacy skills.
- [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center \(ECTA\)](#) provides information and activities for families of young children.
- [The Pyramid Model](#), promoting social emotional skills in infants and young children, has developed a [booklist](#) to help children understand and develop social emotional skills.
- [Heggerty](#): Activities to work on foundational reading skills. These are best for ages 4–6.
- [StoryLine Online](#) and [Epic](#): Hear quality children's literature read aloud and see illustrations.
- Early literacy [games and activities](#) from the Florida Center for Reading Research: easy to print out and play together.
- Digital [decodable readers](#): this type of book is recommended for reading practice for children who are still learning to sound out and read simple words.

ORGANIZATION:

Maintaining a consistent routine is important for helping children feel stable during school closure.

- Set up a daily routine and schedule. Be sure to include time for breaks. DESE is recommending 3 ½ to 4 hours of learning per weekday, which includes both independent and remote instruction.
- Use a calendar or day planner to keep track of daily activities. Many children with disabilities, especially younger ones, respond well to a visual schedule that uses pictures to keep track of upcoming activities.

- For students who need more help staying focused, you can use an online visual countdown timer.
- Limit distractions and arrange a quiet space for your child to work.
- Reward your child for time on-task or finishing assignments. Use activities that they enjoy as rewards.

LESSON HELP:

Schools are providing assignments for students to complete from home during school closure. You can support your child's learning by guiding them through assignments.

- Prepare your child for learning by telling them why the work is important, what they will learn and what activities they will complete.
- Before the lesson, build background and vocabulary. Look for words or topics that you think might be difficult for your child. Use books, drawings, videos, Google, or other resources to help your child build understanding of these words or topics before starting the assignment.
- Read directions together with your child. Have them repeat back the directions to make sure they understand what to do.
- Work on the first task or problem together. Then, watch your child do the next task on their own to make sure they understand the directions.
- Guide your child through the work as needed. Check back occasionally to make sure they are doing the work correctly.
- If your child needs help, offer ideas that can help them work through the problem. Try not to give the answers or do the work for them.
- Allow your child to work with a friend over the phone or video call.
- Help your child stay engaged in learning by varying the time they spend on reading, writing, moving, watching, listening, and speaking.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES:

RESOURCES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION (ECSE):

- Division for Early Childhood: <https://www.dec-sped.org/ei-ecse-resources-covid-19>
- Pyramid Model:
 - Helping Children and Families Cope - Resources Regarding COVID-19: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/emergency/index.html>
 - Backpack Series to support families managing challenging behaviors: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Implementation/family.html#collapse2>

RESOURCES FOR ECSE THROUGH ADULTHOOD:

- Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) - site updated daily: <https://fcsn.org>
- The Arc of Massachusetts –
 - Weekly Webinar Series: <https://thearcofmass.org/post/the-arcs-covid-19-updates-the-arc-launches-weekly-webinar-series>
 - Staying Calm and Connected: <https://thearcofmass.org/post/the-arcs-covid-19-updates-staying-calm-and-connected>

- Autism Insurance Center related to Applied Behavioral Analysis and Covid-19: <https://disability-info.s3.amazonaws.com/AIRC/pdf/COVID-19-Fact-Sheet.pdf>
- Pearson Connection Academy: <https://www.pearson.com/news-and-research/working-learning-online-during-pandemic.html>
- Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times: 7 support strategies to meet the needs of individuals with ASD during the COVID crisis: <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/supporting-individuals-autism-through-uncertain-times>
- National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE): <https://nafsce.org/general/custom.asp?page=coronavirus>
- Autism Distance Education Parent Training: <https://health.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/centers/cedd/adept.html>
- Association of Massachusetts Educators of Students with Visual Impairments (AMESVI) Family and Student Resources: <http://amesvi.org/Home/family-and-student-resources/>
- Family TIES of Massachusetts/Parent-to-Parent program connects parents who face similar challenges in raising their children special needs: <https://www.massfamilyties.org/parent-to-parent-program/>
- Tips to Help Children Continue Learning - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/children.html?deliveryName=USCDC_2067-DM23558
- National Parent Teacher’s Association (PTA) FAQs and tips for educators, information on Social Emotional Support, Learning at Home and Healthy Habits: www.pta.org/COVID-19
- Health Law Advocates: <https://www.healthlawadvocates.org/> legal assistance and advocacy.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY:

Your child may use assistive technology (AT). You can check with your child’s teacher and related service provider about what technology will be best to use at home.

- The Center on Technology and Disabilities offers an [Intro to Assistive Technology video](#) which outlines basic topics and concepts for using assistive technology with students with disabilities.
- CAST has developed a [Remote Learning](#) webpage. It provides resources and information regarding AT.
- The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provides information and resources regarding [Assistive Technology and Accessibility](#) that families may find helpful.
- The National Deaf Center has developed a frequently asked questions document, [Your Questions, Answered](#), to support people who are deaf and hard of hearing.
- CaptionSync provides information to assist you in [adding your own caption file to YouTube](#) .
- The Massachusetts [Accessible Instructions Materials Library \(AIM Library\)](#) can be contacted through your child’s Teacher of the Visual Impaired (TVI) to access available resources.

CAREGIVER TOOLS:

Families may be worried about what will happen if they get sick and are unable to care their child with disabilities. Resources are available to explain the way hospitals diagnose and treat patients as well as how families can transfer caregiver responsibilities to a trusted family member or friend.

- Hospitals may have developed processes to work with families to see if they need support and in helping to identify an alternative caregiver when being admitted.

- You should let your doctor, or the hospital staff know that you are a caregiver of a child with disabilities and that you may need to make a decision about transferring caregiver responsibility.
 - It is important to know that children whose parents are admitted for COVID are suspected to be COVID positive
 - Consider caregivers who are healthy, and do not live with family members who may be at high risk
- Planning tools for caregivers who might become ill
 - Family Preparedness Plan for Immigrant Families, including translations in Spanish and Portuguese: <https://www.masslegalservices.org/content/family-preparedness-packets>.
- Caregiver Affidavit: a planning tool for parents to transfer caregiver responsibility
<https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/08/ul/caregiverauthorizationaffidavitform.pdf>.

We know that you, as parents, families, and caregivers, are stretched with many issues including work and caring for your family. We can only suggest that you do your best but give yourself a break. Be good to yourself and take care of your family's physical and emotional health.

For updates to this list, please email specialeducation@doe.mass.edu.