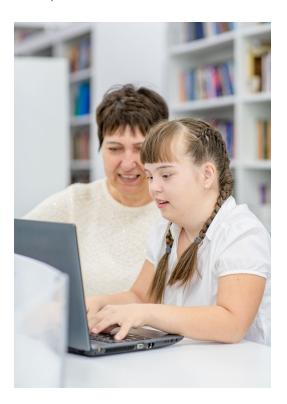# Online Learning and Special Education

K-12 special education policies, strategies and practices require that students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

School leaders care deeply about providing meaningful services to students with disabilities, but remote instruction has challenged and made it difficult for some districts to provide these federally required services. School leaders have to intentionally re-design instruction through new systems or new ways to provide instructional accommodations and related services to comply with federal law and to meet the various needs for their special needs students.

> " All learners will have engaging and empowering learning experiences both in and out of school that prepare them to be active, creative, knowledgeable, and ethical participants in our globally connected society."
>
> — **Office of Educational Technology**

Equitable learning experiences for all students

An equitable educational environment is about student empowerment and should be provided to all students. Students receiving services for Special Education, English Language acquisition, Gifted and Talented, and other diverse educational needs should have the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities that lead to academic achievement and success. In fact, they have protected rights under federal and state requirements.

Online Learning Challenges for students with disabilities

According to a **brief** from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), serving students with disabilities during remote instruction was one of the most challenging aspects of educating during Covid-19. In a similar report, by **"School Leaders Voices: Concerns and Challenges to Providing Meaningful IDEA-related Services During COVID-19,"** school administrators predicted that as soon as schools begin shutting down

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in March 2020, "providing students with disabilities...." -. "As soon as schools began shutting down in March 2020, school administrators predicted providing students with disabilities with meaningful services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act would be one of education's biggest struggles during the global health crisis." The AIR brief also stated that in a survey of 744 districts taken in the summer following the 2020 school closures, 73% respondents said it was "more or substantially more difficult to provide appropriate instructional accommodations to students with disabilities during the pandemic.

Promising Practices

Many districts had to redesign their curriculum with new tiered systems of support and be intentional about providing specially designed instruction through these new systems for their special education students. This includes digital tools that can provide multiple representations of learning in order to meet students' individual learning needs.

Not all aspects of virtual learning had misfires for students with special needs. Positive outcomes include closer relationships between educators and families, more awareness and acceptance from school system departments about the need for digital resources and accommodations that support all learners, especially those with special needs.

Some districts started implementing **teletherapy**, an asynchronous therapy that provides strategies for repeated practice and consistency for students with disabilities. Speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and occupational and physical therapists who were unable to meet with students in-person during the pandemic used video conferencing to work one-to-one with students on specific skills. Another benefit to teletherapy is that the presence of parents during sessions helped therapists to coach parents on strategies to help their child's progress. Parents can reinforce those skills beyond the school day.

Remote learning required district leaders to make quick, hard decisions in redesigning or tweaking their systems in order to meet federal requirements to meet the individual needs of students with special needs. We want students to have positive and purposeful interactions. Systems should be in place to assist students serve students with disabilities no matter if the learning is remote or face-to-face.