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A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



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## **The COVID slide and students with special needs**

By Clinton Householder, staff attorney

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the educational landscape for Ohio's children, parents, and educators. Schools were forced to make rapid changes in how they delivered services while addressing the safety needs of both staff and students.

Parents were thrust into the roles of educator and tech support, helping students navigate hastily arranged virtual learning, while scrambling to arrange for childcare or make adjustments in their professional lives.

Though school systems have largely returned to in-person instruction, the widely spreading Delta variant may lead to further disruptions or modifications in the learning environment. Further, reopening plans have varied widely from district to district, leaving many parents and students frustrated.

The pandemic has had an adverse impact on learning for all students. However, the impact on students with disabilities, those who receive special education services, may be greater and last longer.

Special education encompasses a wide range of services to ensure students with disabilities have access to education. The services are unique to each child and could include specialized reading, math, or writing instruction; assistance from paraprofessionals; physical and speech therapy; occupational therapy; and assistive technology, among other things.

State guidance has said that students are entitled to the services outlined in their individual education plan (IEP) during the pandemic. In other words, unless a parent or guardian agreed to modify the IEP, it remained in effect and had to be implemented by the district to the greatest extent possible.

This guidance is well-intentioned and optimistic. The reality, though, is that these children experienced significant disruption in critical services, especially in-person services.

Imagine a student with cognitive impairments who can not use a computer or participate in virtual learning classes without assistance. In many cases, schools couldn't or wouldn't provide a paraprofessional or aide in the home due to safety, available staff, or other concerns. Some schools turned to paper packets as a solution, which work well for students capable of learning on their own. We know that's not the case for many students.

A lack of computer literacy is not the only hurdle students have faced. Imagine a student whose IEP includes one-on-one therapy every day, for example, physical therapy to improve mobility. Delivering physical therapy remotely is very challenging. Educators can provide video instructions, even in real-time, but both options require adults to provide space and assistance.

And imagine a student just getting started in high school and preparing for life after school. Their IEP includes experiential learning, visits to job sites, interviews with people in the field, and actual hands-on work experience arranged in partnership with the local disabilities board. COVID restrictions closed job sites and field operations and those experiential opportunities were lost. The student is left to navigate options on their own -- a situation their IEP was designed to avoid. And now, nearly two years have been lost to students aging out of school-age support services.

All students, special needs and those in the general population, missed out on the critically important intangible aspects of school: socialization, positive relationships and friendships with peers and adults. These intangibles are paramount. Prior to legislation requiring appropriate public education for children with disabilities, parents fought for years to obtain them. Many

children were left behind.

It's time for parents and educators to work together on realistic plans to further students' academic, social, and emotional development to keep them from falling behind. As the Delta variant is proving, the pandemic isn't going away any time soon, and the disruptions students are facing are only exacerbating longstanding disability-based disparities in academic achievement. Intentionally focusing on continuity, staying on track with evaluations and updates to IEPs, consistency in scheduling supportive services, and providing one-on-one support when needed are critical to supporting students' academic progress and prevent any further regression.

*This article is part of Legal Aid's "Big Ideas" series.*

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