*Remote Learning for those with Special Needs*

Special education is the practice of educating students in a way that provides accommodations that address individual differences, disabilities, and special needs. Currently going through a global pandemic that no student in school was prepared for, one school year ended online and another one began online.

Each child that qualifies for special education services has an individualized education program (IEP). An IEP is a legal document under U.S. law that is developed for each child that needs special education and it is created through a team made up of the child’s parent/guardian and school district personnel who are knowledgeable of the child’s needs. Each child’s IEP describes the child levels of needs and educational services that the school will provide. Many of these related services include speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, behavioral therapy, and counseling, along with other specific services for the child’s needs. These services are extremely important for a child with special needs and help them grow functionally and academically. However, through the pandemic that we are in, it has become apparent that these services are not being given at the level at which they should be.

All students, but especially students with disabilities, are physically separated from teachers and therapists and are not receiving the proper instruction that they “need,” therefore putting their academic and functional success in jeopardy. Resources and support have become limited and harder to get than ever during this pandemic. Many students are unable to attend face to face due to school closures and are receiving services virtually.

The majority of special education students have gone months without face-to-face occupational therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy, and other support services that they would normally receive. A lot of students struggle with the use of technology, but many SPED students do not use technology as much as their nondisabled peers in the classroom because they need more project based learning and hands-on activities. Lack of face-to-face instruction and services has left many parents at a loss with how to help their children while trying to manage their jobs from home along with their children’s education. Parents and students have both had to learn more and dig deeper into the world of technology than ever before. Adding the needs of a child with a disability further compounds the situation for many families.

Prior to the pandemic many schools, particularly rural schools, whose resources are even more limited, have relied on Teletherapy which is an online delivery of speech therapy, occupational therapy, along with other services. Since the pandemic, teletherapy is more widely used in the SPED world since so many students are receiving remote services. Teletherapy in SPED is definitely not “one size fits all.” While these services CAN be provided virtually, they are not always effective virtually. Every single student has a different disability whether it is intellectual or physical. The issue that has risen with teletherapy is that students with disabilities do not have equitable access to these services that are provided remotely. The persons responsible for providing these services should be in contact with the school and district administrators to ensure that these services can continue to be delivered to all students. This could mean providing technological resources for a student if they are not available to them at home.

Specific students who have more severe disabilities are not able to receive the services that they desperately need face-to-face at this time. While teletherapy is a great alternative to receive services through, there are many situations where teletherapy is not the most appropriate resource for a student. For example, many students with autism receive speech and language therapy and have goals that are specifically for social settings where they can learn to communicate effectively with their peers and adults. It is more effective for these students to receive these services face-to-face and in real situations. While their speech services can be delivered through teletherapy, they are unable to work on their goals in settings that would facilitate a better outcome of growth. Another example of teletherapy not being effective would be with a student who has a visual impairment who receives services from a teacher of the visually impaired or an Orientation and Mobility Specialist. These services are much harder to render through teletherapy, since many of these students need to be guided physically whether it be through their physical surroundings or with learning braille.

We are all very aware of the impact that the pandemic has had on all students. Though, students with special needs are greatly suffering. Their services cannot be given in the most effective ways when they are learning remotely. It is amazing what teachers and service providers have been able to do for their students during the pandemic, but it also brings light to the issues that many were not fully aware of prior to the pandemic. There are many school systems that lacked the resources and specialists that they needed prior to the pandemic. Going through the pandemic has made all school systems recognize that in a remote learning environment our students with disabilities are lacking what they need whether they are in a school system with many resources or not. It will be very important for educators and stakeholders in education to find more equitable ways for students to receive the services that they need in an effective way when learning remotely.

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