

OP-Ed

Students with disabilities are missing out during COVID-19

By Jeffrey L. Forte

Of nearly 550,000 students currently enrolled across Connecticut's 200 school districts, there are some 80,000 students with disabilities in special education programs. For many of them, school closures effectively halted — or at the least, diminished — their special education and related services .

Services such as small group or one-on-one instruction, paraprofessional support, daily counseling, physical therapy, academic tutoring, speech and language therapy, and behavioral and/or psychological support cannot practically and effectively be delivered by computer, despite best efforts. Given the suddenness of school closures, the economic impact of parents losing jobs, and the lack of technology support that teachers, parents and students are now facing, it difficult to remotely educate students with significant disabilities.

With school closures continuing into late May and perhaps beyond, the gap widens in educational services for students with disabilities. Parents, teachers, administrators and school districts must collaborate and candidly agree that the crucial question to answer is not whether students with disabilities will regress educationally, but rather to what extent will they regress and how will remediation be handled.

Parents and educators alike should be collecting data on their child's education to compare pre-virus performance to performance during and just after the remote learning period. To that end, there will be a need for statewide compensatory education for our most vulnerable students with disabilities.

In March, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance on federal education law as a result of school closures caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. The relevant guidance for special education, in summary, is that schools providing educational

opportunities to the general student population during a school closure [i.e., by providing online learning], must ensure that students with disabilities also have equal access to the same opportunities, including the provision of free appropriate public education to the greatest extent possible.

As well, the government said that if a child does not receive services during a closure, a child's school team must make an individualized determination about what compensatory services may be needed to make up for skills that may have been lost.

Many hours of ambitious and meaningful learning have been lost during this school closure period, despite the very best intentions of teachers and school districts. Remediation and compensatory education will be required on a systemic level for students with disabilities to get back to near where they left off before schools closed.

Compensatory education, often referred to as "comp-ed," is not a "cash payout." It is not a monetary award that one would typically receive if involved in a civil lawsuit. Rather, comp-ed serves as the appropriate remedy to fund permissible educational services such as tutoring, therapy, evaluations, assessments and other related services that were lost or not delivered during a certain period of time.

Generally, the amount of comp-ed is valued either qualitatively or quantitatively. The quantitative approach is determined by numerical data, such as counting the number of service hours not provided or implemented. The qualitative approach is more about gaining insight and information to determine a student's baseline versus present level of performance. That is followed by development of a plan to more fully educate a child with additional support, minimizing and hopefully reversing a student's academic or cognitive regression.

Regardless of the approach, it is important for parents to understand that empirical evidence, such as the collection and documentation of their child's daily data during the school closure period, will be useful to share with your child's school team to support your request for compensatory education.

Parents and school district teams need to work collaboratively to determine what compensatory education will make each individual student whole. The process is

unique and based on each student's individual needs, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

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