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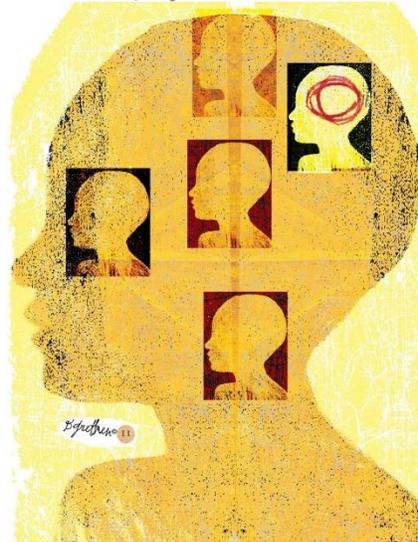
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THE REGISTER CITIZEN

Opinion: CT schools await surge in special needs applications

Jeffrey L. Forte

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This artwork by Donna Grethen relates to mental health. Donna Grethen / Tribune

It's summertime and the living might be easy for some who see this interlude as an escape from school-related issues, but for parents of special needs children this is the season for proactivity, particularly regarding contact with appropriate school personnel.

Since many students with special needs have not been identified during the COVID pandemic, public education professionals expect a surge in applications for special needs designations this summer as districts decide whether to return to "on-site" schooling. Thus, parents must act quickly to ensure their child is scheduled for testing.

There have been many changes in educational formats due to the COVID pandemic, including conducting remote, as opposed to in-person, Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings — a practice that is likely to continue indefinitely. These meetings between parents, teachers, social workers, school psychologists and other relevant personnel, are required to prepare an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) for special needs students, among other issues. Conducting meetings through video conferencing benefits parents who won't have to take as much time off work to attend them, and it allows special needs advocates and attorneys to attend far more meetings on a daily basis.

Remote meetings aren't likely to supplant face-to-face meetings entirely, however, and in-person meetings can still be scheduled when the situation warrants it.

Parents of special needs children, or those who believe that their child might have special needs, should be aware that although the past school year of virtual classrooms has ended, preparations for the coming year are proceeding quickly. Many school districts have not yet decided whether to return to on-site instruction, or continue with remote learning, or a combination. The ultimate decision may be a matter of the number of students in the district, and the COVID stats for that community.

Since this decision could have a significant impact on the educational outlook for special needs students, parents must contact the appropriate personnel in their school district, if they want a voice in this decision.

Some students, for instance, may live in a home where there is an immunocompromised resident who could be adversely affected by a return to on-site schooling. Can school districts provide remote access for students who have such issues, or who have "school refusal" or "school anxiety disorders? If a district offers choices, does it face a "If you offer it to one you have to offer it to all," situation? What happens to students who do better with remote learning if the remote learning option is withdrawn? Some medical experts also are predicting another COVID "surge" in the winter, which also could impact the decision-making process.

Last year, with remote learning the norm, parents had an opportunity to observe their children in an educational setting and see for themselves if their child was struggling. Such observations can help obtain eligibility referrals for students who have not been identified as a special needs student. If a parent had to help their children log in daily, or assist with academic tasks, those issues can be included in a parental concern letter to the school district.

Proactive families who have collected data documenting their student's educational requirements, should express their concerns to the appropriate district personnel immediately, so the process can begin as soon as possible.

When filling out the documentation to support a child's IEP, parents should use the "accommodations" page, and include "remote education" on that page if it is a viable option.

This level of proactivity can assist parents in obtaining special needs referrals over the summer or first couple weeks of school. School personnel already are seeing "initial eligibility referrals," which trigger the evaluation process to determine if students are special needs and to what extent. In some cases, students may just need counseling to get back in rhythm of school.

The process can be a challenge, but the key to a successful resolution is communication between parents and district special needs personnel. COVID and modern technology have forced the hand of parents, students, and educators alike, but students who have been identified as special needs and have an IEP can benefit in ways that weren't even considered pre-COVID.

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