

Back on Track: Supporting Students with Disabilities after COVID-19

This worldwide pandemic has caused many concerns in the special education community. Although your concerns are heard there are no clear answers on the next steps to take in education. There is also a lot of uncertainty on whether students with disabilities are receiving adequate services and support during distance learning. Some things are beyond our control, but we can still control how we choose to support students during and after COVID-19. To get students back on track we must diligently use these four strategies.

1. Build a Positive Relationship with Students.

Building a positive relationship with students is important. Positive relationships keep students motivated to learn and it helps them to feel safe and secure in the classroom. With distance learning it is now more important than ever to build these relationships with students because the students are not in the brick and mortar building, they are in the comfort (or un-comfort) of their own homes. Some ways in which teachers can build positive relationships with their students is by showing an interest in the student's education, well-being, and personal lives. Getting to know your students outside of school will gain the students respect and provide you with critical information for planning instruction. When teachers get to know their students, they also learn more about their capabilities. More strategies that are effective when building positive relationships with student is to teach with enthusiasm, be positive, and have fun. Being enthusiastic and positive has an ever-lasting effect on students' performance and life. When school is fun, student is more receptive to learning. School can be fun and not challenging for students with disabilities when supports are in place to ensure fun opportunities can take place.

2. Increase Supports for students with Disabilities.

There are many ways in which you can increase special education supports. The first support that is necessary when returning to school after this pandemic is social emotional support. We must make sure that the students physical and social emotional well-being does not hinder the students' abilities to learn. We can do this by implementing social emotional learning opportunities. Social emotional learning will help teachers to understand where the student may be struggling. The teacher will then use knowledge of struggles to develop supports to suit the students individualized needs. Another way special education teacher can increase the support they provide to students is by helping them to identify their strengths, motivating students, and encouraging their progress. Modifications to the school setting, materials, and/or instruction will be essential as students return to school in the fall.

3. Be Flexible and Responsive to student needs.

It is imperative that teachers are flexible as students return to school after COVID-19. Teachers must be responsive to the changing needs of their students. Many students will regress, and it is important for teachers to understand that this is normal. Students will likely have adapted to the changes that COVID-19 has brought upon all of us. They may need to relearn strategies that were previously taught but have forgotten due to the changes in their routines. Being flexible applies to both behavior and academics. Students may exhibit different behaviors after returning to school because they have adapted to their home learning. Home learning is likely structured differently from school learning. For academics, we need to understand that the summer slide (learning forgotten over the summer) will be greater ever been before. For students with disabilities, we must develop a plan immediately and get students back on track to making progress.

4. Plan NOW to make up for the inequalities brought forth by COVID-19.

It is typical for students with disabilities as well as those in poverty to have a greater summer slide than their peers. The achievement gap is expected to be larger due to COVID-19 and the summer slide. Special Education teachers and administrators need to implement early planning for students with disabilities. Early planning can include exploring opportunities for extended school year services, increasing rigor, and increased scheduled supports. Adding extended school year services will help students with disabilities maintain skills and routines. Rigor can be increased by explicitly modeling the skill, providing practice and repetition, and providing a higher order extension to the skill being taught. Providing additional supports and slowly decreasing those supports can help to make up for education inequalities and individualized student needs. Additional supports may include individual supports such as accommodations, modifications, or assistive technology or teacher supports such as instructional strategies. Planning for appropriate instruction is vital for students who receive special education services. By providing explicit direct instruction, teachers of exceptional students can ensure that their academic needs are met. Upon returning to school in the fall, Special education teachers should provide many opportunities for students using explicit direct instructions as well as utilizing other strategies. Planning for tomorrow starts today.

Following these four action plans will help students with disabilities to get back on track. Being positive with students after dealing with a pandemic will help to foster the well-being of the whole child so that they may be able to respond to increased supports. When planning for increased supports educators must start now and be flexible with their strategies. Although there are many more concerns than answers having an action plan is important to help students overcome barriers caused by COVID-19. Remember, this is something that has never been

experienced before. Working as a team and seek help and/or support from parents, colleagues, and the community is essential to overcoming the impact of COVID-19 in education. Together we can support students with disabilities to ensure they are back on track.