Meeting the needs of English learners with disabilities: virtual, hybrid, and returning to in-person instruction

When the pandemic forced many schools to transition to virtual or hybrid learning, educators often struggled to meet the language and learning needs of the diverse population of English learners (ELs) with disabilities.[1] Although many schools are in the process of returning to school, distance learning (including virtual and hybrid learning contexts) may continue or be needed again, whether due to the pandemic or other causes such as natural disasters. Further, state education agencies (SEAs), districts, and schools may seek to strengthen supports and foster learning recovery for ELs with disabilities as they return to in-person instruction. Thus, NCSI has compiled guidance and resources that may be helpful for educators and SEAs supporting districts and schools in serving these students. Because there are few resources that specifically address distance learning for ELs with disabilities,[2] we compiled example resource lists[3] on four topics:

1. Supporting learning for ELs with disabilities (p. 5),
2. Serving ELs through distance learning (p. 6),
3. Serving students with disabilities through distance learning (p. 8), and
4. Engaging families or caregivers who have children who are ELs' (p. 9).

Information from each of these topics will support serving ELs with disabilities during distance learning, but they are not enough in isolation. We must consider the whole student within his or her home, school, and community. Thus, we begin with considerations and guiding questions that pull these topics together to serve ELs with disabilities during distance learning or returning to in-person instruction following distance learning (p. 2). State and local leaders can share this document,

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[1] Throughout this document, we use the common terms 'English learner' and 'students with disabilities.' Note that other terms, including some using person-first language, may be used to describe the same groups of students. For example, ELs may be referred to as multilingual learners or students who are bilingual, and students with disabilities may be referred to as students who are differently abled. Whatever terms you use, we encourage you to ensure they are understood by all parties.

[2] One example is the Massachusetts Department of Education's guidance document on Serving English Learners with Disabilities During In-Person, Hybrid and Remote Learning.

[3] NCSI does not endorse any resource but seeks to disseminate information and show the kinds of resources SEAs, schools, and educators may find helpful.

or specific resources or sections in this document, with educators to inform their practice.

Guiding Questions and Considerations for Supporting ELs with Disabilities During or After Distance Learning

As you plan for supporting ELs with disabilities, we encourage you to start with best practices that are likely to work (as reflected in this section and in the example resource lists), check if they are working for that student, and adjust the strategies as needed in collaboration with families (and the student, when appropriate). Examples of guiding questions teams might ask themselves include the following, organized into two broad areas: **1) understanding all areas of need and 2) collaborating to provide integrated supports.**

Understanding All Areas of Need

- Are we considering all areas of need: academic, functional, language, and social/emotional/behavioral?
    - Have we considered what the student knows and can do in all languages the child uses to communicate? Students may not have a single dominant language and may use different languages across social groups, settings, or topics.
    - What educational materials need to be translated so the student can effectively participate in instructional activities? Who will provide the translations and when?
    - How does the student use assistive technology, both at school and at home?
    - Beyond assessment data, consider feedback from students, families, and educators on the student's strengths and weaknesses, and what strategies have and have not worked in the past (both virtually and in-person, as applicable). Remember that families can share valuable insight on the student's educational history and behaviors outside of school.
    - Incorporate culturally responsive data literacy[4] by examining data on the student's life outside of school (e.g., living conditions, access to healthcare, food, transportation, traumatic experiences).

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[4] Example resources related to data literacy include the Considerations for the Fall: Applying The Essential Elements of Data Literacy to Respond to Student and System Needs webinar and the Focusing on Equity-Driven Culturally Responsive Data Literacy Session on NCSI's Pursuing Equity page (including the session recording, session slides, and two companion documents, Culturally Responsive Data Literacy and Data Literacy with an Equity Mindset).

- If we will be collecting data virtually, what tools can collect reliable data? How might we interpret data differently in the context of distance learning?[5]
- How could some of the supports that the student received in-person be adjusted for distance learning?
  - How does the distance learning platform support accommodations and assistive technology specified in the student's IEP? What new or additional accommodations might be needed?
  - How does the platform affect language supports the student is used to receiving?
  - What training does the student (and family, if appropriate) need to participate in distance learning (e.g., new technology)?
  - What are the student's social and emotional needs during this time of reduced social interaction and potentially stressful changes? How can we best meet them?
- As ELs with disabilities return to in-person learning, what additional supports might they now need that were not needed before the pandemic?
  - Consider new or increased academic needs due to missed instruction, language needs due to decreased verbal interactions during distance learning, and social/emotional/behavioral needs due to decreased social interactions, stress, changes in routines, etc.
  - What training or other supports does the student (and family, if appropriate) need to return to in-person learning?
- How might the assessment data we previously collected need to be interpreted differently upon return to in-person instruction?[6]

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[5] Example resources include Maintaining Screening and Progress Monitoring Practices in Virtual/Remote Settings and Frequently Asked Questions on Collecting Progress Monitoring Data Virtually by the National Center on Intensive Intervention.

[6] Although the return to in-person instruction allows us to use assessments validated for in-person contexts, missed or different (e.g., virtual or hybrid) instruction may make old norms less applicable (e.g., more students may screen as at-risk). We should interpret scores with caution, comparing both current performance and progress during instruction or intervention to that of similar peers. See, for example, Considerations for Academic Screening Upon the Return to School by the National Association of School Psychologists.

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Collaborating to Provide Integrated Supports

- How do we collaborate across specialties and perspectives to provide aligned or integrated supports addressing all areas of need?
  - Do we have an integrated planning team to address all areas of need for a given student? The planning team may include general educators, special educators, English language acquisition support providers, related service providers, the family, and the student.
  - If teams are separate, how do we make sure the knowledge and plans of all teams are shared and inform all supports?
  - How does the IEP reflect the student's English proficiency and needed language acquisition supports?
  - How are English language development supports adjusted to reflect the student's IEP (e.g., needed accommodations)?
  - How is general education adjusted to address all areas of need and provide required special education and language supports?
- How can we meaningfully involve the family in decision making around distance learning or planning for return to in-person learning?[7]
  - Do families know how to contact all the educators working with their child?
  - Do educators know the best way to reach the family? Do you share information in a format and language the family can understand?
  - As we plan for return to school, how do we seek families' input on what did or did not work well for their students during distance learning and their primary concerns for their students as they return to in-person learning?
  - How do we support families in participating in IEP and other collaborative meetings?
    - Do we allot extra time to foster understanding of complex and often new content, and to allow for interpretation when needed?
    - Do we send reports or assessment results in advance in a format the family can understand?
    - When an interpreter is needed,
      - How is the team trained to work with an interpreter?
      - How is the interpreter prepared to interpret in the context of a special education meeting (e.g., terminology, assessment results)?
      - Are all parties prepared to provide interpretation services virtually when needed?

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[7] The Center for Parent Information and Resources has compiled COVID-19 Info in Other Languages. Collaborate with your state's parent center to better engage families in supporting the education of their EL students with disabilities.

- How can we effectively hold an IEP meeting virtually when needed?[8]
  - How can the student contribute to decision making?

Example Resource Lists by Topic

Supporting Learning for ELs with Disabilities

It is important to keep in mind existing guidance on supporting ELs with disabilities as you plan continued distance or hybrid learning and work to strengthen in-person instruction as school buildings reopen. In addition to the example resources below, a number of states have developed guidance documents and resources related to learning and instruction for ELs with disabilities. When available, educators should consult their state-specific guidance.

Example Resources

- [Tools and Resources for Addressing English Learners with Disabilities](#). The sixth chapter of the English Learner Tool Kit from the Office of English Language Acquisition (2016), includes guidance and resources to support state and local education agencies in identifying and assessing ELs who may have a disability. It also provides guidance and resources for delivering special education services to ELs and including the family in the process.
- [Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures](#). This 2017 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine summarizes evidence and makes practice, policy, and research recommendations for serving ELs from birth through high school. Chapter 10 focuses on ELs with disabilities.
- [CCSSO English Learners with Disabilities Guide](#). This 2017 guide from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) offers recommendations for state policy and procedures related to identifying (Recommendations 1–7) and developing IEPs for (Recommendations 8–11) ELs with disabilities. The appendix includes resources and tools to support each recommendation, and other related resources.
- [Strategies to Identify and Support English Learners With Learning Disabilities: Review of Research and State Practices](#). This 2019 brief by

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[8] If you need to conduct an IEP meeting remotely see the [Virtual IEP Meeting Tip Sheets](#) developed by PROGRESS Center, Center for Parent Information & Resources, National Center for Systemic Improvement, CADRE, Family Network on Disabilities, and WI FACETS. These tip sheets address technology, hosting virtual meetings, and participating in virtual meetings. Additional infographics on participating in virtual IEP meetings are available in English and Spanish. Note that even when in-person instruction resumes, virtual IEP meetings may benefit families who do not yet feel safe meeting in-person or who struggle to visit the school due to transportation challenges or work schedules.

Regional Educational Laboratory West overviews the issues, identifies strategies for educators and administrators, and reviews state guidance and practices.

- [Resource List: Academic Assessment, Instruction, and Intervention for English Learners.](#) This was compiled by the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) and NCSI in 2019. The Special Education section includes resources to support appropriate identification, assessment, and instruction of ELs who have or may have a disability (some of these resources were described above). Further, many of the general assessment and instructional resources can inform services for students receiving special education and EL services.

Distance Learning for ELs

In light of COVID-19, some organizations have released resources and guidance around distance learning for ELs. Although the example resources below were not designed specifically for ELs with disabilities, the strategies they describe are still important for ELs with disabilities. As you plan distance learning, see other sections for strategies that are specific to supporting ELs with disabilities (previous section) or providing distance learning for students with disabilities (next section). At the individual level, consult the student's IEP and collaborate with the IEP team and family.

Example Resources

- [Ensuring Continuity of Learning and Operations](#). This page from the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition features free resources school personnel and institutions of higher education can use to improve distance learning and support for ELs and their families during school closures. The resources are grouped into three categories:
  - **Facilitating online learning**. These resources address how schools and educators can create distance learning plans and lessons that take into account the unique learning needs of ELs.
  - **Resources to share**. These resources help multilingual families understand how to keep their children safe during school closures and help continue the education of ELs during such events.
  - **Distance learning plans**. This section provides information on what districts and states are doing to continue learning for all learners during school closures.
- [Distance Learning for ELLs](#) by Colorín Colorado provides numerous resources from multiple organizations. Colorín Colorado articles with planning tools, strategies, and resources are organized into a guide around several topics including planning instruction, family partnerships, offline learning at home, and privacy considerations. Offline learning options may be particularly important for the many multilingual families with limited or no access to the

technology needed to participate in distance learning (see [Offline Learning at Home: Ideas for English Language Learners](#)).

- [Supporting multilingual learners (MLLs)/English language learners (ELLs) during the COVID-19 Shutdown.](#) This 2020 resource from The New Teacher Project (TNTP) includes general guidance, language considerations when using a variety of technology tools, and information on resources for continued language and literacy development.
- [Supporting English Learners During School Closures: Considerations for Designing Distance Learning Experiences](#). This brief by WestEd (2020) provides guidance on applying effective classroom practices for ELs to a distance learning context.
- [Webinar Series: Supporting Multilingual and English Learner Students During Distance Learning](#). In 2020, the Region 15 Comprehensive Center, the California Teachers Association, and the California Department of Education delivered a webinar series on several topics including supporting young ELs at home, lesson planning, and communicating with families.
- [Adapting Instruction for English Learner Students During Distance Learning: Perspectives From Practitioners](#). This Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest (2020) research-to-practice webinar with associated materials overviews promising practices and includes a facilitated discussion with EL practitioners.
- [Strategies for Supporting Young Students' Home-Language Development During COVID-19—and Beyond](#). This 2020 article by the American Institutes for Research summarizes the benefits of home-language development and approaches families can implement.
- States also are compiling relevant resources that could be beneficial to your work. For example:
  - The District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education developed [Strategies to Support English Learners During Learning at Home](#).
  - The California Department of Education has a "Language Support" tab on its [Distance Learning](#) page and compiled [English Language Development Distance Learning FAQs](#).
  - The Louisiana Department of Education produced a brief on [Supporting ELs During Distance Learning](#).

Distance Learning for Students with Disabilities

In response to COVID-19, several organizations have released resources and guidance on the topic of distance learning for students with disabilities. When planning distance learning for ELs with disabilities, buttress the strategies described in the examples below with considerations for ELs (see other sections).

Example Resources

- [Considerations for Teachers Providing Distance Learning to Students with Disabilities](#). This WestEd (2020) brief begins with ten questions for teachers to ask themselves in order to understand each student's immediate learning and social-emotional needs, then provides suggestions and resources to address several important areas to consider.
- [Removing Barriers to Effective Distance Learning by Applying High-Leverage Practices](#). This 2020 brief from the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR Center) and NCSI outlines how high-leverage practices (HLPs) can be used to strengthen distance learning instruction for a diverse range of students, including students with disabilities, by providing strategies to address six common barriers.
- [Using Sample Lessons to Support Continuity of Learning During COVID-19: Tips for Educators & Parents](#). This series includes tip sheets and video examples to help educators and families in using the NCII reading and mathematics sample lessons to support students with intensive needs, including students with disabilities, in virtual settings. This content can also be found by content area on NCII's COVID-19 compilation page (see next bullet).
- [Supporting Students with Intensive Needs During COVID-19](#). This NCII page compiles resources to support students with intensive needs, including students with disabilities, during virtual learning. Many of the resources were developed by educators participating in a community of practice in spring 2020. Resources include videos, example lessons, and tip sheets organized into the following topic areas:
  - Mathematics intervention examples
  - Literacy intervention examples
  - Behavior strategies
  - Data collection and teaming
  - Implementation support
  - Collaborating with families.
- The TIES Center, which focuses on Increasing (T)ime, (I)nstructional Effectiveness, (E)ngagement, and State and District (S)upport for Inclusive Practices, has a series of articles on [Distance Learning for students with significant cognitive disabilities](#).
- [Parents: Supporting Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). This IRIS Center module offers parents tips to support their child's learning at home.

Engaging ELs' Families

Engaging families and other caregivers is always crucial to understanding students' needs and planning supports, even more so during distance learning when caregivers may be asked to facilitate students' education. Particularly when collaborating with families of ELs with disabilities, remember to allot extra time to foster understanding of complex and often new content, and to allow for interpretation when needed.

Example Resources

For guidance on communicating with and engaging families during distance learning, see the following 2020 articles by Colorín Colorado:

- Distance Learning for ELLs: Lessons Learned About Family Partnerships
- Communicating with ELL Families During COVID-19: 10 Strategies for Schools

For general guidance on engaging EL families, see the following:

- The Office of English Language Acquisition's (2016) Tools and Resources for Ensuring Meaningful Communication with Limited English Proficient Parents
- Colorín Colorado's (2011) A Guide for Engaging ELL Families: Twenty Strategies for School Leaders

Final Thoughts

As you pull from the example resources in these topical lists, please remember that they often are geared toward ELs or students with disabilities rather than ELs with disabilities, or toward ELs with disabilities outside of the context supporting these students during or after distance learning. Although much of this guidance still applies, you should combine best practices across these topics (revisiting the guiding questions and considerations from earlier in this brief) and collect data to see if your plans work for your state, district, or school as a whole, and for each individual EL with disabilities that you serve.

For accessibility purposes, a list of full URLs to the resources hyperlinked in this document can be obtained by emailing ncsi@wested.org