

The Impact of School Closures on Families and Students with Disabilities Family Focus Groups – June 2020



Survival Coalition held two virtual family focus groups in June 2020 to better understand the experiences of families who have a child/ren with disabilities participating in special education during the March-June school closures caused by the COVID pandemic. In addition to the challenges families with typical school age children faced, families who have children with disabilities experienced a myriad of added challenges that impacted both their child and their entire family. As schools consider how best to meet the needs of children during the pandemic, we offer the following insights and suggestions to help better support students with special education needs.

Families responded to a series of questions with a total of 38 participants from a statewide group and a group of Milwaukee Public Schools families, both of whom identified similar themes that are combined in the summary below.

Question #1 - How have school closings this spring impacted your family?

Families talked about the stress of juggling multiple demands on their time. While working from home, families had to take on the roles of teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists, technology specialists, solve internet access problems and support the mental health needs of each child and family member. Many parents did not feel they had the skills for all these jobs. Families who have children with extraordinary care needs lost staff who had been coming into the home to help with care. In addition, many of the participants' children lost the support they had been receiving from a school-based paraprofessional, who had worked closely with the child to complete schoolwork.

- It was an **extremely stressful** time for my family; trying to work from home and help direct my child's virtual learning; it was **hard on my family**. We decided to stop doing the online and focus on reading with my child and find other tools
- We had other family issues on top of the move to online learning.
- The **lack of routine and a schedule was hard for my kids**; hard to keep my child on task and try to do my own work **was not easy and sometimes impossible**



- **Very stressful to juggle competing demands, with multiple children.** I had to do a one room schoolhouse method where all studied the same thing, hard to meet my own job requirements while teaching kids
- I am his mom and not his teacher and I could not really do both well
- Trying to have all of us (3 kids and 2 adults) in the same house at the same time was very difficult.

I did not always have the bandwidth.

- Working full time AND having to be the teacher, becoming everything, was **hard on my mental health**
- It was really **hard on my kids** for me to have multiple roles from mom to teacher.
- I took comfort in knowing my kids were at **home and safe**.

Question #2 - What were the barriers and experiences with online learning for you and your child?

Many families said virtual learning was impossible for their child given their disability, either due to age, type of disability or learning style. Many children were not able to be independent with online learning, previously utilizing 1:1 support at various times during the school day, which was no longer provided.

Some families experienced initial difficulty getting access to iPads or Chromebooks, sometimes taking up to 6 weeks to be delivered to the home. Others had teachers who dropped off devices almost immediately. Internet access varied widely for families. Parents talked about their internet “crashing” when both children and parents were trying to be online at the same time for school and work. Often families who had multiple school age children, sometime in different schools, experienced widely different levels of contact and support from their schools. This included different software platforms for participating in remote learning and different levels of support and communication.



- **I needed support.** I do not know how to teach or use some of the technology.
- Virtual learning is **very difficult for non-readers and young children.** He needs one on one help; he needs things to touch and it did not work well to try to do much online
- We had multiple people at home trying to be online, so **bandwidth was a challenge** made worse by unreliable internet.
- There was **not enough help with the technology** early in the spring; it took too long to get the devices and the right tools.
- We **lost all special education services like therapies** that could not be done virtually.
- My child's **IEP goals suffered**; we just could not find a way to make progress while participating in the online school environment.
- The use of multiple learning and assignment platforms added to our confusion and **hot spots did not always work.**
- My child did not want my help but was **not able to participate in online learning**
- My older kids were pretty self-sufficient, but I **had to be right with my child with special needs to keep him on task** and on track and turning in his work did not really work
- I have three kids, all in different schools. **Technology and lack of consistency in the platforms used was really hard.** We had to learn multiple online platforms and different tools and expectations.
- Virtual schooling made it **hard for us to create a collaborative relationship with teachers.**



Question #3 - What type of assistance did you get from the school and what has helped you most?

Families reported great variability in support from their child's school; some talked about daily or weekly contact that was very helpful and teachers who went above and beyond, while others had little to no contact with school staff or therapists and felt they had been left to cope on their own. Families talked about the challenge with lack of structure and a schedule. They found it helpful when school provided a daily schedule of tasks for the student to complete, with links to additional information, classroom materials or resources. Families also talked about the benefit of school staff communicating clear expectations to the student and providing regular feedback. Social isolation was a concern for many families, and they appreciated when schools used technology to help connect students with each other.

- **One on one connections** with special ed teachers, therapists, and time with "para's".
- **Teachers who taped their lectures, provided PPT slides and other learning tools we could re-watch** or learn on our own time
- **Resources that were provided to families** – many teachers dropped off materials, tools, and technology.
- **Having teachers provide schedules** so kids were kept on task and given guidance to help with routines.
- **Positive social experience with Google Meets** for my eleven-year-old.
- **SeeSaw app** for online learning well-coordinated and fun for my son.
- **Providing therapies was a challenge**, some done virtually with me doing, some ceased altogether.
- **I liked "outside" therapies provided virtually**, there was less running around to appointments
- My students did better with **clear expectations and a schedule** but did not do as well with looser assignments.
- **Feedback to me and my student was helpful**, but it is critical that it be done in real time or close to it.



Question #4 - What are your biggest concerns as you think about your child going back to school in the fall?

While families coped during the spring shut down, many were concerned about their ability to sustain their close involvement with school while maintaining jobs and other responsibilities long term. They were torn between wanting their children "safe and alive" and the loss of social opportunities and educational progress that comes with being in a school environment. For transition age students, the lack of progress in preparation for exiting school was also a concern. Many felt their child had not made progress or were regressing and they were concerned that "more of the same" would not meet their child's needs. Some said they would just stop participating in virtual school because it was too stressful and didn't work

Families want to have input into the final decision for the fall, but whatever the plan, they need to know what to expect as soon as possible so they have time to plan. The unpredictability is catastrophic for some.

Exposure to COVID was a major concern for many of these families. About 1 in 4 families who participated in the focus groups said their child's health condition would prevent them from going back to school. They talked about the need for a flexible plan to suit the needs of different students.

- I am **scared to send my kids back to school, social distancing in school will be difficult especially for students with disabilities** who have sensory needs, and young children.
- **Really hard for kids unable to wear masks or socially distance**, but still need the social connections or need to see your face to understand.



- It's **hard not to have the routines, schedules, reminders from teachers.**
- The **school did not provide accommodations for many classes.** There was lots of general education stuff without modifications for my child's disability. **My child's needs were not addressed.**
- What happens if there is a spike in infections and we go back to shut down? **It will be hard on our kids if we have to go back and schedules change again and again.**
- **Transition students need more services and interactions, we cannot do transition virtually.**
- **We need financial assistance. We lost childcare and respite services, but we must have an income.** It is very difficult to do my job and teach our children at the same time.
- Provide some kind of stipend for parents who are homeschooling, **I need financial support**
- **Lack of social interaction and "incidental learning" from peers** that helps our children
- **I'm worried about how to connect with a new teacher and new team.** How will we develop a relationship?
- **I'd rather keep my kids home and safe.** It's better to make up the educational losses later rather than have a child get sick or die.
- **Give parents the opportunity to choose what return to school will look like for their child.**
- **Many families are interested in a hybrid approach** where students stay home but get more support from schools such as tutoring (especially in areas where parents don't have the skills), opportunities for socially distanced field trips, and access to the classroom virtually if other students are in school.



Recommendations

The responsibility of educating students must shift from families back to schools regardless of setting. This requires communication and planning with families about each partner's roles and responsibilities, and flexibility by the school in how services are provided. Engage families in district decisions about what happens in the fall. Understand the impact of school decisions on families and offer flexibility in how and when instruction is provided. For working parents, access to school staff after the workday may be needed. Based on family input, Survival Coalition offers the following recommendations for fall:



- **Schools need to develop and communicate to families a long-term plan** that includes how to educate children unable to return to school and how to protect students if there is a change in public health guidance or a resurgence of infections in a community.



- **The school team should review child's IEPs with family to address effective instruction strategies.** Consider in-home or community-based face-to-face supports along with virtual learning, develop a plan to provide related services such as therapies, consider the role of paraprofessionals in daily support to students at home, and identify tools to provide individualized structure and accountability.



- **Families need more support.** This includes help with technology, an attempt to standardize the electronic platforms and tools used within a district, and support to those parents providing educational supports for their special education students. If virtual learning continues, schools should provide real time technical support that parents can call for assistance.



- **Similarly, for families who can continue virtual schooling, they need support and training to act as educators.** This may be as simple as a list of tips for educating a child at home to something more complex such as virtual classes for parents and connections to other parents for mutual support regardless of where they live.



- **Families need financial support.** Creative solutions are needed to help families who have had to quit or cut back on their jobs to educate their children at home. Consider coordinating with Children's Long-Term Supports (CLTS) and Community Coordinated Services (CCS) to maximize other programs' support to families.



- **Set expectations for coordination between special and general education and communication with students and families.** The loss of schools as an organizing structure has been particularly difficult for many students. While some schools did a "great job" others were perceived as absent from a student's education.



- **Develop a plan to address the needs of the 18-21 age students preparing for transition that includes appropriate experiences beyond virtual instruction.** Consider a temporary change to the age at which IDEA ends so that transition age students receive the full benefit of transition planning and experiences.



- **Emphasize accountability.** The Department of Public Instruction must hold school districts accountable for providing a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities even when schools are continuing with virtual education in the fall semester.



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