

Therapies & Supports: Ensuring Equity & Inclusion for ALL Students

Blue Engine & SPED Strategies

Blue Engine and SPED Strategies, two organizations on a mission to improve outcomes for students who think and learn differently, have come together to elevate strategies and practices that school systems can use to design for and meet the needs of students with disabilities as part of continued school reopening. Over many years working with schools, school systems, and states, our organizations have developed expertise in improving systems and instruction for our most marginalized students. We share our recommendations with the aim of spurring actions that result in learning experiences that meet the needs of every single student.

To fully address the needs of students with disabilities, school systems should consider taking the following actions before the start of the 2021-2022 school year:

- 1 Design and implement recovery learning programs that provide inclusive and equitable access to students with disabilities.
- 2 Accelerate therapies and supports for students with disabilities.
- 3 Double-down on high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students.

To that end, today we are releasing the second of a three-part series of resources to help school systems take action in each of these areas, **Therapies & Supports: Ensuring Equity and Inclusion for All Students**.

Our organizations are optimistic about the progress we can make for ALL students when we come together in partnership to advance these key priorities. We continue to support school systems as they work tirelessly to meet the needs of students with disabilities. **Reach out to jessi@blueengine.org and kristi@spedstrategies.com to get involved or learn more about our work.**

[Blue Engine](#) is an education nonprofit that optimizes the power of team teaching, the approach of having multiple teachers work together in a classroom in service of a shared outcome for students. We partner with teachers, schools, districts, and education organizations to ensure that educators can effectively collaborate and individualize instruction for every learner—regardless of race, income level, or learning style. In doing so, Blue Engine delivers mindset shifts and effective practices for teachers and engaging, identity-affirming learning experiences for students.



[SPED Strategies](#) believes every student with a disability deserves a high quality education in an environment where they thrive. We support leaders across all levels of the education system and community by connecting the dots between policy, funding, and academics to advance outcomes for students with disabilities.



The Problem

With COVID-19 pandemic school disruptions, the most vulnerable students missed therapies and supports that are essential to their development and education.

Students with disabilities rely on school systems to provide educational and related services. This includes therapies and specialized supports such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, classroom aides, transition services, and more. [Low-income students](#) and [students of color](#) are disproportionately represented in the special education community, and these families are especially reliant on these services. For these students, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has not only disrupted daily instruction, but delayed these critical services and supports. This compounds learning loss from the pandemic with potential long-lasting effects on the education and functioning of these students. A [growing coalition](#) of school leaders, teachers, parents and advocates recognize the magnitude and urgent nature of this crisis and the need to devise solutions.

The Solution

Quickly provide individualized therapies and supports to accelerate grade-level learning.

Special education leaders should be planning now to accelerate delivery of individualized therapies and supports so the needs of students with disabilities are fully met in accordance with IEP guidelines and address COVID-19 pandemic disruptions. School systems leaders should develop a multi-phase plan to meet the individual therapy and support needs of all students. This plan should focus particularly on students disproportionately affected by recent instructional shifts or those at greatest risk of suffering long-lasting consequences.

Leaders should take these actions:

- 1** Identify students who need accelerated therapies and supports,
- 2** Ensure accelerated therapies and supports advance student progress towards grade-level learning, and
- 3** Design a more resilient service delivery model.

To do this, special education leaders should weave together existing and new funding opportunities to design and implement therapies and supports this summer through the 2021-2022 school year.

Current funding: IDEA formula funds, CARES Act, and state-supported compensatory education funds, if available.

New funding: American Rescue Plan's: 1) funding boost for IDEA , 2) targeted funding for learning loss through evidence-based programs (e.g. extended school year).

Priority 1: IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO NEED ACCELERATED THERAPIES AND SUPPORTS

School system leaders should not wait until school returns to “normal” to assess students, as that would delay critical therapies and supports when they are most needed. The magnitude of this effort is enormous; it will take sustained action over the coming years. To develop a thoughtful response, special education leaders should first focus on students with the most critical need for accelerated therapies and supports.



Identify Students in Need of Accelerated Therapies and Supports Quickly

In addition to regular reviews and updates to all IEPs, special education leaders should quickly identify students with disabilities who need accelerated therapies and supports¹ using the following methods:

- **Use existing assessments as quick diagnostics.** Use formative assessments that are embedded in the wider school context as an “early warning system” to identify vulnerable students. Ensure assessments are administered to students with disabilities who may be affected more, including those who:
 - 1 may miss key [developmental milestones](#),
 - 2 have [significant disabilities](#), and/or
 - 3 need [specific skills](#) for life after high school.
- **Adjust data collections to make informed decisions quickly.** Special education leaders should bring together leaders across the system to make intentional [adjustments](#) to the data collection and review process tailored to existing instruction models, whether in-person, remote, or hybrid.



Ensure IEP Teams Make Well-Informed Decisions

IEP teams work together to make individualized decisions to meet each student’s unique needs. The process of determining the intensity, frequency, and duration of accelerated therapies and supports is no different. When planning to accelerate therapy supports, IEP teams should take these actions:

- **Look at the complete context for each student.** The amount, intensity, duration, and type of therapies and supports do not have to replace the exact (minute-for-minute) service time missed from an IEP during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, IEP teams should look at the educational impact of missed or disrupted services on the student and adjust services and supports to accelerate learning.
- **Develop [contingency plans](#), or amend IEPs,** to account for future disruptions to special education and related services. This is a best practice that can ensure continuity of services during future disruptions that are system-wide (e.g. weather events) or student-specific (e.g. student with medically complex needs).
- **Engage families in the decision-making process.** Families will provide critical insights into the effectiveness of remote learning or disrupted services and supports. Ensure all decisions on services and supports actively involve parents/legal guardians as part of the IEP team, and ensure they understand their [procedural safeguards](#).

¹ Accelerated therapies and supports: adjustments to the intensity, frequency and duration of therapies and supports to 1) address missed or disrupted services and 2) prepare students with disabilities for the 2021 - 2022 school year.

Priority 2: ENSURE ACCELERATED THERAPIES AND SUPPORTS ADVANCE STUDENT PROGRESS TOWARDS GRADE-LEVEL LEARNING

All students should access grade-level instruction every day through a high-quality curriculum in the least restrictive environment. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, students with disabilities were often stuck in an [endless loop of remediation](#), being taught isolated skills below grade level. Traditional therapy and support structures can contribute to this when providers pull students with disabilities out of core instruction, or do not connect functional skills to grade-level curriculum pacing. Special education leaders must ensure service providers connect therapies and supports to the key learning that occurs in the regular-education classroom.



Align Therapies and Supports to Grade-Level Instruction

Therapies and supports should prepare students with disabilities for grade-level content during core instruction, and to access inclusion opportunities. The progression of grade-level content will look different next year for all students. As teachers adjust scope and pacing, service providers will need to understand these shifts in order to adjust therapies and supports.



Intensify and Accelerate Therapies and Supports

Examine and adjust the standard model of service delivery (e.g. all students receive speech therapy 2x a week, in a pull out model). To accelerate learning, school systems should not provide a series of additional therapies and supports in isolation simply to make-up for missed or disrupted special education services. Instead, providers should adjust intensity, duration, and frequency of services to support access to and progress in the classroom.

Priority 3: DESIGN A MORE RESILIENT SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated innovations in special education service delivery that should be a core part of learning recovery plans. Telepractice has become widely accepted, and schools have advanced adaptive and flexible staffing models. Therapies and supports should be designed and implemented in novel ways, and providers must be supported in delivering services safely and effectively. Special education leaders who innovate now will be able to:

- 1 Provide accelerated therapies and supports as soon as possible to mitigate the impact of disrupted services,
- 2 Address workforce and staffing needs that existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and
- 3 Create a more resilient service delivery model that will ensure greater continuity of critical services, no matter what lies ahead.



Schedule Students with Disabilities First

Master schedules can limit inclusion of students with disabilities when their needs are addressed last. By scheduling these students first, their therapies and supports can take priority while making sure these services do not conflict with core instructional content.



Structure Service Delivery

Special education leaders should plan for in-person and remote service delivery that can continue without disruption when conditions change. This may look different during the school year and during the summer, and may vary by goal, service, session or individual student need.

- **For in-person service delivery,** service providers and support personnel may need to be in close physical proximity to students (e.g. to demonstrate correct gross motor movement), physically move students (e.g. diapering), or modify face coverings (e.g. to provide interpretive services). Special education leaders should:
 - Follow the latest CDC [guidance](#), which includes recommendations for service providers who travel between schools and/or provide services in close contact with students.
 - Train and support service providers who must customize health protocols (e.g. masks, distancing) to provide [therapies](#) or [ensure effective communication](#) in the classroom.
 - Ensure providers receive and wear appropriate personal protective equipment and follow standard [precautions to avoid](#) infection.

- **For remote service delivery**, also known as telepractice. Therapies and supports should use an evidence-based approach. Special education leaders should:
 - Ensure remote service delivery [protects student privacy](#) by complying with federal and state rules and industry best practice.
 - Provide additional training providers need to succeed in remote delivery. Many professional associations and states have developed training and resources for remote service delivery including [speech-language therapy](#), [school psychology](#), [occupational therapy](#), and [adapted physical education](#).
 - Provide students with the assistive technology (e.g. computers or tablets with pre-installed accessibility software) and specialized tools and equipment (e.g. slate boards, sensory putty, fidget mats) they will need to fully participate in remote therapies and supports.



Ensure Sufficient Staffing

Special education leaders can leverage current staff or expand with [contractors](#) to ensure students receive additional therapies and supports as soon as possible.

- **If you are using certified therapists employed by your school system**, review the caseloads of service providers and make any adjustments, if necessary. Provide training to service providers and support personnel that will prepare them to be effective across instructional delivery methods.
- **If you are expanding your school system's capacity through external contracted providers**, consider your needs and the contractor's services. Select a contractor that can provide the right scope of services (e.g. speech therapy, counseling), evidence of service efficacy across instructional delivery methods, and proof of applicable licenses and insurance.



Apply Innovations in Service Delivery Moving Forward

More than ever before, creating strong systems to support students with disabilities will require flexible and responsive supports. As schools move forward, special education leaders should understand and apply these innovations to evolve the service delivery models. Promising practices include:

- **Adopt electronic data collection platforms to quickly share student progress.** More school systems are moving to widely accessible platforms to centralize special education progress monitoring data collection and storage. When leveraged well, these promise to improve collaboration between providers and staff by allowing all educators to quickly access and update student progress and by streamlining compliance requirements.
- **Consider remote service delivery as part of the IEP.** Widespread experience with remote learning has expanded the [continuum of services](#) available to students with disabilities. In addition, special education leaders are recognizing that services do not have to be provided solely in person or remotely, but can use a hybrid model. Services can be flexible and dynamic, changing based on student need, instructional area, and modality.

CITATIONS

Barnett, W.S., & Jung, K. (2021). Seven Impacts of the Pandemic on Young Children and their Parents: Initial Findings from NIEER's December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/NIEER_Seven_Impacts_of_the_Pandemic_on_Young_Children_and_their_Parents.pdf

Bamberger, Cayla (December 7, 2020). "Is the pandemic our chance to reimagine education for students with disabilities?" The Hechinger Report. Retrieved April 7, 2021 from
<https://hechingerreport.org/is-the-pandemic-our-chance-to-reimagine-education-for-students-with-disabilities/>

Diamant, Michelle (March 26, 2021). "Ed Department Urged to Direct More COVID-19 Relief Funds to Students with Disabilities." Disability Scoop. Retrieved March 29, 2021 from
<https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2021/03/26/ed-department-urged-to-direct-more-covid-19-relief-funds-to-students-with-disabilities/29259/>

Hill, Paul, Robin Lake. (April 6, 2021). "We Can't Afford to Love Learning Acceleration to Death." Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved April 6, 2021 from
<https://www.crpe.org/thelens/we-cant-afford-love-learning-acceleration-death>

National Center for Learning Disabilities (October 19, 2020). "Significant Disproportionality In Special Education." Retrieved April 7, 2021 from <https://www.nclld.org/sigdispro/>

Nelson, Angela (September 29, 2020). "How COVID-19 Has Affected Special Education Students." Tufts Now. Retrieved April 3, 2021 from
<https://now.tufts.edu/articles/how-covid-19-has-affected-special-education-students>

Pane, John F., Elizabeth D. Steiner, Matthew D. Baird, Laura S. Hamilton, and Joseph D. Pane. (2017). "Informing Progress: Insights on Personalized Learning Implementation and Effects" Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2042-BMGF, 2017. Retrieved April 8, 2021 from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2042.html

Quilantan, Banca (February 22, 2021). "Pandemic offers renewed push to rethink education for students with disabilities." Politico. Retrieved April 8, 2021 from
<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-education-coronavirus-special-edition/2021/02/22/pandemic-offers-renewed-push-to-rethink-education-for-students-with-disabilities-793492>

Savoie, Hillary & EJ Dickson (September 29, 2020). "Amid Covid-19, Parents of Special-Needs Kids Face a Dilemma" Rolling Stone. Retrieved March 16, 2021 from
<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/covid-19-special-needs-parents-education-dilemma-1064900/>

Stein, Perry & Valerie Strauss (August 7, 2020). "Special education students are not just falling behind in the pandemic — they're losing key skills, parents say." Washington Post. Retrieved March 16, 2021 from
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/special-education-students-are-not-just-falling-behind--theyre-losing-key-skills-parents-say/2020/08/05/ec1b91ca-cffd-11ea-9038-af089b63ac21_story.html