

How to Improve Distance Learning for Students With IEPs

Strategies for parental involvement and synchronous and asynchronous activities can help students with individualized education programs.

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Online Learning



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Distance learning isn't easy for most students, but it is particularly difficult for those with learning differences that require individualized education programs (IEPs).

This year, at the request of [Merrimack College Institute for New Teacher Support \(MINTS\)](#), I provided professional development for K–12 schools on teaching children with IEPs remotely. Quickly, I reached out to a handful of highly qualified teachers, administrators, and therapists working remotely with students who had been diagnosed with learning challenges. Through a quick survey, educators provided best practices and passed on the survey to their colleagues. Within five days, more than 90 educators had responded from more than 30 school districts across the Northeast.

The survey results can be broken down into three overarching themes: parent engagement along with synchronous and asynchronous strategies. The responses uncovered the following best practices to address the needs of students with learning differences.

Parent Engagement

Parents with children diagnosed with disabilities are an essential part of the IEP team, now more than ever. I list some strategies for parent engagement here.

- **Initial remote IEP meeting:** Meeting with the parents to go over the IEP is critical. Present Levels of Educational Performance A (PLEP A) outlines accommodations that are useful in the classroom; such accommodations could include frequent breaks, flexible seating, sensory tools, fidgets to focus, reduced distractions, motor breaks, and chewing gum while working independently. Educators note the benefits of working with parents to replicate some of these accommodations at home.
- **Weekly check-ins:** Once a mutual understanding among the IEP team is recognized and replications of accommodations are established, a weekly check-in has been useful in modifying the accommodation needs.
- **Goal setting:** Pick an IEP objective or two each week to focus on with your students. Having too many goals, assignments, and expectations has led to failure and diminished student motivation.
- **Service delivery participation:** Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech and language therapists shared that the most significant benefit to providing services remotely is parent involvement. Many are re-creating services to involve fun activities that parents can participate in while the therapist is watching virtually and making suggestions. The benefits have increased the reinforcement of IEP

goals and parent engagement at home.

“Parents seem to be more invested as they take part in their child’s programming,” said Aimee Johnson, an occupational therapist in Auburn, New Hampshire. “It’s a perfect opportunity for parent education and collaboration. Parents can see the skills their children are working on and can carry them over more effectively.”

Synchronous Strategies

Another common theme of the survey is the importance of increasing engagement during live, virtual, synchronous meetings. My respondents shared the following specific ideas.

Mixing up preferred and nonpreferred activities: IEP goals and objectives may not be the student’s preferred virtual learning activity. Mixing preferred and nonpreferred activities increases engagement. Individually tailoring the preferred activities to each student’s interests has led to an increase in productivity.

For example, create Popsicle sticks with specific activities. Each Popsicle stick has either an activity to address an IEP objective or a preferred activity such as “Do a cartwheel” or “Show me your pet.” During each virtual meeting, the educator blindly chooses a Popsicle stick until all of the

activities are done. When you add some fun, students are more willing to do the nonpreferred activities. There are also websites to replicate this, such as [Wheel Decide](#).

Virtual book clubs: Create book clubs based on students' reading levels and similar IEP goals. Treat the book clubs as a social event and suggest that students come to these meetings with snacks. Have students dress in character or act out parts while engaging in comprehension activities in addition to working on yearly IEP goals.

Start virtual meetings with a fun, engaging activity:

Start each virtual meeting with an engaging event to motivate students to join before starting academics. For example, on Mondays have students wear a costume, on Tuesdays schedule a household scavenger hunt, on Wednesdays allow students to bring their favorite stuffed animal to class. Such activities have students looking forward to attending, boost engagement, and tend to increase participation.

Asynchronous Strategies

The third theme of the survey results is the importance of engagement during independent, asynchronous assignments and activities. Respondents shared the following ideas.

Visuals, routines, schedules: Provide students with daily visual schedules, and educate them on the use of timers to promote independence. Any deviations from the routine can create an opportunity to lose students and can cause frustration. Keep the day predictable.

"I create individualized weekly schedules for my students," said Kelli Alessandro, a special education teacher in Methuen, Massachusetts. "Included in these schedules are their assignments and expectations with links to documents, websites, or other materials in a centrally located document. These schedules assist the students and caregivers with pacing, planning, organization, and task completion, among other functional skills."

Movement breaks: Within the schedule, built-in movement breaks have been useful. Replicating the school's sensory paths with a DIY sensory motor path or creating one outside on a sidewalk or driveway with chalk is an excellent way to incorporate multiple movement breaks within the day.

Recorded videos: When providing students with asynchronous learning programs, recorded video instructions for students and parents to refer to have helped to reinforce IEP goals.

Accept all completed work: Students come from different environments, and not all students have equal access to

computers and tablets. Learning what works best for the family and accepting completed work through various methods, such as electronic media, picture texts, and paper copies, has increased the frequency of completed work.

Be Yourself

In addition to the discussed themes, a reoccurring and nonspecific idea was the importance of having fun, acting silly, and creating a supportive environment in which to learn. When your students look back on the months of remote learning, they won't remember the incredible math lesson you spent hours preparing. They will remember the relationship you established with them. They will remember the silly hats you wore, the fun games you played, and the way you made them forget the scary realities of the world. Your students will remember you and your ability to make them feel safe and happy through this horrible global pandemic.

Thank you to all the educators who took time out of their hectic schedules to respond to the survey to help others. Educators are a selfless community of superstars. I can't thank you enough!