

Winter Special Education COVID-19 Checklist

Public Consulting Group (PCG) is pleased to offer a **Winter Special Education COVID-19 Checklist** to assist school districts in COVID-19 special education planning during this time of great uncertainty. As school districts prepare for transitions to and from remote and hybrid learning as COVID-19 cases rise in their communities, this resource serves as a companion to existing local, state, and federal guidance on both education and public health. Used together, these resources support effective planning as you evaluate your readiness and preparedness for the realities of school year 2020–2021.

This checklist inventories essential actions in three critical areas for Directors of Special Education:

✔ Health and Safety ✔ IEP Development ✔ Instruction and Special Education Programming



Following these steps will help ensure that special education departments are equipped to meet health and safety guidelines for classrooms, therapy rooms, and interactions between students and educators.

Health and Safety

1. Does your school district have a COVID-19 Special Education Steering Committee?

As we've said in [earlier writings](#), teachers and school leaders are not doctors or scientists. In the absence of specific guidance for supporting students with disabilities in a return to in-person services and instruction, it is important to make informed decisions on the nuances specific to providing students with IEPs a free and appropriate education.

- ✔ Create a COVID-19 Special Education Steering Committee.
- ✔ Engage the district's leadership team to agree on key participants of this steering committee.
- ✔ Consider including school district physician, local board of health representation, school nurses, board counsel, special education counsel, special education director, superintendent, and building leadership.
- ✔ Determine the frequency and duration of steering committee meetings as well as expected outcomes.
- ✔ Ensure the steering committee's informed recommendations are consistent with the most recent state guidance.

2. Has your school district procured a supply of necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to partially or fully reopen its school buildings?

Examples of critical PPE may include eye protection such as face coverings, face shields and/or goggles; N95 masks; medical/surgical disposable masks; disposable, non-latex gloves; and disposable gowns, smocks, or other body coverings.

- ✔ Ensure that your district has a policy that clearly defines whether staff must wear district-issued face coverings or personal face coverings. Additionally, clearly define how staff must follow district protocols in wearing face coverings and or face shields when providing direct student support.

- ✔ Assess written guidance issued by your local and state health departments regarding these matters. For example, the Minnesota Department of Health has issued a matrix titled "[Guide for Choosing Protective Equipment](#)" that offers specific advice for schools in choosing PPE.

3. Has your school district, in consultation with your COVID-19 Special Education Steering Committee and the organization that certifies your district's crisis prevention protocols, determined modifications that may be needed when a student is in crisis, specifically during a crisis requiring physical restraint?

School district staff sometimes face situations when a student is in crisis—specifically, when a student is at an immediate risk of harming themselves or others. When such a situation occurs, school staff who are trained and certified may need to perform a non-violent physical restraint. During a restraint, school staff are typically in very close physical proximity to the student. During such a crisis, social distancing is likely impossible.

- ✔ Engage your COVID-19 Special Education Steering Committee and the organization that certifies your district to determine appropriate and necessary PPE or other restraint modifications for certified staff.
- ✔ Review resources from organizations such as [Handle with Care](#), which has issued specific COVID-19 specific guidance for their specific model of crisis response. Additionally, the [Crisis Prevention Institute](#) has also issued specific guidance for their model of crisis response.

4. If your district is returning from a fully virtual to a hybrid or fully in-person model, has the district measured and marked classrooms to prepare for social distancing?

In an effort to ensure social distancing, schools have used colorful adhesive tape, signage, and other measures to ensure the safe social distancing of staff and students in the classroom.

- ✔ Measure, mark, and provide signage within school buildings to support social distancing within buildings—use guidance from your COVID-19 Special Education Steering Committee when possible.
- ✔ Consider using picture communication symbols for social distance signage to accommodate students with communication disabilities.



Following these steps will help support IEP teams in being prepared for creating and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) through different and varying learning environments.

IEP Development

5. Have your district's IEP teams considered developing Distance Learning Plans (DLPs) for students with IEPs?

- ✔ Consider creating a companion document to the IEP, a DLP, that provides strategies on how a student can accomplish his or her respective IEP goals while they are learning in a hybrid or virtual environment.

6. Do all IEP team members have access to necessary student files for their 2020–21 student caseloads?

- ✔ Ensure that IEP team members have access to the files they need to effectively conduct IEP meetings if they are working remotely or on a hybrid schedule between home and their district office.

7. Are protocols established to limit the number of people moving in and out of the special education office to pick-up/drop-off paper files?
 - ✔ Leverage technology as much as possible to reduce the amount of paper files and subsequent interaction with multiple staff from across buildings.
8. Do all new district staff, especially new district staff who may be working from home, have correct access to the district's virtual IEP case management system?
 - ✔ Use IEP or central office personnel to ensure all staff have the correct permissions within the district's IEP case management system so they can easily access the student files they need.
9. Are your IEP backlogs from the 2019–20 school year cleared?

Most school districts were unable to provide special education evaluation between the spring and summer of 2019–20.

 - ✔ Prioritize catching up on outstanding evaluations. This may require leveraging outside providers to support the evaluation process.
 - ✔ Create protocols for confirming that children are not exhibiting symptoms of illness ahead of scheduled evaluations. When a child is unable to participate in an evaluation because they show symptoms of illness, be sure to document this.
 - ✔ Consider leveraging an outside consultant to take inventory of back-ups so the district can quickly respond.
10. Do you have contingency plans in place to avoid IEP backlogs should schools return to a fully virtual model?
 - ✔ Develop evaluation protocols and contingency plans in the event that schools become fully virtual.
 - ✔ Develop a "testing center" in a central location in the district, leveraging PPE and cleaning protocols in a manner that keeps both the student and provider safe.

Instruction and Special Education Programming

11. Is your school district prepared to continue providing students with IEPs a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) during the continued changes to the student learning environment because of the pandemic? Is your district prepared to pivot from in-person related services to teleservices?
 - ✔ Follow recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which provides more clarity on the delivery of FAPE for students with disabilities. OSEP guidance states that no matter what primary instructional delivery approach is chosen, state education departments, school districts, and IEP teams are responsible for ensuring that FAPE is provided to all children with disabilities. "If state and local decisions require schools to limit or not provide in-person instruction due to health and safety concerns, school districts are not relieved of their obligation to provide FAPE to each child with a disability under IDEA."



Following these steps will help special education departments prepare to deliver instruction, special education programming, and FAPE in varied and potentially shifting learning environments.

12. Does your school district have a model for conducting its instruction in a hybrid or virtual learning environment? Specifically, has your district assessed the necessary adaptations that need to be made in the areas of course design, curriculum, learning experiences, and professional responsibilities under a virtual and/or hybrid learning model?

- ✔ Prepare for the possibility of having to significantly modify your district's model, especially given predictions of a potential "second wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the typical effects of flu season (for both students and staff).
- ✔ Create a districtwide hybrid/virtual learning model, adopted by administrative and teaching staff, that addresses the needs of all students. Leverage principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#) in creating such a model, making sure that students with disabilities are engaged through multiple means of representation and expression. Offer training on this model, providing specific guidance for students with IEPs to ensure that students continue receiving FAPE.
- ✔ Prepare for the potential pivot back to a fully virtual related service model. Provide training and supports to existing related service providers.
- ✔ Monitor related service reporting within your district's IEP case management system. Specifically, review "Prescribed Versus Delivered" reports to compare the amount of services prescribed within the IEP versus what is currently being delivered to assess gaps caused by COVID-19.

13. Do all students in a hybrid or fully virtual learning environment have access to laptops/tablets to access their education? Does your district have a troubleshooting and repair center for equipment in need of repair or parents/students in need of technology assistance?

- ✔ Identify ways to disseminate the tools, especially to families experiencing hardships. Consider using lunch distribution as a time to provide technology support.
- ✔ Consider flexible morning and evening hours for technology distribution at locations such as central office; consider hand delivering equipment to families, where appropriate. Ensure that students in a hybrid learning environment have access to reliable internet. Disseminate wireless routers using unconventional solutions, such as through food banks, community centers, playgrounds, or places of worship. Also, consider engaging local internet service providers to determine student eligibility for free home internet.
- ✔ Establish a troubleshooting hotline and equipment repair center that is accessible for parents and students in the event of technology problems.
- ✔ Ensure that students have access to that assistive technology at home if that's part of their special education program. Furthermore, make sure it is clear who will provide support and service to that assistive technology in a hybrid or fully virtual environment.

14. Do your teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers have access to professional development to support instruction and/or service provision in hybrid or fully virtual learning environments?

Although many of your teachers have been instructing in virtual and/or hybrid models since last spring, they still may need significant training.

- ✔ Invest in [online professional development](#) for teachers and paraprofessionals.

15. Has your district developed consistent protocols around the collection of data for the 2020–21 school year?

- ✔ Leverage universal screening tools, especially in reading and in math, to consistently assess how all students are performing. This is especially important for students with IEPs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to continue collecting student information for IEP progress reports, as well as monitoring student progress.

16. Are your IEP teams engaging in progress monitoring of student IEP goals?

- ✔ Ensure there are districtwide standard operating procedures for progress monitoring.
- ✔ Leverage tools that allow for instant data entry of progress monitoring data. Ease and convenience are a key factor in ensuring the timely entry of student data. Utilizing an IEP case management system that includes a convenient progress monitoring tool can be especially important to ensuring there are accessible, informative, and timely reports that can immediately drive instruction.
- ✔ Foster a culture of improvement, starting at the central office, that supports data culture, data capacity, and data quality. Ensure that teachers, child study team members, and administrators serve as the ambassadors of this culture, having it inform the process that drives progress monitoring. This engagement is especially important during the COVID-19 emergency.

Many of the questions on this checklist are adapted from the *Special Education section of Education Forward: Safely and Successfully Reopening Wisconsin Schools* by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. June 29, 2020. Madison, WI. https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/Education_Forward_web.pdf

Action steps were developed by special education subject matter experts at Public Consulting Group (PCG).

To learn how PCG can help you with special education planning, contact us today.

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