



Montana Empowerment Center,  
Inc.  
Montana's Parent Training  
Information Center

P.O Box 2307  
Great Falls, MT 59403  
877-870-1190

[www.mtempowermentcenter.org](http://www.mtempowermentcenter.org)

Under guidance from the U.S. Department of Education (issued in March 2020) school districts must provide FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) while considering the need to protect the health and safety of all students, including students with disabilities and those who provide education, individualized instruction and related services to students.

The guidance document also states, "We encourage school teams and parents to work collaboratively and creatively to meet IEP timeline requirements."

With that in mind, IEP team members (this includes parents/guardians and school staff) should be patient, communicative and creative. The goal is to work collaboratively to determine how specialized instruction and related services can occur.

The contents of this brochure were developed under grants from the US Department of Education, #H328R180004 and #H328M150005. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, David Emenheiser

#### RESOURCES:

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/qa-covid-19-03-12-2020.pdf>

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/tr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf>

# COVID 19 AND SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MONTANA

NOVEMBER 2020

In the spring, districts had little time to prepare for extended school closures. Now, schools and teachers are working to provide guidance and resources to support learning in multiple ways. As part of their individualized education, students with disabilities generally receive a range of services and supports provided by a variety of professionals. These often include instruction from both general and special education teachers, supports from related service providers (speech-language therapists, physical therapists), and more.

If your child has a disability, you probably have a lot of questions about this new academic year. These might include:

- What will my child's special education services look like this year?
- Is my child's IEP still appropriate?
- How will my child receive related services, like speech-language or physical therapies?
- How will my child keep up in general education classes?
- What can I do to support my child's learning?
- Does my child have to wear a mask?

If you have asked yourself any of these questions, trust us, you're not alone. Many parents of kids with disabilities are asking similar ones right now. But how do you find out the answers?

- Stay in Touch with your child's school
- Discuss Special Education Services and Supports
- Support your Child's Individualized Learning
- Follow the Governor's Directives

## Stay in Touch with Your Child's School

Schools are trying to keep in touch with parents to keep everyone informed of the latest developments. As you can imagine, this can be tricky. To keep up with the latest updates make sure the school has your current contact information and that you are on any school communication lists (automated phone calls, mailings, email). Let the teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and others who deliver services or supports to your child know how you want to be contacted (phone call, email, text) and the best time to reach you (mornings, afternoons). Contact the teacher or school if you have not heard from them or if you have questions.

## Discuss Special Education Services and Supports

Instead of typical in-person classroom instruction, many schools and districts are using distance learning. This includes:

- Online instruction—learning happens outside of school, on a computer and using the Internet
  - Real-time learning (often called synchronous instruction) — A type of online instruction in which students are scheduled to be “together” virtually in class and engaged in the same activity at the same time
  - Independent learning (often called asynchronous instruction) — A type of online instruction in which students are not “together” in real time but instead complete work on their own schedule
- Blended or hybrid — Some combination of online and in-person instruction. For example, a school might have roughly half its students attend in-person classes on Mondays and Tuesdays while the other half attends virtually (e.g., via Zoom). Additionally, the school might have all students learn independently on Wednesdays while a deep cleaning takes place in the building. The students “swap places” on Thursdays and Fridays.
- Offline — Learning activities that do not require a computer or Internet access. For example, a school might mail packets of work to students' homes.

For a child with a disability, these changes to his or her typical instruction will probably also affect special education services and supports. Some might require slight adjustments. Others might need to be changed entirely.

## Support Your Child's Individualized Learning Needs at Home

All of this might seem like a lot. Fortunately, as with any parent who has a child learning at home, there are things you can do. Get your child ready to learn. Find out what your child should be learning. Balance learning with social and emotional needs.

As your child participates in distance learning, his or her disability may create some challenges. At school, your child has accommodations that are meant to address such challenges. Some of the same accommodations that support your child's learning in the general education classroom will work at home. But how can you find out what they are? As we discussed above, one thing you can do is review your child's IEP or 504 plan. Additionally, you can ask the teacher(s). This includes both the special education and general education teachers. You can also ask your child. He might be able to explain what the teacher does at school that is helpful. Once you identify the accommodations your child uses at school, you can figure out which ones you need to use as learning supports at home.

### Keep in Mind

*You are not expected to replace your child's teacher or therapists. Your role is to support your child's learning. Do what you can and let the rest go!*

## Do students with disabilities need to wear face coverings?

Yes. All students, including students with disabilities, are required to wear a face covering, under the terms of the Governor's Directives, unless one of the stated exceptions applies. However, students protected under the ADA and IDEA have additional protections regarding access to education.[1] If a student's IEP team determines the student is unable to wear a face covering due to his or her disability, the IEP should be reviewed to ensure the student has access to instruction as set out in the IEP and what accommodations are necessary to satisfy the face covering requirement. The school district cannot unilaterally change the student's placement, if the IEP team determines the student cannot wear a face covering due to a disability. Examples of accommodations, though not an exhaustive list, are:

- Short breaks throughout the day where the student can take the face covering off. During the break, the student should be a safe distance from others but should not be left alone (isolated) or unsupervised.
- Clear vinyl or plastic panel face covering or clear communication face covering to support a student's comprehension of spoken language where lipreading might be relied upon.
- Preferential seating for a student to reduce background noise, as face coverings may limit the volume of speech of a teacher or the student's peers.
- Alternative(s) to wearing face covering (or a specialized type of face covering) for a student with sensory needs, intellectual disability, and/or an emotional disorder or for a student who is unable to remove face covering without assistance.
- Additional instruction on wearing a face covering; for example, instruction on how to put on and take off the face covering.

Please keep in mind this guidance may quickly become out of date given the rapid changes occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic. This guidance does not constitute legal advice or create additional laws or requirements. LEAs are always encouraged to consult with their legal counsel when deciding how to proceed in a specific factual scenario.