



Inclusive Emergency Education: Promising Practices, Technical Assistance, & Policy Recommendations

Summary

Since the shift from in-person K-12 education to virtual learning in March 2020 in the midst of a national emergency, the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) has been collecting examples from University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) and Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) programs across the 50 states and territories regarding continuity of education for students with disabilities. This white paper summarizes promising practices from educators and parents, technical assistance from UCEDDs, and policy recommendations for government leaders at the Federal, State, and Territorial levels.

Background on AUCD

AUCD is a membership organization that supports and promotes a national network of university-based interdisciplinary programs. Currently, there are 67 UCEDDs, at least one in every US State and Territory. UCEDDs are placed in the unique position to facilitate the flow of disability-related information between communities and universities acting as a bridge between universities and the disability community. UCEDDs work with people with disabilities, members of their families, Federal, State, and local government agencies, and community providers in projects that provide training, technical assistance, service, research, and information sharing, with a focus on building the capacity of communities to support all their citizens. Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) programs provide long-term, graduate level interdisciplinary training as well as interdisciplinary services and care. The purpose of the LEND training program is to improve the health of infants, children, and adolescents with disabilities. They accomplish this by preparing trainees from diverse professional disciplines to assume leadership roles in their respective fields and by ensuring high levels of interdisciplinary clinical competence. LEND programs operate within a university system, usually as part of a University Center for Excellence (UCEDD) or other larger entity, and collaborate with local university hospitals and/or health care centers. This set-up gives them the expert faculty, facilities, and other resources necessary to provide exceptional interdisciplinary training and services. There are 52 LEND programs located in 44 US states, with an additional six states and three territories reached through program partnerships.

Methods

AUCD staff reached out to all UCEDDs and LENDs including family faculty and trainees via email requesting promising practices in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. In turn, our members reached out into their communities and to other partners. We heard stories and resources shared from many – teachers, parents, students, and network members – across all regions of the United States including urban, suburban, and rural areas. We continue to hear from our members, so these are a representative starting point of a nationwide status. Examples shared are anonymous.

Implementing IDEA

When the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* ([Pub. L. No. 94-142, 1975](#)) was passed, Congress anticipated knowledgeable teams of parents, students, and professionals would come together to develop educational plans for students with disabilities. During the most recent reauthorization of the law, *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA) ([Pub. L. No. 108-446](#)), Congress reaffirmed its commitment to students with disabilities with an emphasis on learning in the general education environment. The United States Supreme Court recently added their opinion that progress for students with disabilities should be “appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances.” *Endrew F. v. Douglas City Sch. Dist.* ([Re-1, 137 U.S. 988, 2017](#)). In none of these laws or opinions are there special sections regarding how state and local education agencies should act during a global pandemic which has shuttered the vast majority of schools nationwide and forced teachers into the provision of instruction through other means. Yet, this is exactly the predicament that we find ourselves in today, and so teachers are called upon across the nation to implement and maintain free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. This standard continues to be confirmed from the US Department of Education in the Secretary of Education’s recent report to Congress supporting no IDEA waivers.

These examples articulate what is possible in enforcing IDEA during an emergency. They build upon the flexibility that is already written into the law, while protecting the civil rights of the students. What is happening during the 2019-2020 school year is informing educators, administrators, policymakers, and more for providing equitable, inclusive education moving forward as we look to the 2020-2021 school year. While regions have responded to emergencies in the past and continued to deliver education for students, this is on a national scope. These innovations and promising practices are informing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for accessibility and reaffirming the critical need to provide FAPE to all students, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) maintaining school and parent partnerships, parents’ due process rights, and use of Federal education funds adhering to the IDEA, the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act and other civil rights laws.

Promising Practices

Northeast:

A mother with a child with Down syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), hearing loss, and medical and behavioral needs lives in Ithaca, NY and serves on the school board. She shared that Ithaca City School District considers the equity of all students when it comes to education, including now. “I am in discussions with the special education department who is asking for parental input for what is working and what isn't. They are not altering Individual Education Programs (IEPs). All services remain in place. Virtual IEP meetings are being held.” Teachers are sharing visual schedules and other supports to assist families in this extreme disruption in their schedule. Tele-teaching, therapy and music is being offered, as well as, individual meetings are being offered. Technology such as Chromebooks, iPads, and other items are being sent home. “We see teachers and educational professionals doing everything they can to help our children.”

Midwest:

An elementary autism spectrum disorder (ASD) teacher for kindergarteners and first graders in a local education agency (LEA) in Southeast Michigan shared her vast strategies to continue to educate her students from her home to her students’ homes. She set up a “seesaw classroom” or virtual learning platform where she gives assignments that are tailored toward each students’ needs. Her routines have not changed and she is utilizing Zoom, an online video conferencing platform, to do morning meetings which includes calendar, weather, feelings, counting, letter identification, and story time read along. While having meetings, she includes the Speech Language Pathologist, Social Worker, and paraprofessional as “Special Guests.” “I have

weekly independent Zoom meetings with each individual student and their families and have completed one IEP virtually so far.” She even has used “snail mail” to send handwritten cards to her students.

The Indiana Retired Teachers Association (IRTA) launched a new ["Call & Learn" hotline](#) to help kids learning at home. Their tagline “No Internet? No Problem!” addresses the growing needs in rural communities to access education from home. Any K-12 student can call a toll-free number for help. Not only are members of IRTA able to help students learn in this different environment, it is a way for retired teachers to stay connected to their communities, while they too shelter at home. Students and parents can call (877) 45-STUDY (877-457-8839) to request assistance from a volunteer educator. The hotline is open weekdays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. ET.

A 9-year-old student with Rett Syndrome diagnosis is a 3rd grader in an Indiana neighborhood elementary school. She is non-verbal, has no hand use, and uses an eye-gaze communication device. She depends on many people for all her needs throughout her school day. Now that she's at home, she misses her school friends and teachers, and she's made it clear that her parents are not nearly as qualified as her teachers. “We



were a little panicked about how to teach our complex child. Thankfully, her school staff has stepped in to adapt learning plans to engage her and keep her working toward her learning goals. We made a plan with her teachers soon after school closure, and we have modified it as appropriate over the past month.” Every day Alia participates in a one-on-one virtual session with a teacher, aide, or therapist (pictured), and she regularly joins her entire 3rd grade class for a more social Zoom meeting. Each week she reads an e-book on a school-loaned iPad and works with additional pre-reading and evaluative resources her teachers compile for her. Her principal sends daily read-alouds and math challenges to all families, and her

classroom teacher has continued many of their daily routines during class meetings. Her urban public district has provided over 3,500 laptops to families and adopted at-home learning policies that keep equity and safety at the forefront.

Southeast:

“With the online schooling, my student is excelling. The biggest benefit is that he is not having near the anxiety he has having. His anxiety we feel has kept him from succeeding in the classroom.” A 6th grade student with ASD has been excelling in assignments that even his fellow students have been unable to complete. For example, his teacher posted a video for the students to watch that mistakenly was in foreign language. Where a majority of students commented online that they couldn't do the assignment because it was in another language, this student listened to the video, identified it as Hungarian, then proceeded to find the same video in English online, and did the writing assignment; the only student in the class to do the assignment. Overall, his online schooling because of the pandemic has been extremely successful for him with less anxiety, happier, and excelling in school.

Southwest:

The Texas Education Agency has implemented an innovative pilot with the Houston Independent School District (HISD), University of Houston and [National Center on Accessible Educational Materials at CAST, Inc.](#) using a UDL rubric to make UDL the norm even during the pandemic. Their work highlights the continued and now growing need that general education teachers will require professional development and special education skill training to support all students and remediate skills when students return to school.

West:

A Colorado Department of Education approved Facility School that serves children with ASD and other developmental disabilities (DD) from ages 2 1/2 to 21 have maintained their mission to help each individual child attain the highest quality of life. Like many other schools, staff had to very quickly, and with no experience, switch to a remote learning platform for children that require communication supports, as well as working through significant behavior needs. “We have been able to tailor the platform to fit different learners, including 1:1 parent mediated intervention with our staff, group meetings with students and their peers, online reinforcement systems specific to students and modified to be delivered online, and online academics and individualized materials sent home for families.” In the Denver-metro area, families were provided with technology as needed. This school continues to look for innovative ways to meet IEP goals by mapping those goals onto skills that can be worked on in the home setting and prioritizing those skills that are the most functional in the current stay at home environment.

Technical Assistance

Since 1963, University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) have worked towards a shared vision that foresees a nation in which all Americans, including Americans with disabilities, participate fully in their communities. Independence, productivity, and community inclusion are key components of this vision. Authorized under Public Law 106-402, The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 or "DD Act", UCEDDs serve their state in providing preservice preparation, technical assistance, community education, direct services, research, and information dissemination. During this pandemic, UCEDDs have shifted to meet the needs of students, parents, teachers, and State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and LEAs through training and technical assistance. For example, the [Idaho Center on Disabilities and Human Development](#) included on their [Idaho Training Clearinghouse](#) Special Education Support and Technical Assistance website COVID-19 Resources and Tools. This encompasses Flow Charts and Diagrams, Forms & Planning Docs, Guidance Documents, Padlet Resources, and Behavior Tools & Resources. And across the nation, in partnership with [The Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities](#) the [Children's Specialized Hospital](#) in New Jersey, developed a [resource](#) to help parents support their children's IEP goals without feeling unnecessarily burdened. Multiple UCEDDs have also been involved in creating and sharing a variety of child focused materials addressing the pandemic including [social stories](#).

Policy Recommendations

The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) ensures services to students with disabilities. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. Infants and toddlers with disabilities (birth - 2) and their families receive early intervention services under IDEA Part C. Children and youth (ages 3 - 21) receive special education and related services under IDEA Part B.

Any altering or waiving of IDEA, and particularly its civil rights protections for students with disabilities, weakens IDEA's clear requirement that schools and districts must educate all students including students with disabilities. We must protect FAPE, timelines of Individualized Education Programs, and presumption of general education, because without it, we can expect to see increases in children with disabilities not being educated contradicting the clear language, intent, and established legal precedent of IDEA.

At the start of this pandemic, the US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services made it very clear in their [Supplemental Fact Sheet](#) that “ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction.”

Also stated, “It is important to emphasize that federal disability law allows for flexibility in determining how to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities.” Given that IDEA offers flexibility by design and states, districts, communities, and families are working together to find solutions to the problems they face in the next several months, now more than ever is it imperative to uphold the civil rights protections of IDEA including:

1. LEAs must continue to provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities.
2. Teams responsible for student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) must involve parents in all decisions.
3. Parents’ due process rights must remain intact.
4. Use of Federal education funds must adhere to the IDEA, the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act and other civil rights laws.

On April 27, 2020, the Secretary of Education submitted a report to Congress as required by The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Section 3511(d)(4), Division A in which she also confirmed the importance of IDEA and its principles of FAPE and least restrictive environment LRE:

“The Department is not requesting waiver authority for any of the core tenets of the IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, most notably a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The Department’s position is based on the principles that:

- Schools can, and must, provide education to all students, including children with disabilities;
- The health and safety of children, students, educators, and service providers must be the first consideration;
- The needs and best interests of the individual student, not any system, should guide decisions and expenditures;
- Parents or recipients of services must be informed of, and involved in, decisions relating to the provision of services; and
- Services typically provided in person may now need to be provided through alternative methods, requiring creative and innovative approaches.”

Students with disabilities are always served best when school leaders, teachers, specialized instructional support personnel, parents, students and advocates work as a team to address complex issues based on the individual needs of the student.