

# **Back to School RI:**

## **Guidance for Supporting Differently Abled Students**

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**RIDE** Rhode Island  
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# Best Practices for Supporting Differently Abled Students

## *Introduction*

***The impact of schools being closed this spring may be greater for differently abled students. After missing out on instruction and possibly other school-based services such as occupational therapy, speech-language therapy, social emotional supports and other supports, the transition back to school may be more challenging. Students who participate in special education programming receive Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as required by law to meet the mandate for a Free and Appropriate Public Education, (FAPE). LEAs and families will need to work together to ensure a safe return to school that creates conditions for students to thrive. The following guidance is based upon inclusive best practices that differently abled students are being educated alongside their peers in the least restrictive environment.***

## Best Practices for School Leaders

### *Communications & Family Engagement*

#### ***Before School Reopens***

- Recruit families of differently abled students to serve on your school's Reopening committee and/or school improvement team. Reach out to the parents of differently able students and offer opportunities to review your school's reopening plan and address parent questions and concerns. Consider targeted communication with the parents of differently abled students since they may have questions about reopening beyond the general student population.
- Engage special education teachers, related service personnel and your district special education administrator in your communication efforts. Seek their advice in maintaining ongoing communication with the parents of differently abled students throughout the year.

#### ***Once School Reopens***

- Most special education staff have systems for tracking communications between school staff and families. Being familiar with these protocols may help with identifying methods for examining ways to improve overall family communication. Be sure that communication logs include notes about the nature of parent communication and document decisions that are made and follow up communication.



## *Ensuring Equity for Differently Abled Students*

### ***Before School Reopens***

- Set a schedule that allots regular common planning time for special education teachers with their general education teaching partners. Consider flexible scheduling, and allow for collaboration to occur virtually as needed.
- Embed training into orientation about digital tools (e.g. general and specific accessibility software) that may help educators ensure access in remote instruction and communicate more effectively with teaching partners and families.

### ***Once School Reopens***

- In partnership with your district special education administrator, identify targeted professional learning for general and special education teachers that address specific learning strategies for the students receiving special education services in your school. Visit [BridgeRI](#) and similar professional learning sites for current professional learning opportunities.
- Give teachers opportunities to hone their leadership skills and share effective classroom strategies with colleagues by devoting a portion of school meetings to peer-led demos. Consider extending the invitation virtually to teachers at other schools, and develop a staff resource library by recording these micro lessons.
- Schedule frequent check-ins with teachers to learn how differently abled students are accessing instruction through in person and virtual instruction and plan for adjustments to accommodate student's needs.
- Utilize your formative data systems and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) team to examine the results of attempted interventions and make adjustments to continue short cycle intervention.

## *Data & Continuous Improvement*

### ***Before School Reopens***

- Determine which data points the LEA will track (attendance, work completion, technology access, results from formative assessments, etc.) to monitor the quality of continued learning opportunities for differently abled students. Discuss these measures with your teaching teams and share results.



- Recognizing that some differently abled students may not have made expected progress through distance learning, review results with the special education teachers in order to develop improvement strategies for the coming year.
- Consider the differently abled students who may have not progressed as expected through distance learning and consider schedules and opportunities where these students will have increased opportunities for in person instruction.

### ***Once School Reopens***

- Utilize agreed upon measures to monitor student progress and review the results with general and special education teachers regularly. At the high school level, check for progress in meeting graduation requirements and fulfilling secondary transition requirements.
- Evaluate plans for Reopening by asking families what is working well and what the school can do better. Consider using survey tools or the [National Parent Teacher Association focus group toolkit](#) to determine whether families are receiving the supports they need. Encourage parents to access training and information from the [RI Parent Information Network](#).

## Best Practices for Educators

### *Academic Instruction & Support*

#### ***Before School Reopens***

- Special education teachers should meet with the general education teachers and plan for the delivery of specialized instruction through in person approaches such as co-teaching, small group or individualized instruction or through the provision of services virtually.
- Teaching teams should consider the principles of Universal Design for Learning for instruction. If a special educator cannot be in the room to deliver SDI, it is essential that the general and special educator work with the special educator to make lessons accessible for all. [The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#) are especially helpful in thinking about how to expand the accessibility of lesson plans.
- Teaching teams should become familiar with [co-teaching models](#) as these might be helpful for special educators to stay with student cohorts to provide specialized instruction. It is important to note that Parallel, Team Teaching, One Teach One Observe, and Alternative Teaching Models might provide opportunities for special educators to provide SDI effectively in the general education classroom.

- If in person instruction is not possible for the special educator, it is important to begin planning with the general educator how SDI will happen virtually and what technology will be required in order for the student to access instructional content and needed supports.
- As students transition back to school, former teachers and new teachers should review quantitative data on student performance; (academic data, grades, work completion rates, assessment systems results) before COVID, how the student performed during distance learning, and the academic expectations for the student in the coming year. Additionally, qualitative data (perceptions on engagement, interest level, etc.) and progress on behavior/SEL plans that may have been provided before school closure and during distance learning should also be reviewed.
- For students with more complex needs who traditionally receive supports outside of the general education classroom, clear coordination of instructional objectives should be planned with the general education teacher to promote inclusion.
- As with all good school/family communication, educational planning and how SDI will be delivered should be shared with parents and documented.

### ***Once School Reopens***

- Scheduled common planning time with general and special educators should be established immediately upon school opening. This time should be [protected planning time](#) in the schedule to ensure regular review of lesson objectives, accommodations and modifications for differently abled students can be planned. All students should have access to tier one, grade level core content.
- As students with more complex needs join cohorts of peers it is important to consider how inclusion will occur to the [greatest extent](#) possible. Every effort should be made to support inclusion, educate students with their peers and examine the students goals that will most benefit from instruction delivered in the general education classroom. The COVID crisis is not an excuse for limiting inclusion, but teams may need to thoughtfully consider objectives and outcomes. In doing so, teams may consider:
  - Alignment of the [Essential Elements](#) to the standard being instructed in the classroom.
  - Modification of the activity so that it is aligned to address the specific Essential Element and needs of the student.
  - Application of accommodations to aid the student in participating in the academic activity, even if a different outcome is expected.
  - Teachers are encouraged to review the [essential elements and their relation to Common Core](#) as they plan instruction.
- Teams should discuss and adopt or develop formal and informal structures for [progress monitoring](#) for in person and [virtual learning](#). Teachers should discuss how students will be evaluated, how formative assessments will be used and develop common metrics and rubrics for collecting data.



- Since returning to school may involve a combination of in person instruction and virtual learning, teams may need to review how students use assistive technology. The [SETT Framework](#) would be appropriate for assessing a student's use of technology in accessing instruction.
- Since some students may have difficulty adjusting to the new school environment, teams will want to consider the emotional needs of students. RIDE has developed reopening guidance for Social & Emotional Learning and Mental Health that may be of assistance.
- Special education teachers are encouraged to establish set office hours for student check in's. Additionally, frequent check in's with parents can assist with learning.

