

Low incidence itinerant services during the COVID-19 crisis

Policy brief submitted to the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education by

Kym Meyer, MS, The Learning Center for the Deaf

Barbara Hecht, PhD, Clarke School Boston

On behalf of the Massachusetts Low Incidence Itinerant Working Group

Action Request

In accordance with best practice guidelines, DESE is requested to provide guidance to school districts supporting the continuation of current contracts for itinerant services and to enable the provision of remote specialized education and related services during the COVID19 crisis.

Students who have low incidence disabilities need specialty service providers to continue to support them during this extended school closure, whether the provider is a school district employee or a contracted itinerant provider.

Background

Students who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or visually impaired are considered to be part of a *low-incidence population*. Although they comprise only 1% of all Massachusetts special education students, these students require support from specialized professionals who understand their specific and unique needs (see [NASDSE Guidelines](#)). These unique needs are not taught within special education teacher training programs. Massachusetts recognizes the specialized low-incidence knowledge and skills through unique licensure and certifications for Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (TOD), Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI), Orientation and Mobility Specialists, captionists, educational interpreters, and audiologists.

When IEP teams determine that a specialized low-incidence out of district placement (i.e., “school for the deaf” or “school for the blind”) is needed for a student to make effective progress, the receiving school has the expertise and professional support needed to meet the needs of these students.

Specialized schools and programs for low-incidence students are already providing uniquely designed remote educational support during the COVID-19 crisis.

Most students with low-incidence disabilities in inclusive settings also require instruction and consultation from a specialized professional (e.g., TOD, TVI, audiologist) in order to make effective progress, as documented in their IEP or 504 plans. Given the low incidence nature of deafness and blindness, most Massachusetts school districts contract these services from specialty programs and agencies or independent contractors who have the unique expertise required. **These contracts for critical specialized services must continue to be honored during the COVID-19 crisis.**

Sources

National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2019) *Optimizing Outcomes for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*

United States Department of Education. (March 19, 2020) *Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities*

Scope of Problem

We are all experiencing uncertainty under this COVID-19 crisis. With schools closing, students are home and most are beginning to receive “enrichment” and other educational services from their regular education classroom teachers. However, students who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or visually impaired need specialized educational support and access to these materials and enrichment activities. In addition, their IEP goals and objectives need to be addressed in order to minimize regression and the need for compensatory services.

Since Massachusetts schools closed, there has not been consistent understanding by districts of how the services of specialty service providers should be utilized. Many school districts have explicitly stated they are waiting for DESE guidance before these speciality service providers, currently under contract, can work remotely with the students they have taught and supported all year.

Specialty contract low-incidence providers have been receiving questions and concerns from parents and teachers. Just a few examples:

- My deaf student cannot hear me talking to students on the video
- My child is not receiving any learning support--and the principal says that they have been told not to provide any educational support to any student due to equity concerns
- How will my child’s critical audition, speech, language development needs be addressed?
- How will my child’s ASL development be supported?
- I don’t know how to help my child to understand the materials and assignments.
- How can I turn on captioning and direct audio connect so my student can follow a videoconference class conversation?
- Why is my child’s listening technology still at school, and not at home?

Policy Recommendations

Currently, school districts are looking to DESE for guidance. As plans are being made to offer alternative learning support during this crisis, students with low incidence disabilities, who are placed in out-of-district specialty programs AND those who attended their local public schools at the time the crisis began, all continue to require the services of low incidence specialty providers, as outlined on their IEP and 504 plans.

For the period of school closures districts should:

- Honor current contracts and service agreements for both out-of-district placements and in-district itinerant specialty and related services and encourage provision of remote services to students and their families to the extent possible.
- Facilitate collaboration (including co-teaching) between general education teachers, parents and specialty and related service providers
- Allow students to utilize the Hearing Assistive Technology that was purchased specifically for them to access learning.