

Massachusetts Advocates for Children
**Initial Recommendations to MA Department
of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)**

**Proposed Action Steps to Help Meet the Needs of Students with Disabilities
During the COVID-19 Crisis**

1) Incorporate a **racial equity** approach to all COVID-19 related interventions, recognizing the racial disparities in the current delivery of special education services and the powerful tendency for emergency interventions to magnify, rather than mitigate, such disparities.

2) Work with private and public sectors to ensure that all families of students with disabilities have **laptops or tablet computers necessary for remote learning, and also have access to Wi-Fi** (such as requesting that internet companies provide free Wi-Fi services to low-income families of students with disabilities during the period of school closure).

(Note: It is important to also provide a mechanism for parents to be able to access technical support, including language and literacy access, needed to set up and utilize new technology.)

4) Develop an **online clearinghouse of information for educators** (including general education teachers, special education teachers, and related-service providers) that includes a broad range of resources, lesson plans, activities and strategies for remote learning for students with disabilities. Resources for parents are critical as well. *(Note: Our communications with many leaders in the field indicates that many professionals are already mobilizing to develop materials and strategies, reflecting a range of disciplines)*

5) Ensure that the clearing house information, materials, and resources are **translated into different languages** so that school districts can more readily meet the needs of English Learners who have disabilities and of limited English proficient parents who have children with disabilities. In addition, explore use of language access line and other resources to provide remote interpreters as needed to provide equal access.

6) Work with experts in the field to provide a **range of examples demonstrating strategies to meet the needs of children with different types of disabilities** while they remain at home. This could include student spotlights/ student examples that first describe a student's needs and presentation and then describe possible options for

meeting the child's needs with combinations of telephonic and online remote instruction, teletherapy, tele-intervention, data tracking, and/or documentation.

7) Develop policies and procedures to ensure that **special educators communicate directly with parents while their children are** at home, providing at a minimum weekly "check-ins" between at least one member of the IEP Team and parents (the frequency of communication between IEP Team members and parents will vary, based on the child's individual needs). Recognizing that lack of continuity of familiar relationships can exacerbate trauma, to the extent possible identify the team member with the closest relationship to each student and family.

8) Develop policies and practices to ensure that **parents know who to contact** (by phone or e-mail) regarding any urgent concerns.

9) Develop platforms to create opportunities to interact among **superintendents who can support principals** to develop best practices and infrastructure needed to redefine the remote school learning community to address the needs of students with disabilities. Through these platforms DESE can provide an understanding of trauma's impact on learning in this emergency.

10) Provide districts with remote services available to support children with disabilities through **MassHealth and other human service agencies**. Work with educators to create materials and methods to assist families and other in-home caregivers in providing continuity, which is particularly critical to students impacted by trauma.

10) Provide district with **referral resources for parents** who may need information and referrals regarding access to food, unemployment, housing and other basic needs.

11) **Coordinate state education, human service, and MassHealth** officials to develop strategies and protocols to meet the needs of children with emotional disabilities, autism, and other disabilities that may result in significant behavioral issues. Such strategies and protocols should strive to ensure safety, prevent regression, and support learning, and should include strategies for families who may require BEST Team and emergency room services, when such services are less available due to the anticipated surge of COVID-19 patients.

12) Provide supports to help ensure districts are responding to **procedural timelines** within current constraints for certain important activities, such as IEP development, initial eligibility determinations, annual reviews, and reevaluations.