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A school and community partnership that provides an inclusive, respectful, and collaborative learning environment where all stakeholders are engaged in the development of the whole child.

April 12, 2020

Wilmington Public Schools Special Education Services and Operations During COVID-19 School Closure

Dear Wilmington Parent and Guardians;

I hope this letter finds you and your families safe and healthy during these unprecedented times. These last few weeks have been filled with feelings of uncertainty about the future and adjustment for many over their personal and professional responsibilities. We are all doing our best to take care of our families and each other. It is intended for this document to provide guidance around Wilmington Public Schools remote services that will be provided for students with disabilities during this school closure.

As you may know since our initial closure on March 12, 2020 the guidance from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has evolved over time. The initial guidance was for districts to provide Enrichment activities through our original scheduled reopening date of early April. Once the Governor closed schools through May 4, 2020 the DESE guidance shifted to recommending districts provide remote instruction, and to provide student engagement for up to 50% of the normal school day, which needs to be accounted for and balanced with the provision of both special and general education. This guidance together with the USDOE included the provision of FAPE for students with disabilities during this time. DESE has also provided guidance on what a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) may look like given the current circumstances for students with disabilities'. They have been clear in their guidance that it ***may not replicate services as written in a student's current IEP***, rather that it will allow students the opportunity to progress towards the goals currently outlined in their IEPs.

“During this national emergency, schools may not be able to provide all services in the same manner they are typically provided. Many disability-related modifications and services may be effectively provided remotely. These may include, for instance, extensions of time for assignments, videos with accurate captioning or embedded sign

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language interpreting, accessible reading materials, and many speech or language services through video conferencing. It is important to emphasize that federal disability law allows for flexibility in determining how to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The determination of how FAPE is to be provided may need to be different in this time of unprecedented national emergency (DESE, Johnson, 3/26/2020).”

Currently however, they have distinguished services into the following two categories:

- **Resources and Supports:** Strategies, Assignments, Projects, and Packets, Supplementary material
- **Services and Instruction:** Virtual, Online, or Telephonic Instruction and Therapy. Examples of services: Sending resources and supports, services through video conferencing, and videos with captioning.

Wilmington Public Schools Remote Learning Support/Service Plans

To the greatest extent possible during this time of school closure, we are committed to making our best efforts to assure that each student with a disability is provided the special education and related services identified in the student’s IEP. This will be done using Remote Learning Support/Service Plans for each student with an IEP. Each child’s plan will be individualized to meet his/her/their needs, and may include supports and services such as: Email Check-In, Suggested Activities/Activity Packets (online and offline), Projects, Video Message/Post, Action Planning, Daily “To Do” lists, Phone Check-In, Apps, consultation, and instruction & services through individual or group phone or video conference and online platforms. Consent is not required to implement a remote learning support/service plan as it is simply designed to assist with implementing IEPs to the best extent possible during school closures, and provide a notice to parents about what services are being provided during this time.

The goal of the remote learning support/service plans are as follows:

- Address the individual needs of a student as described in the student’s IEP to the maximum extent possible
- Alleviate the disruption to student learning caused by the extended school closure

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- Plans will contain elements of both real time support and work done on a student's own time and schedule.
- Serve as a communication tool to help parents/guardians understand the support and services their child is receiving.

Last week, district leadership met with staff to determine what remote learning opportunities we can provide to address student needs as outlined in their IEPs and to identify what training or resources our special educators and related service providers need to do this work. We are also connecting with all contracted service providers, who provide services such as hearing, vision, and behavior support to include these services remotely as deemed practical.

Families should expect to hear from their special education liaison beginning the week of April 13th regarding the Remote Learning Support/Service Plans for their student(s). Once plans begin they may need to be adjusted and educators will do their best to communicate any changes as well as to remain as flexible as possible. In the meantime, teachers and special educators will remain in contact with students and families to support access to planned remote learning lessons and activities. In addition, the following information is provided as a summary of the status of many aspects of the services provided by the Office of Student Support Services.

1. Student Privacy and Confidentiality regarding remote learning

We ask that families be mindful of maintaining student privacy and confidentiality in a remote learning environment. To facilitate this, building principals have sent to all families the Consent to Participate in Virtual learning notice. This notice summarizes the district expectations and agreement for student participation in virtual learning.

2. Timelines for Special Education

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has provided leniency regarding timelines. The Wilmington Public School Office of Student Support Services and school based special education departments will make every effort to adhere to timelines within these extraordinary circumstances, with the understanding that there will be some timelines that will be unable to be met. Parents will be notified if such occurs.

3. Referrals and Remote Evaluations

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All initial and re-evaluations are on hold until school re-opens unless testing was completed by March 11, 2020. Per guidance from state and federal officials, timelines can be suspended as the student is “unavailable” for the assessment and “schools must suspend in-person educational operations”. For referrals received or due during this time, consent will be sent out and parents asked to sign and return, however, timelines are suspended and the evaluation process will begin when school is in session.

4. Remote IEP Meetings

School districts are not required to hold remote meetings during school closure, however, IDEA permits meetings by alternative means (e.g. phone/videoconferencing). We recognize the many challenges to maintain our usual IEP process, but given the length of the closure, we are going to do our best to maintain our practices. DESE has already indicated that there will be leniency with regard to timelines during this period of closure. Currently, the district is working towards piloting conducting annual reviews and transition IEP meetings remotely for those parents in agreement to participate electronically. If a family is not comfortable with the option, the meeting will be rescheduled for an in-person meeting after school reopens. Meetings will be held through teleconferencing or video conferencing using Zoom dependent upon the WPS facilitator’s access to technology.

If held, DESE guidance is clear that the plan discussed and developed at the meeting needs to be based on what the program would look like if school was in session, and not reflect services from the COVID-19 closure. All IEPs that were in place at closure, if expiration occurs during closure, would continue on a “stay put” status until such a time that the team can meet to draft a new IEP. If parents are contacted to hold virtual IEPs, a consent to participate in a remote IEP meeting will be provided that outlines the guidelines for participation in a remote IEP meeting. Meeting invitations and all other documents will be sent electronically. Any requests for hard copies will be provided once school reopens.

5. Is my child entitled to compensatory services due to the COVID-19 closure?

Whether a student is entitled to receive compensatory services because of the school’s closure is an individualized determination to be made by the IEP team once school resumes. We will be doing everything possible now to provide required special education instruction and services as expected by DESE during this remote learning time. Once school resumes, we will review how the closure impacted the delivery of special education and related services to individual students and convene IEP Team meetings as necessary in order to make an individualized determination as to what, if any compensatory services may be necessary, and to ensure the student receives FAPE prospectively.

6. MCAS and MCAS-ALT

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Last Friday (April 10), Commissioner Riley announced that, "As a result of the federal and state actions and in light of the ongoing health crisis, I am cancelling this spring's regular administration of grade-level MCAS tests for students in grades 3-10." We want to make you aware that this announcement also includes the cancellation of the MCAS Alternate Assessment and therefore, MCAS-Alt portfolios will not be submitted, scored, nor reported this school year.

7. IEP Progress reports

Progress reports will be provided electronically at the same time that district report cards are provided, as indicated in the WPS District Remote Learning Plan.

8. Tutoring services

For students who are currently hospitalized, WPS will continue to fund tutoring for any programs still providing such. For students receiving tutoring through an agency such as SEEM, tutoring sessions will be provided remotely. Please also access the WPS Enrichment document at the district website for additional resources you may want to consider.

9. Out of District students

Out of District Special Education Schools are all responsible to provide remote learning opportunities to their enrolled special education students. To that end, parents of students in these programs will be receiving contact from their child's individual school. If a parent of a student in an Out of District placement does not receive the program's plan to support their child during this closure, or if you need assistance, please contact your child's Team Chairperson. In addition, students and families are also encouraged to access the WPS Enrichment document at the district website for additional resources.

10. Paperwork and Documents

Our goal is to process as much as we can including paperwork and documents that are received weekly via USPS to the extent we can and as long as it is safe to access such. All communication from the department will be electronic for all Special Education documentation until school reopens. Special education documents may include: IEP meeting notices, IEP consent forms, the entire IEP document for annual, progress, initial and re-evaluation, copies of the evaluations, IEP amendments, remote learning plans and any other special education documents. Any requests for hard copies will be fulfilled once school reopens.

11. Upcoming Guidance

- Extended school year programming –additional information will be forthcoming in the coming weeks.

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Please know our Special Education staff have been working tirelessly over the last few weeks and have developed numerous ways in which we believe we will be able to support your students through supports, resources and/or instruction and services during these unprecedented times. If you have any questions please contact our district Coordinator of Special Education, Ms. Leanne Ebert, leanne.ebert@wpsk12.com, or myself.

Stay well, take care of yourself and each other.

Sincerely,

Alice Brown-LeGrand

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