# OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE LEARNING

**Colleen M. Elbe**
**Pam Kaminsky**

Colleen M. Elbe
Supervising Attorney
Disability Rights Texas
Lubbock, TX
celbe@drtx.org
806.370.1445

Pam Kaminsky
Of Counsel
Rogers, Morris & Grover, L.L.P.
Houston, Texas
pkaminsky@rmgllp.com
713.960.6006

# OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE LEARNING

In the spring of 2020, Texas students, their families, and educators found themselves in unchartered territory when the COVID-19 Pandemic caused school districts across the state to shut down. Texas students transitioned from on campus learning to virtual learning from their homes. This quick and encompassing change was difficult for everyone, but posed significant challenges to students with disabilities. We know some students were not able to access online learning provided by their district; some districts failed to provide services at all during this time; and some families struggled to fully participate in virtual learning, despite districts making good faith efforts to provide individualized, quality remote learning services. This presentation will review the virtual learning challenges that districts, students and families continue to face; state and federal guidance on each topic; and examples of innovative and collaborative ways these challenges can be met.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) issued guidance to states and local governments, setting out the responsibilities of schools during the pandemic. Once schools began operating, the DOE required that schools "make every effort to provide special education and related services" in accordance with the child's IEP or 504 Plan. The DOE guidance clarified that only if schools are completely closed and no education is provided to any students (with or without an IEP or 504 Plan) is a school excused from providing IEP/504 services.

## Technology Issues

When the shift to online learning occurred, a variety of technology related hurdles quickly became apparent. High quality online learning environments necessitated reliable access to required technology devices, stable internet access, sufficient data plans, and digital literacy skills. Districts, individual campuses, educators, students (both general education and special education) as well as parents all struggled to meet the logistical challenges of online learning, and some continue to prove difficult for some districts and families.

<u>District Concerns</u>

When schools suddenly closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Districts quickly transitioned to online or remote learning. For most teachers and students that meant online or virtual instruction, and "Zoom" became the most popular educational term for 2020. While other platforms like Teams and Skype were also used, most were introduced to Zoom for the first time. Two issues quickly became apparent:

1. Accessibility and
2. Distribution of student specific assistive technology devices.

When face-to-face instruction was suddenly unavailable to students and teachers, the shift was on to virtual or remote instruction options. For younger students and many students with disabilities, this meant paper packets of instructional work delivered to students' homes. Many teachers also

utilized electronic formats to attempt to hold classes virtually. For younger students who were not as tech savvy or students with disabilities that were limited in their ability to access online instruction, parental assistance was necessary. Districts also realized that the use of technology for most students, including general education students was cumbersome at best. Teachers were using whatever means they could to provide instruction, but at the secondary level that often meant depending on the may be Google Classroom, Blackbaud, Nearpod, Ed Puzzle, Schoology, and the list goes on to easily 20 or more programs students (and parents) were trying to learn in addition to the academic content. Keep in mind, most staff left for Spring Break and did not take their lesson plans or other instructional materials home with them and following the holiday break all school facilities were closed.

When school resumed this past fall, most schools across the state narrowed in on one primary platform and limited the number of software programs being utilized by teachers to reduce the burdensome nature of finding and figuring out the class instructions. ARD committees also found ways to simplify virtual instruction options. For example, students with disabilities that require visual schedules may now have an accommodation in place that incorporates a one-page schedule with all class links broken down according to the student's class schedule. This allows the teacher to modify the instructions in a way that makes it easier for the student (and parent) to maneuver and access the instruction in a more independent manner. Schools may also provide lessons for students and parents on how to access virtual platforms. Schools continue to find ways to make virtual instruction as accessible as possible, but most find in person, face-to-face instruction is truly the best forum for student success.

The other big technology challenge districts faced when face-to-face instruction was suddenly suspended included integrating assistive technology devices for students with disabilities. Many students had devices that remained in the classroom and were not sent home with them over Spring Break, so distribution became the first hurdle. Some of those devices included a visually impaired student's braille note device, an eye gaze system used in the classroom for a student to communicate, or even amplification systems used by a student with a hearing impairment. Online instruction also created the need to consider whether a student who previously did not require assistive technology might require that technology in the new setting. The new online setting may require specific software to access the curriculum, additional amplification, a modified keyboard, and the list goes on to include numerous devices that may be necessary for a student to access the curriculum.

Parent Concerns

In March, families scrambled to assemble home-based virtual learning stations for each school-aged child in the home. Having access to technology devices in the home went from being a luxury to being a necessity for school-aged students. During this adjustment, families discovered a myriad of technology related issues and limitations with devices, internet service, and access. In order to access online learning, a virtual student requires a device such as an iPad, Chromebook, or another type of laptop. Not all families had appropriate devices at the time virtual learning began, and even if they did, some families with multiple school-aged children in the home had to split time between the sole device.

## Title search: Overcoming the Challenges of Remote Learning

Also available as part of the eCourse
[2021 School Law eConference](#)

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
36th Annual School Law Conference session
"Overcoming the Challenges of Remote Learning"