

# The Uncharted Challenges of Special Needs Students and Their Parents: Issues May Increasingly Worsen Under the Coronavirus Federal Aid Package

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Being a parent of a special needs student has its own unique challenges. The shift across the country to online schooling as a result of school closures due to COVID-19 has only made these challenges increasingly more difficult. Many students with disabilities are losing access to services that can only be provided in person, such as physical and occupational therapy and the need for an aide or teacher to assist and/or re-direct a student to the educational task at hand.

Right now, a majority of school districts are trying to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees students with disabilities a free public education, by having their special needs teachers available online and to provide modified assignments and material. However, the online school environment cannot replace in-school services for children with special needs.

As a result, special needs students are not getting the services they are entitled to receive. Parents are not trained to provide services such as physical and occupational therapy. Also, most parents are not educators and do not have the training to teach a child, especially their special needs child.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (the Act), introduced on March 19, 2020 by the Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, and passed by Congress and signed by President Trump on March 27, 2020, gives the U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, 30 days to suggest a plan to Congress for waiving portions of the 45-year old IDEA.

Disability advocates believe the Act will permanently weaken or eliminate the protections for special needs students across the country. For parents of children with special needs, there is enormous

concern that school districts will be allowed to eliminate protections at this time, effectively making special education no longer a priority for school districts.

Instead of eliminating their services, educators should be creating new ways to assist special needs students. While many special needs services cannot be replicated precisely through online schooling, educators should be asked to find ways to deliver similar services through online learning tools. Just as parents do not give up on their special needs child, educators need to help identify how to serve these children rather than simply eliminating their protections.

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