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Least Restrictive Environment in the Wake of COVID-19:

A Brief from the National Association of State Directors of Special Education

Introduction:

Least restrictive environment (LRE) is determined by a student's IEP team and is based on the defining principles of special education law and the presumption that the general education environment with non-disabled peers is the first choice for educating all individuals with disabilities. The removal from the general education environment only occurs if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the general education classes with the use of supplementary aides and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

In the spring of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic shut down school facilities across the world and forced educators into the uncharted territory of providing general and special education services outside of physical school buildings. This shift was abrupt and unexpected, and great emphasis was placed on a good faith effort to provide special education and related services to the greatest extent possible. As we look ahead to the 2020-2021 school year, school systems across the country will once again have to balance health and safety concerns with providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and will likely be considering various operational models for delivering services. As various operational models are considered, it is important that state directors of special education in collaboration with local special education directors provide leadership and guidance on how to preserve the principles of LRE and implement a student's individual LRE in the non-traditional models brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Delivering Services:

Given the different circumstances in each local community, the models of delivering instruction at the start of the 2020-2021 school year may look different across the country. It is important to note that while **the COVID-19 pandemic has not changed the individual student's right to LRE** it has changed how the general education system operates. These operational changes require school systems to determine how they will maintain each individual student's LRE in the new context in which they are operating.

Example 1: Susan will be entering a third-grade class with 26 students at the start of the 2020-2021 school year. She receives 60 minutes a day of special education services in the general education classroom in math and English Language Arts (ELA) and 30 minutes a week of speech-language therapy outside of the general education classroom under the disability classification of specific learning disability. Susan’s local community has experienced an outbreak of COVID-19 in recent weeks and is considering multiple operational models for the start of the 2020-2021 school year. Susan’s IEP will be implemented, and FAPE provided in each operational model.

School Operational Models		
Distance Learning	Hybrid	Traditional
Students will use a distance/remote platform for educational services.	Students will follow an alternating schedule to reduce the number of students on campus and in each classroom. Students will report to school two times a week with social distancing procedures in place and will use a virtual platform three times a week.	Students will report to school five times a week with social distancing protocols in place.
LRE Considerations for Susan		
Susan will participate in a virtual learning model with her general education third-grade class. Her special education teacher will host a small group virtual break out session with her and other students in ELA and math after large group instruction (or provide supports during the large group instruction). Susan will participate in a weekly virtual speech session.	While on campus, Susan’s third grade class will be split into two sections. Susan will remain in one classroom all day with her peers, and her teachers will rotate as appropriate. Her special education teacher will provide 60 minutes of support in math and ELA each day while Susan is on campus and follow the distance learning model the other three days. Susan will participate in a virtual speech session once a week.	Susan will receive her special education services inside her general education classroom and speech services outside of the general education classroom once a week.

Example 2: Eddy will be entering 10th grade at the start of the 2020-2021 school year. He receives 240 minutes a day of special education services outside of the general education classroom and 60 minutes a week of speech-language therapy outside of the general education classroom under the disability classification of Autism. During his 10th grade year, Eddy is scheduled to take the following courses: English II, Business Math, Biology, Civics, PE, Health, Journey to Careers, Animal Science, and Study Skills. Eddy’s local community has experienced an outbreak of COVID-19 in recent weeks and is considering multiple operational models for the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

School Operational Models		
Distance Learning	Hybrid	Traditional
Students will use a distance/remote platform for educational services.	Students will follow an alternating schedule to reduce the number of students on campus and in each classroom. Students will report to school two times a week with social distancing procedures in place and will use a virtual platform three times a week.	Students will report to school five times a week with social distancing protocols in place.
LRE Considerations for Eddy		
Eddy will participate in virtual English II, Business Math, Biology, and Civics classes outside of the general education classroom led by a special education teacher with support from the general education content teachers. Eddy will participate in PE, Health, Journey to Careers, Animal Science, and Study Skills inside the virtual general education classroom with support from a special education instructional aide. Eddy will participate in two virtual speech therapy sessions a week outside of the general education classroom.	While on campus Eddy will participate in English II, Business Math, Biology, and Civics classes outside of the general education classroom led by a special education teacher with support from the general education content teachers. Eddy will participate in PE, Health, Journey to Careers, Animal Science, and Study Skills inside the virtual general education classroom with support from a special education instructional aide. Eddy will participate in two virtual speech therapy sessions a week outside of the general education classroom.	Eddy will participate in English II, Business Math, Biology, and Civics classes outside of the general education classroom led by a special education teacher with support from the general education content teachers. Eddy will participate in PE, Health, Journey to Careers, Animal Science, and Study Skills inside the general education classroom with support from a special education instructional aide. Eddy will participate in two traditional or virtual speech therapy sessions a week outside of the general education classroom.

How we can support students in the Least Restrictive Environment using Universal Design for Learning and Teaching Remotely

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for curriculum design and classroom instruction that is based on years of research of neuroscience and the science of learning. It considers the diverse learning strengths and needs of ALL students and supports accessibility and engagement within the classroom. UDL operates under the assumption that all students can and will learn when provided with a suitable learning environment. UDL removes barriers, provides needed supports, and appropriately challenges students while maintaining high expectations for ALL. Universal Design for Learning is built on years of research in learning sciences and is focused on three networks of the brain: Affective Networks (Engagement), Recognition Networks (Representation), and Strategic Networks (Action & Expression).

Now, more than ever, UDL is a way to think about providing an equitable learning environment, whether virtually or in-person, to ensure that every student has the instruction, tools, and resources to be successful. UDL promotes the learning needs of all learners by considering *from the beginning of the lesson planning process*:

- Clear, flexible goals and assessment
- Variability within the classroom
- Multiple ways of representing information and expression of learned material to eliminate barriers in the curriculum

UDL Considerations for Remote Instruction

Goals and Assessment

- **Learning goals should be made clear and in student-friendly language.**
Students should know exactly what they are working toward and why it is important (relevancy). Goals should be posted in multiple places as a reminder to the students (e.g., on a class website, in synchronous and asynchronous presentations, on activity sheets, on syllabuses, learning management system folders, etc.).
- **Separate the means from the ends**
Separating the learning goals from the means (way) of achieving them. If goals are too specific, with only one way to achieve the goal, some students are excluded from success because they can not achieve the goal in that specific manner. Offering more than one way to achieve the goal increases the likelihood of mastery.
- **Offer ongoing, flexible assessments**
In a UDL environment, effective assessments are essential. These assessments should be flexible and meaningful and should provide information about teaching and learning. Assessments should offer the opportunity to improve teaching and learning during instruction and should be used to offer meaningful feedback and focus on the process of learning or meeting a goal.

Variability

- **Acknowledge learner variability and the fact that variability depends on time, day and context.**

Brains are unique and varied and no two people learn in the same way. The way one chooses to learn depends on his or her background knowledge, cultural background, experiences, and interests. Not only do we all learn in unique ways, but our abilities continually change in response to the environment in real-time, resulting in variability based on the day, hour, or even minute. In a UDL environment, differences in experience, knowledge, and ability are to be expected and are celebrated. Educators should consistently anticipate barriers within the online curriculum and proactively offer flexibility in the goals, methods and materials, and assessment used in the classroom. Offering choice in those methods, materials and assessment allows for students to be advocates for their learning and increase engagement in the learning process.

Multiple Means of Engagement:

- **Choice** is the surest way to increase student engagement. By offering ways students can access the material and show their understanding, barriers are eliminated and students become more likely to view the assignment as worthwhile.
- **Building relationships with students** is paramount in a virtual classroom. Teachers should devote time to have one-on-one or small group discussions about topics other than academic assignments. This helps teachers gain an understanding of each student, learn about their interests and increase the likelihood that students will feel more comfortable asking for help or receiving feedback in an academic discussion.
- **Building relationships with families** is also important. Be sure to let students and parents/guardians know what to expect from the teacher as far as availability for conferences, email or phone calls and the amount of work that will be required for each subject area. If needed, offer one-on-one sessions offering technical support for the different learning management systems, online tools and where to find assignments that are due.
- **Build a sense of community** within the virtual classroom. Have time devoted to where students can come together and discuss topics that are important to them. Offer quick discussion prompts, games, trivia questions, or a virtual show and tell to help with team building.
- **Set online classroom expectations** with your students. Establish norms and procedures for the virtual classroom. Topics include how to ask or respond to a question, submit assignments, receive help, or find resources. A good idea is to use a behavior matrix that follows the school-wide behavior expectations (e.g., PBS or other systems).

- **Organize materials** in a way that makes sense and where students can easily find what is needed. Clearly label folders in the learning management system (i.e., Schoology, Google Classroom, etc.). Include due dates and needed resources or links within the folder. If possible provide a weekly schedule and provide consistency with synchronous and asynchronous learning times as well as independent work times.

Multiple Means of Representation

- **Offer Choice in how content is represented.** Offering more than one modality helps students to choose the best way to access and understand the material. Examples include pdf versions, digital formats, graphics, and videos of texts or concepts. When presenting synchronously, it is a great idea to record the lesson so that students can refer back if needed.
- **Offer ways to support decoding or translation of the text.** Some students may have issues processing written words and would benefit from verbal explanations. To enhance learning, use alt-text to describe visuals, text to speech, hyperlinks to other learning resources, and videos with subtitles.
- **Offer ways for students to comprehend text.** Provide graphic organizers, visuals and class notes to help with learning new concepts. Consider using various forms of media to assist with comprehension (text, images, videos, diagrams, animations, etc.). Make your content accessible by posting slides and notes on the learning management system.

Multiple Means of Action and Expression

- **Offering options for tools and assistive technologies** allows students to express their knowledge in a variety of ways and use tools to help them show what they know more efficiently. Whether students need physical tools due to a disability, communication devices to help them participate in a discussion, or built-in word processing tools, offering tools to communicate their understanding leads to a more accurate and robust picture of mastery.
- **Offer choice in how students express what they have learned.** Allow for flexibility in students' responses (e.g., text, audio, video, kinesthetic (record on video), etc.). This helps to eliminate any barriers to expression of mastery that is common when only one modality is the standard. Giving students the choice as to how they are showing what they know helps to foster self-advocacy and expert learning and allows teachers to gain a better understanding about what a student knows.
- **Offer summarization and reflection break times.** When conducting a lecture-type format, be sure to include a break or reflection activity every 15-20 minutes to allow for the brain to process new information and to allow students to self-reflect on the progress towards the goal.

UDL Upcoming Webinars for Fall 2020

Live Teaching Remotely Webinars

This is an updated **live** version of the interactive, seven-part webinar series looks at the UDL guidelines and explores new tools and applications to help to eliminate barriers associated with online teaching and learning. **The series will occur on the first and third Thursdays of the month from 3:00-4:00 pm during the months of September 2020 - December 2020.**

Participants can attend one or all of the hour-long sessions and will receive the appropriate number of clock hours. **Registration is through PDMS Course #29039.** Questions about the webinar series can be directed to deaccessproject@udel.edu.

- September 3rd The UDL Welcome Mat
- September 17th Options for Sustaining Effort and Persistence
- October 1st Options for Language and Symbols
- October 15th Options for Expression and Communication
- November 5th Options for Self-Regulation
- November 19th Options for Comprehension
- December 3rd Options for Executive Functions

Recorded Teaching Remotely Webinars

This recorded seven-part webinar series takes a closer look at the UDL guidelines and explores tools and applications to help to eliminate barriers associated with online teaching and learning.

- The UDL Welcome Mat Course #29092
- Options for Sustaining Effort and Persistence Course #29097
- Options for Language and Symbols Course #29098
- Options for Expression and Communication Course #29099
- Options for Self-Regulation Course #29132
- Options for Comprehension Course #29144
- Options for Executive Functions Course #29147

Recorded Schoology UDL Introduction and Advanced Module

- Universal Design for Learning Modules Course #27301

K-4 Literacy and UDL

- K-4 Literacy and UDL Credentialing Cohort Course #29299

This learning pathway will consist of two face-to-face sessions where clock hours will be awarded and four on-line Schoology modules where participants will gain an understanding of variability in the classroom, the need for the elimination of barriers in the curriculum and an overview of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles and Guidelines developed by CAST. Participants will receive a stipend for completing all modules and developing and submitting a UDL lesson plan. At the conclusion of the pathway, participants will be registered to complete the Learning Designed UDL Core Credential - Level 2, an international credential supported by CAST.