

## Parents of Students with Learning and Other Disabilities Need Support...Not Waivers

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act” or the “CARES Act was signed into law to help schools, businesses and families survive the closure of brick and mortar facilities. Included in the Act is the threat of waivers to federal laws that protect the rights of students with disabilities. It is unreasonable and unnecessary, even under current circumstances, to waive the hard-won rights of students with disabilities.

Our organizations represent parents and students with learning and other disabilities. We recognize that these are difficult times for public education as well as for students and families. We are also aware that the federal laws that protect students with disabilities already allow states sufficient flexibility to make innovative, collaborative decisions to meet student needs. We call on Congress to recognize the existing flexibilities in current law and to direct funds to national and regional centers that can work with families to develop best practices to address parent and school needs during the extended school closures.

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) released the findings of its recent survey that asked parents and guardians of students with disabilities about their remote learning experiences during the extended school closures. To date parents and guardians in thirty-five states responded to the survey.

Overall, almost 63% of parents report that they generally feel supported by the professionals at their school. However, only 41% of the parents report that someone from their school has reached out to their child with a disability. It is alarming that remote learning has been the norm for weeks and fewer than half of the parents responding to the survey indicated that they have been contacted by their child’s school. 38% of parents stated that they need help adapting schoolwork for their child with a disability and 31% say they need regular contact with their child’s special educator.

The findings from LDA are consistent with what Learning Rights Law Center, a non-profit legal services organization, that works with low income families of children with disabilities, has encountered in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Ventura Counties.

Parents also report that they are working from home while also schooling from home. Parents are looking for (and not always receiving) clear guidance from their schools about expectations related to work completion, grading, and engaged academic and screen time each week. Parents whose native language is not English are left almost completely out of the process, since many schools rely on now absent support staff for communication with parents.

The adaptations and supports required by the IDEA for students who have difficulties with focus, behavior and social needs are not being consistently provided in the remote learning context, and parents are sharing their stress and frustration. A number of respondents asked that schools be more mindful of how many online platforms they use. Students with disabilities often have many organizational and attention challenges making it difficult to navigate remote learning independently. Parents must balance parenting, their own work (in and outside the home), supervising online learning *and* often directly teaching their children.

As the crisis continues, it is apparent that many students will not return to a normal school day any time soon. Parents are looking to partner with their children's teachers and related service providers. They are asking for help adapting assignments and engaging their children in academics. They need support and resources to deal with difficult behaviors and to help their children cope with the fear and anxiety caused by our current situation. Parents are trying their best to tackle schooling from home during this crisis and they need support. School districts must partner and engage with parents so that remote education can be successful.

As representatives of students with disabilities, we call on Congress to focus on pulling together the collective knowledge of the various national and regional centers that focus on education and let them put their expertise to work supporting school districts, educators, parents and students. Rather than waiving federal protections for students, Congress can ensure that special education resources are in place so that state departments of education can innovate and meet student needs.

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**Bios:**

Monica McHale-Small, Ph.D. is president of the Learning Disabilities Association of America. She spent close to 30 years in public education in Pennsylvania initially as a school psychologist and eventually serving in a variety of administrator positions including superintendent.

Laura Schultz is co-founder and state leader of Decoding Dyslexia MD (DDMD), a parent-led, grassroots network with 14 chapters across the state. DDMD volunteers advocate for instructional solutions for students with dyslexia in Maryland public schools.

Janeen Steel is the Founder and Executive Director of the Learning Rights Law Center in California. As a staunch advocate, she has worked tirelessly to ensure that all children receive a meaningful and equitable public education which empowers them to grow into happy, productive, and independent adults.