

Natural Disasters and Relocated Students With Special Needs: Recommendations for Receiving Schools

Widespread destruction from a natural disaster can significantly impact children and families forced to relocate to other communities. For children with disabilities, the challenges of relocation are compounded by the loss (temporary or permanent) of records documenting their history and current needs and the disruption in the delivery of appropriate services.

For schools receiving these students, the lack of access to due process documents, difficulties communicating with previous service providers, and unfamiliarity with students and families are further barriers to providing prompt and appropriate services. While guidance from state and federal agencies must address compliance and other legal issues, there are a number of steps that receiving schools can take to help relocated students with disabilities receive appropriate instruction and find success in their new schools.

GATHERING INITIAL INFORMATION

School officials should be aware of the provisions of the federal McKinney-Vento Act as well as any state policies regarding requirements for serving homeless students. This law requires receiving school districts to accept and enroll students temporarily living in their district. All families enrolling relocated students should be given the opportunity to provide relevant information about their children's school and medical history. Some families may have been able to gather some records prior to evacuation, but many will arrive with little or no documentation about previous schooling or even birth certificates. It is essential that schools establish temporary enrollment files and not delay enrollments or placements for lack of official documentation. Changes can be made later as needed. Some basic information that should be gathered for all relocated students includes:

- Birthdate
- Current address, phone, e-mail if available
- Name and location of schools attended since kindergarten
- Name (and address if possible) of most recent health provider
- List of any special circumstances and services received (special education and related services such as speech therapy, early childhood programs, Title I, gifted and talented, grade retention, English language learner [ELL] programs, etc.)
- Last grade attended
- List of any concerns parents have had in the past year regarding child's learning or behavior
- Names of any medications child takes regularly (or has taken in the past year)
- List of any health problems in the past or of current concern

It can be helpful for parents to provide a written and signed letter that states their child received special education services at the previous school and give the letter to the school principal. With this document on file, a member of the special education team should further interview the parent and ask the following questions:

- When did your child first receive an evaluation for special education?
- Did your child receive special education services during the last school year?
- What disabilities categories are on the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
- What services are on the IEP? Do you recall the names of the providers?
- Is English your child's first language? If not, did your child receive ELL services at the previous school? Do you or your child need an interpreter? Was your child receiving any other special interventions or supports?
- When was your child's most recent physical exam? Are there any significant health or medical concerns?
- Is your child now or has your child recently been on any prescription medications? (If yes, for what conditions?)
- What help do you think your child needs to succeed in school?

All newly relocated students should receive very general academic screening to aid in classroom placement and instructional planning. If your school conducts routine academic screening, include newly relocated students or administer the same screening procedures as soon as possible. Do not conduct screening the day students arrive. Give them some time to acclimate to the new school.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES OR APPARENT NEED FOR SERVICES

If students arrive with special education records from the past school year, you may be able to make decisions based on these records without further screening. However, for students with insufficient records:

- Determine if the last school is open and if it is possible to access previous records.
- If records are not available, conduct individualized screening and progress monitoring to determine need for tentative placement and comprehensive assessment.

Individualized Screening

For students with apparent or reported special education needs who do not have current IEPs available, make an initial determination of areas of concern (e.g., reading, math, behavior, speech) based on parent interview and initial teacher observations. Conduct a screening of relevant academic skills in order to obtain a baseline from which to judge student progress over time.

Curriculum-Based Measurement

Curriculum-based measurement procedures offer a highly efficient and reliable means of obtaining information about decoding, comprehension, spelling, writing, and math calculation skills; these probes can be administered using the current school curriculum materials, and can be re-administered weekly in order to evaluate the student's response to instruction in the classroom and thus gauge the need for more intensive instruction or intervention.

Additional Assessment and Temporary Placements

Based on the results of this screening process, the special education team can support relocated students with disabilities (or who are suspected of having a disability) as follows.

- Monitor performance in the regular education classroom for several weeks. If progress is limited, consider the following steps.
- Place the student in a targeted program to more intensively address skill acquisition (such as Title I).
- Conduct an initial evaluation (which could take place while ongoing monitoring or remedial instruction are provided).

Place the student on a temporary IEP with services that appear most appropriate to meet the student's needs, while developing and implementing a plan for an evaluation. Most states have timelines in place for interim IEPs and services.

COMMONSENSE PROGRAMMING

The circumstances of relocation following a crisis event of major scope are not adequately addressed by IDEA and state regulations. Teams and families must exercise flexibility and creativity in initially addressing the needs of students with disabilities, often in the absence of an IEP or due process records. For example, if there is a sudden influx of students needing services, it may be necessary for schools to be flexible in their approach to providing special education services, such as larger groupings of student with similar needs, self-paced instruction, computer-assisted learning, or peer tutoring. Rigid adherence to usual procedures will not be possible or will result in significant delays of needed services. Further, the consequences of delaying needed supports for students who have already lost their homes, communities, and much of their possessions and sense of security will only compound their losses and likely will result in an exacerbation of learning and behavior problems.

Good Faith Efforts

Teams should therefore make a good faith effort to determine a student's needs and provide services that appear to be in the student's best interest, pending receipt of records, completion of additional assessments, and most important, careful monitoring and evaluation of the student's progress in both the regular education and special education environment, making modifications as needed. Often service needs can be determined without extensive assessment based on the student's response to well-designed and carefully evaluated intervention strategies. This is particularly critical in schools that receive significant numbers of relocated students.

Cautions

Teams should also exercise caution in interpreting screening and assessment results when considering students who have recently experienced a significant trauma. These students will not likely perform optimally for some time after relocation. They likely will have lost some learning time in the transition, and most will face a learning environment that different from their previous experience—a different curriculum, different expectations, a new peer group, and, for some, the culture shock of a different community. Some students will exhibit behavior problems that are not typical of their personal histories—such as more acting out or more withdrawn behavior, emotional

outbursts and lability, or other difficulties. For students with no reported history of serious behavior and emotional difficulties, a classification of emotional-behavioral disorders should be delayed until sufficient data can be collected over time and situational stress reactions can be ruled out. Teams should also exhibit caution in making a determination of severe learning problems for students with no such reported history, because trauma can significantly impact long-term memory, acquiring new skills, concentration, and more.

STAFF TRAINING NEEDS

Ideally, the receiving school already has in place reliable and efficient screening procedures, progress monitoring, and problem-solving approaches to assessment and disability determination, regardless of the actual criteria mandated by the state. There are resources available to help schools implement such procedures as curriculum-based assessment and comprehensive, problem-solving approaches to intervention planning and special education placement. Some schools may wish to access specific training available from nearby universities, state departments, or nearby school districts.

ADDRESSING PARENT NEEDS

Parents of children with disabilities often need extra support, particularly when dealing with a new school setting and new state rules and procedures. Relocated families in particular will likely need guidance in order to better advocate for their children and identify appropriate community resources. If your community has an advocacy center or organization for families of children with disabilities, be sure parents have its contact information. It might help to pair relocated families with families who are familiar with the local disabilities community. If there are significant numbers of relocated families of children with disabilities, a member of the special education team might establish a support group to help parents with common concerns find resources and support from each other. The school psychologist or social worker might be able to facilitate such a resource; the school nurse might be helpful in assisting families identify health providers in the community.

SUMMARY

Compliance with federal and state regulations is critical for all children with disabilities. However, in the aftermath of large-scale disaster causing the relocation of many families, best practices tempered with common sense and compassion will ease the transition for all students and families.

Adapted from a handout written by NASP after Hurricane Katrina.

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