



Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
L'Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec

Challenges and Recommendations Related to Distance Education Support for Students with Special Needs in Quebec's English Public Sector

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The COVID-19 health crisis has prompted the government to close all educational institutions until May 2020. This decision means that all students will be confined to their homes until this date, and possibly longer if the school closure is extended. Although educational activities have been available online since Monday, March 30, 2020, and grade level specific learning kits will be made available as of the week of April 6, not all students in Quebec will have access, in such a context, to the most favourable learning conditions and environment. This reality will also affect our most vulnerable students, particularly those who normally receive services and support in school.

The following document focuses on the issues to be considered regarding the support that may be provided to our most vulnerable students in general, with a focus on those with special needs, whether related to a learning difficulty or disorder, handicap or behavioural difficulty. The fact that this support will have to be offered at a distance adds to the complexity of the exercise and the importance of identifying challenges. It is essential to identify the limitations of distance learning for special needs students allowing us to set more realistic expectations with respect to any measures that may be considered or implemented.

It was made clear by the Minister of Education that the learning activities which are being made available online are not only optional but also meant to consolidate learning rather than introducing new content. The concept of educational support should be understood and adapted to this specific reality and not planned with the idea of providing support in a formal educational context. The support to our special needs students should therefore encompass a global approach and be a means of staying connected, so that students may benefit emotionally, functionally, and possibly academically at this time. In the current context, teachers cannot be expected to shoulder alone the vulnerability of students who are far removed from necessary services and supports. It is therefore essential that the entire Quebec educational community collaborate to find creative solutions to support our students with special needs.

The way services are organized in Quebec’s English educational sector will present additional challenges for teachers to provide support, in the current context, to students with special needs. The fact that there are far fewer closed contained classrooms and that full inclusion is a common practice in most English boards adds a layer of complexity for the majority of our regular classroom teachers. Although the full-inclusion approach is rights-predicated and favours typical and atypical students learning together, this way of organizing services results in teachers having to respond to a broader range of academic levels and needs in the same “regular” classroom. Teachers are faced with a greater diversity of needs or disabilities, where at-risk, learning difficulties or disorders, handicaps, and behavioural difficulties may all be present in the same classroom. Given this, the expectation that regular classroom teachers

would be able to provide individualized support to their students with special needs via distance learning is unrealistic.

Before solutions are put forth and implemented, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges and limitations relating to distance education and the diversity of realities and needs of the most vulnerable students in order to set expectations which are practical and realistic. Furthermore, it is important to remember that at some point the situation will return to normal and that a readjustment period will be required to ensure that all students are given equitable opportunities to move forward with their learning.

Challenges specific to students with special needs in the context of distance learning

- a. Students with special needs not only range in age and learning ability but their difficulty, disorder or disability will range in severity as well.
- b. Most students will be between the ages of 4 and 17 but some will be older (e.g., 21 years of age – severe intellectual handicap).
- c. Special needs students may be more impacted than others by a change to routine/structure from the lack of a classroom setting, particularly if there are executive or adaptive functioning issues or a greater inability to maintain work habits.
- d. This will be the first online/distance learning experience for most teachers, students and their families.
- e. Special needs students will need to complete learning activities without accessing the usual support available to them in a school setting.
- f. Students with special needs may have a poor academic self-concept which may cause greater confidence issues with respect to distance learning.
- g. Some special needs students require access to specialized material, equipment or software that they usually have in school to assist them with certain functions such as writing, text to speech, navigation, reading/reading comprehension.
- h. Some students have hearing, visual, fine/gross motor impairments. Others have (significant) health conditions that impair them (e.g., physical health: diabetes, cystic fibrosis; mental health: anxiety, depression).
- i. Students with ASD characteristics or adaptive functioning issues are more likely to experience difficulty with online/distance learning communities.

Recommendations in light of current challenges

1. Support to students with special needs in the current context should be focused on consolidation of learning and the establishment of daily routines rather than formal instruction of new content.
2. Support should be implemented using a global approach that considers emotional, functional, and academic benefits.
3. Support for students with special needs should resemble a check-in or follow-up format (and not that of one to one tutoring) to help students develop and maintain a sense of connectedness.

4. School boards should determine the ability of students with special needs and their families to access online material and support their children's learning (e.g., time per day/week parents are available, availability of technology, accessibility of internet, limitations, etc.). Alternative solutions should be considered for students with connectivity and accessibility issues.
5. School boards or school administrators should provide information for parents as to procedures to be followed when communicating with teachers or members of the school team (e.g. timeframe to respect, online etiquette, role and limitations of teacher, etc.).
6. Once the school board or school administrator has contacted families, the first contact with students should be by the homeroom or main teacher at the elementary level and the designated teacher or support personnel at the secondary level.
7. School teams should agree on common procedures to be followed when communicating with students and parents and when providing the support to students.
8. The distribution of responsibilities amongst staff (teachers, non-teaching professionals and support personnel) should be done in an equitable manner and reflect the reality of each school (e.g., availability of resources, organization of services, characteristics of the student body, etc.).
9. Teachers should be assigned to supporting students they were assigned to or servicing in the current school year.
10. Connectivity or accessibility issues should be taken into account when assigning students to teachers for support.
11. Crisis situations concerning students should be referred to the school administrator.
12. A variety of online educational tools, resources, materials, software for students with special needs should be made available on the MEES platform (e.g., websites, graphic organizers, speech to text, navigation, online stories, reading comprehension, etc.).
13. While it is mentioned in the MEES directives that learning kits may be supplemented by the school teams before they are sent to parents, teachers cannot be required to adapt or modify materials or pedagogical activities available online for students and parents.
14. IT support or suggestions should be provided by the school boards for families who may need it.
15. Support and appropriate materials and tools should be available to teachers, if needed, for the check-in and follow-up with special needs students.
16. The number of individuals providing support for students with an ASD profile or adaptive functioning issues should be limited.
17. The school board or school should arrange for students to have access to devices they normally use for learning in the school setting.