



# **The Principles of Equitable Schools in the Context of COVID-19**

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# Principles of Equitable Schools

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Schools across the country are making plans for how to approach education in various combinations of distance and in-person learning for the foreseeable future given the realities of COVID-19. It is vitally important that equity for all students, including those with disabilities, is prioritized and planned for. In creating a path to reopening, we must not develop and implement policies and practices that discriminate against students with disabilities and their families. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states, districts, and schools to continue to meet their obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities and that parents maintain their right to be involved in all educational decisions. The original [Principles of Equitable Schools](#), published in 2018, established a set of principles to serve as a standard by which public school options should be assessed by families, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Rather than putting their commitment to equity aside, now is the time for schools to rise to the challenge of putting equity at the forefront of decision-making and planning through close examination of how their plans for educating students in the context of COVID-19 measure up against these principles.

The original Principles of Equitable Schools appear in bold; below, we have expanded on how these principles can and must be applied and expanded in the context of COVID-19.



- I. Accessibility: An accessible school clearly communicates its commitment to upholding students' rights and protections under the law and articulates policies and procedures to ensure it welcomes, retains, and provides equitable enrollment, programmatic, and physical access to students with disabilities in accordance with federal civil rights statutes.**

During COVID-19, the concepts of accessibility continue to apply. However, they may also be expanded to consider how schools will make sure any changes to transportation plans, physical spaces, and hygiene measures are adapted to be accessible for all students; how distance learning plans can include practices such as teleservices, assistive technology devices, closed captioning, and other necessary supports and technology to provide meaningful engagement for all; how to include students with chronic health conditions or other health concerns if and when students return to physical buildings (e.g., enabling the option for some students to continue distance learning while others return to the school building); and developing plans for delivery of related services driven by student need.



**II. Inclusion:** An inclusive school educates students in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate to their individual needs; thereby allowing for learning predominantly in high-quality general education settings alongside peers with and without disabilities. It leverages prevention and targeted intervention approaches to support all students and, when necessary, instruction and supports are modified, adapted, and differentiated to promote student growth. Its disciplinary practices do not disproportionately impact students with disabilities.

Inclusion in the context of COVID-19 presents new challenges and opportunities for schools as they seek new methods of engagement and creative connection points through which to build a positive culture of inclusivity. Creating and enabling new methods of connection in general education settings, such as inclusion in general education video conferencing with push-in and pull-out supports provided virtually, and enabling meaningful participation through accessible and adapted curricular and co-curricular activities will allow schools to maintain and build strong inclusive practices in the current context. As students return to physical buildings, schools must ensure that adaptations and supports are designed with all students at the forefront of the planning process.



**III. Quality:** A quality school holds students to high expectations, provides instruction, both general and specialized, that is data-driven, evidence-based, student-centered, and culturally responsive. It employs highly skilled staff members and provides high quality professional development opportunities.

In order to ensure high-quality learning during COVID-19, schools must find new pathways to developing and providing strong curriculum and structures that enable meaningful educational opportunities for all students. Schools must plan for appropriate staffing and professional development to meet the expanded needs of students, including cross-training and leveraging co-teaching models to increase accessibility; providing high-quality, evidence-based instruction; and assessing and addressing lack of progress and instruction that was lost, rather than merely focusing on addressing regression. Schools must prioritize training both general and special education teachers and other staff on how to accommodate learners and differentiate instruction, leverage technology and remote learning tools and techniques, and implement strategies for enhancing meaningful participation and inclusion. The focus must be on determining where the student would be academically in the absence of COVID-19 and then finding the path to get them there.



**IV. Collaboration:** A collaborative school embraces opportunities for partnership and engagement with stakeholders by providing transparent and accessible information and involving students/parents/guardians in decision making.

Collaboration is more critical than ever during COVID-19, as the relationship between the school and students and families is pivotal to achieving strong outcomes. Schools should leverage their communication with parents/guardians as part of the IEP team to gain insight into barriers to meaningful access; to assess and learn how to best accommodate student needs; and to determine what types of support the school can provide in order to improve engagement and learning through methods such as establishing a designated point of contact for each family. Parents/guardians must be valuable, equal partners in this work for collaboration to be meaningful and to assure student success.



**V. Accountability:** An accountable school is held to high standards. It is required to uphold all applicable laws and demonstrate positive and measurable outcomes for educating students with disabilities as a criterion to continue receiving public funding. It may be overseen by one or multiple entities, and the collective oversight provided must be able to ensure that local education agencies offer a full continuum of services for students with disabilities and uphold a commitment to educating all students.

High standards remain a priority during COVID-19, and accountability still requires schools to be aware of, responsive to, and proactive about planning in alignment with all applicable laws and guidance. Regardless of whether states have been granted flexibility in administering statewide assessments, schools need to find innovative ways to assess and track student progress. Attendance requirements and continued expectations that all students can participate meaningfully must be maintained. Additionally, schools must activate tools that enable a strong assessment of all students' present levels of performance in order to demonstrate measurable progress in the evolving context. In addition, all federal obligations under IDEA remain in place. Therefore, schools must track the provision or withholding of services guaranteed by a student's IEP (such as by utilizing apps or online tracking systems), conduct evaluations, whether in person as public health guidelines allow or remotely, and plan for the delivery of appropriate services.



**VI. Autonomy and Flexibility:** An equitable school leverages its autonomy and flexibility to maintain high standards, promote quality, and cultivate innovation.

The opportunity to leverage autonomy and lean into the charge for innovation cannot be understated in the context of COVID-19. As the entire world grapples with the opportunities created by the current circumstances, schools can and must rise to the occasion to engage in

out-of-the-box thinking and utilize whatever autonomy and flexibility they have to develop new and innovative strategies that continue to prioritize high quality and standards of equity. This may include approaches such as combining synchronous and asynchronous classes, leveraging community learning opportunities, and reimagining use of physical spaces in the school. Schools must encourage staff to bring innovative ideas forward and anticipate that ongoing flexibility and adaptations that prioritize inclusion and access are essential to a successful and equitable path forward that will benefit all students.



**VII. Resources:** An adequately resourced school has access to sufficient fiscal, human, legal, programmatic, facilities, and administrative capacity to educate its students. The funding mechanism of an adequately resourced school is equitable and minimizes incentives to over, or conversely under, identify students with disabilities or to serve students in more restrictive settings than necessary or appropriate for their individual needs.

Adequate resources that provide educators, related service providers, and students with access to the supports and services required as part of each students' Individualized Education Program are a critical component of equity during COVID-19. As budgets are strained and reconsidered, schools must prioritize equity as they proactively plan for increased academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students while calculating and assigning costs for the likely increased need for special education services. Planning and estimating costs associated with increased staffing needs, transportation constraints, number of necessary service hours, and technology requirements are critical and essential equity considerations.