**DESE Expands Guidance to include Remote Learning**

**for Students Receiving Special Education Services**

On March 15th Governor Baker announced a three-week suspension of school operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after this announcement, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) issued a FAQ which fell short of promising any supports for students receiving special education services during the school closure. In fact, under the guise of equity, districts were told that a pause in formal instruction for all, meant a pause in the responsibility of providing supports and services to students on 504’s or Individual Education Plans (IEP’s).

Districts across the state began scrambling to gather online resources, links to fun activities and printable worksheets to fill students time while at home. The roll out of online resource sharing was inconsistent depending upon where you lived and ultimately left the most vulnerable students behind.

This shortsighted approach sparked an enormous outpouring of advocacy from parents and professionals including The Arc of Massachusetts who partnered with SPaN, and the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) to pen a [letter](https://d.docs.live.net/2b926a3233ed26d7/Documents/The%20Arc%20of%20Massachusetts/DESE%20IDEA%20COVID%2019/span_fcsn_arc_letter_to_commission_johnston__002_.pdf) that encouraged DESE not to exclude the provision of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) ([IDEA 34 CFR § 300.17](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.17)), during this time of school closures. FAPE enables students to make “meaningful and effective progress” equivalent with his or her educational potential.

This “short term” solution, coupled with the incredible advocacy to do better for special education students shifted after March 25th when Governor Baker issued another emergency order extending the closure of public and private K-12 schools through May 4th.

The following day DESE Commissioner Jeffrey Riley announced in a [publication](https://d.docs.live.net/2b926a3233ed26d7/Documents/The%20Arc%20of%20Massachusetts/DESE%20IDEA%20COVID%2019/2020-0326remote-learning.docx), “we must all pull together – parents and caregivers, students, the community, and of course, our educators and staff – to help students continue their learning over this extended period.”. At this same time, Russell Johnson, State Director of Special Education, met with a vast array of stakeholders. Clearly impacted by the advocacy of many, as well as the reality this is going to be a much longer closure of schools, he made it clear that that ensuring compliance with Special Education regulations should not prevent schools from offering remote educational instruction. He stated that students must receive an education and districts must provide FAPE while protecting the health and safety of students and educators.

This is cause for celebration, but certainly not the end of this conversation. We are swimming in uncharted waters. Our recommendation is to stay connected, reach out to your local SEPAC’s and Parents groups, and don’t be afraid to connect with your child’s teacher. While the guidance is reassuring, it still leaves room for questions and flexibility. As has become the norm, we will get through this one step forward- and one day at a time. Let us know how its working for your family, [here](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TheArcCOVID19).