

MITIGATING LEARNING LOSS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES DUE TO COVID-19: AN ANALYSIS OF FLORIDA EDUCATION PLANS AND ASSURANCES WITH AN EYE ON LEADERSHIP

School closures, inequitable technology, and diminished access to educational support negatively impacted learning for all students during the COVID-19 pandemic but more so for students with disabilities. In anticipation of learning loss for all students, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) mandated each school district to develop an Educational Plan and Assurances (FLEPA) document outlining how districts intended to tackle learning loss for all students, including students with disabilities, as they transitioned to face-to-face instruction. The purpose of this study was to investigate how Florida's 67 school districts planned to mitigate the anticipated learning losses among students with disabilities, to determine if the districts' plans were sufficiently comprehensive to ensure Free Appropriate Education (FAPE), and to determine if there was evidence of leadership actions that would support students with disabilities and their service providers. Using a document review approach, the researchers systematically reviewed all school districts' FLEPA narratives, with the FAPE framework as the conceptual base, to determine how each school district was planning to recuperate learning loss experienced by students with disabilities during the period in which instruction was restricted to online platforms. Findings indicated a general lack of explicit planning for students with disabilities, particularly those with physical, communication, social, and behavioral needs. The researchers conclude with recommendations for policy makers and school leaders that should be considered when a crisis occurs that prohibits students from attending school to ensure our most vulnerable students receive the needed support.

Keywords: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Free Appropriate Education (FAPE), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced state and local education officials to close schools in spring 2020 to protect the health and well-being of students and staff. It is estimated that during the height of school closures, over 100,000 public schools were closed, disrupting the education of more than 50 million students (Education Week, 2020). With the disruption came projected learning loss for all students, especially for students

with disabilities and other youth placed at risk.

Even in light of the best efforts by teachers and school districts to pivot quickly and effectively to online learning, the projected negative repercussions for student learning have been disheartening (Kaffenberger, 2021; Zviedrite et al., 2021). Results from early projections indicated that students who received no or minimal remote instruction in the spring were likely to begin fall 2020 with only 63-68% of the learning gains in reading and 37-50% in math, compared to what would be expected in a typical school year (Zviedrite et al., 2021). Those who received approximately half of the instruction they would typically receive were likely to start the new school year with 60-87% of their typical learning gains.

Nonetheless, a switch to remote learning was a reasonable response, even if inadequate, to the learning needs of most students. But it was poorly planned and executed for students with disabilities, particularly those with physical, communication, social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities. Indirect evidence has suggested that school closures and the unavailability of services had a substantial negative effect on children with profound physical and intellectual impairments. In one study, researchers surveyed 302 parents and caregivers of children, aged 2-17, with neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDD), and concluded that the breakdown of support systems and inadequate access to services had a deleterious effect on the health and well-being of these children (Masi et al., 2021). Worsening of NDD or comorbid mental health symptoms was reported by 64.5% of caregiver respondents, while 76.9% reported negative impacts on child health and well-being. The children were spending more time in front of a television or computer screen, exercising less, and eating a poor diet.

Parents Together Action (n.d.), a parent-led organization with over two million members nationally, surveyed 1,594 families around the country about the impact COVID-19 was having on their children's education. Of those surveyed who had a child with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or were entitled to some form of special education services, only 20% indicated they were receiving those services; 39% reported their children received no support at all. Furthermore, children with IEPs were twice as likely as their peers to be doing little or no remote learning (35% vs. 17%). Twice as many parents of children with disabilities, compared with parents of children without disabilities (40% vs. 23%), also expressed concern about their children's mental health. These projections and survey results portend challenges for both educators and students as schools reopen and traditional instructional modalities return, especially for children with physical, communication, social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities.

Providing educational opportunity for students with disabilities has been a long, hard-fought struggle for nearly half a century. It was codified with the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. Although it has been amended and reauthorized several times

since its initial adoption, the law's primary purpose remains: "to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living" (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C.A. § 1400(d)(1)(A)). The key provision, Free Appropriate Education (FAPE), is defined in the law as

Special education and related services that (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge, (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency, (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 1414(d)." (IDEA, 2004, § 1401(9)).

However, what exactly is an appropriate education has been left to interpretation.

The U.S. Supreme Court took up this challenge in *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District, Westchester County v. Rowley* (1982). As a result of its analysis of the federal law, the Supreme Court provided the lower courts a two-pronged test to apply when tasked with determining if a student with disabilities had been provided FAPE: (a) did the state comply with the statute's procedural requirements and (b) was the IEP "reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits?" (*Rowley*, p. 207). The *Rowley* decision made it clear, though, that school districts did not owe students with disabilities more than what was due general education students; there was no requirement to maximize the potential of students with disabilities. Yet, in the Court's own words, "the determination of when handicapped children are receiving sufficient educational benefits to satisfy the requirements of the Act presents a more difficult problem" (*Rowley*, 1982, p. 202).

In the years since *Rowley*, federal circuit courts have wrangled with the level of educational benefit due students with disabilities, making it difficult to ascertain the sufficiency of a student's IEP. They have split primarily between two standards: (a) "just above trivial" or "de minimis" standard and (b) the higher standard, "meaningful benefit" (Hurwitz et al., 2019). Given subsequent case law and amendments to IDEA, researchers and legal scholars have argued that it is time for a new, more concrete standard to define educational benefit (Davison, 2016).

The concern becomes more compelling and complex in light of the full range of learning, physical, social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities that complicate students' access to education. Many were hopeful that the Supreme Court would bring more clarity to and articulate a more contemporary interpretation of FAPE when it accepted *Andrew F. ex rel. Joseph F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1* (2017). This case in-

volved the educational circumstances of Endrew who, at the age of two, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). He had difficulty communicating his personal needs and emotions and was unable to participate in normal social interactions with others. His many maladaptive behaviors interfered with his ability to learn and to function in a traditional school setting.

His parents believed the district failed to provide Endrew with FAPE and, after exhausting administrative appeals, sued the district in federal court. In its ruling, the Court warned that “[t]o meet its substantive obligation under the IDEA, a school must offer an IEP reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances” (p. 999).

While some despaired at the yet-vague FAPE standard provided in Endrew, others found hope, particular for students whose disabilities had a profound impact on their ability to learn. Unlike Amy Rowley who had the cognitive and behavioral capacity to learn, Endrew represented students whose disabilities make learning, communicating, socializing, and behaving a challenge every day. The Court clearly struck down the *de minimis* standard, asserting every student with disabilities should have the opportunity to achieve challenging objectives. However, the Court was also careful to say it had not departed from its *Rowley* definition of FAPE; it only wandered far enough to promise something more than the basement floor of educational opportunity.

Purpose

The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2020b) mandated that every school district submit education plans that described what programming and strategies were to be implemented to help all students recuperate any loss as a result of the rapid shift to remote learning when school buildings were closed, and teachers and students were required to work from home. The purpose of this study was to investigate how each of Florida’s 67 school districts intended to mitigate the anticipated learning loss of students with disabilities as the state’s public schools returned to traditional instructional formats. This included determining if the district’s plans were sufficiently comprehensive to ensure FAPE and if there was evidence of leadership actions that would support students with disabilities and their service providers in ensuring FAPE.

Background

Pursuant to an emergency order issued by Florida’s Commissioner of Education, Richard Corcoran, in early July 2020, the FLDOE required all 67 public school districts to submit a 2020-21 District Optional Innovative Reopening Plan (FLDOE, 2020a). These plans were to guide

school districts as they formulated strategies to reopen schools in fall 2020. In these plans, districts were instructed to assure that (a) all schools would open; (b) the full panoply of services required by law would be offered so that families who wish to send their children to brick and mortar schools could do so; (c) progress monitoring would be extended to all students and that tiered support for struggling students would be provided; (d) individual education program (IEP) teams would determine needed services, including compensatory services for students with disabilities to ensure they were given FAPE; (e) English Language Learner (ELL) committees would ensure provision of additional or supplemental English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services for ELL students who had regressed; and (e) sponsoring school districts would extend the same flexibility in instructional methods to every charter school that submitted a reopening plan.

In November 2020, Commissioner Corcoran issued a second emergency order that required all school districts to submit a second plan, the Florida Education Plan and Assurances (FLEPA), to recommit to the assurances they provided in the first document and to map how they were going to tackle learning loss as more students returned to brick and mortar schools (FLDOE, 2020b). Furthermore, this plan was to guide districts in accomplishing four goals:

- 1) Building on the successful reopening of all public schools to in-person instruction;
- 2) Promoting parental choice while ensuring that every student is making adequate academic progress;
- 3) Providing financial continuity to enable each school district to maintain the full panoply of services for the benefit of Florida students and families, including students from vulnerable populations such as low-income families, migrant families, those experiencing homelessness, English Language Learners (ELLs), students in foster care, and students with disabilities; and
- 4) Empowering every district to maintain high-quality school choices for Florida students and families with a focus on eliminating achievement gaps, which have been exacerbated by the crisis (FLDOE, 2020c).

To gain FLDOE approval of their educational plans, districts were to explain what interventions they were going to implement during spring and summer 2021 that would focus on closing achievement gaps, on targeted outreach for students demonstrating poor performance in reading and math, and on additional supports to assist students transitioning from “innovative” learning models (remote learning) to “traditional” models (face-to-face) (FLDOE, 2020d). The districts were also to indicate how they were going to deliver additional instructional time which

could include after school, weekend, and summer programs, to make up for instructional time that had been lost during the school closures. The researchers postulated these detailed plans would afford them an opportunity to determine how the school districts aimed to ensure the provision of FAPE for students with disabilities.

Research Design

This study is the first in a series of studies on meeting the unique needs of students with disabilities during and following the school closures that resulted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. At this initial point, the researchers relied on document review, the results of which will help the researchers formulate interview and survey instruments to elicit more specific information about the development and implementation of the FLEPAs with regard to students with disabilities. A data extraction matrix was constructed using key FAPE terms and phrases (e.g., compliance with IDEA's procedural requirements; IEPs; least restrictive environment (LRE); individualized instruction; related services; compensatory education) from the conceptual framework across the top and the names of the school districts along the left side of the matrix. Sentence fragments from individual plans that included or correlated with these terms were entered into the appropriate cell in the matrix under the appropriate FAPE terms and phrases. This approach allowed the researchers to determine independently, and then through conferencing, if the school districts' FLEPAs included provisions to meet the individualized learning and behavioral needs of students with IEPs in the period from spring 2021 through summer 2021.

This process also allowed the researchers to identify themes independently and then to arrive at consensus based on the data pieces each collected in support of their thematic choices. This was their process to ensure trustworthiness in the selection of themes that guided the discussion of the data.

Findings

From the researchers' review of all FLEPAs, 37 out of 67 school districts referenced students with disabilities to varying degrees. From the analysis, three overarching themes emerged with regard to the provision of FAPE for students with disabilities. The overarching themes are: (a) pledges and promises, (b) service delivery models, and (c) stakeholder participation.

Pledges and Promises

The first theme, pledges and promises, encompasses the districts'

implicit and explicit promises of instructional programming for students with disabilities. It also includes evidence of the lack of continuity among the pledged assurances, the directions provided to the districts in completing the document, and what was actually described by the districts in their FLEPA. The researchers also noted what was *not* in evidence with regard to programs and services for students with disabilities.

Instructional Programming

All districts indicated their continued reliance on a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to address any identified learning gaps. The MTSS approach was and continues to be the standard intervention for struggling students in all school districts in Florida. References to the MTSS model focused on generalized approaches, frequently identifying prepackaged programs that target academic needs in reading and math (e.g., iReady, Go Math). However, there was no clear indication that districts considered strategies, even within the MTSS model, to monitor the progress of students with non-academic focused goals, such as behavioral and social development.

Also absent in the narratives were details distinguishing how additional instructional time was to be scheduled and structured for students with disabilities. Broad commitments to Saturday “camps,” after school academic support, and summer school for all students needing additional remediation in reading and math were commonly identified to recuperate lost instructional time. However, with the exception of the occasional mention of compensatory education for students with disabilities in reading and math and of progress monitoring, no details were provided on how the additional instructional time would be structured to meet the individualized needs of students with physical, communication, social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities.

Lack of Alignment Between Assurances, Goals, and Instructions

Seven assurances and four goals were itemized in the FLEPA template. Among the assurances, each school district was required to pledge that Individual Education Program (IEP) teams would determine needed services, including compensatory services for students with disabilities to ensure they were provided FAPE. Furthermore, the third of four goals that were to be accomplished through the implementation of the FLEPA was “providing financial continuity to enable each school district to maintain the full panoply of services for the benefit of Florida students and families, including . . . students with disabilities.”

Yet, FLEPA instructions to districts contained no explicit requirement that the districts address how they would ensure these would be attained. As a result, only six school districts made mention of specific plans

for IEP committees to meet and that conversations would have to occur regarding how districts would provide adequate funding “to maintain the full panoply of services.” In fact, those few that did articulate some reference to IEP committees or compensatory education relied on broad, boiler plate language, something closely resembling generic IDEA language on FLDOE webpages. One such quote from a district’s plan stated,

“[We] include the following areas of focus as we enter the Spring semester: meeting the needs of all students, starting with those most vulnerable students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners, providing a strong foundation for instruction for all students and helping to address the opportunity and achievement gaps that have widened during the pandemic.”

In a few other instances, school districts couched their intentions to provide additional instructional time and support, particularly during the summer, on the availability of funds by referring to “pending funding.” Many districts did not address these topics at all.

Not all FLEPAs were devoid of plans to address the needs of students with disabilities. Seven school districts outlined specific strategies. These strategies included: (a) providing an additional hour of support from a speech language pathologist for eligible students who attend schools with extended day schedules; (b) restructuring the co-teaching service delivery model to allow for special and general education teachers to work together simultaneously with small groups of students; (c) in-class accommodations that would provide instruction to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment; (d) offering related services face-to-face with proper health precautions; (e) prescheduling collaborative support meetings for parents with a special education teacher or paraprofessional; (f) determining the need for compensatory services by the IEP teams for students with disabilities, based upon reading and math progress monitoring data, as well as possible counseling and therapy services, mental health and wrap-around services, and assistive technology; and (g) specifying tier 3 interventions for students eligible for Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and who may need support by a liaison, behavior specialist, paraprofessional, or co-teacher.

One large school district was offering the option of blended instruction (partially face-to-face and partially virtual) for students with disabilities. The face-to-face instruction would focus on core academics, and additional support that could not be provided face-to-face would be available through streaming live or recorded sessions with the teacher.

Noteworthy was one very large school district’s efforts to monitor and revise IEPs prior to the implementation of the FLEPAs. Between March 2020 and the time of plan development, this district conducted 1,750 initial eligibility meetings for students believed to have a disability and completed 23,100 annual reviews of IEPs.

Service Delivery Models

The second overarching theme to emerge was service delivery models. This theme captured evidence related to key provisions of FAPE, which included: (a) education in the least restrictive environment (LRE); (b) related services; (c) recoupment of lost instructional time; and (d) funding sources for supplemental instruction. Only one district specifically mentioned FAPE in their narrative stating that students with disabilities and medically fragile students who had an IEP would receive the full array of services to ensure FAPE as outlined on their IEPs.

Least Restrictive Environment

Four districts addressed LRE in their planning. The plans stated that services would be provided in the least restrictive environment but without defining how that translated to virtual platforms still being supported by districts. The authors did not find textual evidence that described how districts would systematically monitor IEP compliance to ensure that FAPE was being provided as outlined within each student's IEP.

Related Services

Of the 67 FLEPAs reviewed, only five districts specifically mentioned some provision of related services. One district stated that related services would be provided face-to-face and virtually. Another district indicated that related services would be only provided face-to-face. One district only identified an extra hour of speech therapy in the related service narrative, yet limited that service to schools that had an extended day schedule. One district did mention counseling in the related service narrative while another discussed related services as a “check-in with the students.”

Recoupment of Lost Instructional Time

As previously noted, all districts indicated to varying degrees their intentions to provide before or after school tutoring, summer school, and Saturday boot camps or academies to reclaim lost instructional time. This supplemental instruction was clearly marked for academic remediation, with no mention of supplemental instruction for students who had disabilities that were not learning disabilities. Most narratives generally stated that all students not making adequate progress would attend one of the supplemental instructional programs.

However, four school districts specifically dedicated additional instruction through Extended School Year Services and ESE Saturday School to students with disabilities who were eligible for compensatory

education. Two districts did not outline a particular service but did state additional services would be provided as determined by the IEP team. An additional district stated that students with disabilities had access to all of the district's academic recovery programs.

Other districts set qualifying criteria for students to participate in additional instruction. Examples of eligible students identified in the plans included students reading two or more years below grade level, students who were performing below the federal index, and students with multiple warning indicators. Although students with disabilities were not explicitly identified as eligible, many likely would qualify.

Funding

Districts noted additional programs would be made available to all learners with the caveat that those opportunities would be dependent on the availability of funding. One such district stated, "pending funding" and listed the available remedial services to all students. Identified funding sources included CARES Act, Title V, and Title I. There was no mention about the school districts' legal obligation to provide additional instructional opportunities for students with disabilities to ensure the provision of FAPE, regardless of the availability of additional funding.

Stakeholder Participation

The researchers noted when particular mention was made of those who would have a role in implementation of these plans. The resulting overarching theme was stakeholder participation, which included: (a) leadership oversight, (b) educator and service provider input, (c) parent involvement, and (d) community agencies and partnerships.

Leadership Oversight

Principals were the individuals tasked with supervising the implementation of the plans. Specific responsibilities identified by the districts included collaborating with district personnel, relying on multiple data sources to inform and guide the process to determine interventions for struggling students, including those with disabilities, monitoring student attendance, and meeting with parents and caregivers to discuss student progress and modality of service (e.g. face-to-face vs. remote learning).

Educator and Service Provider Input

Narratives did not specifically state who contributed to or wrote the FLEPAs or to what extent, if any, school administrator or service provider feedback was elicited and incorporated throughout the process. Nor

was there language describing how the expectations outlined in the plan were to be disseminated and clarified for those responsible for implementing the FLEPAs in their respective schools.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement was explicitly or implicitly addressed in Assurances 2, 3, and 5, as well as in the directions. Assurance 2 required school districts to ensure that IEP teams would appropriately determine needed services which implies parental participation per IDEA regulations. Under the IDEA procedural safeguards, schools must practice due diligence to ensure parents are active participants in the IEP process.

Procedural safeguards also require that parents are to receive prior written notice in their native language of changes to FAPE for their child (FLDOE, 2021). Noticeably absent from the FLEPAs was any mention of these procedural safeguards in relationship to parental involvement in the development of these FLEPAs or in the revisions or realignment of their child's IEP, if it were needed.

In fact, explicit mention of parent involvement was limited to receiving notice of their child's progress and being urged to choose face-to-face instruction if their child was not making adequate progress in the innovative learning modality (i.e., remote learning). Students not making adequate progress, based on progress monitoring, could only continue with remote learning if parents acknowledged in writing they understood their child was not making adequate progress yet chose to have their child continue in the innovative learning modality in lieu of face-to-face instruction.

Community Agencies and Partnerships

The location of districts and their proximity to community agencies seemed to dictate the districts' ability to coordinate and provide additional supports to students through agency and organizational partnerships. Those near universities were able to take advantage of partnerships such as the UF Lastinger Center for Learning or the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University and their Regional Education Laboratory. A large school district in north Florida was able to rely on its partnership with the Kids Hope Alliance, and three districts partnered with a designated 21st Century Community Learning Center to provide additional academic services for their students. Beyond this small group of districts, no others mentioned extending their capacity to offer additional supports through community partnerships.

Discussion

The provision of FAPE is the responsibility of all public school districts, even in challenging contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Stenhoff et al., 2020; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2021a, 2021b). The FLDOE acknowledged this duty in both the assurances and goals conveyed in the FLEPAs (FLDOE, 2020c). In light of this guidance, the researchers hypothesized that district plans would articulate, with some level of specificity, the extenuating needs of vulnerable populations of students and their families. Thus, with regard for the novel circumstances of COVID-19 that necessitated quick thinking and action on the part of all stakeholders, the focus of this study was to determine if school districts planned to mitigate the anticipated learning loss of students with disabilities, if the districts' plans were sufficiently comprehensive to ensure FAPE, and if there was evidence of leadership actions that would support students with disabilities and their service providers to meet this obligation.

Although the language across documents articulated a vague commitment by districts to continue the provision of specialized instruction and individualized supports as mandated by federal legislation even during times of crisis (Stenhoff et al., 2020), the plans did not clearly articulate: a) how students' individualized educational programs would be implemented with fidelity across instructional modalities or b) how progress would be monitored for students' non-academic-focused goals. Consequently, students with physical, communication, social, and behavioral disabilities may have experienced exacerbated learning loss undetected by the universal progress monitoring systems described in districts' plans and in turn, may have been more vulnerable to violations of FAPE than those identified with specific learning disabilities.

Findings also indicate that districts ubiquitously relied on instructional programming beyond the traditional school day (e.g., after school and Saturday tutoring) and/or academic year (e.g., spring break camps) to address the extensive learning loss of the general student population. However, the plans did not provide adequate specification as to how districts would ensure students with various disabilities could equitably access this programming, or the extent which students with disabilities would participate in this programming alongside their nondisabled peers, as required by FAPE and as defined by students' individualized education programs. Collectively, the findings indicate districts did not: (a) develop comprehensive plans that address the true scope of services and diverse populations that FAPE was designed to protect and (b) maintain the continuation of special education services and supports for all eligible student populations during the transition periods in alignment with the provisions of FAPE discussed here.

Furthermore, the document review provided little evidence of leadership actions specifically targeted at ensuring that the unique needs

of students with disabilities were adequately addressed as reflected in the plans. For this reason, the researchers suggest the following recommendations for consideration to policy developers and district and school leaders.

Recommendations for Leadership

The first lapse in leadership was the development of the FLEPAs. There was no direct evidence that all those who have roles in the education of students with disabilities were asked to contribute to plans for their learning recovery. When tasked with writing comprehensive plans such as the FLEPAs, school district leaders should have viewed this as an opportunity for those who will be implementing the plans to assist in the design and decision-making process (Marzano et al., 2005). For instance, according to Marzano et al. (2005), input from teachers regarding school decisions has an effect size of 0.25 on student achievement. This implies that teachers are essential to student success and, therefore, are key players in planning and implementing learning recovery plans. They are positioned to select and implement instructional strategies that best meet the needs of all students, in particular the specialized instructional needs of students with disabilities.

Parents and caregivers of students with disabilities should always be a part of the process. Not only does the law require districts to involve them in programming planning for their children with disabilities, parents have first-hand knowledge of what teaching and learning transpired during the school closures. They have pertinent information to contribute as partners with educators on how to help students with disabilities recuperate learning loss.

Likewise, related service providers also know where there were gaps in the provision of related services during the time students with disabilities remained at home. They could contribute expert advice about how to move forward in helping students regain lost physical, communication, social, emotional, and behavioral growth that was delayed as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on access to related services and learning.

Lastly, community agencies, some of which were identified in the FLEPAs, can be a valuable source of input when developing comprehensive plans to recover learning loss, especially for students with disabilities. They can extend the reach of educators in providing support services for students with disabilities that may go beyond the instructional day or week.

Next, successful educational programming and implementation rely on several factors, all of which connect to leadership. First, successful programs are often the result of being implemented by the people who designed them (Cameron et al., 2011). This aligns well with the earlier recommendation to invite those invested in the success of students to the table when drafting plans such as FLEPAs. School leaders can ensure that those

individuals are “in the room” as recovery plans are developed.

Secondly, on-going administrative support in the form of resources and technical support is essential (Weingartner, 2009). Overcoming the negative impact of school building closures and the inevitable but unplanned switch to online learning through learning recovery plans necessarily requires additional fiscal and human resources. Which resources can be tapped and how the organization can be (re)structured to respond to the learning needs of students are decisions that leadership must make in support of those who are in the classroom, that is both teachers and students.

Thirdly, how the correctional plans are disseminated to all who have responsibility for implementation is a key leadership responsibility (Spillane et al., 2002; Weingartner, 2009). It is important that state, district, and school leadership makes clear who is responsible for disseminating and implementing each part of the plan. They also must allow for some flexibility in the implementation to meet each school district’s unique circumstances (Leaske & Younie, 2022).

With the increased need in services for all students to recoup learning loss, the state and districts could assist with additional personnel to support instruction through rehiring retired teachers to support instruction and smaller class size for social distancing (Leaske & Younie, 2022). Students with disabilities require specialized techniques that include instruction to be paced more slowly than the regular classroom instruction and broken down in smaller steps than most students need. These students need frequent opportunities for guided practice with the teacher, including feedback (Bays & Crockett, 2007). By rehiring retired teachers, the district will give students access to these techniques from trained individuals.

School and district leaders have a moral duty to address the mental health of both teachers and students as these two groups transition back to brick and mortar educational environments. Students and teachers alike are experiencing some level of emotional trauma due to the fear, stress, social isolation, and political polarization that has occurred in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC Foundation, 2021; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022; Gewertz, 2021; Vestal, 2021). Without tending to the mental and emotional wellbeing of students and staff, efforts to recuperate lost learning will be less effective (Leaske & Younie, 2022; USDOE, 2021).

Among the recommendations for school and district leaders to address mental health includes open and personal communication, such as using every opportunity to talk about the toll that the pandemic has taken on everyone; that COVID’s impact is something that administrators, teachers, and students share (Gewertz, 2021). Also, leaders should prepare their staff and themselves to spot mental health problems among teachers and students in order to direct support and resources to whom and where they are needed (Gewertz, 2021; USDOE, 2021). Leaders should reach out to community mental health organizations, seek their partnership in addressing the mental health of school personnel and students, and create

support systems, such as virtual support groups and call lines (Gewertz, 2021). Of particular importance, leaders should stay in contact with teachers, counselors, and mental health service providers who work with students with disabilities to ensure they are monitoring all who are among the most vulnerable to mental and emotional problems.

In order to ensure FAPE is provided, school leaders need to be well versed in special education law and compliance (Zaretsky et al., 2008), but often times, the role of ensuring compliance with special education law is delegated to someone with more preparation in special education than the school leader (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). One way to ensure FAPE and to support special education service providers and students is for the school leaders to assist with the coordination of student, service provider, and paraprofessional schedules that meet students' identified time requirements per their IEPs (Bays & Crockett, 2007) and to monitor that teachers are adhering to those defined time requirements (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). It may be wise for school leaders and service providers to meet with parents of students who will need additional time or a change in their schedules and supports due to the change in modality of instruction to ensure FAPE and, together with the parents, revise the IEP to reflect the change in accommodations and services.

The following is a list of strategies that can be implemented during remote learning or a return to face-to-face learning for students who need extra support to recoup learning loss as well as for ensuring the provision of FAPE for students with disabilities.

- 1) Provide teachers professional development in digital learning strategies (Leask & Younie, 2022) and in using Universal Design for Learning while planning lessons and instruction (Jameson et al., 2020; Zaretsky et al., 2008);
- 2) Protect time for general education and special education teachers to collaborate (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Jameson et al., 2020; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Zaretsky et al., 2008); and
- 3) Develop strong relationships with community networks that can support students and families during the time of crisis (Jameson et al., 2020; Zaretsky et al., 2008).

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of this study should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. First, the researchers only reviewed the FLEPAs submitted by the public school districts representing the 67 counties across the state of Florida. Plans submitted by laboratory schools and/or charter schools (nine in total) were excluded from this study to avoid any confounding variables related to the special populations served and/or autonomous instructional modalities that may characterize these settings (e.g.,

School for the Deaf and Blind, Florida Virtual School). Second, the findings reported here only reflect what was articulated in the reviewed documents and, in turn, may not be indicative of how districts implemented and/or amended the identified strategies for recouping learning loss for students with disabilities or the role leadership played following submission of the written plans.

Future research should explore the lived experiences of stakeholders charged with the oversight and/or implementation of district plans to determine: (a) the extent to which the plans met the diverse and complex needs of all eligible students and their families and (b) the feasibility of ensuring the provision of FAPE across instructional modalities and within the context of the existing systems and procedures common across districts.

The researchers urge practitioners and other stakeholders to note what was learned from this novel time, and to consider the recommendations made here, in order to better provide for the needs of all students with disabilities when unanticipated circumstances arise that disrupt traditional educational program delivery and present potential widespread violations of FAPE for the most vulnerable populations of students.

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