



June 3, 2020

Rhode Island State House of Representatives
Committee on Health, Education, and Welfare

Re: Distance Learning (especially for children with disabilities)

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the State's experience with distance learning. The Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN) helps thousands of Rhode Islanders every year navigate special education, healthcare, Early Intervention, and more. Founded in 1991 by a group of parents of children with special needs, RIPIN is still led and staffed primarily by peers experiencing the same challenges as the families we serve.

This spring, we also helped the State's distance learning helpline (Highlander Institute) serve families with children with disabilities, and we supported more than 500 families as they navigated the intersections of distance learning and special education. We've had a front-row seat to the distance learning experience – especially for children with disabilities – both through our work with families we serve and with our own families at home.

First, it's important to thank the many committed educators who made distance learning work this year when no other options were available. We also want to recognize the commitment of both the RI Department of Education (RIDE) and U.S. Department of Education to upholding the rights and protections of students with disabilities during this unprecedented time.

For children with disabilities, probably not unlike other children, distance learning has worked very well for some and been extremely challenging for others. As the State reviews parents' and student's experiences, and plans for a new school year that may include distance learning components, we would like to share the following suggestions:

- *Formal Assessment:* First and foremost, we hope the State will quickly conduct a formal assessment of the experiences of parents and students (especially students with disabilities), including surveys and focus groups. Anecdotes are insufficient to assess an initiative of this size, and our impression is that experiences have varied, again especially for parents of children with disabilities. This assessment should be made public and used to inform planning. CARES Act funds may be usable for this type of initiative.
- *In-Home Services for Children with Significant Needs:* Many students with significant needs (such as 1-on-1 nursing) were left without critical services during this period. There may have been an expectation that Medicaid-funded services would fill the void, but that often has not happened. The State should assess the feasibility of providing these services in the home during periods of distance learning, at the option of families, especially if the services are indicated in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

- *Transitions*: For students with disabilities, transitioning into the school special education system (at age 3) or into adult services (at age 22) has been difficult, with many inconsistencies between districts. These transitions, and transitions between schools, need far more attention.
- *Coordination of Services and Communication*: For students with disabilities who receive multiple services through their school (e.g. occupational or speech therapy), coordination between the various professionals has been challenging for many families. Some schools, districts, and professionals have been more successful at this than others. A learning community to share best practices may be helpful.
- *Distance Learning Opt-Out or Other Rights*: When a family can demonstrate that their child with disabilities is poorly served by distance learning and no in-person learning is possible, the State should consider developing an opt-out process that does not penalize the student or family. For example, parents could choose a self-directed at-home learning option with fewer formalities than home schooling, even temporarily. This system must start from the assumption that the vast majority of parents want what's best for their children and are in the best position to assess what's working. We saw many families of students with disabilities experience extreme stress this year struggling to keep up with distance learning that was ill-suited for their child, out of fear of negative repercussions like retention or even truancy court. The system can and should be made more forgiving for these families during this special time.
- *Continued Distance Learning Option for Medically Fragile Children*: Should in-person school resume in the fall, some students and/or families (and their IEP teams) may find it preferable or necessary to continue with distance learning, especially if their children are medically fragile or struggling with anxiety. The State should consider how best to maintain distance learning capacity for these purposes.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

/s/

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