



Massachusetts School Psychologists Association Position Paper

Considerations for Assessment and Access to Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Massachusetts School Psychologists Association (MSPA) offers the following guidance to school psychologists who may have concerns about assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a stressful and challenging time for children, families, and practitioners in many districts in that students may be participating in learning through a combination of remote, hybrid, and in-person models. With this in mind, MSPA offers the following guidance to school psychologists who work hard to meet the needs of all students. This guidance should be considered alongside NASP and APA ethical principles, state and federal laws, district policies and procedures, and a school psychologist's own training and expertise.

To understand the context of this position paper, it is critical to first review the current federal and state guidance and directives relative to special education assessment. On April 27, 2020, Betsy DeVos issued a report to congress which indicated that no waivers would be made under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This means that all special education timelines and requirements remain in effect. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has acknowledged that there may have been a delay in assessments last spring and has urged districts to conduct required assessments as soon as possible and to provide compensatory services to students who may require them. We agree and support the laws specifying that any student who is eligible to receive services should receive them. We provide the following guidance for assessment and services within this framework.

It is the position of the Massachusetts School Psychologists Association that individual school psychologists, who are knowledgeable about assessment and particularly the standardization of various assessment measures, are in the best position to determine the types of assessments which can be and should be used to assess students regardless as to whether these tools are conducted face-to-face or in a remote setting. District administrators must collaborate with school psychologists and seek their input regarding which assessments can be and should be administered. There are critical issues in regard to validity when assessments are not conducted as they were intended or designed to be used.

MSPA would like to remind school psychologists to review NASP and APA ethical principles in regard to assessment, confidentiality, equity, and obligations to clients. The best approach for assessment is for the school psychologist to work face-to-face with a child with *proper safety precautions* to protect both the child and the school psychologist. When in-person assessment is not allowed by the district, the second-best option is to complete all assessments that can be ethically and safely administered and to postpone those assessments with agreement from parents whose validity and usefulness would be jeopardized. School psychologists should work with parents and administrators to assist them in understanding that when a tool is administered in a manner that is different from standardized procedures the data may be compromised and would therefore not be valid or useful.

When in-person evaluation is not possible, evaluators can gather relevant information remotely to address the child's presenting problems including: a detailed full record review, developmental history, both formal and informal interviews with parents and teachers, background history, previous observations of the student in school, reviews of previous testing, reviews of academic and behavioral performance, teacher reports of work samples, parent and student individual concerns, mailed and returned rating scales from parents and teachers (include stamped and self-addressed return envelope), information from the child's previous teachers, school medical records, and reports and data from outside providers who are knowledgeable about the student. When sharing potentially confidential information, school psychologists should be aware that the telephone is the most secure

option. When considering how to communicate with families, school psychologists should keep this in mind, review their district's policies, ethical guidelines, and choose an option that allows them to most effectively communicate with families. These assessment methods can be used to determine interim services and plans. Standardized assessment can be administered when face-to-face assessments are allowed by the district, if needed. School teams can work with districts to provide services through an interim special education plan, or through a district curriculum accommodation plan using multi-tiered systems of supports, or through early identification procedures allowed under IDEA.

If virtual tools are used as part of the evaluation process, consent forms should explain the serious limitations of these tools including that virtual tools have primarily been researched with adult populations or with students who have particular disorders and there is a serious *lack of research* on the effectiveness of virtual assessment with children with ethnic and cultural differences. With one exception standardized comprehensive assessment measures have not been developed for virtual assessment, and school professionals typically have not been trained to administer tools virtually. School psychologists cannot ethically administer assessment tools for which they have not been properly trained and are not experienced in using.

Further limitations to virtual assessment include the inability to fully observe children, the potential lack of an on-site trained proctor to assist young children or students with disabilities with the tests, concerns with reliability and validity, and the fact that some tests cannot be administered virtually (those with tasks that are visual or motor). If a decision is made by an individual school psychologist to utilize virtual tools, a thorough search of the literature should be conducted to determine the training and experience needed to administer these tools. The school psychologist should also seek consultation from professionals experienced in this type of administration. It is critical that school administrators fully understand that virtual assessment is one of the *least researched* areas of telehealth. High stakes decisions, including special education eligibility determinations, should not be made based primarily upon results from remote test administration.

It is also important for school psychologists and parents to understand issues of confidentiality that emerge when decisions are made to administer assessments virtually. These issues include the challenge of protecting information when online, rights to the data, who maintains ownership of data obtained through virtual means, and how confidential feedback is provided to parents about student performance when in-school meetings cannot take place.

Additionally, the decision to administer assessments remotely raises questions about equity and assessment. School psychologists need to be prepared to engage district administrators in conversations of equity should virtual assessment be considered. In order to administer assessments virtually Internet connectivity must be strong and reliable, families must have reliable computer access and knowledge of computer use, and there must be a quiet place within the home environment for assessment. There are potential language barriers. Districts need to consider whether interpreter services may need to be provided within the home environment. Proactive conversations about these and other issues should take place to reduce the barriers that some students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic homes, may face in accessing services. These considerations not only raise equity issues for families where assessment supports may not be feasible, but it also raises issues related to confidentiality and training.

Because of the many concerns associated with virtual assessment, it is also important to recognize the subsequent limitations of the data gathered through these methods and the implications that this has for recommendations to assist students. In all decisions that are made around this very important issue, school psychologists are reminded to focus on their ethical obligation to the student and his/her parents. The student should be at the center of all decisions made and any consideration to assess students should always be made with the student's best interests in mind. Nothing in this position paper should be construed to suggest that services should be delayed as students who may be disabled might need even more support when schools are not fully open than they might if schools

were fully open. As an advocate for students and as an expert in assessments associated with their specialty, the individual school psychologist is the individual who should be making assessment decisions and intervention recommendations after careful consideration of individual student needs.

With this in mind, MSPA urges individuals to consider the critical points as identified above:

- Keep ethical and legal principles in mind when planning how to assess students.
- School psychologists have limited to no training or experience in the use of virtual tools. School psychologists are ethically obligated to practice within their areas of competence.
- The use of virtual tools comes with significant limitations and ethical concerns.
- School psychologists are in the best position to determine which assessment tools and tests can and should be included when conducting assessments. There are many types of assessments that can be completed without being face-to-face with students. This is preferred over conducting a virtual assessment with a student that may produce data that is not valid or useable.
- Educate others about risks to validity, confidentiality, and ethics, when attempting to administer tools in a manner for which they have not been designed or standardized.
- We cannot and should not deny access to services students are entitled to receive under IDEA. There are multiple ways to provide needed services. These include an interim individualized education plan, district curriculum accommodation plans, multi-tiered systems of support, and early intervention services authorized by IDEA.

Most Informative Resources:

Farmer, R. L., McGill, R. J., Dombrowski, S. C., Benson, N. F., Smith-Kellen, S., Lockwood, A. B., Powell, S., Pynn, C., Stinnett, T. A. (2020a). Conducting psychoeducational assessments during the COVID-19 crisis: The danger of good intentions. *Contemporary School Psychology*, Advance online publication. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40688-020-00293-x>

Farmer, R. L., McGill, R. J., Dombrowski, S. C., McClain, M. B., Harris, B., Lockwood, A. B., Powell, S. L., Pynn, C., Smith-Kellen, S., Lowthen, E., Benson, N. F., & Stinnett, T. A. (2020b). Teleassessment with children and adolescents during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond: Practice and policy implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pro0000349>

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020, August). *COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions for Schools and Districts Regarding Special Education*. (Revised August 27, 2020). <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/sped.html>

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020, May). *COVID Special Education Technical Assistance Advisory 2020-2*. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2020-2covid-ta.html>

National Association of School Psychologists (2020). Virtual Service Delivery in Response to COVID-19 Disruptions. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/virtual-service-delivery-in-response-to-covid-19-disruptions>

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