Helping Relocated Students With Special Needs in Japan: Recommendations for Receiving Schools

The widespread destruction of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan significantly impacts all children and families forced to relocate to other communities. In addition to basic concerns for shelter, food, clothing and medical care, families face considerable difficulties addressing employment for adults and education for their children. Schools in communities where families have relocated also face challenges in providing appropriate levels of instruction and special services for all displaced students.

For children with disabilities, the challenges of relocation are compounded by the loss (temporary or permanent) of records documenting their history and current needs and the disruption in the delivery of appropriate services. For school receiving these students, the lack of access to due process documents, difficulties communicating with previous service providers, and unfamiliarity with students and families are further barriers to providing prompt and appropriate services. While guidance from national agencies must address legal issues, there are a number of steps that receiving schools can take to help relocated students with disabilities receive appropriate instruction and find success in their new schools.

Gathering Initial Information

Receiving school districts should be prepared to accept and enroll students temporarily living in their district. These students are entitled to the same services as any other student who is a resident of the district, including transportation and special education. All families enrolling relocated students should be given the opportunity to provide relevant information about their children's school and medical history. Some families may have been able to gather some records prior to evacuation, but many will arrive with little or no documentation about previous schooling or even birth certificates. It is essential that schools establish temporary enrollment files and not delay enrollments or placements for lack of official documentation. Changes can be made later as needed. Some basic information that should be gathered for all relocated students includes:

- Birthdate
- Current address, phone, e-mail if available
- Name and location of schools attended since kindergarten
- Name (and address if possible) of most recent health provider
- List of any special circumstances and services received (special education, speech therapy, early childhood programs, Gifted and Talented, grade retention, remedial classes, secondary language programs, etc.)
- Last grade attended
- List of any concerns parents have had in the past year regarding child's learning or behavior
- Names of any medications child takes regularly (or has taken in the past year)
- List of any health problems in past or of current concern
If parents indicate their child has received special education services, it is recommended that the parent provide a written and signed letter that states the child received special education services at the previous school and give the letter to the school principal. With this document on file, a member of the special education team should further interview the parent and ask the following questions:

- When did your child first receive an evaluation for special education or speech services?
- When did your child first have an IEP for special education services?
- What disabilities category(ies) were on the child’s IEP?
- Did your child receive special education services during the last school year?
- What services were on the IEP? Do you recall the names of the providers on the IEP?
- Was your child receiving services in a special class or special school program, or through resource classes/tutoring?
- Do you recall the approximate date of your child’s most recent special education evaluation or reevaluation?
- To the best of your recollection, what were the main concerns and findings of recent evaluations, and the main goals on the most recent IEP?
- When was your child’s most recent physical exam? Where there any concerns? Are there now or have there been significant health or medical concerns?
- Is you child now or has your child recently been on any prescription medications? (If yes, for what conditions?)
- What help do you think your child needs to succeed in school?

All newly relocated students should receive very general academic screening to aid in classroom placement and instructional planning. If your school conducts routine academic screening, include newly relocated students or administer the same screening procedures as soon as possible. (Do not conduct screening the day students arrive! Give them some time to acclimate to the new school.) Many students will perform sufficiently on such screening that classroom placement and planning can proceed as with any new student. However, some students may appear to have more significant needs, based on school-wide screening, parent reports of concerns or previous special education status, or initial teacher observations.

**Students With Disabilities or in Apparent Need for Services**

If students arrive with special education records from the past school year, you may be able to make decisions based on these records without further screening. However, many relocated students will arrive with few or no records at all. For students with insufficient records:

- Determine if the last school is open and if it is possible to access previous records.
- If records are not available, conduct individualized screening and progress monitoring to determine need for tentative placement and comprehensive assessment.

**Individualized screening** For students with apparent or reported special education needs who do not have current IEPs available, make an initial determination of areas of concern (reading, math, behavior, speech, etc.) based on parent interview and initial teacher observations. Conduct a screening of relevant academic skills in order to obtain a baseline from which to judge student progress over time.

**Curriculum Based Measurement** procedures offer a highly efficient and reliable means of obtaining information about decoding, comprehension, spelling, writing and math calculation skills; these “probes” can be administered using the current school curriculum materials, and can be readministered weekly in order to evaluate the student’s response to instruction in the classroom and thus gauge the need for more intensive instruction or intervention.
**Additional assessment and temporary placements.** Based on the results of this screening process, the special education team might support relocated students with disabilities (or who may have disabilities) by:

- Monitoring performance in the general education classroom for several weeks. (If progress is limited, consider the following steps.)
- Placing the student in a remedial program to more intensively address skill acquisition
- Initiating a comprehensive assessment (which could take place while ongoing monitoring or remedial instruction are provided)
- Placing the student on a temporary IEP with services that appear most appropriate to meet the student's needs, while developing and implementing a plan for a comprehensive assessment. Most prefectures have timelines in place for "interim" IEPs and services.

**Common Sense Programming**

Teams and families must exercise flexibility and creativity in initially addressing the needs of students with disabilities, often in the absence of an Individual Education Plans or due process record. For example, if there is a sudden influx of students needing services, it may be necessary for schools to be flexible in their approach to providing special education services, such as larger groupings of student with similar needs, self-paced instruction, computer-assisted learning, or peer tutoring. Rigid adherence to usual procedures will not be possible or will result in significant delays of needed services. Further, the consequences of delaying needed supports for students who have already lost their homes, communities, and much of their possessions and sense of security will only compound their losses and likely will result in an exacerbation of learning and behavior problems.

**Good faith efforts.** Teams should therefore make a good faith effort to determine a student's needs and provide services that appear to be in the student's best interest, pending receipt of records, completion of additional assessments, and most important, careful monitoring and evaluation of the student's progress in both the general education and special education environment, making modifications as needed. Often service needs can be determined without extensive assessment based on the student's response to well-designed and carefully evaluated intervention strategies. This is particularly critical in schools that receive significant numbers of relocated students.

**Cautions!** Teams should also exercise caution in interpreting screening and assessment results when considering students who have recently experienced a significant trauma. These students will not likely perform optimally for some time after relocation. They likely will have lost some learning time in the transition and most will face a learning environment that may be very different from their previous experience-a different curriculum, different expectations, a new peer group, and for many a "culture shock" of a very different community. Many will arrive with little in the way of possessions and few if any supports outside the immediate family. Many students will exhibit behavior problems that are not typical of their personal histories-such as more acting out or more withdrawn behavior, emotional outbursts and lability, etc. For students with no reported history of serious behavior and emotional difficulties, a classification of emotional/behavioral disorders should be delayed until sufficient data can be collected over time and situational stress reactions can be ruled out. Teams should also exhibit caution in making a determination of severe learning problems for students with no such reported history as trauma can significant impact long-term memory, acquiring new skills, concentration, etc.
Staff Training Needs

Ideally the receiving school already has in place reliable and efficient screening procedures, progress monitoring, and problem solving approaches to assessment and disability determination. There are resources available to help schools implement such procedures as Curriculum Based Assessment and comprehensive, problem-solving approaches to intervention planning and special education placement. Some schools may wish to access specific training available from nearby universities, departments of education, or nearby school districts.

Addressing Parent Needs

Parents of children with disabilities often need extra support, particularly when dealing with a new school setting and new prefecture rules and procedures. Relocated families in particular will likely need guidance in order to better advocate for their children and identify appropriate community resources. If your community has an advocacy center or organization for families of children with disabilities, be sure parents have contact information. It might help to pair relocated families with families who are familiar with the local disabilities community. If there are significant numbers of relocated families of children with disabilities, a member of the special education team might establish a support group to help parents with common concerns find resources and support from each other. The school psychologists or social worker might be able to facilitate such a resource; the school nurse might be helpful in assisting families identify health providers in the community.

Summary

Compliance with national regulations is of course critical for all children with disabilities. For the thousands of students who have relocated due to the devastation of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and for the thousands of students with disabilities who have been displaced to new schools, new districts, and new prefectures, it is most important that their immediate learning needs are identified and that they begin to receive support as soon as possible—even before records are found or comprehensive assessments are completed. Best practices tempered with common sense and compassion will ease the transition for all students and families.

Resources

National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org
Japanese Association of Educational Psychology http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/jaep/index.html

読者を向かって子供たちへの支援: 受け入れ校へのアドバイス  (Japanese translation)

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