



South Carolina Association of School Psychologists

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May 8th, 2020

South Carolina Department of Education

1429 Senate St,
Columbia, SC 29201

RE: Special Education Evaluations During COVID-19

I am writing on behalf of the South Carolina Association of School Psychologists and school psychologists practicing across the state, in response to the South Carolina Department of Education Memorandum that was sent to District Superintendents on May 4th, 2020 entitled Face-to-Face Services and Support to Students and Families. We are concerned with the guidance that face-to-face assessments, evaluations, and screenings can be considered if agreed upon by districts and parents. The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges in regard to ethical assessment and decision making practices. We ask you to consider the following:

- We believe that bringing students in for evaluations negates the spirit of the social distancing guidelines provided by DHEC and the CDC and puts children, school psychologists, and school staff in undue risk.
- In addition, the unique circumstances pose validity issues which must be addressed when assessments are taking place in a time of anxiety for youth, their families and caregivers, and school personnel. The likelihood of making inappropriate eligibility determinations based on invalid assessment data is high.
- School Psychologists are not typically trained or competent in completing evaluations through electronic means. The standardized tests used (i.e. IQ tests, formal achievement tests) are not designed to be administered electronically more or less outside of a school setting during a pandemic crisis. In short, the administration of tests must be given through the means in which they were standardized. Deviations from standardization must be reported and, at times, can invalidate test results, which could potentially impact eligibility determinations.

- If evaluations are to be conducted remotely, they should be conducted through platforms specifically designed for that purpose. At this time, such delivery would also require training beyond the evaluator, but also include training for the student and adult facilitator (likely parent/caregiver) who is assisting the student at home. It is unlikely the appropriate supports can be developed quickly.

With consideration of the ethical implications and irresponsible assessment practices, the South Carolina Association of School Psychologists strongly recommends upholding the advice provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights as follows, "If an evaluation of a student with a disability requires a face-to-face assessment or observation, the evaluation would need to be delayed until school reopens. Evaluations and re-evaluations that do not require face-to-face assessments or observations may take place while schools are closed, so long as a student's parent or legal guardian consents." We ask that South Carolina adopt similar guidelines during this delicate and uncertain time. In addition, we recognize that a one size fits all approach likely will not work; districts have unique needs. However, we would like to make general recommendations to the various educational stakeholders involved in service provision. We have summarized these recommendations in the attached *Recommendations for Stakeholders* document. Our goal as school psychologists is to consider the best interests of the students and families we serve, while not abandoning their social, emotional, academic, and mental health needs. We have an ethical responsibility to maintain the highest standard for professional practices in educational and psychological assessment.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Philip Young". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Philip Young

SCASP President (on behalf of the SCASP Board)



Recommendations for Stakeholders

What Superintendents, Deputy Superintendents, Directors Special Education & Student Services Can Do:

- Agree within districts and among districts to cease evaluations (initial evaluations and re-evaluations) until state entities determine that it is safe for schools to re-open and students to return to school.
- Provide a message indicating such to parents/guardians via district and school websites.
- Share the message with all educational stakeholders.
- Promote clear and consistent communication throughout the pandemic so that parents/guardians of students with suspected disabilities and those who have been identified with disabilities know that supports will be available.
- Enable your school psychologists to provide the critically important work of supporting students through this pandemic through the provision of mental health supports (provided virtually to students), professional learning opportunities for instructional staff, and addressing barriers to learning in these unique times.

What Supervisors of School Psychological Services Can Do:

- Support and encourage school psychologists to engage in the meaningful work:
 - Creating and disseminating self-care resources for school professionals during this stressful time.
 - Creating and disseminating self-care resources for students and families including ways families can talk to students about the pandemic.
 - Engaging in virtual or phone counseling with students or families to address the mental health needs of students.
 - Creating professional development resources for staff in how to support the social emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students in a virtual environment.
 - Partnering with the community to support families and students with accessing and understanding technology for virtual services.

What the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) Can Do:

- First, we ask the SCDE to release guidance to districts indicating that evaluations and decision-making around eligibility related to those evaluations be suspended during this unprecedented time of crisis.

- We believe that a mutually agreed upon extension of the timeline as instructed by OCR and OSERS has barriers. These barriers include the logistics of individual communication with all parents who have provided consent for evaluations which have not been completed, providing Prior Written Notice, documenting the outcome, etc. As a result, we ask that you grant a waiver to remove the requirements of timelines for evaluations that is not contingent upon receipt of the mutually agreed upon extension.
- Further, we ask that you hold harmless districts who are unable to comply with evaluation timelines (i.e., Indicator 11 of the State Performance Plan which measures the percentage of children with parental consent to evaluate, who were evaluated within the State established timeline) or who are unable to obtain mutually agreed upon extensions.

How can districts prioritize evaluations when they resume:

1. Complete/finish any signed initial and triennial assessments.
2. Begin initial assessments of students whose school staff recognize there is an urgent need as soon as possible.
3. Begin assessments of students who come from outside of the district and who, based on their current IEPs, do not appear to be appropriately placed.
4. Review any initial assessment plans that were in development prior to shelter in place, including preschool transition evaluations that had been put on hold (in order of birthday - oldest child first).
5. Complete triennials in order of due date (oldest past due is first).