



## Don't confuse distance learning with home instruction, homebound services

With so many students receiving instruction in their kitchens and living rooms during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may seem appropriate to use "home instruction" or "homebound services" as a synonym for distance learning. However, educators who use these terms interchangeably may be creating unnecessary confusion for both parents and district administrators.

"Home instruction" and "homebound services" have specific meanings in the context of special education:

- **Home instruction** is a placement on the least restrictive environment continuum. An IEP team may only place a student with a disability on home instruction if it determines she can't receive FAPE in a less restrictive setting.
- **Homebound services** are available to any student, regardless of disability status, who will be absent for an extended period of time (usually at least two or three weeks) due to illness or injury. For example, if a student with dyslexia will miss three weeks of school while recovering from surgery to repair a broken bone, he may be eligible for homebound services.

Neither of these definitions fits the distance learning model that many districts have adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. That's because the shift to distance learning stemmed from widespread school closures -- a circumstance that affected all students -- as opposed to the educational or medical needs of a student with a disability. Although students with disabilities may be completing lessons at home (just like their nondisabled classmates), they are not receiving "home instruction" or "homebound services."

## Potential for confusion

Educators tend to conflate these terms even under the best of circumstances. However, using "home instruction" or "homebound services" when talking about distance learning programs may inadvertently lead a parent to believe that the district has changed the placement of a student with a disability or that the student has educational needs the district hasn't yet addressed.

For example, if a teacher mistakenly refers to a child's distance learning activities as "home instruction," a parent might wonder whether the district changed the child's educational placement as a result of the pandemic. This could result in confusion over the child's placement once in-school instruction resumes, a stay-put claim, or a due process complaint about the parent's participation in the IEP process.

Districts can help minimize the likelihood of such confusion (and potential litigation) by reminding teachers and other relevant personnel to use the correct terminology when referring to remote learning activities. Administrators can accomplish this by:

- **Defining key terms.** The district may wish to send out a short email defining distance learning (i.e., any arrangement in which the teacher and the student are in different locations), home instruction, and homebound services.

- **Offering guidance as needed.** Some educators may need additional clarification on the differences between these types of programs. Encourage them to ask questions as needed and provide answers in a timely manner.
- **Setting a good example.** When administrators use the terms "distance learning," "home instruction," and "homebound services" correctly, teachers and other service providers are more likely to follow. Be sure to use these terms correctly in all communications or publications the district might send out.

*See also:*

- [Misuse of 'distance learning' terminology can cause real problems for districts](#)
- [Home-Based Programming for Students With Disabilities: How to Develop and Implement Compliant Programs](#) by Amy E. Slater, Esq.
- [CHART: Home instruction vs. homebound services](#)

[Amy E. Slater, Esq.](#), covers special education legal issues for LRP Publications.

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