



Guidance for School-Based Evaluations during COVID-19 ***August 19, 2020***

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the entire field of education into uncharted territory. From full shutdown to variable remote learning systems, school psychologists throughout the state have shown flexibility and ingenuity in continuing to support the learning, mental health, and behavior needs of Delaware's children.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) [2020 Professional Standards and Practice Model and the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics](#) provides professional and ethical guidance for school psychologists. These national standards play a role in both typical practice as well as practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reviewing these standards may help school psychologists with decision-making and advocating both for themselves as well as for students, staff, and families.

As various stakeholders at both the state and local levels make decisions regarding the 2020-2021 school year, school psychologists throughout the state have reached out to the Delaware Association of School Psychologists (DASP) with questions and concerns regarding what school psychological practice may look like. This has heavily focused on questions and concerns around completing school-based evaluations. DASP has reviewed a variety of resources and research, and notes the following areas below with guidance for practitioners in the upcoming year.

As time continues forward, school psychologists are receiving increasing pressure to complete evaluations in order to maintain compliance with state and federal mandates. While evaluations are important, it is necessary for school psychologists to balance this need to complete evaluations with both the health and safety of themselves and of students, as well as their ethical responsibilities. In addition to the DASP document titled [COVID-19 Guidance - Delaware March 30, 2020](#), below are some areas and topics to consider as we begin the 2020-2021 school year.

Evaluation Reliability and Validity

As we review various components related to evaluations and assessment, we will discuss the ongoing concerns regarding reliability and validity. While school psychologist graduate training programs are grounded in these concepts, it is vital to briefly review these terms because of how important they are to assessment and high-stakes decisions around special education.

Generally speaking, **reliability** refers to consistency between multiple administrations of a single tool. **Validity** explains if an assessment is accurately measuring what it claims to measure.

Tests that are administered as part of psychoeducational evaluations are **standardized**, meaning that they are administered under standard conditions. The test developers determine what those standard conditions are. Conditions involve how to prepare the testing environment, what specific wording school psychologists use to explain to the student how to do each assessment task, and which items should be administered. School psychologists can then compare that student's performance to other students who have taken the same test under the same conditions. By keeping the conditions the same, school psychologists can be more confident that, if the student does better (or worse) than other students on a particular task, then it is most likely due to the student having better (or worse) skills than those students.

If school psychologists change the conditions under which they ask a student to do those same tasks, they introduce other factors that could influence how a student performs. For example, if a student correctly solves a math problem with a calculator, but students in the “standard condition” were not permitted to use calculators, it is uncertain if the student solved the problem correctly because they understood the problem or because they had a calculator. Each change that takes us further away from that “standard condition” introduces additional factors that could account for the student’s performance and limits school psychologists’ ability to use the student performance under that “standard condition” as a measuring stick to assess the student’s true skills. This is the issue that school psychologists face if they try to administer an assessment where the “standard condition” is altered in any way. Any alteration to this standardization - be it modifications to in-person format or a virtual administration - will alter the validity of that assessment.

The tests that school psychologists use typically have strong validity and reliability. However, there are many other tests on the market, and it is the responsibility of school psychologists to select only those with the technical specifications that meet the high standard to be used for special education eligibility determination.

Record Review Re-Evaluations

It is important to consider that while students require an evaluation when looking at special education services, the completion of one-to-one testing is an assessment procedure that, while often used, may not be required in all situations. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be possible to complete re-evaluations for special education services without requiring additional testing. One-to-one assessments should only occur in situations where it is absolutely necessary to obtain additional data to consider all areas of suspected disability. In order to minimize the risk factors associated with one-to-one assessment (e.g. spread of the virus between individuals and validity and reliability due to changes in standardization), record review re-evaluations may be the best option.

In these specific situations, re-evaluations should be seen as part of an ongoing data collection procedure, for which we continue to compile evidence from multiple sources related to

areas of need and determine potential areas to target for specialized instruction. As part of an evaluation that does not obtain direct one-to-one testing, both historical (at least since the last psychoeducational evaluation) and up-to-date information should still be obtained from a variety of sources. This would include, but is not limited to, student/parent/teacher feedback, classroom-based measures and assessments, all previous psychoeducational evaluation testing results, other standardized testing data, and progress of both IEP goals and grades.

Face-to-Face Evaluations

In some districts across the state, face to face evaluations have resumed. This goes against the current position statement from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), which noted, “If an evaluation of a student with a disability requires face-to-face assessment or observation, the evaluation would need to be delayed until school reopens.” (OCR, 2020). DASP understands the pressures that school districts are currently facing regarding completion of evaluations. In these instances, teams should be thoughtful in planning to only have face-to-face assessments that are necessary. The Maryland School Psychologists’ Association (MSPA) (MSPA, 2020) noted considering if the risk of contracting COVID-19 outweighs the need for the evaluation to take place.

If any face-to-face testing is to occur, it must do so following strict health and safety guidelines in order to ensure the safety of the school psychologist as well as the student and their family. These safety procedures should be CDC compliant, documented, and shared with all stakeholders both within the district and the school community as a whole. Considerations for these plans must include the following:

1. All students and evaluators must receive COVID-19 screening by appropriate district personnel (i.e. school nurse) at the testing site prior to the evaluation, such as temperature checks and symptom questionnaires.
2. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must be provided and used for both the student and staff. This should include consideration of face masks and face shields. For further reference, see the 8/11/20 CDC [Guidance for K-12 School Administrators on the Use of Cloth Face Coverings in Schools](#).
3. Evaluators must be provided with a testing space that allows them to maintain 6 feet of distance between themselves and students at all times. The space should provide adequate air flow and exchange as well. This may result in buildings setting up new locations specific to the evaluation process.
4. Materials and equipment utilized in testing should be sanitized or be disposable if possible (i.e. pencils). Cleaning solution should be provided to sanitize all materials.

Even if these safety procedures occur, there is still a significant chance for contamination between students and school psychologists, especially for younger students or students who have difficulty using PPE. This causes additional pause for the decision to complete in-person

assessments. Additionally, the validity and reliability of any assessment would be called into question, given these assessments were not normed in a testing environment that included PPE, physical distancing, etc. Further, these safety procedures may affect results due to various factors, including ability to establish rapport, difficulty following prompting instructions, and inability to administer certain parts or whole assessments in this structure.

Virtual Evaluations

Another area that raises many concerns is the topic of conducting virtual evaluations. Given the current climate, a push to have evaluations be completed virtually is understandable, as it is seemingly a way to maintain the health and safety of all involved while also providing data to use for decision-making. However, there are significant concerns in the validity and reliability of any traditionally in-person assessment completed virtually, as normative data for these tools did not include virtual administration. In addition, some assessments that have been normed in a virtual format have normative samples that are questionable. School psychologists need to continue to evaluate the tools utilized, not picking something less reliable and less valid just because it fits the situation. Doing so results in potentially invalid data being utilized when making eligibility and programming decisions for students, which could lead to the misidentification of students. As these are high-stakes decisions, they require a higher standard of reliability and validity. Unfortunately, many of the assessments currently on the market that are promoted for virtual administration do NOT meet these high standards.

In addition, school psychologists have an ethical responsibility to practice within the scope of their training. Remote assessments fall outside this domain for most practicing school psychologists, as training in these areas are not part of graduate programs. Additional training would need to be provided to start consideration of these areas. In addition, school psychologists need to use assessment techniques and practices that the profession considers to be responsible, research-based practice (NASP Ethical Code).

As noted in the American Psychological Association's (APA) guidelines for the practice of telepsychology, there are many considerations to be made that may impact virtual assessment. First, access to technology (e.g. cell phone, internet) may impact the validity of the assessment. For example, students may be able to utilize additional tabs on internet browsers to search answers, or utilize calculators on their phone. Also, it is unknown if the student is receiving support from someone off screen; potential help from other individuals out of sight causes additional challenges to the validity of the assessment. There are also significant concerns with assessments being potentially videoed and shared, causing significant damage to the validity and reliability of strong in-person assessments. In addition, consideration needs to be made to the quality of technologies being utilized. Examinees may have limited access to technology, or lower quality technology, that may also impact them at a rate different from peers with better technology. This creates an equity issue. For example, fluency based measures that are timed may be directly affected due to internet connectivity issues or issues with hardware capabilities. Technological factors, such as outdated hardware, limits on internet bandwidth and connectivity, and technological fluency, should be considered.

Report Documentation

There are many factors resulting from COVID-19 that will have a direct impact on how school psychologists will need to consider writing their psychoeducational evaluation reports and the Evaluation Summary Reports. It is important that any report indicate these factors so that eligibility teams will have an accurate lens through which to review data appropriately. Not doing so provides misinformation and may result in students not receiving appropriate services that target their needs. Below are some areas to consider as report writing begins:

- **Trauma Impact**: It is important to consider that we are still in the midst of an ongoing, long-lasting, traumatic experience. This may have an impact on many factors of a student's functioning both in a testing session as well as general functioning.
- **Evaluation Environment**: Any difference from a typical evaluation session should be noted and potential validity concerns discussed. This includes PPE utilized, student reaction to these safety protocols, and the potential impact it has on rapport building with the student.
- **Student Learning Environment**: As there is variation in how students will receive their education (i.e. remote, hybrid, in person), documentation of this should be provided along with its alignment to various assessment procedures. For example, noting the format of observation (online, in person), and specific features that are unique to these circumstances.
- **Standardization of Assessment Tools**: Some assessment tools may be used outside of their intended, standardized, system. This may include alterations made due to the format of the testing, or other factors. For example, rating scales often include a window of time for observation that was meant to be in-person. This will call into question the validity of any rating scale completed by staff who only have accessed the student either virtually, or have not interacted with the student in person since March 2020.

Eligibility Decision-Making

Ultimately, the purpose of psychoeducational evaluations is to provide data on students in order to determine if a student meets criteria as a student with a disability, requires specialized instruction, and decide in what areas they may require this support. Caution will need to be taken when reviewing any data collected from March 2020 to the present. As mentioned previously, it is the role of the school psychologist not only to compile data, but to assist teams with interpretation. Many factors will need to be considered in the course of the decision making, including the following:

- **Lack of Instruction**: Given the closure, students have had variable instruction compared to typical environments, which may have resulted in unfinished learning. This may play a role in any student data compiled.

- Emotional/Behavioral Functioning: Students may have adverse reactions to COVID-19, and the many changes to their world may cause them to experience internalizing and externalizing problems not before seen.
- Variation in assessment procedures completed: Regardless of what decisions Local Education Agencies (LEA) make in terms of how evaluations will be completed, there will be variations in assessment procedures compared to typical situations. These should be reviewed during the eligibility discussion as well as their potential impacts to the reliability and validity of the assessment. For example, typical classroom observations will be unable to be completed in situations where school is occurring remotely.

Summary/Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the educational arena for all professionals. Given current federal guidelines, special education evaluation procedures need to continue to determine eligibility for students. However, as mentioned, there are significant considerations that need to be made when continuing this process. These considerations include weighing the costs and benefits of face-to-face evaluations, maintaining the health and safety of students and practitioners if face-to-face evaluations are completed, and noting all reliability and validity concerns given these circumstances. In addition, while virtual assessments seem appealing due to maintaining the safety of students and practitioners, there are significant concerns associated with them.

Overall, it is the stance of DASP that the physical and psychological health and safety is the priority for all students, staff, and families. School psychologists need to think through an ethical and equitable lens throughout all decision-making, both now and in typical practice. In addition, school psychologists will need to continue to review and follow updated guidance as it comes from federal, state, and local levels.

Sincerely,

The Delaware Association of School Psychologists Executive Board

References:

- [APA Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology](#)
- [CDC Guidance for K-12 School Administrators on the Use of Cloth Face Coverings in Schools](#)
- [DASP COVID-19 Guidance - Delaware March 30, 2020](#)
- [MSPA \(2020\). Assessment During COVID-19 School Closures, Maryland School Psychologists' Association White Paper](#)
- [NJASP Guidance: In-person Administration, Scoring, and Interpretation of Standardized Assessments During Covid-19](#)
- [US DOE OCR March 16, 2020 Fact Sheet: Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students](#)

Resources:

- [CASP School Psychology Practice during COVID Series #1 - Assessment Guidance](#)
- [COVID-19 CRISIS - Returning to School After COVID-19: Strategies for Schools Communiqué Volume 48, Number 8 \(June 2020\) \(NASP\) - *NASP Members Only*](#)
- [NASP 2020 Professional Standards and Practice Model and the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics](#)
- [NASP COVID-19: Resource Center](#)
- [NASP Ethics Advisory Bulletin: Preventing and Resisting Administrative Pressure to Practice Unethically \(2015\)](#)