



The New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) recognizes the extraordinary challenges that the COVID-19 outbreak presents to schools in meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. NYASP, as the organization representing school psychologists across New York State, is dedicated to assisting schools in meeting these challenges.

NYASP understands that now, more than ever, the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students, families, and educators is of the greatest import. In losing the ability to attend school, students have lost important connections to peers and supportive adults, including school psychologists. These professionals have been working diligently to connect with students and families to offer support during this time.

While there are many challenges that schools are facing, we would like to address the specific issue of “virtual evaluations,” as they relate to the provision of special education services. NYASP appreciates the flexibility provided at the federal and state level which recognizes that conducting evaluations with students presents some unique circumstances. Based on the March 27, 2020 memo from NYSED, “Evaluations and reevaluations, including bilingual evaluations, that do not require face-to-face evaluations or observations may take place while schools are closed, if the parent consents. If an evaluation of a student with a disability requires a face-to-face meeting or observation, the evaluation would need to be delayed until school reopens. A reevaluation may be conducted by reviewing existing evaluation data.” Determining appropriate evaluation tools to obtain needed information to guide a student’s educational program is challenging at the present time. Testing of cognitive and academic functioning, as well evaluation of social, emotional, and behavioral functioning is part of what school psychologists do in the schools. NYASP would like to offer the following comments and guidance on the appropriate use of tele-evaluation practices during this time.

Concerns Related to Administration of Cognitive and Achievement Tests

School psychologists are experts in test measurement design and interpretation. Understanding the norming process for test instruments and standardized administration protocols is critical for obtaining valid and reliable results. Without valid and reliable outcomes, the resulting test data have no value in contributing to recommendations for a student’s educational program. The most frequently used cognitive and academic evaluation instruments have not been normed for virtual administration. The standardized protocol for administering these instruments have not been developed for tele-evaluation. Therefore, NYASP does not recommend administering standardized cognitive or achievement tests virtually and urges extreme caution in administering any test that is designed for one-on-one, in person administration. Additionally, an important part of administering these tests in a valid manner is controlling the testing environment so that it is quiet, calm, and free of distractions. This would not be possible during a tele-evaluation situation, in which the student may be sitting at home and the school psychologist would likely be unaware of what his or her broader surroundings are like.



Concerns Related to Social, Emotional, and Behavior Evaluation

Another evaluation technique commonly used by school psychologists to conduct comprehensive psychological evaluations is the use of behavioral and social/emotional rating scales. These are typically completed by the student and/or someone who knows the student well (e.g., parent or teacher). Many rating scales are available online and can be completed via secure online platforms. For some students, the virtual administration of rating scales is still possible during this time. However, this may not be possible in all circumstances because of issues related to access to and proficiency with technology. Some families do not have reliable access to the internet. Additionally, unless a school district has an account with a publishing company that allows for virtual administration of rating scales, school psychologists will not have access to this option. It is unethical to copy and/or scan copyrighted material to send to parents. Therefore, caution is urged for schools that do not have an online subscription for virtual administration of behavioral rating scales.

Additional Areas of Concern

Current circumstances dictate that testing would be taking place in a time of heightened anxiety, uncertainty, and possibly trauma for youth, families and caregivers, and school personnel. This may result in students performing differently on tests than they otherwise would. The possibility of making inappropriate eligibility determinations based on invalid evaluation data is heightened. This could lead to CSEs over-identifying students with disabilities.

Additionally, individual evaluations require direct classroom-based observation of the student in the child's learning environment to document their academic performance and behavior in areas of difficulty. As classroom observations are impossible during this time, this requirement would have to be waived.

Recommendations

While there are significant concerns for virtual evaluation, the following recommendations are offered:

- Evaluations must be administered in the manner in which they were developed and validated. If adaptations are made for remote administration, there must be high-quality evidence that such adaptations produce results that are similarly reliable and valid to the face-to-face administration. Any such adaptations should be documented in the evaluation report.
- Evaluations should be administered remotely only on platforms designed for that purpose. Appropriate training is needed for both the school psychologist and any individual at home who assists the student. Even when appropriate supports are available, school psychologists should still identify and report any validity issues given the student's level of anxiety, disruptions during the testing session, etc.
- Although rating scales, interviews, and possibly home-based observations could be conducted remotely, it is important to remember that students' social, emotional, and behavioral functioning during school closure may not be typical for that student. This may reduce the utility of those



evaluations, particularly when planning interventions that may eventually be delivered when school resumes.

- Some reevaluation decisions can be made based on data available prior to the school's closure. School psychologists should carefully consider whether there is sufficient evidence to support the continued need for special education services without further 1:1 testing for individual students.
- Part 200 defines an individual psychological evaluation as a process which uses “a variety of psychological and educational techniques and examinations in the student's native language, to study and describe a student's developmental, learning, behavioral and other personality characteristics.” NYASP recommends that the “techniques and examinations” herein be understood as including clinical judgement, observation data, record reviews, existing progress monitoring data, performance on state and local tests, phone interviews, and rating scales and questionnaires administered online.
- Consideration of developmental factors and age of the student is important. Younger children may need greater supervision and support during a virtual evaluation, whereas older youth may be more independent in responding to test items.
- If the evaluation or reevaluation cannot be completed safely, ethically, and/or legally, school personnel should communicate with parents about this and request extensions to timelines until a date when the comprehensive evaluation can be completed with integrity.

Ultimately, the determination of what tests to give as part of an individual psychological evaluation has always been left up to the professional judgment of the school psychologist completing the evaluation. During the time that schools are closed due to COVID-19, or any other future public health emergency, NYASP recommends that evaluations be administered in a legal, ethical, and valid manner using the guidance above.

NYASP would like to reiterate that many of the direct services that school psychologists provide in schools, such as counseling to address emotional difficulties or consultation with teachers, administrators, and parents, can be provided virtually. In addition, evaluations that do not require face-to-face testing can still be completed, with parent permission.