



The New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) recently released a statement related to “Virtual Assessment of Children” during the pandemic. NYASP recognizes that we are all living and working under extraordinary conditions. The disruption to the lives of children and youth and the impact of this crisis are of significant concern to school psychologists. While conditions have changed under which school psychologists perform their work, it is clear that our services remain critical to helping students access appropriate educational and mental health supports. Assessment continues to be an essential activity for school psychologists to engage in to help students learn and thrive within the educational context. Alternative strategies to assessment and the delivery of supports to students are imperative during this crisis. Further, NYASP recognizes that potential changes in assessment practices reflect an adaptation to current circumstances and may not represent ongoing practices when school buildings reopen.

NYASP’s recent statement regarding virtual assessment is clear in raising concerns regarding the use of procedures that require face-to-face testing with students. To reiterate:

- Assessments must be administered in the manner in which they were developed and validated. If adaptations are made for remote administration, there should 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.
- Assessments 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 sessions, etc.
- 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

**However, this guidance should not be interpreted to indicate that no assessment of students can occur under our current circumstances.** In fact, the NYASP statement indicates that:

- 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, record reviews, existing progress monitoring data, performance on state and local tests, phone interviews, and rating scales and questionnaires administered online.

To explore this further, alternatives to face-to-face assessment may include the following:

### Preschool Level Assessment

An individual evaluation of a preschool child must include information about functional areas related to cognitive, language and communicative, adaptive, social-emotional, and motor development in order to determine the child's individual needs. A variety of assessment tools and procedures should be used to gather relevant functional and developmental information related to the preschool child's participation in appropriate activities. Both formal and informal evaluation strategies are appropriate in the evaluation of preschool children. Formal strategies use standardized criterion- or norm-referenced instruments, which are developmentally appropriate for preschool children. In addition to standardized tests, practitioners may use informal measures. These strategies include non-standardized instruments such as checklists, developmental rating scales, observations, interviews, teacher reports and performance-based assessments that are developmentally appropriate for the preschool child. Informal evaluation strategies rely upon the knowledge and judgment of the professional and are an integral part of the evaluation.

Some instruments can be both formal and informal tools. For example, the observation may incorporate structured observation instruments as well as other informal observation procedures, including professional judgment. When evaluating a child's developmental level, a professional may use a formal adaptive rating scale while simultaneously using professional judgment to assess the child's motivation and behavior during the evaluation process. In fact, guidance is offered on the use of various assessment strategies for preschool students

(<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/publications/preschool/guide/indeval.htm>). These include:

1. *Interview* - Information is gathered by interviewing family members/caregivers and/or teachers about the child's abilities, strengths and weaknesses and their concerns about the child's development and learning.
2. *Play* - Evaluation during play provides important information about a child's developmental skills such as cognitive/perceptual motor skills, language skills, fine and gross motor skills, social-emotional skills and daily living skills.
3. *Ecologically-based Assessment* - This is also referred to as a naturalistic evaluation of context. This technique focuses on the physical and interpersonal attributes of the setting in which the child's behavior occurs. Physical attributes include spatial arrangements, lighting, and noise; interpersonal attributes include family, peer, and teacher relationships.
4. *Arena Style Evaluation* - The multidisciplinary team simultaneously evaluates a child using formal and/or informal evaluation strategies. Team members should design a schema prior to the evaluation so that a common sample of behaviors can be observed. In using this technique, one team member facilitates interaction with the child while the other team members observe and record the child's performance across all testing domains.
5. *Individual Assessments* - Individual discipline-specific evaluations of the child are performed separately by each member of the multidisciplinary team using both formal and informal evaluation strategies, (for example, speech, motor, etc.).

The psychological evaluation assesses a student's cognitive, developmental, behavioral and emotional status. School psychologists may review existing evaluation data and other information from the family to determine if such assessments or evaluations fulfill the requirements of the individual evaluation. Examples of other appropriate assessments or evaluations are as follows:

- **Cognitive Evaluation** - Information about a child's cognitive functioning may be obtained from sources in addition to the formal psychological assessment. A cognitive assessment measures attention span, thinking processes, and concept formation, as well as visual discrimination, imitation, memory, sequencing, classification, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. This assessment provides developmental skill levels and areas of strength and weakness, as well as learning styles. The cognitive evaluation process can use a variety of formal and informal assessment strategies. Many assessment instruments that utilize reports from others, observation, and material in the child's environment are frequently used (e.g., DAYC-2, DP-3).
- **Adaptive Behavior** - Adaptive behavior is defined as the performance of developmentally appropriate daily activities required to meet personal needs and social responsibility. Areas of adaptive behavior to be assessed include, self-help skills, play skills, learning styles, communication skills, motor skills, and social interaction/behavioral skills. The adaptive behavior evaluation process can use a variety of formal and informal assessment strategies (e.g., Vineland-3, ABAS-3) and are often completed through the use of an interview or questionnaire.
- **Social-Emotional** - A social-emotional evaluation measures interpersonal relationships, social interaction skills with adults and peers, learning styles, personality traits, and social-emotional development. The social-emotional assessment process can use a variety of formal and informal assessment strategies and ratings scales and are often completed through the use of an interview or questionnaire (e.g., BASC-3).
- **Functional Behavior** - A functional behavioral assessment is the process of identifying behavioral concerns that impede learning or participation in developmentally appropriate activities. A functional behavioral assessment is not a separate evaluation component from the multidisciplinary evaluation process. Information from the psychological observation may be used in the functional behavioral assessment. This type of assessment often involves reviewing curriculum, instructional and motivational variables in relation to a student's behavior and/or examining classroom arrangements. A functional behavioral assessment may include, but not be limited to, indirect assessment, such as structured interviews and review of existing evaluation information, and direct assessment, such as standardized assessments or checklists, observation and recording situational factors surrounding the behavior, and data analysis such as a comparison and analysis of data to determine whether or not there are patterns associated with the behavior.
- **Observation** - Observing the behavior of a child in a natural setting is a required part of the evaluation process. A natural setting may include the classroom, playground, restroom, bus, or home. Observations should occur in places familiar to the child where he or she is comfortable and will have the opportunity to demonstrate typical behaviors. Observations add a critical dimension to the evaluation process, particularly when they are used in conjunction with objective tests, behavioral checklists, questionnaires, interviews, a videotape of the child in a familiar or natural setting and other evaluation strategies. This observation may be completed in

conjunction with the administration of another evaluation component such as the psychological or other needed assessments and evaluations.

### School-aged Assessment

While assessing school-aged students presents challenges at the current time, school psychologists are encouraged to utilize existing data and alternative strategies to determine educational needs. NYASP continues to endorse that if a face-to face assessment is needed as a part of the individual psychological evaluation, that this evaluation is delayed until such time that it can be conducted in a safe manner. However, for school-aged children, it is important to highlight that there may be alternatives and there are times when not every child requires a face-to-face evaluation. Such situations may include:

- Although an individual psychological evaluation is a required part of all initial evaluations, it is important to note that Part 200 allows for this requirement to be waived by the school psychologist if they determine that available data is sufficient to determine students' needs. The school psychologist is required to write a report indicating the data reviewed and the reason no further testing is required. This might be the case in the primary problem is a speech-language concern or an orthopedic concern, where the psychological is not needed to determine the presence of a disability and need for specially designed instruction.
- As indicated earlier, 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, record reviews, existing progress monitoring data, performance on state and local tests, phone interviews, and rating scales and questionnaires administered online.
- It is important to remember that districts are also permitted to use a Response to Intervention (RTI) process to determine eligibility as a student with a learning disability. Specifically, it is noted that a student may be eligible as a student with a learning disability if a student has not made sufficient progress to meet age or state-approved grade-level standards in reading, writing, math, or language, when using a process based on the student's response to scientific research-based intervention.

While not specifically related to virtual assessment, districts should consider implementation of evidence-based general education supports of appropriate frequency and intensity prior to consideration of an individual evaluation. NYSED has provided guidance on the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) to determine the level of need for educational supports for school-aged students

(<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/RTI/guidance-oct10.pdf> ). RTI represents an important educational strategy to close achievement gaps for all students, including students at risk, students with disabilities and English language learners, by preventing smaller learning problems from becoming insurmountable gaps. It has also been shown to lead to more appropriate identification of and interventions with students with learning disabilities. While RTI is a framework that guides the provision of educational and behavioral supports along a continuum or "tiers," it is important to note that it is designed to provide the appropriate level of services based upon data that indicates how the student is performing or responding to instructional opportunities. Students should not have to "wait to fail" or for an individual evaluation to receive supports in school. Initial screening and progress

monitoring data inform decisions about the level and type of interventions needed to help individual students make progress.

### Summary

While the pandemic has disrupted the work of school psychologists, we cannot allow it to prevent schools from supporting students with learning and social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Albeit challenging, NYASP recognizes that alternative methods for evaluating students exist. It is appropriate to delay assessment of students when face-to-face methods are the only valid, ethical, and legal options to completing testing. However, school psychologists are encouraged to seek valid, ethical, and legal alternatives that are available to help determine the needs of children and youth. When a virtual evaluation or an evaluation with alternatives to face-to-face administrations are possible, NYASP endorses their use. Furthermore, when there is consideration of a learning disability, there may be preexisting data present to contribute to eligibility determination by using a Response to Intervention framework if that is a method that is utilized by school districts. NYASP maintains that each evaluation should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The evaluation is specifically tailored to students and an assessment plan is developed. While there are many cases where evaluations will require a face to face assessment, there are also times when existing records and other types of remote assessment (e.g., interviews and questionnaires) can be effectively utilized.