



Understand child find in a post-pandemic world

NEW ORLEANS -- While nothing about districts' child find obligations have changed, potential child find red flags related to mental health needs require more attention in light of the past few years.

"I don't want to suggest everything mental-health related is automatically going to lead to special education eligibility," said William Zee, an attorney at Appel, Yost & Zee LLP in Lancaster, Pa. "But I think that reasonable suspicion piece is what you're looking at with respect to child find."

Child find requires a district to evaluate a student when it suspects or has reason to suspect that he has a disability and needs special education services. [34 CFR 300.111](#) (a)(1)(i). Districts that don't expand their child find efforts to include mental health may violate the IDEA, face litigation, and be ordered to provide compensatory education or tuition reimbursement in the future. Zee, who provides professional development and training initiatives with a special focus on student services and trauma-informed and restorative practices, shared the following potential child find triggers involving mental health in his session Child Find and Student Mental Health: Evolving Obligations Post-Pandemic? at [LRP's National Institute on Legal Issues of Educating Individuals with Disabilities®](#).



Social media posts. Pay attention to students' discussions about social media posts, Zee said. You may overhear peers talking about a student who is revealing details about self-harm or making suicidal statements online. A student may also post threats or other aggressive communications on social media as a cry for help.

"I don't think all social media posts will lead to special education evaluations, but you can also steer students to support services outside of school," Zee said.



Long COVID. Students may have difficulties after contracting COVID, Zee said. These may include brain fog, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and other issues because of the physical and social-emotional effects of the pandemic. These students may engage in challenging behaviors or school avoidance. "This can be disruptive to their education," he said. "Students may also self-medicate with drug use."

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Bullying. Recognize that a student who is being bullied or is bullying others may have an unidentified disability that is spurring the bullying behavior or inability to easily navigate peer relationships, Zee said. This may involve in-person or cyberbullying.

"A lot of allegations of bullying and difficulty interacting with peers can be related to mental health issues," he said. Students' social-emotional skills, not just their academic skills, may have regressed over the past few years, Zee said.



Hospitalization. If you find out about a student's hospitalization for mental health reasons, you should explore the educational impact of it immediately, Zee said. Seek parental consent to talk with the student's private providers about what they think she needs in school. "Sometimes there's a stigma, and parents don't always want to give consent, but you can document that you requested consent and the refusal," he said.

C- Absences, dropping grades. A student who is accumulating absences, tardies, and low grades may be showing effects of trauma and warrant an evaluation, Zee said. A student who withdraws from and avoids school may not be coping well with stress, but he may also be struggling with the fact that his brain isn't working the same as it used to work.

"The COVID-19 disruption may have prematurely aged students' brains similar to how trauma can disrupt brain development," he said. "School avoidance, withdrawal, declining grades, a change in demeanor -- those are all things [of which] educators need to be really mindful."

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