

THE SCHOOL RE-ENTRY TOOLKIT

A Two-Part System for Supporting Students After Illness, Surgery, or Hospital Care

Created for: Students, Families, Teachers, School Staff, and Healthcare Providers

Purpose: This guide is designed to share general information and practical considerations to help support conversations among families, schools, and healthcare teams when a child is returning to school after illness or surgery. This should not replace guidance from a child's healthcare providers, educators, or other qualified professionals.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit has **two parts** designed for different audiences:

PART 1: Student & Family Guide

Written at a 6th-grade reading level

For students returning to school and their families

Warm, accessible, trauma-informed language

Fill-in-the-blank tools students can use immediately

PART 2: Professional Implementation Guide

Written for school staff and healthcare providers

Detailed checklists, legal frameworks, and protocols

Professional language with actionable steps

Templates and resources for official implementation

Hospitals and schools can distribute both parts together or separately based on the audience's needs.

For Teachers:

- Small adjustments make a big difference
- Believe students when they say they're struggling
- Flexibility is not lowering standards
- Check in privately, not publicly

For Schools:

- Assign one point person to coordinate support
 - Share only what teachers need to know
 - Protect student privacy
 - Follow through on agreed accommodations
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PART 2: PROFESSIONAL IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

SECTION 1: FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Your Role in Successful Reintegration

As a school administrator, you set the tone for how returning students are supported. Your leadership ensures that accommodations are implemented consistently, communication is clear, and the student's privacy is protected.

Students who return after hospitalization, illness, or surgery are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for access to learning while their bodies and minds continue to heal. Your response to their needs demonstrates your school's commitment to equity and inclusion.

Counselor Checklist

Before Return:

- Meet with student/family about social-emotional concerns
- Assess whether individual counseling is needed
- Develop plan for handling peer questions
- Identify peer support opportunities
- Coordinate with teachers on social-emotional needs

Ongoing:

- Check in regularly with student
- Provide safe space for processing feelings
- Monitor for mental health concerns
- Facilitate peer education/awareness (if requested)
- Connect family with community resources as needed
- Communicate with team about social-emotional progress

SECTION 5: LEGAL FRAMEWORKS & FORMAL SUPPORT

Understanding Students' Rights

Students returning from medical events may be entitled to protections and services under federal law. This section provides an overview of the most common legal frameworks that support these students.

Important note: This is educational information only. Families should consult with their school's special education coordinator, counselor, or an education advocate for guidance specific to their situation.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

What it provides:

Accommodations for students with disabilities (including medical conditions) that substantially limit one or more major life activities, including learning.

Who qualifies:

Students whose condition significantly affects their ability to learn or participate in school. This can include students recovering from surgery, managing chronic illness, or experiencing ongoing effects of medical treatment.

Common accommodations:

- Extended time on tests and assignments
- Modified attendance policies
- Reduced homework load
- Permission to take breaks
- Preferential seating
- Use of elevator or reduced walking
- Modified physical education
- Access to rest area
- Flexible deadlines

Process:

1. Parent/guardian requests a 504 evaluation in writing
2. School evaluates whether student qualifies
3. If eligible, a 504 team (including parents) develops an accommodation plan
4. Plan is documented and provided to teachers
5. Plan is reviewed annually or when needs change

Timeline: Schools should respond to evaluation requests promptly (typically 10-15 school days, though requirements vary by state).

Key principle: Accommodations provide access, not advantage. They level the playing field so students can demonstrate their knowledge despite physical or cognitive challenges.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**What it provides:**

Special education services for students whose disability affects educational performance and who require specially designed instruction.

Who qualifies:

Students whose medical condition creates an educational disability that cannot be

addressed through accommodations alone. They need specialized instruction, therapies, or related services.

Services may include:

- Specialized academic instruction
- Speech/language therapy
- Physical or occupational therapy
- Counseling services
- Assistive technology
- Modified curriculum
- Small group or one-on-one instruction

Process:

1. Parent/guardian requests evaluation for special education
2. School conducts comprehensive evaluation
3. Team determines eligibility under one of 13 disability categories
4. If eligible, IEP team develops Individualized Education Program with goals, services, and accommodations
5. IEP is reviewed annually; student is re-evaluated every 3 years

Timeline: Evaluation and eligibility determination must be completed within 60 days in most states (check state-specific requirements).

Key difference from 504:

IEPs provide specialized instruction and services, not just accommodations. They're more comprehensive but also require the student to qualify under specific disability categories.

Homebound or Hospital Instruction

What it provides:

Educational services for students who cannot attend school due to medical reasons for an extended period.

Who qualifies:

Students with a physician's statement indicating they are unable to attend school for a specified minimum period (typically 2-4 weeks, depending on state law).

Services may include:

- Home visits by certified teachers
- Virtual/online instruction
- Modified assignments
- Tutoring in specific subjects
- Coordination with hospital school programs

Process:

1. Physician provides written statement of medical need
2. Family contacts school district's special education or student services department
3. School arranges homebound services
4. Services begin while student is unable to attend school
5. Services end when student returns or no longer qualifies

State variations: Requirements and service levels vary significantly by state. Contact your district for specific information.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

What it provides:

Protection of student educational records, including medical information in school files.

Key rights:

- Parents control access to their child's educational records
- Parents decide what medical information is shared with school staff
- Schools cannot share student records without parental consent (with limited exceptions)
- Parents can review and request corrections to records

Application to reintegration:

Families decide what information teachers and staff receive about the student's medical situation. Schools must protect this privacy and share information only on a need-to-know basis.

How to Request Support

For any of these services, families should:

1. **Make the request in writing** (email is fine)
2. **Address it to** the school principal, counselor, or special education coordinator
3. **Include:**
 - Student's name and grade
 - Brief statement of concern
 - Request for evaluation or services
 - Request for response in writing

Sample request:

"I am writing to request a Section 504 evaluation for my child, [Student Name], who is in [Grade] at [School]. [He/She/They] recently returned to school after [surgery/hospitalization/illness] and is experiencing difficulty with [fatigue/concentration/attendance]. I believe accommodations may help [him/her/them] access learning while recovering. Please let me know the next steps in this process and provide me with written notice of your response. Thank you."

What Schools Must Do

When families request evaluations or services, schools have legal obligations:

- ✓ **Respond in writing within a reasonable timeframe**
- ✓ **Conduct evaluations if requested**
- ✓ **Hold meetings with parents to discuss findings and develop plans**
- ✓ **Implement accommodations or services once agreed upon**
- ✓ **Review plans regularly and adjust as needed**
- ✓ **Protect student privacy**

Schools cannot:

- ✗ **Ignore or delay evaluation requests indefinitely**
- ✗ **Require extensive medical documentation before considering support**

- ✗ Refuse to provide accommodations that have been agreed upon
 - ✗ Share confidential information without parental consent
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When Families Need Additional Support

If families feel their child's needs are not being met, they have options:

Step 1: Communicate concerns in writing

Document requests, agreements, and concerns in email or letters.

Step 2: Request a meeting

Ask to meet with administrators and relevant staff to resolve issues.

Step 3: Contact district-level support

Reach out to the district's special education director or student services coordinator.

Step 4: File a formal complaint

Families can file complaints with the state education department or U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

Step 5: Seek advocacy support

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) in each state provide free advocacy support and information.

SECTION 6: RESOURCES & SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Federal Resources

U.S. Department of Education - Office for Civil Rights

Information on Section 504, disability rights, and filing complaints

Website: ed.gov/ocr

U.S. Department of Education - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Information on special education law and services

Website: sites.ed.gov/idea

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services - Maternal & Child Health Bureau

Resources for children with special health care needs

Website: mchb.hrsa.gov

Advocacy & Legal Support

Parent Center Network

Connects families to state Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) that provide free advocacy support

Website: parentcenterhub.org

Wrightslaw

Special education law, advocacy, and parent resources

Website: wrightslaw.com

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA)

Legal resources and attorney referrals for special education issues

Website: copaa.org

Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF)

Legal advocacy for people with disabilities

Website: dredf.org

Educational Support Organizations

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)

Information on learning supports, IEPs, and 504 plans

Website: nclld.org

Understood.org

Resources for parents of children with learning and attention issues

Website: understood.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America

Support and resources for students with learning disabilities

Website: ldaamerica.org

Health-Related Organizations

Family Voices

Family-led organization supporting children with special health care needs

Website: familyvoices.org

Children's Hospital Association

Resources for families of children with medical complexity

Website: childrenshospitals.org

American Academy of Pediatrics - HealthyChildren.org

Health information for families

Website: healthychildren.org

Mental Health Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

24/7 crisis support

Call or text: 988

Crisis Text Line

24/7 text-based crisis support

Text: HELLO to 741741

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Education, support groups, and resources for mental health

Website: nami.org

Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Treatment locator and mental health resources

Website: samhsa.gov

Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

State-Specific Resources

Every state has:

- **State Department of Education** with special education divisions

- **Parent Training and Information Center (PTI)** providing free advocacy support
- **Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agency** offering legal advocacy
- **State chapters of disability organizations**

To find your state's resources:

Search "[Your State] Parent Training Information Center" or visit parentcenterhub.org

SECTION 7: IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOLS

Creating a School-Wide Reintegration System

To effectively support students returning from medical events, schools should establish a consistent, compassionate system that all staff understand and follow.

Administrative Checklist

- Designate reintegration coordinators** (counselors, nurses, or social workers)
 - Train all staff** on supporting returning students
 - Create standard reintegration protocols** that outline steps for families and staff
 - Develop template letters and forms** for families
 - Establish communication procedures** between hospital liaisons and schools
 - Create a reintegration team** including administrators, counselors, nurses, and special education staff
 - Stock copies of this toolkit** in counselor and nurse offices
 - Include reintegration procedures** in staff handbooks
 - Review legal requirements** for 504, IEP, and homebound services annually
 - Collect and review data** on reintegration outcomes to improve practices
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Individual Student Checklist

When notified of a student's extended absence:

- Assign reintegration coordinator
- Contact family to express support and offer assistance
- Provide family with Student & Family Guide
- Arrange homebound services if needed

Before student returns:

- Schedule reintegration planning meeting
- Receive completed Student Packet (if family chooses to use it)
- Develop reintegration plan with family input
- Determine if 504, IEP, or other formal services are needed
- Share accommodation plan with relevant teachers
- Prepare classroom environment as needed

First week back:

- Coordinator checks in with student daily
- Teachers implement accommodations
- Monitor student's adjustment
- Communicate with family
- Make adjustments as needed

Ongoing:

- Regular check-ins with student
- Monthly communication with family
- Review and update accommodation plan as needed

For School Leaders

Your leadership sets the tone for how returning students are treated. By creating clear systems, training staff, and prioritizing student wellbeing, you build a school culture where all students can thrive. Remember:

- Proactive support prevents crises
- Accommodations are equity, not special treatment
- Student privacy must be protected
- Consistency across staff is essential
- Every student deserves to feel safe at school

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Created by: Bridge to Health Equity Foundation

Purpose: This toolkit provides practical, compassionate guidance for supporting students returning to school after hospitalization, illness, or surgery. It respects student privacy, honors family preferences, and provides educators with clear, actionable strategies.

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