

# Parents of special ed students struggle during COVID-19 closure

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Erin LeMieux and her son Remy, 4, work through a stack of flashcards in the yard of their Bremerton home on Friday. Remy was receiving speech therapy at Armin Jahr Elementary through Head Start before schools shuttered in response to the pandemic. Parents are now in the position of working with their children on therapies for preschool and school-age children. (Photo: Meegan M. Reid / Kitsap Sun)

BREMERTON — Before schools closed in mid-March because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Remy LeMieux, 4, was getting twice-weekly speech therapy sessions at Armin Jahr Elementary where he's enrolled in Head Start.

Remy has apraxia, a brain disorder that makes it hard for him to form words. He's super smart, says mom Erin LeMieux, he just can't express his thoughts.

With the governor's stay-home order and classrooms shuttered for the rest of the school year, Erin and her husband, Chris LeMieux, have been called on to provide Remy's therapy at home with some coaching and guidance from the school's speech pathologist. The couple has two other sons, Aidan and Christian, in second and third grade at View Ridge Elementary who also need help with schoolwork.

"Our family is grateful for the opportunity to work at home, to be together, to continue education and special services, but man is it tough," Erin said.

Bremerton School District, similar to other local districts, does not at this time provide teletherapy for special services that typically involve person-to-person interaction or hands-on care. Instead, parents have become the de facto providers of speech and occupational therapies, physical therapy, sensory therapy and even behavioral therapy

Remy is now getting private speech therapy sessions via Zoom, and "they're going as well as can be expected asking a 4-year-old to sit in front of a screen," LeMieux said. "It's far more effective than me trying to teach him speech, which is what we were getting from the district. I'm not a speech and language pathologist."

Special education teachers and program directors, like educators everywhere, have quickly had to reinvent the delivery of instructional services amid school closures.

Gov. Jay Inslee said that school buildings could be used to prepare and distribute to-go meals for students with social-distancing precautions, but the state clarified in early April that was not a green light for direct services on-site to students with "significant needs."

"OT (occupational therapy) and PT (physical therapy) services for our students are developed through school-based teams of case managers and related service providers working together to reach out to every family by phone, email and Zoom," said Lynn Romero, Bremerton's assistant director of special education.

Teams work with parents to develop a "continuous learning plan" that meets their student's individualized education needs. Therapists might recommend a sensory diet, physical activity or therapy equipment to use in the home. Consultation, coaching, newsletters, online resources and supportive phone calls are all modes the district uses to connect with parents. But according to LeMieux and others, it's not a replacement for being face-to-face.

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Erin LeMieux and her son Remy, 4, work through a stack of flashcards in the yard of their Bremerton home on Friday. LeMieux and her husband work with Remy on speech therapy exercises each week as well as helping their older children, students at View Ridge Elementary in Bremerton, with their schoolwork. (Photo: Meegan M. Reid / Kitsap Sun)

"I think they're (the district) doing the best they can with what they have," LeMieux said, but she added it's frustrating. "If we were solely relying on the school district, I think our son would be lost right now."

She worries about families of special education students who don't have access to private care.

"I would hope the special services team is trying to 'triage' their kids and still support those who need it the most," she said. "I really feel for those families."

## Momentum lost

"This has been an incredibly hard time," said Heather Mae Bethje, single mom to Abigail, 9, a student at South Colby Elementary, and Jaxson, 4, (also with apraxia). Jaxson, before the closure, had been receiving individual speech therapy and group sessions at Orchard Heights Elementary.

Jaxson, diagnosed at age 2, formerly received services through Holly Ridge, a local agency that now provides its therapies to the county's youngest special needs students [through remote conferencing](https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/news/local/2020/04/18/babies-cant-wait-holly-ridge-center-takes-therapy-services-online-during-pandemic/5148540002/) (https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/news/local/2020/04/18/babies-cant-wait-holly-ridge-center-takes-therapy-services-online-during-pandemic/5148540002/).

Bethje has high praise for Katelynn Doherty, Jaxson's speech therapist at Orchard Heights.

"Honestly this is the first year he's had really great momentum," Bethje said. "They're doing the best they can, but it's really that face-to-face that helps these kids and the routine of it. ... We've kind of stalled out a bit."

In South Kitsap, service providers are guided in developing individualized plans for students by the district's Remote Learning Plan that was developed in response to the school closures. The plan was implemented in mid-April after the district's spring break.

"Our SLPs (speech and language pathologists) are honoring the governor's social distancing order, and our primary goal is to maintain the health and safety of our most vulnerable students," said Kimberly House, South Kitsap School District's director of special services. "They are providing activities and weekly check-ins via Zoom or the phone with families."

In some cases, therapists may sit in on general education Zoom sessions or Google classroom sessions with students. But one-one-one teletherapy is not part of the plan.

Doherty spent all of spring break recording videos of therapy techniques and of her reading to students, loading it all on her teacher's webpage, along with a plethora of online resources and activities.

Bethje is grateful for resources and regular phone check-ins she's gotten from Doherty and a speech therapy aid (now that Doherty is on maternity leave), but she, like LeMieux, often feels guilty and overwhelmed by being thrust into the role of therapist and teacher.

## 'I feel completely inadequate'

"I feel completely inadequate as far as knowing what to do or if I'm doing it correctly," Bethje said. "I'm definitely not a speech pathologist. So it makes me feel sad for all the kids with IEPs (learning plans for special education students). As much as the school district is doing for kids, I just feel like the special needs kids are getting lost in the shuffle and aren't getting the resources they truly rely on and need."

As far as speech therapy goes, older students should be able to practice without parents' help by following videos and other guided activities, Doherty said. She acknowledged keeping younger kids on track is more challenging.

The lack of direct contact with service providers has hit hard students with the most severe health or developmental disabilities and their families.

"Honestly it's incredibly difficult, especially for those of us with medically complex kids with IEPs. The kids think school is over," one parent said in response to a call-out from the Kitsap Sun for comments on remote learning.

Doherty said the district has been diligent in reaching out to all families of students with special needs, but some have declined remote services because they are simply overwhelmed by the whole situation.

"We're totally respecting that and saying 'please reach out when you're ready,'" Doherty said. "This whole transition is hard, not just on special education students with IEPs. It's hard on all students, parents and teachers trying to make it work. But everyone's trying their absolute best, and that's what matters."

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