Homebound instruction, also referred to as home teaching, home visits, and home/hospital instruction, involves the delivery of educational services by school district personnel in the homes of students, many of whom have disabilities. It differs from home schooling, which is usually delivered by parents (Zirkel, 2003).

Homebound instruction was initially seen as an educational service option only for students who qualified for special education and who were physically unable to attend school. These included very young children, students with illnesses, and those who were physically fragile. Over the years, however, the option of homebound services has been expanded to include other populations and circumstances, such as students whose schools are on break, who may be suspended or expelled, are waiting for more appropriate settings, or are difficult to handle in classrooms.

Services provided in the home include academic instruction, adaptive physical education, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy. Although coordination for homebound instruction sometimes is handled at the district level, in many districts school administrators are responsible for coordinating and monitoring the process.

Providing homebound instruction is problematic for several reasons:

- Homebound services are provided in a more restrictive environment than school, as students have no opportunity to interact with their peers.
- Many school districts have not developed or adopted written guidelines for home instruction.
- Few professional preparation programs, outside of early childhood special education, address the issue of home-bound instruction. Most teachers, therapists, and paraprofessionals have not been formally trained in the nuances of supporting families and teaching in home environments.
- Hiring practices that are based on economics or seniority may interfere with the hiring of the most qualified instructional staff to provide homebound instruction.
- School staff may be exposed to dangers when students’ homes are located in communities with high crime rates. Additionally, some family members and students can be hostile.
- When homebound instruction is provided, there is no direct administrative supervision.

Considering that these problems have the potential of turning into due process hearings or litigation by dissatisfied parents or disgruntled staff, it is important that principals facilitate the development of policies and procedures for the delivery of homebound instruction. The following issues should be addressed: documentation, staffing, procedures, potential problems, and instruction.

**Documentation**

The provision of homebound instruction should be well documented in a written service agreement. If students are eligible for special education, homebound services need to be noted on individual family service plans (IFSPs) or individualized education programs (IEPs). Even where homebound instruction is offered for a limited time, it should be formally documented by the providers, including a rationale for the placement, specificity of the services, the frequency and duration of the services, and a review date.

The service providers also should document parent and caregiver contacts and maintain weekly written schedules that are accessible to office staff and administrators. Such schedules can be used to verify instructional hours and check for the whereabouts of service providers.

Optimally, service providers should write summaries of each home visit. This can be done on a standardized form that specifies the date and time of the home visit, the activities accomplished, the student’s behavior, contact with the parent or caretaker, homework assignments, and future appointments.
Finally, when providing academic instruction, service providers should be encouraged to collect samples of students’ work that can be used for assessment purposes and as evidence of student progress.

**Staffing**

Staffing guidelines for homebound instruction are a regional issue. In some locales, paraprofessionals are allowed to provide services to students in their homes. In other regions, certified staff must provide services. State and district hiring practices should be verified before assigning service providers.

The staff assigned to provide homebound instruction should be qualified and trained to teach or provide therapy in the areas specified within the homebound service agreement (e.g., IEP or IFSP). They should be able to work well with parents and caregivers (Klass, 1996), be comfortable in teaching or providing therapy in front of others, possess good communication skills, and be well organized and proficient in recordkeeping.

Because homebound instruction often is provided to students after regular school hours, only qualified staff members who are able to take on the extra duties of homebound instruction after their regular working day should be considered.

**Procedures**

Staff should be encouraged to follow these basic procedures when conducting homebound instruction:

- Make appointments with parents and caregivers well in advance;
- Verify appointments the day before;
- Communicate environmental needs to parents and caregivers (e.g., floor space, table and chairs);
- Make every effort to be on time for appointments;
- Carry school identification with your picture;
- Include time to communicate and bond with parents and caregivers after the instructional period (Martin & Hagan-Burke, 2002); and
- Follow universal health care precautions after working with students (e.g., washing hands and cleaning instructional materials).

**Potential Problems**

There are many potential problems to contend with when providing homebound instruction. For example, if a student’s home is located in a dangerous neighborhood, strategies for dealing with dangers must be identified. These might include staff bringing along their cell phones for emergency use, providing services only during daylight hours, sending a partner with the staff member, or offering to conduct the service in an alternate location.

Identifying circumstances when it would be appropriate to terminate instruction is another consideration to anticipate. For example, service providers might stop a lesson if a parent, caregiver, or student is aggressive or threatens violence. They also may choose to stop a lesson if they witness illegal activity or contraband in the home. Other situations in which instruction could be terminated include a student being so ill or agitated that it is impossible to work with him or her.

Although the intent of homebound services is to provide educationally related services to students, and not to spy on family lifestyles, staff may witness unusual situations, such as child abuse or neglect. In such cases, they should be aware of reporting procedures.

**Instruction**

Service providers need to teach to the goals and objectives specified in the homebound service agreement, for which the school is legally responsible. They should not supplant these goals and objectives with activities that are simply fun or easy to complete in the home setting.

Mere supervision of paper-and-pencil tasks is not adequate and service providers should be encouraged to provide multiple activities, such as direct instruction, demonstrations with manipulatives and pictures, discussions, taking turns reading aloud, educational games, and investigative tasks. Staff also should be encouraged to use a variety of materials in their instruction. Thoughtful and well-planned lessons increase the likelihood of successful learning.

Involvement by parents or caregivers in the instruction is desirable. Minimally, they should be within hearing range when instruction is taking place, and services should not be provided in the absence of another adult.

Because the hours of instruction provided to homebound students usually do not match the instructional hours provided to students in traditional settings, those receiving homebound instruction are frequently given extensive homework assignments. This homework should be at the student’s level, reinforce concepts and skills addressed during lessons, and be able to be completed within a reasonable period of time.

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Homebound instruction should not be seen as an insignificant interim service. Whether the coordination and supervision of services are delegated or handled by the principal, homebound instruction needs to be well planned and well delivered to be effective.

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References


WEB RESOURCES

School Health Resources is a Web site co-sponsored by the Council on School Health and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The site includes information on news events, school health facts, and policies pertinent to school health issues.

www.schoolhealth.org

Advocates for Children is an advocacy group based in New York that provides legal services, public education, case representation, and policy analysis on behalf of at-risk populations. Its Web site includes resources for parents and professionals, publications, and news items.

www.advocatesforchildren.org

IDEA Data is sponsored by WESTAT, a research-based corporation serving agencies of the U.S. government, business, foundations, and local governments. This Web site provides public access to the most recent data about children with disabilities served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

www.ideadata.org

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities is a product of the Academy of Educational Development. Its Web site includes a fact sheet, publications, and resources concerning children with disabilities.

www.nichcy.org