Equity Matters 2016 Executive Summary

The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) has released the 2016 version of its annual publication *Equity Matters: Digital and Online Learning for Students with Disabilities.* This year's publication focuses on promising practices for addressing the needs of students with disabilities in full-time virtual, blended, and supplemental online settings. The publication summarizes state and territorial policies related to students with disabilities, research on students with disabilities in online settings, the shifting roles of parents and teachers in K-12 virtual education, and state educational agency responsibilities.

This publication includes six chapters focused on research compiled and published in the previous year. It provides field-based reviews and monitors current practice in the delivery of K-12 online education for students with disabilities. Chapter 1 contextualizes the report's focus on the link between the online learning environment and learner variability, and factors associated with the critical issue of the sustainability of K-12 online teaching. Chapters 2-5 provide findings from the Center's research. Chapter 6 recaps COLSD's five-year history and specifies critical questions that remain for researchers and other stakeholders. The primary audience for this publication includes educators, education leaders, teacher education faculty, parents, policy makers, researchers, and digital curriculum developers.

KEY FINDINGS:

Chapter 2 consists of U.S. state and territorial policy scans regarding each of the 50 states and five territories. The content summarizes their online education policies related to the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) for students with disabilities. The state scan highlights the need for informed policy decisions at the state and local level. Sample findings include:

- Of the 55 states and territories, 21 have state-mandated vendor applications for online providers that specifically mention serving students with disabilities.
- Only 24% of states provide information on the supervision of special education, on Child Find (the IDEA legal requirement that schools identify children with disabilities), and on the provisions of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in online programs.
- Thirty-eight states do not have any clear guidance/policy of who would provide special education services in a virtual/online school setting.
- Approximately 75% of all states and territories had *Unclear*, *No with Evidence*, or *Nothing Found* in six of the nine items most closely aligned with IDEA.

Chapter 3 discusses recent research on curriculum considerations, pedagogical strategies, and other service considerations for students with disabilities in online environments; and the preparation of teachers for the online instruction of students with disabilities. Primary considerations from Center research include:

- As many as 75% of universities offer online courses in teacher education, but teacher training institutions are not preparing teachers to offer instruction in online settings.
- Teacher education programs lack standards associated with teaching students with disabilities in online settings, and K-12 online education is not tied to program accreditation.
- When online teachers form relationships with students and their families and provide individualized explicit instruction, student progression through coursework improves.
- Teachers continue to need support related to the legal compliance responsibilities associated with addressing the needs of students with disabilities.
- In many online schools, teachers of students with disabilities leave their positions at higher rates than general education teachers, although reasons for this turnover remain unclear.

Chapter 4 discusses the shifting roles among professionals and parents within online learning environments. The chapter also covers the social experience of students in online education. Findings from the Center's research indicate:

- High student-to-teacher ratios dominate in full-time virtual settings, sometimes in excess of 200 students per teacher in the upper grades.
- Related services continue to emerge online, including occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and speech-language therapy (SLP).
- In full-time virtual schools, parents play a vastly expanded role in guiding their child's online education compared to brick-and-mortar instruction, becoming what are sometimes referred to as learning coaches or site-based mentors.
- Parents' decisions to move a child from traditional to fully online learning may be based on the negatives of one environment and not necessarily the strengths of another.
- Social skill development for students with disabilities requires explicit direct instruction with purposeful feedback, which must be factored into the academic supports the online environment offer.

Chapter 5 discusses the responsibilities of local and state educational agencies in serving students with disabilities in online learning settings. Sample findings include:

- Critical factors of success for students with disabilities in online education include proper teacher preparation and support for students to develop their self-regulation skills.
- Online education has provided an expansion of proficiency-based education, which can enhance the need for students with disabilities to be more highly self-regulated. Many states have struggled to adapt oversight procedures originally designed for brick-and-mortar classrooms for online learning environments.
- For local education agencies, successful implementation of personalized learning depends on fostering students' abilities to take greater control of their learning by giving them and their teachers timely access to progress and activity data and more flexible competency-based pathways.

The confluence of technology-enhanced instruction, progress monitoring, competency-based education, and student-centeredness has the potential to create truly inclusive educational environments.

New online educational materials and delivery systems are increasingly focusing on learner variability as the implementation of "personalized" or "student-centered" designs continue to grow. These models hold significant promise for students with disabilities. This can be seen in the implementation of instructional practices, curricular materials, and delivery systems that have been either designed from the outset to address learner variability or have evolved into more flexible and responsive online educational offerings.

Nevertheless, critical issues remain surrounding the sustainability of online teaching, the social development of students with disabilities, completing coursework online, and the shifting roles of parents and teachers as they work to provide positive learning experiences for students and to accommodate disability.

Download a full copy of *Equity Matters: Digital and Online Learning for Students with Disabilities* at http://centerononlinelearning.org/publications/equity-matters-2016/.

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