

# Guidance for Preparing Online Teachers to Work with Special Education Students

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Millions of K-12 learners are currently involved some form of online learning. Generally, three major settings of online learning are available. Those settings are *fully* online, *blended*, or *supplemental* online learning.

Students enrolled in *fully* online schools receive all their instruction and content through online sources. Their teachers and course materials are online, as are their classmates. Students do their coursework from a home or other domestic space or in a public space such as a library with the use of WiFi to connect to the Internet (Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015a).

In *blended* learning settings, students receive at least part of their learning online but they also have in-person classroom time with teachers and classmates. Some teachers set up blended learning so that when students are engaged in online activities they are engaged in learning new information and when they are with the teacher in the classroom they practice what they learned online (Staker & Horn, 2012). Another option is that the online instruction is used to supplement and practice the skills that are taught in the classroom setting.

Finally, students enroll in *supplemental* online learning when they want to take an online course not offered by their district or school. The subject area might be a course that the district either does not have enough students to enroll (e.g. advanced math course) or does not have certified teachers to offer the course. In this situation, students take the course as a supplement to their program and the course is fully online while all their other courses are in traditional classrooms with teachers and classmates (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2014).

As entire schools and districts are engaging in blended and supplemental learning initiatives, students with disabilities come into these environments because they are already in the school (iNACOL, 2015). Still others are enrolling in charter schools that already incorporate (or plan to use) online learning as part of their instructional delivery (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2014). Regardless of which type of online learning is involved or how students become involved in it, students with disabilities need support to access and process content to maximize their learning and reach their potential (Basham, Stahl, Ortiz, Rice, & Smith, 2015).

While parents and other adults assume increased roles in helping students who are working online, teachers who are prepared and supported are also necessary (Waters & Leong, 2014). Further for students with disabilities, teachers are a critical conduit between students and the services to which they are legally entitled (Greer, Rowland, & Smith, 2014). These services are given to help students “derive educational benefit” from special education and were incepted to help children participate in all aspects of community life, but particularly a school (IDEA, 2004).

The purpose of this brief document is to provide guidance to teacher educators as individuals and as committees that are preparing teacher candidates to work with students with disabilities in online learning environments. The document provides an overview of initial findings and themes from COLSD research and activities on preparing online teachers to work with students with disabilities, shares what institutions that prepare online teachers can do to help their candidates understand how to serve students with disabilities, and then offers additional resources in terms of additional publications relevant to the topic.

### Preliminary findings from forums and themes on teacher preparation for online special education

COLSD staff have conducted a number of research activities, forums, discussion groups, and interviews. Some of the preliminary findings are included in the following list and where applicable supported with other researchers’ findings.

1. Online teachers who are assigned to work with students with disabilities generally have a high turnover in all types of programs. (Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015b).
2. Online teachers in all types of programs (including those who are assigned to work with students with disabilities) report little to no previous preparation in online learning. (Carter & Rice, 2016; Crouse, Rice, & Mellard, 2016; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015b).
3. Fully online teacher educators report that they teach their prospective teachers about the importance of one-on-one instruction, relationship building, collegiality, parent collaboration and Internet safety (Smith, Basham, Rice, & Carter, 2016).
4. Teacher educators report that they do not teach their prospective teachers about instructional planning for differentiation, personalization, data interpretation, or shifting legalities in online educational settings because of limited information available on these topics (Rice, Mellard, & Carter, 2016).
5. Online practicum experiences, program models and examples, and greater guidance from standards-making bodies have been identified as critical for improving online teacher preparation (Franklin, East, & Mellard, 2015; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Rice, Mellard, & Carter, 2016).

To learn more about preparing teachers to work with students with disabilities in online settings, researchers held several group interviews. These interviews were held with multiple stakeholders over a period of nearly two years and included state special education directors, superintendents and other high level administrators in online programs, vendors of online

curriculum, and special education teacher educators working online teacher preparation. The critical findings from these focus groups have been cited above, but all forum reports are available at [centerononlinelearning.org](http://centerononlinelearning.org).

Another research activity occurred as special education teacher educators were invited to discuss online learning. These participants were selected from among the 325k (teacher preparation) and 325t (technology) grant awardees receiving funding from the Office of Special Education Program (OSEP). In addition, COLSD researchers invited presenters from the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) 2016 annual conference who were presenting about teacher preparation for online missing a word here (supplementary, fully online, credit recovery or technologically enhanced learning to the group interview sessions). Nineteen teacher educators and researchers agreed to participate in these groups interviews. Nine of those who agreed to attend, did so. Participants met with researchers at the 2016 CEC annual meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. During the group interview, participants discussed (1) efforts to prepare special education to work in online settings, (2) approaches to this preparation, (3) concerns with achieving this preparation, and (4) navigating barriers to increasing preparation. In addition, participants responded to a short survey in which contextual information about their department and responsibilities were collected and they responded regarding their comfort with designing courses and practical experiences for prospective teachers and their respective institutions. The findings from these discussions are presented in Rice, Mellard, and Carter (2016). The data obtained from these interviews and the survey were analyzed using two rounds of coding: open and thematic (Boyatzis, 1998). Based on what we learned during this process, we offer the following guidance.

### What teacher educators can do to prepare teachers for online special education

- Become generally aware of the current state of K-12 online learning enrollment, persistence, and instructional trends;
- Discuss online teaching as a viable teaching pathway and draw attention to the diversity of learners within it;
- Attend conferences, read articles, sign up for listservs, or engage in other strategies to become aware of promising online practices with regards to students with disabilities;
- Volunteer for standards-making discussions, advocacy groups, or other assemblies in which teacher educators who are preparing teachers for online special education can be heard;
- When and where possible, find opportunities to learn to instruct teacher education courses online and to the greatest extent possible, be meta-pedagogical during these courses (talk about why and how you set up the online course the way you did for content learning and accessibility and what you would change if the students were children).

## What teacher preparation programs can do to prepare teacher online special education

- Provide opportunities for all teacher educators to learn to instruct teacher education courses online;
- Cultivate relationships with online schools of various configurations (fully online, supplemental, credit recovery, blended) for practica and student teaching experiences;
- Normalize though literature, in program literature and other places online settings (fully online, supplemental, credit recovery, blended) as viable pathways with the teaching profession;
- Prioritize professional development for instructors (tenure track and non-tenure track) around online teacher preparation and preparation for online teaching

For further information on teacher educators' and teacher education programs' roles and responsibilities for students with disabilities in online settings, please consult the website of the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities at <http://centeronlinelearning.org>. Related reports are included under the Publications section of the website.

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