Guidance for State Educational Authorities and Licensing Entities Regarding Online Certification to Work with Students with Disabilities

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Millions of K-12 learners are currently involved in some form of online learning. In general, 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 domestic or 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 also have class time in a shared physical space with teachers and classmates. A common way for teachers to set up blended learning is to introduce students to new information with activities online. Later, when they are with the teacher in the classroom, they practice, clarify, and reinforce what they learned online. (Horn & Staker, 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 in which the district either does not have enough students to enroll (e.g. an 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 in physical spaces with teachers and classmates (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2014).

Some growth in online learning is coming as entire schools and districts are engaging in blended and supplemental learning initiatives. In these cases, students with disabilities come into these environments because they are already in the school (iNACOL, 2015). Still other students 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 of the three types of online learning is involved or why students enroll, students with disabilities need support to access and process content to maximize their learning, and reach their potential (Basham, Stahl, Ortiz, Rice, & Smith, 2015).

Although parents and other adults assume increased roles in helping students who are working online, teachers who are prepared to teach subject matter via Internet and web-based technologies, and who understand the range of learners coming to online learning, are also necessary (Hasler-Waters & Leong, 2014). Further, for students with disabilities, teachers are a critical conduit between these students and the services to which they are legally entitled (Greer, Rowland, & Smith, 2014). These services are given for students to "derive educational benefit" and were incepted to help children participate in all aspects of community life, particularly in school (IDEA, 2004).

States play an important role in ensuring these students have access to quality teachers because, among other things, they set licensing standards and collect data on participation rates of various groups of students in various educational settings. Although online teaching is a rapidly emerging context, only nine states have addressed the qualifications necessary for teachers to demonstrate before they can take positions in online schools and provide fully online, blended, or supplemental instruction over the Internet. These states are Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Vermont (McAllister, 2016). Further, none of these licensure programs have specific requirements that relate to students with disabilities. As more states take up licensure for online teaching, and as states revamp and revise their existing programs, they may wish to consider the needs of at-risk students in their planning, including students with disabilities.

The purpose of this document is to report to state directors of education and licensure boards in states considering online certification policies that include provisions for students with disabilities. The document provides an overview of what is known about 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 offers additional resources.

What we know about certification in online special education

1. Online teachers (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; Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015b).
2. Online teachers of all types who are assigned to work with students with disabilities generally have a high turnover in all types of online programs (Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015b).
3. Some state directors of education are concerned about professional development for online teachers with regards to students with disabilities, but they are unsure of what the content would look like in these efforts; at present, several state directors

indicated that including educational technology requirements as part of certification is the best that can be done (Franklin, Burdette, East, & Mellard, 2015).

4. Online practicum experiences, program models and examples, and greater guidance from standards-making bodies have been identified as being critical for improving online teacher preparation (Franklin, East, & Mellard, 2015; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Rice, Mellard, & Carter, 2016).

5. Online teacher educators have limited resources for planning curriculum to prepare prospective teachers to educate students in the online learning environment. They question the quality of resources that do exist, and they note a scarcity an overall knowledge base in online education of students with disabilities, which complicates requiring teacher preparation for online learning for these students (Rice, Mellard, & Carter, 2016).

As part of COLSD's on-going work in learning about the preparation of teachers to work with students with disabilities in online settings, researchers held several forums. These forums were conducted with multiple stakeholders over a period of nearly two years and included state special education directors, superintendents, other high-level administrators in online programs, vendors of online curriculum, and special education teacher educators working on online teacher preparation. During these group interviews, 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 the barriers to increasing preparation. The data obtained from these forum discussions were analyzed first for by group and second, across groups using rounds of coding that were initially open and then thematic (Boyatzis, 1998). The critical findings from these focus groups are available at centerononlinelearning.org under Center Reports in the Publication section. Based on information from these interviews, other studies at COLSD, and work by researchers outside COLSD (all of which were referenced in the previous section), we offer the following guidance for state directors of special education and state licensing board regarding online learning for students with disabilities.

What state directors of special education can do to contribute to conversations about the certification of teachers for online special education

- Become generally aware of the current state of P-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 online learning in state agency documents.
- 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 perspectives from state directors can be heard.
- Engage in policy-making around service delivery that includes services for online students, *whether their state has officially allowed online schools state accreditation or not.*

What licensing boards can do to consider online special education of students with disabilities as part of the credentialing process

- Work closely with teacher preparation programs to share information about the preparation and support of online teachers in various settings (fully online, supplemental, credit recovery, blended) to serve special education students.
- Require online practicum experiences to include working with diverse students, including students with disabilities.
- Normalize online teaching in state agency documents as a legitimate setting for teaching.
- Prioritize professional development for teachers around online teacher professional development *and* professional development for online teaching.

For further information on teacher educator and teacher education program 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://centerononlinelearning.org.

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Additional Resources

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