

Parent Preparation and Involvement

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Online learning currently reaches millions of K-12 learners and its annual growth has been exponential. Industry has projected that this growth will likely continue and has the potential to lead to dramatic changes in the educational landscape. While online learning appears to hold great promise, civil rights legislation, related policies, and their application in online learning as they pertain to students with disabilities has received much less research attention than is necessary for policy planning and decision making. Researchers urgently need to develop shared understandings about how online learning affect students with disabilities as they participate in online learning environments, move through their coursework, and transition back to the brick-and-mortar classrooms (or out of school settings in general). Research that claims to focus on students with disabilities in online learning environments should be designed and carried out with particular attention to educational and social outcomes. The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) conducts research in alignment with these goals.

COLSD, a cooperative agreement among the University of Kansas, the Center for Applied Special Technologies (CAST), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), is focused on four main goals:

1. To identify and verify trends and issues related to the participation of students with disabilities in K-12 online learning in a range of forms and contexts, such as full or part time, fully online schools; blended or hybrid instruction consisting of both traditional and online instruction, and single online courses;
2. To identify and describe major potential positive outcomes and barriers to participation in online learning for students with disabilities;
3. To identify and develop promising approaches for increasing the accessibility and positive learning outcomes of online learning for students with disabilities; and
4. To test the feasibility, usability, and potential effectiveness of as many of these approaches as would be practical.

To meet the first two goals, COLSD has conducted a number of activities designed to develop understandings about the general status of students with disabilities in online learning. Exploratory research activities included case studies of two fully online schools; several national surveys of purposefully sampled parents, students, teachers, and district and state administrators; interviews with members of individualized education program (IEP) teams working with students with disabilities who were completing online coursework; and a systematic review of one state's student participation, retention, and completion data. COLSD is making an additional effort to describe the landscape of online learning for students with

disabilities through a series of forums with different stakeholder groups. The first forum was held with state directors of special education (or a designee) to obtain an in-depth view of the issues and concerns with students with disabilities in online learning from the state policy perspective. The second forum was conducted with virtual school district superintendents and other top-level district administrators. The responses obtained from these administrators are the topic of this paper.

Participants and forum topics

In the summer of 2014, COLSD staff began planning a series of forums to shed light on the state of online learning and students with disabilities from the perspective of various practitioners and stakeholders. This second forum was held with virtual school superintendents and other virtual school administrators in a face-to-face gathering March 31 and April 1, 2015. Due to their configuration as online schools, some of these institutions enroll students across the country. These administrators were selected for participation on the basis of three factors: (1) Status as a top-level official of a large blended learning program. (2) Status as a supervisor in states that have high levels of participation in online learning, even though school enrollments vary in size. (3) Responsibility for schools that represented demographic diversity. Although the experiences and information from the participants do not represent all administrators of virtual schools in this country, they do provide an informed sample.

The five forum participants represented two public school districts (Mooresville, NC and Detroit, MI), two national charter schools (Carpe Diem Schools and Rocketship Education Network) and one state level program (North Carolina Virtual Public School). The two charter school administrators represented programs in multiple states: Arizona, California, District of Columbia, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin. Collectively their schools enrolled students from kindergarten through 12th grade and included eight to 40 percent of the enrollees as students with disabilities. A list of participants is also included in this report (Appendix A).

At the time of her participation, the first administrator was the special education director for a school district of 6,100 in North Carolina. Her district had been involved in online/blended instruction since 2008. In the fall of 2015, that district was expected to be a full 1-to-1 with laptops or tablets in every grade (K-12). Roughly 12 percent of the student body in her district had been identified as having at least one disability. Currently she is a special education director for a different school district in North Carolina with 20,000 students that is also 1-to-1 with laptops and tablets in grades 3-12.

The second administrator is the vice president of achievement for the National Education Board of National Charter Schools. Currently, he is in charge of achievement for 6,000 students attending grades K-5 in California, Wisconsin, and Tennessee. His schools have used various blended models since they opened in 2007. Approximately 11 percent of students in his network are identified as having at least one disability.

The third administrator was included because of her recent history of employment with the Education Achievement Authority in Detroit, Michigan, which is a statewide reform charter district. As of 2015, six high schools and one K-8 school were in her district. She is currently working with Operation Breakthrough in Kansas City, Missouri, one of the largest early learning centers in the region. Percentages of students with disabilities in the schools she works with range from 8 to 40 percent.

The fourth participant is an administrator at the North Carolina Virtual Public School, the nation's second largest fully online supplemental program. Her program has 35,000 students, approximately 10 percent of which are identified with at least one disability. In addition, her program operates a unique occupational course of study program aimed at transitioning students from school to work and post-high school training, especially directed toward meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This program has 7,400 students and 14 percent are students with disabilities.

The fifth administrator represented Carpe Diem Schools—a multistate charter school network for grades 6 through 12. Schools in his network employ various learning models but most are some type of blended learning. Percentages of students with disabilities in his schools range from 12 to 25 percent of the approximately 2500 total students in the network.

COLSD staff reviewed previous literature, revisited findings from previous research activities (e.g., case studies, surveys, and interviews), and considered responses from the first forum of state directors of special education to determine the topics for this second forum. As in the previous forum, the population under consideration consisted of students with disabilities. Therefore, the responses reported are always in the context of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in online learning environments. The 10 topics covered at this forum included:

1. Enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement
2. Parents' preparation and involvement in their child's online experience and IDEA notifications
3. IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., free appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, due process protections)
4. IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., eligibility assessment, IEP development)
5. Access and coordination of related services for students with disabilities
6. Effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student response data among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructor, administrator, provider, and vendor), along with privacy issues
7. Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment, and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development
8. Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments; use of the unique properties afforded in online environments

9. Differential access to online learning within and across your schools (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions on material access and assistive technologies)
10. Local supervision for online learning in general education and, in particular, for supervision in special education

Participants received a packet of materials prior to the meeting, including the agenda (see Appendix B), and a list of the topics and questions to be considered. The forum began with introductions and a comprehensive discussion of the importance of online learning for students with disabilities from each participant's perspective. Next, each administrator responded to a set of questions about the selected ten topics. The participants determined the order in which they wanted to use to describe their organization's current status, needs, values, and other perspectives pertaining to the topic. The format of the meeting was framed as a conversation in which participants were encouraged to elaborate, explain, and engage in uptake with one another's comments. A representative from COLSD moderated the talk to provide all participants with comparable opportunities to share insights about each topic. For each of the 10 topics, participants responded to five questions:

1. How is your organization currently addressing this topic?
2. Of the (10) topics in our discussion list, how important is this topic?
3. What is working well for you on this topic?
4. What are the top challenges you face and the direction you see your organization taking on this topic?
5. What research question could have a significant impact on your policy or practice?

Parent preparation and involvement in their child's online learning experience

This document, the second in a series of forum proceeding papers, presents participants' responses to a set of five questions on the topic of parent preparation for and involvement in their child's online learning experience. This topic was identified from COLSD's research as well as other published and anecdotal information. When students are enrolled in online courses, research suggests that the parental roles for supporting students are expanded (Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014). COLSD's initial activities found that in traditional educational settings, the parents' instructional role is more limited, less active, and largely focuses on supporting classroom instruction (e.g., ensuring homework completion). In online learning environments the parents take on new roles as instructors as well as managers, instructional coaches, and curriculum directors (Deshler, Smith, Greer, & Rice, 2014; Rice, 2015). The participants provided their views regarding this important topic of parental engagement and how their respective schools were supporting parents in these expanded roles.

How is this topic being addressed in your state?

The participants indicated local education agency (LEA) and the online vendors generally specify parental roles. Each entity sets expectations for parental roles and involvement. However, dissemination of this information does not equate to understanding and compliance. Parental participation in their child's online instruction is easiest to engender when the student is attending an elementary school. One participant shared, "Parental participation is pretty high in elementary education. Middle school, less so, and in high school, it's essentially gone. Parents of students with disabilities also follow the same pattern" (AZ). Staffs in online programs have noticed this shift in parental participation and make an effort not to discourage parents from enrolling their children in online learning environments and to engage with them regarding their child's online education. Online programs provide parents with an understanding of the commitment and resources necessary, as well as disability supports available, whether through an orientation in which parents and teachers can meet or in some other fashion (e.g., online interaction for Q&A).

The issue of parent preparation and participation is further complicated by the fact that not all local schools ask for the same level of parent involvement and commitment, nor do they use the same language to describe the level and types of involvement. Some local schools appoint parents as business managers to supervise their child's academic attendance and activities, while other schools expect them to serve in an instructional coaching role. In general, the local schools are still seeking solutions for increasing and clarifying parents' roles and responsibilities. One participant even shared that in her state of North Carolina, grants have been written to develop a parent education curriculum specifically for families of children enrolled in online learning programs.

The most common theme that emerged during participant discussion was parent involvement in the creation and revision of IEPs. While some districts are required to invite all participants involved in a student's education, which may include parents, online teachers, and LEA representatives, not all of them do. Parent involvement can take many forms in the IEP development process as well, but many districts want parents present at meetings for creating and revising IEP goals. Some schools even send parents drafts of their child's IEP before the meetings so they can come with questions and comments to share. However, participants were concerned that this strategy could undermine the multi-disciplinary approach in the eligibility and program development concepts embedded in the IDEA regulations and guidance. Such an approach raises the question of whose perspective is represented in the draft document and whether that approach stifles discussion and the roles of various professionals and parents. One forum participant said that while the online multi-state charter school that he represents never aims to discourage parents from enrolling their child in an online learning program, they are frank with parents about how the child's IEP will be addressed in an online environment, and ask if the parents are comfortable with such an approach.

How important is this topic to your school? Should it be more/less important?

While participants indicated differing priority levels for parent involvement and preparation, a consensus among participants was that this topic was important. Participants expressed that while parent involvement is always desirable, that involvement is less critical for blended learning environments than fully online environments. Forum representatives also shared that parents can play an integral role in IEP utilization for students enrolled in fully online and blended programs, noting that parent and teacher collaboration on student IEPs and personalization based on the available technology is an incredible opportunity that should be recognized and reflected in online practices and will surely benefit students with an IEP. Regardless of whether a student is enrolled in a blended or fully online program, participants noted that a critical element of the process was to manage parental expectations beginning at the time of their child's enrollment. This approach sets the stage for a smoother transition from brick and mortar schools and calls awareness to increased parental participation needs.

What's going well?

Similar to other topics, participants shared a variety of successes in regards to what is going well in the realm of parent preparation and involvement in their child's online learning experiences. Some participants cited feeling very positive about the training required and disseminated to parents of children with disabilities enrolled in their online learning programs. Devices, applications, and tools are modeled in some parent trainings. This training addresses a barrier more often encountered by parents of students with disabilities, as assistive technology (AT) is ever evolving and not always intuitive for those persons without disability for which the technology was designed. In some states and districts represented at the forum, related services for occupational and speech therapy can be provided online. In addition, other specialized services are more likely to be utilized in the online environment (e.g., mental health therapy).

Another positive theme shared by several participants was that of collaboration between parents and educators on serving the child/student. Participants agreed that a lot of parent participation occurs at the elementary school level, which has resulted in collaboration around the type of technology that works best for specific disabilities and providing input at IEP meetings. In some districts, the online schools have taken responsibility for making sure that all who need to be at an IEP meeting (including parents) attend and that the meetings are in-person as often as possible. In Michigan, a special education parent advisory group meets quarterly to answer parent questions regarding their children's online learning. The strong consensus was that great value is attached to enhancing parent-teacher collaboration and parental support for their child as a student. This value is demonstrated in the extent to which the schools support parents' education, asking questions, and communicating their concerns about their child's online learning experience.

What direction are you moving on this topic in the school(s) where you work and, what are the top challenges faced?

Although participants provided a variety of responses concerning their respective state's policy and procedural direction regarding preparation and involvement of parents with students in online programs, two consistent themes emerged. Participants indicated that one direction for their schools' efforts is ensuring that the appropriate infrastructure is in place. This infrastructure enables IEP meetings to be held virtually with all of the appropriate parties even when not everyone playing a crucial role in the student's learning can be available in person (TN). Others are focused on implementing practices that strive to fully inform parents of the benefits, challenges, and parental participation requirements of enrolling a child in a fully online or blended learning program. Some of these efforts include frank discussions with parents before enrolling their children and orientations that give parents, students, and teachers a chance to physically meet together (AZ).

Participants indicated one of the most frequent challenges faced regarding parent involvement in their child's online learning is ensuring parent understanding of the benefits, requirements, and challenges of online learning. According to forum representatives, parents often agree to the terms of the online learning program before carefully considering what will be expected of them in terms of involvement because they are so eager to enroll their child. Parents often demand services or resources that cannot reasonably be provided for their child who is enrolled in an online learning environment, and when such services or tools cannot be obtained, they quickly withdraw their support. Some parents also seem to have trouble with the idea that technology can be a great and wonderful tool to enhance learning, but does not replace the role of a teacher. In the most extreme view, the teacher's role is replaced by the computer-based applications. Along these same lines, some parents fail to indicate that their child has an IEP when enrolling their student. This issue may stem from the idea that online learning environments are inherently more personalized and therefore the virtual school may not need the IEP, or the parent is simply unaware that they need to advocate for their child in this way.

Additionally, several representatives expressed concerns about how IEPs are managed in their state and school contexts. These concerns were also expressed in our Center's forum with state education agency participants. In the Topic 3 SEA forum on *IDEA Principles in the Online Environment* (Burdette, Franklin, East & Mellard, 2015), the participants indicated that in some states IEPs are written by the vendor, but the related services for students with disabilities, beyond what the parents can provide, are the responsibility of the local school. This situation means three parties have to consult and coordinate many facets of students' instruction and related services to ensure that students receive needed services. IEPs are generally written to match the child's needs and what the school can provide, which is vastly different in traditional versus online settings.

What research questions could have a significant impact?

The discussion of parent preparation and involvement elicited several questions regarding best practices, what works, and what impacts certain policies and interventions are having. Because the option of online education is so new for many parents and educators, as is

the level of required parent involvement, a dearth of applicable research exists regarding what works well for garnering and keeping parental involvement for students enrolled in online learning environments. With an eye toward supporting parent preparation and involvement, forum participants asked questions like how do LEAs coach parents to assert themselves in their child's IEP process?; To what extent are parents learning about the online learning process *before* enrolling their child?; What resources are most useful for parents supporting a child enrolled in online learning programs, and how does this change based on what the LEA and vendor expect from the parent?

Forum participants also raised questions about the strength of relationship between parent support and student achievement for students with disabilities participating in online learning environments. Along the same vein, what parent behaviors contribute most to student achievement? Another question arose regarding the perception of related services, such as providing speech and occupational therapy in the online environment was do parents and stakeholders support this mode of delivering related services? The plethora of questions raised during forum discussions indicated that a lot of unknowns exist about best practices for parent preparation and involvement in their child's online learning. However, the participants also indicated that those persons involved want to support parents in this new role as much as possible.

Implications

For parents of students with disabilities, the expansion of online learning programs provides not only traditional involvement (e.g., participation in assessment conferences, IEP planning, and transition planning), but also more active instructional, curricular, and assessment roles in the decisions for their children's learning. Since an additional entity, the online school program, is also now involved as a necessary educational partner, the policy, procedures and practices are also more complex. For example, the traditional responsibilities of the local school staff could now be shared with the online school staff. Policies must be clearly delineated that speak to these shifts in roles and responsibilities so they too can be shared with parents. Thus, parental preparation and involvement is a critical issue in all states that provide online schools. This challenge is especially true regarding parents of students with disabilities, because three parties - the parent, the local school, and the online school - are expected to serve the student's needs through collaborative efforts with one another.

The participants unanimously agreed that a delineated system for parent preparation and support would be immensely helpful. As yet, these participants don't feel that an adequate system of this nature has been developed or tested. In addition, another missing component is a set of best practices to facilitate a clearer understanding of each party's responsibilities.

The discussions lead to several questions for further investigations:

1. What information do parents need to make an informed decision about their child's participation in online instruction?
2. What are the best options for preparing and supporting parents in their roles?

3. Given that parents have larger participatory roles in online instruction, what approaches should schools take to ensure parent participation in and understanding of student IEPs?

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Appendix A
Forum Participants

OSEP AND COLSD FORUM

Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities

OSEP AND COLSD FORUM

Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities

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Appendix B
Forum Agenda

OSEP and COLSD Forum
**Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for
Students with Disabilities**

MARCH 31 – APRIL 1, 2015

AGENDA

NASDSE Conference Room
225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 420
Alexandria, VA 22314
703-519-3576

Tuesday, March 31, 2015

- 12:00 - 12:45 Working Lunch
- Welcome: *OSEP staff and Bill East*
 - Participant introductions: *Your district experiences with online instruction*
 - Overview: *Explanation of how we hope this discussion proceeds*
- 12:45 - 1:45 Discussion *Topic #1: Enrollment, persistence, progress and achievement for students with disabilities*
- 1:45 - 2:00 Break
- 2:00 – 2:45 Discussion *Topic #2: Parent preparation and involvement in their child’s online experience and IDEA notifications*
- 2:45 - 3:30 Discussion *Topic #3: IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, due process protections)*
- 3:30 - 4:15 Discussion *Topic #4: IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., eligibility assessment, IEP development)*
- 4:15 - 4:30 Break
- 4:30 - 5:15 Discussion *Topic #5: Access and coordination of related services for students with disabilities*
- 5:15 - 5:30 *Wrap-up, suggestions for improving our process and preview for day two. Dinner plans?*

Wednesday, April 1, 2015

8:15 - 8:30	Review	<i>Review of yesterday and today's preview</i>
8:30 - 9:15	Discussion	<i>Topic #6: Effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student response data among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructors, administrator, provider, and vendor) and addressing privacy concerns</i>
9:15-10:30	Discussion	<i>Topic #7: Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment; and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development</i>
11:15-11:30	Break	
10:30-11:15	Discussion	<i>Topic #8: Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments; use of the unique properties afforded in online environments</i>
11:30 - 12:15	Discussion	<i>Topic #9: Differential access to online learning within and across your schools (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access & assistive technologies)</i>
12:15 - 1:00	Working Lunch - Discussion	<i>Topic 10: Local supervision for online learning in general education and in particular for supervision in special education</i>
1:00 - 1:15	Discussion	<i>of your views on the Center's future activities</i>
1:30 - 1:45	Wrap up:	<i>Our next steps with this information: draft a summary; share the summary with you for accuracy and completeness; draft a report on the topics and share with you for edits regarding accuracy and completeness; and complete revisions and disseminate.</i>

Your closing comments

Reimbursement issues and our closing comments

Thank you and safe travels