Enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement for students with disabilities

Kate Tindle, Theron (Bill) East, & Daryl F. Mellard
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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 and policies—and their application—in online learning, as they pertain to students with disabilities, have been the subject of much less research than is necessary for appropriate policy planning and decision making. Researchers urgently need to develop shared understandings about how online learning affects 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; 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 to obtain an in-depth view, from different perspectives, of the issues and concerns with students with disabilities in online learning. The first forum was held with state directors (or a designee) of special education to obtain the state policy perspective. The second forum was conducted with virtual school district superintendents and other top-level district administrators to obtain the practitioners' perspective. Findings from these forums indicated that views from industry vendors were important, therefore, the third forum was conducted with vendors who provide platforms or resources for use in online settings or support fully online or blended environments with courses and instructors. The responses gained from the vendors are the topic of this paper.

Forum Participants

This third forum was held with online instructional vendor providers in a face-to-face gathering August 11-12, 2015. Descriptions of the vendors and participant responsibilities appear below. A list of participants (Appendix A) and the forum agenda (Appendix B) are also included in this report. The participating vendors were chosen because they: (1) have status as an organization with a national presence; (2) have been involved in K-12 teaching and learning support strategies, research, and product development in online learning environments for at least 10 years; (3) represent different segments of online learning (e.g., supplemental instruction, fully online programs, and learner management systems) and; (4) provide a variety of supports and products to states, districts, and schools (public and charter) engaged in fully online and blended learning settings. Although the experiences and information garnered from the participants do not represent all vendors in the industry, they do provide an informed sample.

The first vendor, Agilix Labs, founded in 2000, included two administrator participants, a Vice President (VP) of Innovation and a VP for Strategic Partnerships. Agilix provides support for personalized online learning through Buzz, a customizable platform, and offers BrainHoney!, a popular learning management system (LMS) for fully online courses in K12 and higher education. The VP for Innovation examines innovative industry practices to determine how to support and promote them and how to use existing technology for effective innovations to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The work of the VP for Strategic Partnerships includes helping interpret accessibility requirements with such entities as state technology directors, Council of Chief State School Officers, and other industry vendors.

The Senior Director for Student Services represented the second vendor, Connections Education, which has been supporting online schools since 2002. As of the 2015-2016 school year, Connections Education supports full time virtual charter schools in 26 states and seven blended schools in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio by offering courses, a proprietary LMS, and instructors as needed. The Senior Director focuses on fully online schools that serve about 6,000 students with a variety of disabilities such as learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities, and cognitive, motor, and sensory disabilities.

The third vendor, D2L Corporation, founded in 1999, designated the Product Design Manager as the forum participant. D2L offers Brightspace, a LMS, to its K-12 and higher education clients that represent statewide consortia to individual schools. The Product Design Manager's focus includes improving technological accessibility, resulting in two gold level awards (2010 and 2011) from the National Federation of the Blind Nonvisual Accessibility, a leading advocate for Internet access by blind Americans. The Product Design Manager is now increasing focus on personal and classroom accommodations using the Universal Design for Learning framework.

The Director of Research from Edgenuity Inc., a 16-year vendor, was the fourth participant in the forum. Edgenuity creates content in the form of secondary level core, elective, and Career and Technology Education courses. Edgenuity offers supplemental instruction, courses for credit recovery, and is beginning to offer Tier 2 type interventions. The Director of Research conducts studies with districts partnering with Edgenuity to determine the accessibility and effectiveness of the courses and how to improve the course features to impact student learning.

Knovation, helping districts meet the needs of diverse learners for 15 years, sent their Chief Academic Officer (CAO) to participate in the forum. Knovation offers solutions and services centered on its collection of over 360,000 professionally-evaluated, standards-aligned digital learning resources. Knovation's solutions include netTrekker (find and share digital resources from its collection) and icurio (use digital resources from its collection to design and deliver digital lessons). The CAO works with industry organizations to research and share scientific-based ideas supporting online learning and has formed a volunteer workgroup to advance UDL with vendors as they create or curate products to support online learning.

The sixth and final vendor Texthelp, founded in 1996, sent their Vice President of Professional Solutions to participate. Texthelp began by supporting reading and writing for people with communication and physical disability issues and are expanding their work to support all learners—including English language learners—through their literacy software. The VP's professional responsibilities include handling the licensing of Texthelp software to publishers and large software developers and ensuring their software can be accessed on any device, on any platform, so the software can be integrated into mainstream technology for classroom and home use for all learners. Most of their work supports districts and K-12 schools (90%), but they also support individuals, higher education, and government agencies with youth and adults struggling with reading, writing, and communicating.

Forum Topics

COLSD staff reviewed previous literature, revisited findings from previous research activities (e.g., case studies, surveys, and interviews), and evaluated responses from the first two forums to determine the topics for this third forum. As with the previous forums, 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
3. IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., free and appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, due process protections)
4. Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the blended and online learning environment and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development
5. Schools and vendors as data collectors and users; effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student usage data (e.g. performance scores, clickstream, pages accessed, etc.)
6. Addressing privacy concerns: Vendor access and use of school and student information
7. Integration of universal design for learning (UDL) into courses (e.g. options for how information is presented, the ways in which students can demonstrate mastery, supports for engagement)
8. Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices
9. Availability of students' strategy instruction in online environments (e.g. selection, monitoring prompts for strategy use that support student learning as in reading comprehension or memory strategies)
10. Supervision for online learning in general education and, in particular, for supervision in special education

Prior to the meeting, participants received a packet of materials including the agenda (see Appendix B) and a list of the topics and questions to be considered. The forum began with introductions and a discussion of the importance of considering students with disabilities in the context of online learning. Each vendor then responded to a set of questions about the selected 10 topics. 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. Representatives from COLSD moderated the discussions to provide all participants with comparable opportunities to share insights about each topic. Participants responded to three questions (see below) for all 10 topics, and an additional 2-5 questions relevant to each particular topic:
1. How is your organization currently addressing this topic?
2. What is working well for you on this topic?
3. What is the top challenge you face and the direction you see your organization taking on this topic?
The discussion questions serve as the headings in the following text.

Enrollment, Persistence, Progress, and Achievement for Students with Disabilities
This topical paper is the first in a series of Vendor Forum Proceedings papers and includes participant responses to a set of six questions regarding enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement for students with disabilities in fully online or blended learning

environments. This topic was identified from previous COLSD research as well as other published and anecdotal information. For example, COLSD's initial research activities found that students with disabilities are generally satisfied with the quality of online coursework provided by online schools (Burdette & Greer, 2014). Even so, curriculum materials developed for online courses are difficult to study because of their proprietary nature, and because the curriculum and course materials change so rapidly (Rice, 2014). However, findings of several initial research projects have revealed that students with disabilities have lower achievement rates in fully online courses (Deshler, Smith, Greer, &, Rice 2014; Deshler, Rice, & Greer, 2014) and the text in many online lessons was evaluated as being too difficult for students who cannot read at or above grade level (Greer, Rice, & Deshler, 2014; Rice & Greer, 2014). Another issue directly related to online curriculum vendors is the fact that coursework has been found to contain many highly specialized vocabulary words with little curricular support for learning the words other than direct instructional strategies such as providing a definition (Deshler & Rice, 2015).

How important is this topic to your organization?

All vendors saw enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement as very important to their organizations, especially as online enrollments are steadily increasing. They expressed a strong perspective that this topic represented the actual purpose of their business: to attract and keep students engaged and successful in online settings.

What is working well for your organization on this topic?

Three of the vendors indicated that using a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and approach to the online setting was working well, as was previously indicated by virtual school superintendents in the preceding forum (Franklin, Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015). UDL provides a framework by which to design curriculum and instruction for the wide range of diverse learners seen in today's classrooms. The vendors indicated that the UDL approach provided guidance on useful supports to assist students with disabilities, helped differentiate curriculum and instruction, offered ways to sequence instruction based on students current performance levels (and to move them forward), and helped to include student interest and ability choices in selecting content, all of which can improve student persistence, progress, and achievement.

Two vendors discussed engaging in research studies to (1) study the impact of the innovative scaffolding supports for students with disabilities in their courses and (2) to analyze the effectiveness of the tools they build to support student learning. One vendor commented on how often they see students who do not normally contribute in traditional classrooms contributing in online classes. This vendor felt this was due to students feeling less inhibited outside of the social environment of a traditional classroom. Another vendor involved in fully online schools said that they are most successful in persistence, progress, and achievement when they can enroll students before the first day of the school year. This vendor felt that having students enrolled and prepared to start school on the first day of classes indicated that the families consider the online school as "real" and are committed to taking it seriously. Finally,

one vendor discussed the inclusion of assistive technology in homes as well as schools as something that is working well to support students' persistence and subsequent progress and achievement.

What is the top challenge you face and the direction you see your organization taking on this topic?

When asked about the challenges each organization faces in enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement, the vendors reported on a variety of issues. Three vendors discussed educator behaviors and the need for teachers to understand the importance of implementing a course or curriculum with fidelity. When teachers learn about and add technology features to their online courses and implement with fidelity, the changes create successful instruction and supports students' persistence. Vendors also expressed a sense of obligation to ensure that learning about and adding new features is quick and easy for teachers. Another concern is that most current online environments use a teacher-centric model that expects teachers to monitor and respond very quickly to the extensive student data. This expectation can be quite burdensome; one vendor discussed the need to move toward student-centric models that encourage the students to be more independent learners and self-aware of their progress and need for assistance. Another challenge is to continually develop new and innovative UDL instructional supports for students with disabilities to meet their persistence, progress, and achievement needs and mesh with the Learning Management System (LMS) within the vendor's product development cycle.

Another vendor discussed that, much as in a traditional school, multiple people are involved when a student with a disability is enrolled. Whether the school uses an inclusion or pullout model, the team of teachers and specialists must capture progress and achievement data to determine the extent to which IEP goals are met. This same vendor also discussed the challenge of providing a continuum of curriculum that is specialized to meet a district or school's specific needs. The curriculum might be sequential or competency-based around a set of standards. The vendor's challenge is to be able to offer personalized choices for students, based on topic or learning preference, and, at the same time, support the teacher in differentiating for groups of students. More broadly, the goals are for the students to find the material relevant and engaging, take ownership more easily, and, therefore, persist and have a better chance to achieve.

The vendor representing a fully online school discussed the challenge of attrition. Students often leave online schools because they are not connected socially in their day-to-day lives and the online school does not usually provide social connectivity. This vendor discussed the challenge of incorporating ways to connect families, just as traditional schools connect families and create a sense of community. This challenge is exacerbated by online schools having open enrollment where students enroll and start courses at any time during the school year, which, as this vendor indicated, is more common in online schools than in traditional schools. Parents who are dissatisfied with the traditional school often enroll their child in the

online setting mid-year, which makes integrating the new students and families and building a sense of community more difficult for the online school staff.

How is persistence supported?

All vendors, when asked how their organization supports persistence for students with disabilities, answered that they offer the capacity to personalize the students' learning experience. Based on students' feedback, one vendor revised their learner management system (LMS) (available now on mobile devices) to be flexible enough to allow students to track due dates across courses. This change helped students plan strategies to meet assignment requirements and deadlines. This same LMS now offers teachers the ability to offer more personalized feedback, including the students' names and assignment scores. One vendor discussed the need for feedback to engage students on a social and emotional level to create a safe mechanism for sharing. Having the learning activity and the feedback mechanism within the same system is important for task persistence so the students do not have to switch between different screens. One vendor described this as a "cognitive breakage"—when students must move between different platforms to access content and feedback, such disruptions impact students' ability and interest in persistence.

Another vendor discussed tracking and disaggregating usage data to learn how subgroups engage with the learning system. This vendor has found it beneficial to have an on-the-ground facilitator in blended environments to promote persistence and deeper learning. The vendor also thought that teachers that set high expectations, actively teach students how to learn, and work to boost student engagement by providing regular feedback, help students persist. When teachers have access to and use student data, they can develop unique learning plans that include opportunities for relevant offline activities and checking for understanding that foster learners' persistence.

One vendor gave some examples of personalizing the learning environment so that the instructional approach supports students in becoming more self-regulated, responsible learners. This vendor offers students' choices in a toolset that includes listening to audio, looking at pictures, translating words into another language, and a dictionary. The toolset allows students to customize (personalize) their learning environment to best meet their own needs. The vendors noted that offering teachers a toolkit of diverse approaches to teaching and selecting appropriate materials helps them determine what content or skills are needed to address students' needs. The teachers can then offer coaching, materials, or approaches to personalize their students' learning.

A vendor noted that teachers need to minimize "threats" (i.e., factors that inhibit students' retention and completion) and distractions to help students take ownership of their own learning. For example, a student might not enjoy group work or might thrive if allowed to be in control of choosing from a list of learning opportunities to demonstrate mastery. The more teachers know about student preferences and are able to incorporate them into the

learning, the more likely students are to persist, which is also true in traditional classroom settings.

How is learner progress assessed?

The vendors who provide LMS and courses discussed tracking usage data that details logins, attendance, grades, feedback, benchmark formative tests, time spent in the course, meeting IEP goals, and course completion rates. Other vendors discussed tracking the length of module sessions, data on the number of correct choices, and how students interact with the software (e.g. listening to audio, using self-recording to read aloud, completion of projects, and pacing through material). One vendor compared usage data to the students' affective measures of self-evaluation for 21st Century skills (e.g. Am I learning? What level of effort do I have? What level of a collaborator am I? Am I feeling better as I succeed?). Another vendor discussed the importance of assessing students based on teachers' online dialogue and feedback with the student about learning—those interactions lead to the students' eventual contribution and outcome.

What is your benchmark or proficiency standard for learner achievement levels?

Given the wide range of vendor purposes, this question had a variety of responses. Those vendors who partner with districts and schools use the proficiency standards of their partners, customizing their products and services to align with local district and school needs. Another vendor discussed following Achievement Standards Network (http://www.achievementstandards.org), an organization committed to open access to machine-readable representations of learning objectives by education agencies and organizations. The vendor, who focused on improving literacy, uses Hasbrouck and Tindal's reading fluency norms (2006). Despite the variety of proficiency standards, all vendors work to ensure that their products and services meet the needs of the students they are serving, and foster achievement.

Implications

Several implications are drawn from the vendors' discussions on enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement of students with disabilities in online settings. First, an important tenet seems to be that online learning should be personalized so that students find the material and approach to learning engaging and relevant. This personalized approach means that vendors should provide integrated feedback mechanisms and easily accessible and easy-to-read visual data dashboards that provide relevant usage and performance data for teachers, students, and parents. These data are used to inform decisions about how to support student learning in a way that fosters persistence, progress, and engagement.

Online environments have the potential to provide an overwhelming amount of data. Vendors and their partner districts and schools should work together to determine what data should be mined so that teachers and parents receive only salient data relevant to their

decision-making process and goals. The system should be programmable to create a variety of reports that meet the needs of the variety of users in the system, from district superintendents who must report to the state, to the teacher of one class who must report to students and parents.

In order for teachers to be facile and adaptable in their online instruction, the LMS must be flexible and the add-on course features must be easy and quick for teachers to use. Therefore, online teachers must have access to timely professional development that supports their learning about new technology, unfamiliar features, and using student data to understand their students' motivations and learning needs. Teachers need to develop an understanding of how the available data can reduce their workload and improve their instructional and curricular decisions. Once teachers are comfortable with the new features they will be more likely use them in their courses to enhance the students' learning experiences and improve student persistence.

Several policy related issues surfaced in these discussions. In this and in previous forums, participants spoke of the value of student engagement and response data. These data were important for many purposes including lesson planning, and developing and monitoring students' IEP goals and objectives. A policy that supports data sharing among relevant stakeholders is important. Clearly, a great deal of data are available but, at present, accessibility and usage by persons involved in learners' educational planning and assessment is limited and cumbersome.

Another policy area that could be clarified is how an IEP as specified in IDEA is different from a personalized educational plan. The former is very clearly tied to federal and state regulations regarding the provision of free appropriate education for students with disabilities. The latter is an educational approach. Given the diversity of the stakeholders and their roles in education—especially for parents of fully online students—clarifications should be explicit about how the IEP differs from a personalized plan.

Based on the discussion, additional consideration is recommended for topics including:
1. What are the most effective collaboration models for vendors, SEAs, LEAs, and families of students with disabilities to use to bring about a seamless transition of services for students with disabilities entering the online learning environment?
2. How can vendors use the UDL framework and principles to promote access, student self-regulation and choice, and personalization of online learning to demonstrate mastery and meet IEP goals?
3. What are the metrics vendors should use to determine the effectiveness of their products and services meeting the needs of students with a diverse array of disabilities?

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Appendix A

Forum Participants

OSEP AND COLSD FORUM

Vendor Related Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Janna Cameron
Product Design Manager
D2L Corporation
151 Charles Suite W, Suite 400
Kitchener ON, Canada N2G 1H6
(519-772-0325) x3388
janna.cameron@d2l.com

Katie Gilligan
VP Professional Solutions
Texthelp
600 Unicorn Park Drive
Woburn, MA 01801
(888) 248-0652 ext 3302
Cell: 610-304-1805
k.gilligan@texthelp.com

Lindsay Marczak
Director of Research
Edgenuity Inc.
8860 E. Chaparral Rd.
Scottsdale, AZ 85250
(646) 825-0763
Lindsay.Marczak@edgenuity.com
Mailing Address:
724 Upshur Street, NW
Washington, DC 20011

Steve Nordmark
Chief Academic Officer
KNOVATION
3630 Park 42 Drive, Suite 170F
Cincinnati, OH 45241
(513) 612-1054
Toll free: 1-855-KNOVATE
snordmark@knovationlearning.com

Marjorie Rofel
Senior Director Student Services
Connections Education
Address 1001 Fleet Street, 5th Floor
Baltimore, MD 21202
(410) 236-6667
mrofel@connectionseducation.com

Mark Tullis
VP Strategic Partnerships
Agilix Labs, Inc.
733 East Technology Ave.
Orem, Utah 84097
(801) 615-2257
mark.tullis@agilix.com

Christian J. Weibell
VP Innovation
Agilix Labs, Inc.
733 East Technology Ave.
Orem, Utah 84097
(801) 228-0792
christian.weibell@agilix.com

Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) Staff:

Theron (Bill) East, Jr.
COLSD Principal Investigator and Executive Director
National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc.
225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 420
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 519-3800
bill.east@nasdse.org

Daryl Mellard
COLSD Principal Investigator
Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities
Center for Research on Learning
University of Kansas
Dole Human Development Center, 3062
1000 Sunnyside Ave.
Lawrence, KS 66045
(785) 864-7081
DMellard@ku.edu

Skip Stahl
Senior Policy Analyst
Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)
40 Harvard Mills Square
Wakefield, MA 01880
(781) 245-2212
sstahl@cast.org

Kathleen "Kate" Tindle
Private Consultant
2505 Terrett Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22301
(703)220-3500
kptind@gmail.com

US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP):

Celia Rosenquist, Project Director
National Initiatives Team
Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Special Education
Potomac Center Plaza, 4070
550 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20202
Celia.Rosenquist@ed.gov

David Egnor, Associate Division Director
National Initiatives Team
Research to Practice Division
Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Special Education
Potomac Center Plaza, 4054
550 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20202
(202) 245-7334
david.egnor@ed.gov

Appendix B

Forum Agenda

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

AUGUST 11TH AND 12TH, 2015

AGENDA

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

Tuesday, August 11th

12:00 - 12:45   Working Lunch
- Welcome: *OSEP staff and Bill East*
- Participant introductions: *a description of your organization; the targeted audience for your products; your role in the organization*
- 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

2:45 - 3:30   Discussion Topic #3: IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, due process protections)

3:30 - 4:30   Discussion Topic #4: Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the blended and online learning environment; and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development

4:30   Wrap-up, suggestions for improving our process and preview for day two. Dinner plans?

Wednesday, August 12th

8:15 - 8:30   Review: Review of yesterday and today's preview

8:30 - 9:30   Discussion Topic #5: Schools and vendors as data collectors and users: Effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and

	instructional usage of student usage data (e.g., performance scores, dwell time, pages accessed)
9:30-10:15	Discussion Topic #6: Addressing privacy concerns; Vendor access and use of school and student information
10:15-10:30	Break
10:30-11:15	Discussion Topic #7: Integration of universal design for learning (UDL) into courses
11:30 – 12:00	Discussion Topic #8: Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices
12:00 – 1:00	Working Lunch – Discussion Topic #9: Availability of students' strategy instruction in online environments (e.g., selection, monitoring, prompts for strategy use that support student learning as in reading comprehension or memory strategies)
1:00 - 1:45	Discussion Topic #10: Supervision for online learning in general education and in particular for supervision in special education
1:45 – 2:00	Wrap up: Our next steps with this information: draft a summary; share the summary with you for accuracy and completeness; draft a report on each topic and share with you for edits regarding accuracy and completeness; and complete revisions and disseminate to you and interested parties. *Your closing comments* *Reimbursement issues and our closing comments* *Thank you and safe travels*