



# Parents' Perceptions of Social/Emotional Support for their Children with Disabilities in Fully Online Schools

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## Introduction

Parent participation in the education of students with disabilities is a core principle of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) (2004). Since IDEA's initial passage in 1975, Congress has provided additional reinforcement for parent involvement of individuals with disabilities. This reinforcement includes providing statutory requirements whereby parents are to be informed and included in planning for their child's education. Engaging parent participation has been affirmed in research findings in which partnering with school personnel has been found to benefit student outcomes and enhance access to the general education curriculum and environment (e.g., Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Although legislated, parent participation is far from universal in terms of quality and participation opportunities, with some parents reporting dissatisfaction with their ability to participate fully in the decision-making process in their child's traditional brick-and-mortar special education programs (Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). One option for parents who do not deign to send their children to a traditional setting is fully online learning in which children do all their coursework away from a traditional setting and interact with the materials, teachers, and/or classmates over the Internet.

Most fully online school placement decisions are made by parents who have determined the traditional school is no longer meeting the needs of their child (Werrell, 2014). For parents of students with disabilities, a primary factor in selecting the fully online school was due to the social demands of the traditional brick-and-mortar building (Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, & Harvey, 2016). In this study, parents reported concerns in their child's inability to address the social skill demands of their school environment. Challenges with the social demands of the learning environment led parents to seek alternatives. With the growth in online learning options, parents sought to remove their child to a "safer" environment to support their child's learning considering the unique and individualized education experience special education seeks to provide. The purpose of this current study was to further understand the level of social skill development provided within the fully online K-12 environment. Through parent interviews, we sought to determine if the social competency needs of students with disabilities were being met in the fully online environment.

## Research Questions

The following research questions governed this study. Findings will be presented in accordance with these three questions.

1. Do parents perceive a need for school officials to provide coaching or counseling to them around social and/or emotional concerns of their children?
2. What opportunities exist for social interaction as well as social and emotional skill development for students with disabilities in fully online schools?
3. How do parents describe their overall satisfaction with the services received and their children's opportunities for developing socially and emotionally?

## Social Demands of Learning

Academic skills are insufficient for school success. Students must also navigate school as a set of on-going complex social situations. To navigate the issues that arise in these situations, complex sets of social skills are necessary. Although somewhat rule governed, these rules vary across location, situations, people, age, and culture. Particularly in schools, certain sets of social skills appear essential, including (a) understanding unwritten social rules, (b) knowing how to make friends, (c) sustaining social interaction during an academic task, (d) finding someone who can explain or interpret social situations for those with less social competencies, and (e) understanding how sensory needs operate during social interactions (Gresham, Cook, Crews, & Kern, 2004; Gresham & Elliott, 2008).

Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hornig-Fox (2013) argued that “[t]here is powerful evidence that social emotional learning, if scaled, could dramatically improve student achievement in schools and a lifetime of outcomes for children that would strengthen education, the economy, and our communities” (p. 11). Further, a meta-analysis conducted by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, & Schellinger (2011), found that students who receive support for social and emotional learning have achievement scores that are a mean of 11 percentage points higher than students who do not. Despite its documented importance, one study indicated that 56% of educational professionals reported that social and emotional skill instruction does not occur. Approximately one-half of educators have not had any preparation in teaching social and emotional skills, yet approximately 80% indicated an interest in such preparation. Finally, the work of O’Connor and Jenkins (1996) demonstrated that academic work in which students cooperate with one another and do projects is when important social skills are learned. However, they noted that using cooperative learning in inclusion situations required delicate balancing among students with disabilities’ need for direct instruction, a group’s need to accomplish a task, and a class’s need to learn the social skills necessary for sustaining group work.

Historically, efforts to address poor social skills in students typically take place in the school setting (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007; Wang & Spillane, 2009). Often provided as an element of a special education activity, parents, for the most part, are not highly involved. This situation is true even though stress and anxiety on the parent and family are heightened in families in which the child has poor social competence exhibited through anxiety, emotional challenges, behavioral responses, and at times, depression (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, & Schellinger, 2011). One of the few interventions that features parents as an engaged role is the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relationship Skills (PEERS; Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, & Dillon, 2009). Yet, even in the PEERS model, parent engagement is limited to the home setting not directly connected to any school-based efforts in most cases.

Thus, while parents are aware of social challenges at schools, the research is very limited about documenting parents’ role in providing social skill intervention that is academically-based. Therefore, when students enter the online learning environment and complete most of their work at home, parents have a new perspective about their child’s social behaviors. Previously

the parents were not seeing negative social behaviors associated with academic work and the limited persistence in school work, but at home they would suddenly see these negative behaviors and their skills for mitigating these behaviors might also be limited. What is useful to know, then is how parents perceive the social skills of their children when the children are enrolled in online schools as well as whether the parents have access to supports for social skill instruction when or if they need it.

## **Methodology**

This study aimed to develop phenomenological understandings about parents' perceptions of the opportunities for social and emotional interaction and skill development in students with disabilities who enroll in fully online schools. We wanted to understand from parents' perspectives what constituted opportunities for their children to interact with peers without disabilities, whether social skills were being actively cultivated as part of the IEP or in some other way, and whether parents thought that the online schools were responsible for providing social and emotional support. To explore these issues, we collected parents' perspectives primarily as phenomenological interviews (Kvale, 1983, 1994, 2009). When researchers take up phenomenological approaches in their work, they focus on both the phenomenon and those persons who have experienced it (Englander, 2012).

### **Study Participants**

In accordance with typical practice for qualitative studies, participants invited into this study (1) authentically belonged to the population targeted in the research question and; (2) had experienced the phenomenon. Parents in this study had children in grades 2 through 8 that had a disability and had enrolled in a fully online program or school receiving special education services. We wanted to locate families with children who had specific emotional disturbances as well as families with children who had other types of disabilities. In addition, these parents had children who were being served under IEPs in their traditional schools and who expected a continuation of services when their child moved into the fully online setting.

Participants in the study were parents with children with a disability enrolled in a fully online educational program or school and receiving special education services. Parents were interviewed from five states (Georgia, Utah, Ohio, Kansas, and Wisconsin). To locate and invite participants, we identified parent technical assistance centers in online schools in five states through state department of education websites. Some participants responded through these technical assistance centers. To invite additional participants, principals of online schools in states with these centers were contacted and asked to provide information for parents that might be willing to participate.

The goal was to contact schools that served students in at least one of the specified grades 2 through 8 and offered fully online services. When a principal agreed to assist in recruitment, a school's staff member (typically a special education teacher or counselor) sent information to parents. Using this strategy, 18 parents participated in the survey. In addition, 11 of these 18 parents and one grandparent agreed to participate in phone interviews. The grandparent in the

study was custodial and had responsibilities concomitant to a parent, and we do not reference her differently from the other parents throughout this document.

The amount of time students had been enrolled in a fully online school or program ranged from 6 months to more than 2 years. Twenty-three percent of parents who took the survey reported that their child had been enrolled between 6 and 12 months. Twenty nine percent reported enrollment duration between 13 months and two years. Finally, 47 percent reported enrollment for more than 2 years. In short, the parents participating in this study had spent substantial time in the fully online environment.

### **Instrument Development and Data Collection**

To answer our research questions, we developed two instruments. The first was a survey with 19 items designed to elicit information about parental perceptions about social and emotional development of their children with disabilities in fully online schools. The second was an interview protocol designed to draw out additional information about the survey items' content.

**Parent Survey.** Most items for the parent survey used a 4-point Likert-like scale. Responses were framed on a scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Several questions focused on whether a specific social or emotional service was being provided. In these instances, parents responded to items with *Yes, No, or I Don't Know*.

**Interview Protocol.** The interview protocol was developed using the current literature on parent involvement in online learning generally and considered COLSD research on parent involvement and engagement in online learning environments for students with disabilities. Parents were asked about their experiences with fully online learning in general and what typical days were like working with their children. In addition to these general questions, parents were asked for information relating to social and emotional development opportunities for peer interaction and skill development. More specifically, the interview questions included:

1. Describe the nature of interactions your son has with other children without disabilities throughout the instructional day.
2. Describe a recent opportunity for social interaction with other students in the school.
3. Does your child have opportunities for academic interactions with students without disabilities regularly? How often are these opportunities?
4. Does your child participate in extracurricular activities with students with or without disabilities in non-academic settings? Can you describe these activities?
5. What social or emotional skill development does your child participate in? Does the online school provide this development? If so, is it part of the IEP? If not, how was your child referred for such services?
6. What do you wish were different about opportunities for social and emotional interactions and/or development for your child?

Demographic information about the parents and their children who participated in the interviews are contained in Table 1. All the participants in the interviews were female parents of male students. The following numbers of students were reported by their parents to be in the following disability categories: autism (4), emotional disturbance (1), other health

impairment (4), specific learning disability (2), and speech impairment (1). Table 1 provides information about the participating families.

Table 1  
*Participant Information*

Parent's Race/Ethnicity	Child's Gender	Child's Primary Disability	Child's Grade
African American	Male	Autism	5
African American	Male	Other health impairment	3
African American	Male	Other health impairment	8
White/Caucasian	Male	Autism	5
White/Caucasian	Male	Autism	7
White/Caucasian	Male	Autism	8
White/Caucasian	Male	Emotional disturbance	3
White/Caucasian	Male	Other health impairment	4
White/Caucasian	Male	Other health impairment	4
White/Caucasian	Male	Specific learning disability	3
White/Caucasian	Male	Specific learning disability	4
White/Caucasian	Male	Speech impairment	2

The individual phone interviews with the 12 participating parents lasted between 60 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

Survey data was analyzed by determining the number of responses for given questions and by determining percentages of responses to the items. Findings from the survey were then linked to and analyzed alongside responses from the parent interviews. For example, no parents said that they contacted school officials specifically with social or emotional concerns. In the interviews, we looked to see if a parent mentioned being frustrated with a situation in which a call to the school may have been appropriate. We also listened for instances in which parents mentioned counseling with school officials about social and emotional concerns even though they said they did not. As we proceeded through these interactions of comparing survey and interview data, we attended to the three major areas associated with our research questions.

## Findings

The findings below couple survey data completed by parents of children enrolled in a virtual school with excerpts from phone interviews with parents and researchers. Results on how parents responded to survey items include communication with online regular and special education teachers regarding social, emotional, and behavioral concerns are presented. In addition, parent survey results are included about the prevalence of related services that support behavioral and social skills training and therapy. Finally, survey data is also provided to indicate whether parents believe their children's social and emotional needs were met during online learning. These data are presented alongside interview transcription excerpts that provide a more in-depth view of the online learning experiences and possible implications for social, emotional, and behavioral development of children with disabilities.

### **Perceptions of the Need for Social and Emotional Support**

Parents were asked if one of the primary reasons for communication with their children's online regular and special education teacher was to get support with behavior management. Only 5.9% said that behavior management was a reason for contacting the online regular education teacher. However, 23.5% of parents indicated that they did contact their online special education teacher about behavior management. This 7.6% difference in communication with the special education teacher may indicate that parents do not perceive online general education teachers as the appropriate person to call about behavior management or that behavior management is not a primary factor for parent-teacher communication.

Interviews with parents indicated that their child's behavior was one of the primary factors that contributed to the removal of their children from the traditional school environment.

He has always had an issue learning. He's autistic and ADHD and just this year I decided.... Last year he was having a hard time at going to school; he wasn't having a hard time at school, sometimes he has bad behavior and stuff but he was having a hard time going to school every day. And then he was also picking up bad language and things from other kids at school so we had our spring break last year and he was home and he seemed so much happier when he was at home with us. UT.1, lines 20-30

**Placement considerations.** During the interviews, parents were asked about the events preceding the placement to fully online for their child. In two cases, parents indicated that their child's behavior and how the school was addressing the behavior was a driving factor in their decision to remove their child from the brick and mortar setting.

Parents were asked if one of the primary reasons for communications with their child's online regular and special education teacher was about social skills concerns. In the survey data, no parent reached out to their child's online regular education teacher about social skills. Only one parent contacted their child's special education teacher regarding their child's social skills.

Interviews with parents indicated that their children have minimal opportunities to interact with other children during the instructional day.

No, he doesn't interact with kids with disabilities. In the online learning, you really don't interact with any kids, as far as this curriculum. (He) did more interacting with kids in our neighborhood. They are not kids with disabilities, they are just regular kids. KS.2, lines 368-366

Another parent added a contrasting perspective.

Parent: The only time he has access to the other children would be in the homeroom or the small group. Because the chat area is pretty small and I can't manipulate that to enlarge it well, he can't keep up with those chat box conversations. He's always friendly. He will say "hi". If the teacher is praising someone, he will type in "good job." But because of the way that it's made on the screen, he can't keep up in real time to be able to have those conversations. KS.1, lines 336-352

**Peer interactions.** During the interviews, parents were asked about opportunities their children have for interacting with children without disabilities throughout the instructional day. One parent indicated that her child is not offered any opportunities to interact with peers throughout the instructional day. She shared that her child may interact with kids in the neighborhood, however these interactions were not in the context of school and structured educational activities. The second parent did mention that a designated time is provided during the instructional day so that the students can interact with one another with chat boxes. However, she shared that she is unable to manipulate the chat box in a way that allows her child to become more involved in the class discussion. Thus, she disclosed that her child does participate as much as possible without the screen accommodation.

**Related services.** Parents were asked if their child received social and emotional support as a related service as articulated on the IEP. In the survey data, only 17.6% of parents indicated that their child received these types of services despite citing social and emotional reasons for removing their children from the brick and mortar environment.

He does ok but then there are times when he doesn't and the kids think he is a little weird. It's a hard thing for him. He has a high-pitched voice, he has glasses, he's very intelligent, talkative when you talk to him. And sometimes this is challenging for him. Rather than him just stay where he is, he will come and he'll cling to me. He'll come back in the house like here, we have kids next door. He'll go outside for a split second and he's back in the house. He does better with a one-on-one person, a friend rather than a bunch of kids. And it's challenging. GA.1, lines 399-405

Another parent offered an additional perspective:

Parent: A little background... We adopted him when he was 2 from a foreign country. When he was 3 he was on an IEP from our school district for a reverse mainstream preschool. He didn't thrive very much in that, so when it was time to put him in kindergarten we put him into a charter school. On the third day of charter school, they



pretty much kicked him out of kindergarten. So, I was looking for an alternative option. That's how I came across online school.

Interviewer: What was the reason for kicking him out?

Parent: His behaviors. It's not on his IEP, but he has a diagnosis that was formerly called the Emotional Detachment Disorder. CA.1, lines 28-37

In the first description, the parent discussed the difficulty her child had interacting with children. The parent's narrative described behaviors that inhibit her child from being able to successfully interact with the other children in the neighborhood. In the second description, the parent revealed her child's background and diagnosis. She shared about the difficulty her child had in assimilating into a brick and mortar environment and that he was removed from two schools before he completed kindergarten. In both cases, parents indicated that their child experienced severe social and emotional barriers that directly affected the children's ability to function in social and educational settings.

Parents were asked if their child received behavioral instruction through related services as articulated on the IEP. In the survey data, 23.5% of parents indicated that their child received these types of related services. In the survey, more parents reported that their children received related services for behavioral instruction than for social and emotional support. However, in the excerpt below the child receives related services instruction that supported appropriate behavioral and social interactions.

Interviewer: How many hours a week is he getting the ABA (applied behavior analysis) therapy?

Parent: He does up to 20 per week.

Interviewer: And that therapist comes into the home?

Parent: Right. We have two therapists that come into our home and split the hours, and then there's a senior therapist that oversees them. That person would also come into our home and have a weekly meeting about progress and things that we need to be working on. And there is a doctor that oversees his case.

Interviewer: Does that really kind of make the difference? How long has he been receiving that therapy?

Parent: Three years now. He's getting older now and is heading into adult phases, he almost is considered an adult because of his age. He's maturing. Things will be changing now as far as what his focus is on. But we saw a lot of immediate change with his social skills, just learning how to interact appropriately with peers, the eye contact thing, allowing people to touch him, you know put their arm around him, things like that. Game playing, sportsmanship, sharing, those kinds of things. Impulsivity. WI.1, lines 323-335

The parent in the excerpt above describes the extent to which her child received applied behavior analysis therapy during the online instructional day. In this specific case, the therapist came into the home to support the parent and child. The parent described skills that her child learned during therapy including appropriate interactions with peers, understanding nonverbal cues, and cooperative interaction with others. The parent mentioned that the duration of the therapy was extensive in that services were delivered up to 20 hours a week.

### Perceptions of Interactions with Peers

Parents were asked about the level of engagement or interaction their child had with peers, with or without disabilities. Questions sought to address whether and how fully online students participated with same age peers virtually or face-to-face. Participation in extracurricular or community-based activities were also part of the conversation in attempt to determine neighborhood and community social opportunities and the child’s engagement level in these settings.

**Quantity of social interaction.** Figure 1 highlights the overall participation, measured in hours per week. Fifty six percent of parents reported that their children spent less than 3 hours per week interacting with other students and barely 30% of the students noted engagement of up to 4 per week. Less than 20% of students interacted with other peers for more than 8 hours per week, a little over an average school day for a brick-and-mortar student.

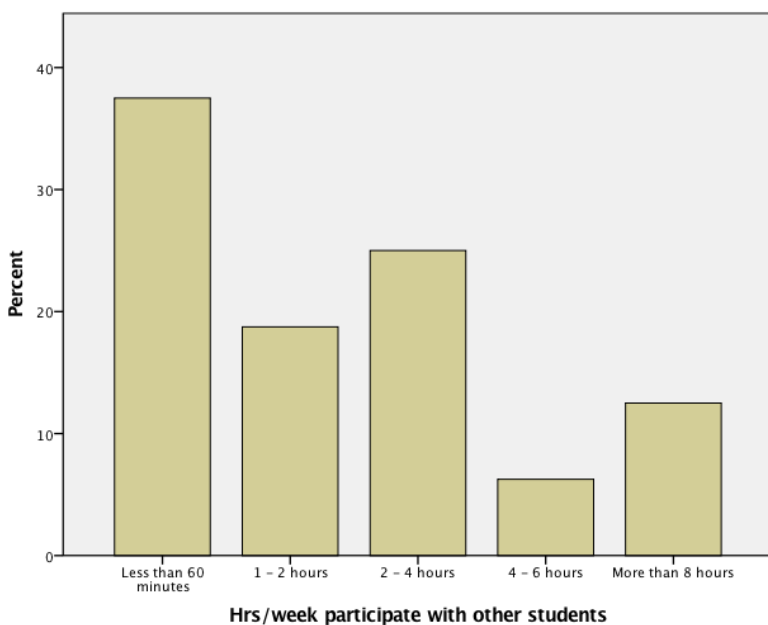


Figure 1. Hours per week participating with other students in or out of online school

Parents reflected on the challenges fully online learning presents for opportunities to socially engage same-age peers. For the most part, parents understood that entering the fully online home-based environment would impact opportunities for social interaction. One parent was upfront with this understanding and shared the following:

He obviously doesn't get as much socialization. That's always a big thing, when you homeschool your online homeschooler. We have a large homeschool community here. We did try to do events with them. There are field trips and things like that with your online school and we have participated in some of them. That's a little harder because it's a complete, grade-wise, field trip, he only recognizes a few kids that he sees in his web lessons. So, there's not necessarily local people that we could see on a regular basis. GA.3, lines 151-160

Another parent shared that the very nature and structure of the fully online program does not provide a forum for social interaction.

Virtual school does not offer you an opportunity for social interaction. It doesn't. There isn't social interaction in that, you're talking with someone about your English language paper and you're working only on that. But you're not actually face-to-face which for a lot of children on the spectrum is a good thing, except it's a bad thing. UT.2, lines 117-120

**Satisfaction with quantity of social interaction.** The parents were asked to rank their agreement with the statement: I am satisfied with the number of opportunities for social interaction with peers without disabilities provided by the online school. Satisfaction with the opportunities is another dimension of social engagement. Interestingly, when surveyed on their perception of their child's social interaction, most parents responded positively. Figure 2 shows that over 50% of parents are satisfied with their child's social interaction with students with and without disabilities with 30% being neutral on their level of satisfaction and less than 20% of the parents being dissatisfied.

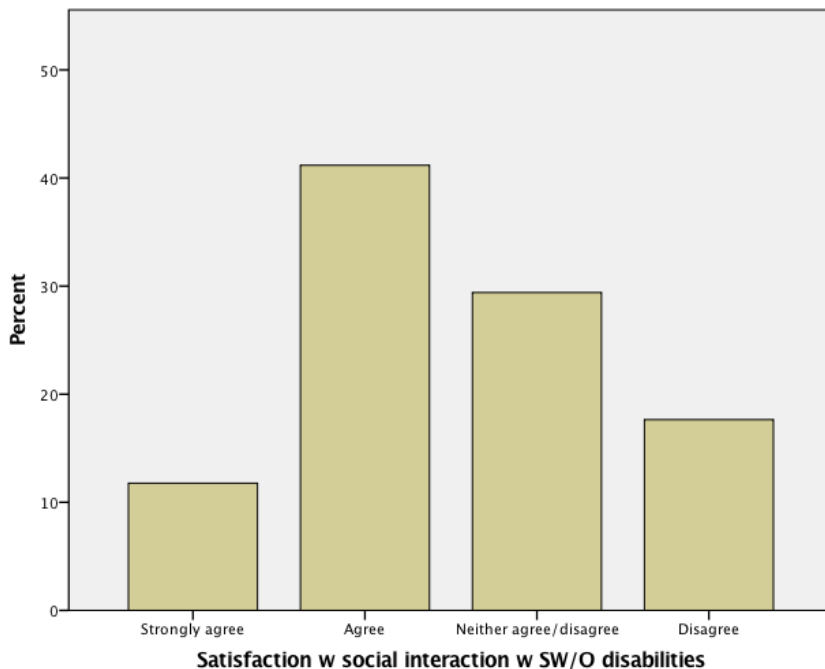


Figure 2. I am satisfied with the opportunities for social interaction with peers without disabilities provided by the online school

**Sites of quality of social interaction.** Parents were also asked to rate their agreement with the statement: I am satisfied with the quality of the opportunities for social interaction with peers without disabilities provided by the online school. Figure 3 indicates nearly 55% of parents were satisfied with the quality of social interaction with another 30% neither agreeing or disagreeing and only 25% of the parents were dissatisfied. Yet, further examination indicated that parents' level of satisfaction was not necessarily indicative of the fully online learning environment. Instead, parents cited extracurricular, religious, and community-based experiences as social outlets for their child. One parent provided the following description.

We do it at church, but it doesn't work out usually as we would like it to. We can't simply pick and choose friends for our children and mostly they end up without because that is the unfortunate reality of [Autism]. And I knew that going into virtual education that was going to be the same thing. UT.2, 125-127

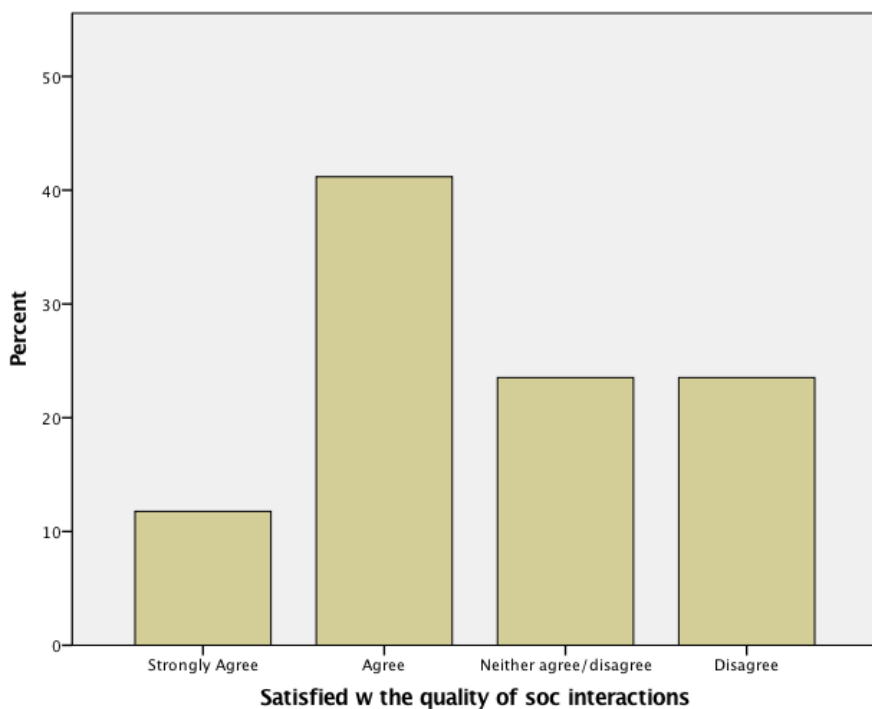


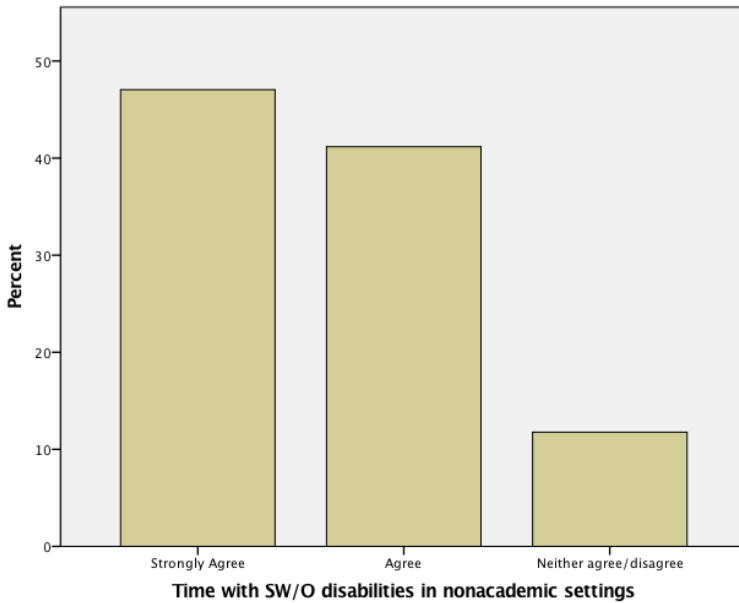
Figure 3. I am satisfied with the quality of the opportunities for social interaction with peers without disabilities provided by the online school

Another parent illustrated social involvement through community sport programs:

We are able to do club sports locally... he participates in swimming and wrestling every year. We are also active in church so every Wednesday night is church night and every Sunday is church, so he has his friends from church. WI.2, lines 360-364

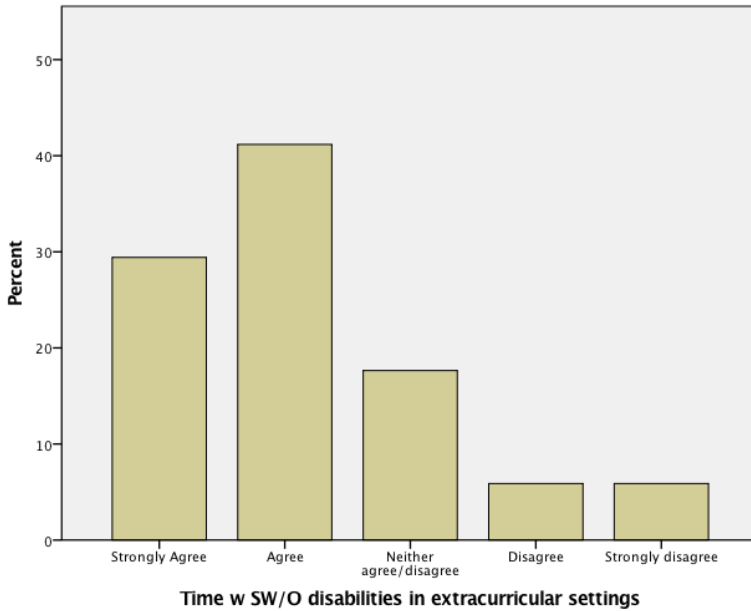
**Time spent in social interaction in non-academic and extracurricular settings.** Figures 4 and 5 provide further evidence that the fully online student level of social interaction is dependent

upon non-academic events outside of the school in the local community or extra-curricular activities offered by the online school. Specifically, parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the amount of time spent interacting with other students in non-academic settings and in extracurricular ones. Nearly 90% of parents agreed that time with students with or without disabilities took place in non-academic settings with the remaining 10% being neutral and thus, neither agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. Similarly, 70% of parents agreed that time with peers was spent in extracurricular activities sponsored by the school with less than 20% of respondents reporting otherwise.



*Figure 4:* I am satisfied with the amount of social interaction with students without disabilities in non-academic settings

The extracurricular setting varied for families. As we have already indicated, the family’s church is often a popular setting but so too are community programs.



*Figure 5: I am satisfied with the social interaction with students without disabilities in extracurricular activities provided by the school*

Many responses described activities that offered physical engagement. Few of these opportunities were provided by the school. One parent explained:

His interactions with kids are very good. He is a Tae Kwan Do student so he attends classes 3-4 times per week with various age groups and various levels. There are some children that also have disabilities that do Tae Kwan Do. It's one activity, socially, that has been awesome because it's a safe place for them to be. WI 1 308-312

Yet even in some of these environments, parents suggested that the social interaction is not necessarily with same-age peers. Instead, it might involve individuals of all ages as offered by a parent:

So, when he goes to Tai Kwan Do, he's involved with various age groups. There are adults in their 60's and 70's all the way down to kids that are 4 years old. WI.1, lines 315-318

**Opportunities to make new friends.** Overall, the perception of the degree of social interaction offered to the fully online student appears was ambiguous for social outcomes, a primary concern being the addition of new friends. Parents reported limited opportunities to meet new friends in the online learning environment.

Figure 6 reports mixed findings with 30% of the parents agreeing, 30% disagreeing, and an equal number neither agreeing or disagreeing to whether online schools facilitate meeting new friends within the online instructional experience. Figure 7, on the other hand, found nearly 60% of the parents agreeing that their child benefitted from school staff support in making

friends. Less than 10% disagreed and nearly 40% of the parents neither agreed or disagreed that their children were making friends with the support of the online school staff.

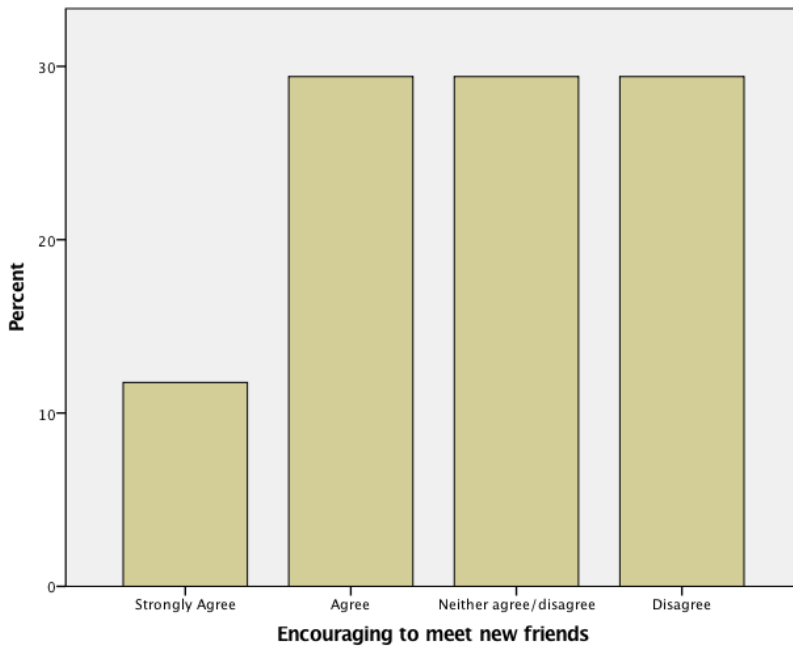


Figure 6: The school facilitates meeting new friends in the online school

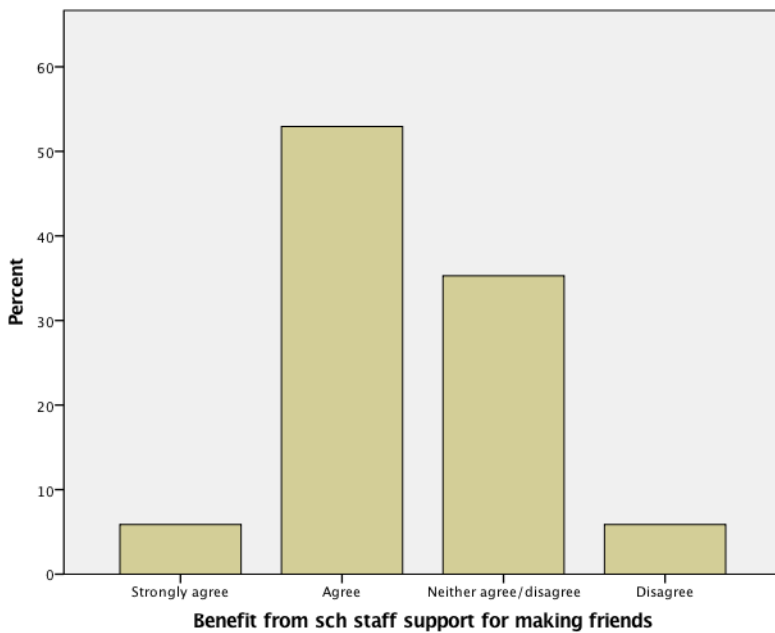


Figure 7: Online staff facilitate meeting of new friends in the online school

When looking for clarification from parents, findings are mixed with some parents suggesting no social support, others indicating a satisfactory level of engagement, and still other parents uncertain. One parent was quite pointed when she stated:

The worst part [of fully online school] is there's no socialization. UT. 2, lines 129-130

Another agreed explaining that the very nature of virtual learning curtails social interaction:

Because the part that we wish mostly for our children on the spectrum is appropriate and successful social interaction and virtual school does not provide that forum. It can't, by nature of its very design. UT.2, lines 495-498

A third concurred reinforcing what other parents shared and the survey findings suggest:

I would say the only challenge is that he doesn't get the socialization that he would if he was in public school. But then I learned that he gets socialization by playing with friends around the neighborhood. KS.2, lines 169-171

Parents reported that interacting with peers in the virtual setting is a challenge. Limited opportunities and the nature of the learning platform appears to facilitate an independent learning experience, not a socially integrated one. Instead, parents reported extracurricular settings being the environment in which their child engaged with others. Be it church, a community sports league, and simply the neighborhood, parents were satisfied with their child's social interaction in both time and quality. While the development of new friends suggests work, parent feedback did not indicate concern or dissatisfaction with continued attendance in the fully online learning environment.

### **Perceptions of Support for Social and Emotional Development**

Parents were asked whether online learning was meeting their children's social and emotional needs. Figure 8 highlights the responses to this question. Fifty-nine percent strongly agreed that online learning was meeting those needs and another 23% agreed. Only 18 percent selected "neither agree nor disagree" or "disagree. This finding indicates a clear perception that parents think that their children's social and emotional needs are being met in the online learning environment.



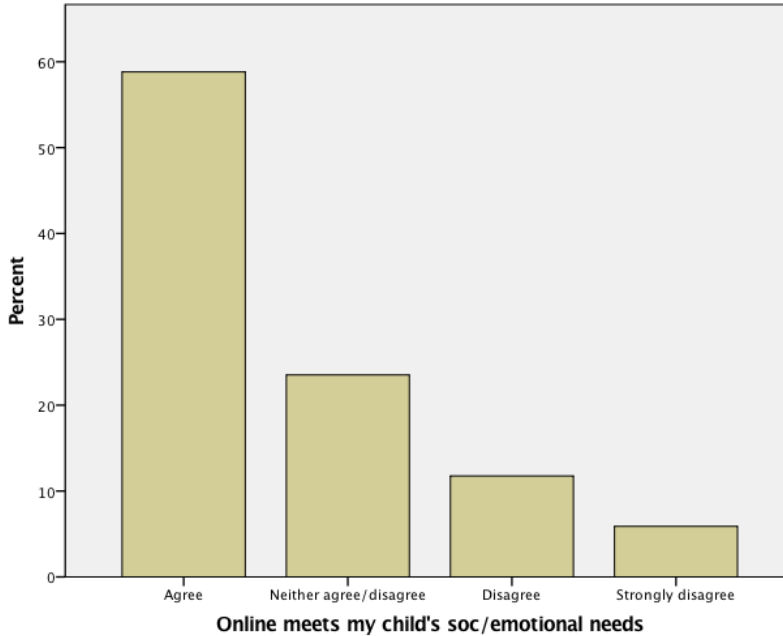


Figure 8. Overall, the online school meets my child’s social/emotional needs

Although parents perceived that the online environment was meeting their children’s needs, only one parent could describe specific social skill development that was occurring in the online school.

Parent: [My child] is in social skills groups [at the online school]. I think the goal is to teach kids more how when you’re struggling, how to work through. It’s sort of like anger management but they call it social skills.

Interviewer: Is that online?

Parent: That is online. They only invite certain kids. It’s probably the kids with ADD. I’m guessing, I don’t know how you get invited, but [my son] always is. They generally go on once a month or something like that. The book club is in the summer. They did offer sign language last year that we started out participating in but then [didn’t finish]. They’ve got Lego Club and all sorts of other things [my child] potentially participate in. W1.4, lines 380-390.

In this description, the parent describes specific social skill instruction, although she is unsure of how or why her child qualifies. She believes that this class is not just about teaching social skills, but emotional support in the form of anger management. She agrees that the service is necessary and helpful and does not ask additional questions, even though she does not fully understand the service. In this case, the child is also receiving additional opportunities for social interaction in the form of clubs.

The parents were also asked whether their children were making appropriate social development. Figure 9 highlights the responses to this question. Forty-nine percent indicated agreement or strong agreement that their children were in fact making appropriate social development. However, another large percentage (41%) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, which suggests that they may not know or are uncomfortable with the decision.

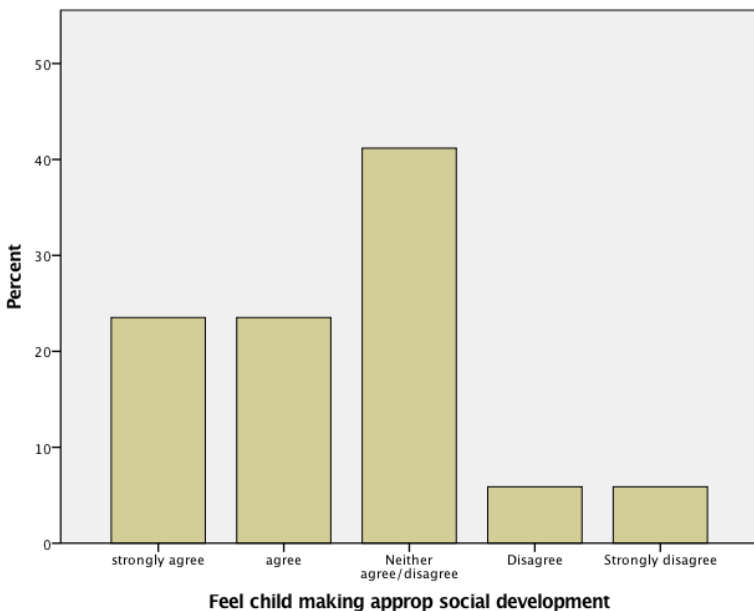


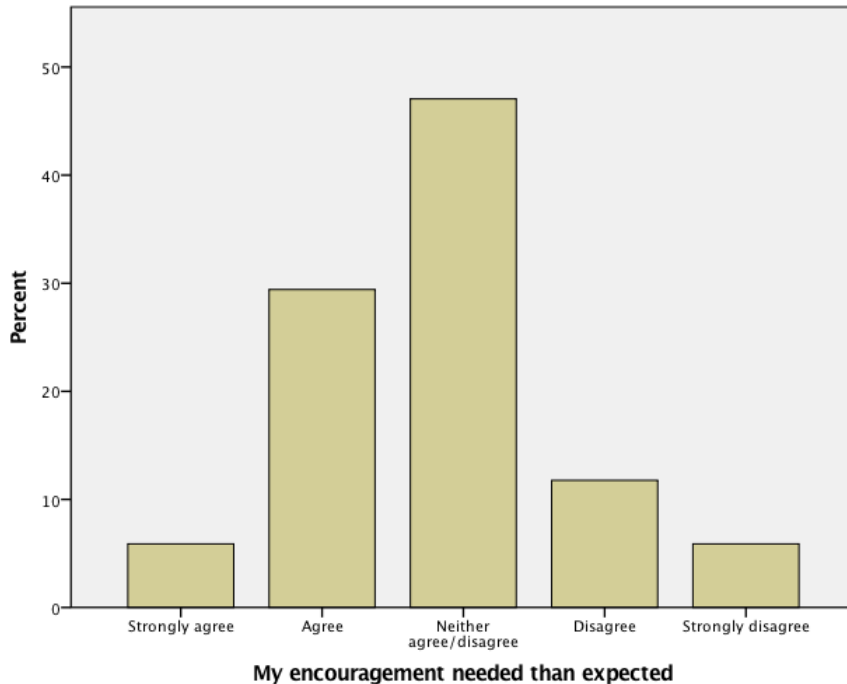
Figure 9. Overall, my child is making appropriate social development

During the interviews, some parents disclosed that they thought their children missed out on social interactions at school, even when they moved their children to the fully online school because of social problems within the school such as bullying.

[The IEP] was reviewed when he first came in. We went through an IEP meeting from the school that he was in saying that we were moving him. And then when we got him into the virtual school after about two weeks they did an IEP for him for virtual schools because it's a different environment and a lot of the things don't correlate in an IEP in a virtual classroom. But he did get most of his basic accommodations. It's just mostly he's missed out on the social stuff that he needed... He's not obviously going to be in a classroom with 22 or even 10 students where he gets that constant interaction. FL.1, lines 94-101.

This parent was satisfied with the fact that she moved her child and had an IEP meeting right away. Even though the virtual school staff knew that their school was different from a traditional school, the staff did not initiate services for social skill development for the child. Instead, the basic accommodations that seemed applicable to the online environment were included and the parent walked away from the meeting feeling that the school had taken care of her child's needs. What is interesting is that the parent felt the social interaction was missing but did not feel as comfortable advocating for social interaction or skill development on the IEP.

Parents were asked whether they had to provide more emotional support to children than they were expecting with the move to the fully online environment. Figure 10 highlights the responses to this question. Thirty-seven percent indicated through agreement or strong agreement that their children were in fact making appropriate social development. However, the largest percentage (44%) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed.



*Figure 10.* Overall, I provide more emotional support and encouragement to my child than I was expecting to in the online learning environment

During the interviews, parents described in greater detail the emotional support that they had to provide. Some of this support came when children were frustrated about the amount of work that they had to do, while others became frustrated about deadlines. When the child became frustrated, work on lessons decreased. Although most fully online schools allow extended time in the form of student-determined paces, the students still must log on regularly and turn in assignments according to the timeline. The penalty for not keeping pace in these ways was to be dropped from the course. One parent described the concerns she had about keeping pace during the occasions of her child’s disruptive behavior.

It was getting so bad that there would be months at a time when we would barely get anything done, and they’re going to kick us out, then what do I do? But they’ve pretty much assured me that they understand. As long as they see some kind of progress being done they’re not going to hold him to the same standard as kids without an IEP. I think that, by far, has been the biggest relief, to know that they’re going to support us regardless of the pace we work or the amount of stuff we get done, as long as we are making an attempt every day to go to school. WI.4, lines 165-172.

In this description, the parent handled the behaviors on her own, coming up with her own strategies to assuage her child’s emotional outbursts that impede academic progress for days or even weeks. These outbursts occur even though this child was receiving what the parent described as “anger management classes” through the online school. Instead of asking questions about the effectiveness of these classes or soliciting individualized support from the online school, she expressed gratitude to them for what she interpreted as compassion under the circumstances. The “support” she described occurred when she called the school and said, “my son is experiencing trauma and cannot work” and the virtual educator essentially responded with, “Thanks for letting us know. We won’t drop him from our rolls.” The plan was for the mother to do her best and keep her fingers crossed that her son would not be kicked out.

### **Discussion**

This study sought to understand parental perceptions of social skill interaction and development in fully online schools. The participating parents all had elementary students who were attending fully online schools and who exhibited difficulties in various settings in interacting with peers—in and out of school—particularly peers who did not have disabilities. The parents perceived that their children lacked social skills and they perceived that their children were made uncomfortable by having to interact with peers. Even so, they wished that some form of assistance was available for them and their children that would not bring emotional pain or extra public attention to their children, many of whom have substantial social and behavioral markers that set them apart from their peers without disabilities.

Many parents shared that at least part of the move to online environment came because of social challenges, many of which were more disruptive to the child and/or to family life when they occurred in the traditional educational setting. When the children were working at home, they did not experience social discomfort or distress to the same extent, which alleviated parental stress about dealing with school officials and worry about what children might do when they are away from parents. Even so, the children still had emotional outbursts requiring parental support to manage while working through online coursework. Parents realized that their children were not receiving social interaction and sought to participate in activities through the school such as field trips and they also leaned on community social opportunities such as church and sports. The findings of this study have implications for practice, research, and policies regarding parental involvement in online learning that includes concern for children’s social and emotional learning.

### **Implications for Practice**

Parents reported that online schools are making some attempts for face-to-face social interaction for their students. This goal is laudable and desirable for students, especially those students with disabilities who lack solid social and emotional foundations (Gresham & Elliott, 2008; Lahiri, Bekele, Dohrmann, Warren, & Sarkar, 2015; Myles & Simpson, 2001). However, another clear finding was that students were not receiving opportunities for social skill *instruction* and *development*, which are also critical to their success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, & Schellinger, 2011). More targeted efforts towards instruction and development are

recommended for improving students with disabilities social and emotional competencies and increasing the chances that they will eventually acquire these skills, which are linked to success beyond school (Bieber, 1994). Parents and service providers should also recognize that social opportunities in online schools that are grounded in field trips and other extracurricular activities are not the same in their capacity to improve social development as cooperative learning, collaboration with peers, project-based learning, and other academic opportunities might be when implemented properly (O'Connor & Jenkins, 1996). These types of academic opportunities for socialization are entirely absent from the lives of the students whose parents participated in this survey.

### **Implications for Research**

For research, more studies are clearly needed about the long-term social and emotional development of children with disabilities in fully online environments who either have or have not received social and emotional support. Comparison studies between students with and without disabilities who do and do not receive opportunities and/or instruction in social and emotional learning will be critical for decision making within online school settings. These studies can also be used to better inform parents about the social and emotional support they should expect when they enroll their children in fully online learning. This research seems especially critical for parents who enroll their children *because* of social and emotional discomfort in a traditional educational setting.

### **Implications for Policy**

IDEA names parents as partners in the educational process, particularly in regards to developing an IEP for child with a disability, although the level of involvement differs greatly depending on the setting (Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). Parents who participated in this study seemed ill-equipped to understand the difference between the *opportunities* for social and emotional learning and *instruction* in social and emotional learning. This disconnect left parents less able to advocate for support because when parents perceived that interaction was all that is necessary for their children to succeed, they did not demand instruction. Further, parents in this study were unlikely to bring up social skills as an area of need or focus because the children's behaviors were a source of stress and potentially even embarrassment. Having the child in an online school meant that parents could witness and to some degree, control the settings in which their children exhibit poor social skills. Our impression is also that they are less concerned about social challenges at places like church than in a traditional school. As policies are made at the state level and as charters are granted to fully online schools, evaluators should consider the social and emotional supports and opportunities, potentially for all students, but especially for students with disabilities. In addition, authentic parent involvement policies might consider adding information for parents about social and emotional learning as part of decision-making practices before, during, and after students enter the fully online learning environment.

### **Limitations**

While the reader may find these results of great interest, a concern to balance that interest is that the size of the sample and the participants' recruitment has implications. The sample is

very limited in size and could not be considered as representative of the larger population of the students or their parents in online settings. The challenges in recruiting a random, representative sample were quite significant and thus the research staff were delighted to include even this range of parental participation. Perhaps future researchers will have better access to parents and recruiting their participation. These findings should be treated as tentative and perhaps at the best indicate some of the issues that could be explored in future research activities.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to learn about the perceptions parents had regarding the social and emotional support their children received from a fully online school. The perceptions were ascertained using both a survey instrument and phenomenological interview techniques. While students with disabilities are receiving some social and emotional support, what they are receiving is not in accordance with prior research on what is helpful for students with disabilities. Further, even considering individual circumstances of the participating families, substantial room for improvement exists in the way in which social and emotional skills are learned and taught in the fully online learning environment.

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