



ONLINE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT

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Online learning's exponential growth is dramatically changing how and where students' learn. In fact, millions of K-12 learners are currently involved in *blended*, *supplemental*, or *fully online* learning. In *blended* learning, students receive at least part of their education program online but also have in person classroom time with teachers and classmates. Students usually sign up for *supplemental* online learning in addition to their schooling in traditional classroom settings, when they want to take a course that is not offered by their district or school. Students enrolled in *fully* online schools (referred here as *virtual schools*) receive all of their instruction and content through online sources. This brief will focus on parent engagement for students with disabilities enrolled in *virtual* schools as their primary educational setting.

Research is very limited about (a) students with disabilities enrolled in virtual schools, (b) parent engagement in supporting their children with disabilities, or (c) how to best support parents of students with disabilities in virtual schools. However, since 2011, the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) has been conducting research and gathering insights into the world of online learning as it pertains to students with disabilities and their parents. Drawing from such COLSD research activities as stakeholder forums, interviews of parents who have children with disabilities in virtual schools, parent surveys, and surveys in which states answer questions about their virtual schools, we can share our insights into parent engagement when their children with disabilities attend virtual schools. Sharing these insights is the purpose of these few pages. With this information, parents can be more knowledgeable about the advantages and challenges that they and their children might experience with virtual schools.

For-profit and non-profit companies, state departments of education, and even individual school districts can create virtual schools. In virtual schools, teachers and course materials are completely online, and offered through a *Learning Management System* (LMS). The LMS houses such things as course materials and resources, the grading system, and teacher contact information. The majority of interactions between teacher and student, student and

student, and teacher and parent are likely to occur through the LMS using computer technologies that often include email, video conferencing, and chat rooms. Phone calls are also used to keep in contact.

Information in virtual courses is presented in different ways as compared to traditional schools. Learning requires very different skills compared to the way students learn in a brick and mortar school. Students enrolled in a virtual school might learn by reading information on a computer screen, tablet, or smart phone, watch an online video or animated presentation, completing exercises in online proprietary programs, interacting with different software programs, or writing their ideas in a discussion thread or virtual small group meeting. Therefore, enrolling students with disabilities in virtual schools has major implications for parents because parent engagement is much more involved in supporting their child's learning through these activities as compared to a brick and mortar setting.

Students with disabilities may need special education support to access and process content to maximize their learning and allow them to reach their potential. Some virtual schools do not use the term "special education" or "disability." Instead, they use terms such as "personalized learning" or "student services" for *all* virtual students, meaning that learning is tailored to each student's preferences and needs. Regardless of what words are used, it is important for parents of children with disabilities to understand how virtual schools will meet the needs of their child and what their level of engagement will be in supporting their child's learning.

WHAT WE KNOW

Most of COLSD research findings on parent engagement and virtual school are consistent, with some variation in perspective among stakeholder groups. According to the more recent COLSD publication, *Equity Matters (2016)*, a major difference is noted between parent engagement in virtual schools compared to brick and mortar settings, with parents being much more actively involved in the day-to-day virtual instruction to support their child's learning. This active involvement translates to a significant investment of time on the part of the parents (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014; Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, & Harvey, 2016; Smith, Ortiz, & Rice, in progress). The list below provides examples of parent support activities as reported by parents of students with disabilities (Burdette, Paula & Greer, Diana, 2014; Smith, S., Burdette, P., Cheatham, G., & Harvey, S., 2016; Smith, Ortiz, & Rice, in progress).

Parent Support Activities

- Teaching academic content, including curriculum modifications
- Integrating instructional ideas and interventions suggested by the instructor
- Locating and organizing instructional materials
- Maintaining and reporting learning progress
- Trouble-shooting technology issues

Some parents expressed concern that they were playing the primary role of teacher for their child, which was beyond their capacity and too demanding on their schedule. However,

some parents also acknowledged that virtual schools offer easier and more frequent access to the instructors because of flexible schedules and the ability to meet in a variety of ways.

While parents of online students with disabilities report an increase in responsibilities, virtual school vendors reported that they and virtual instructors often do not recognize the parents’ role as being so significant. Instead they consider the course materials as the primary mechanism for guiding learning success (Tindle, K., East, T., & Mellard, D.F., 2015).

From their state policy scans, COLSD found that most states report offering very limited support for parents and offering no guidance for how virtual schools should incorporate student’s IEP information into their programs. A few virtual school district superintendents discussed training they offer to model how to use different devices, applications, and assistive technology tools (Franklin, Rice, East, Mellard., 2015). However, this practice was not a common occurrence across the virtual school districts. According to state directors of special education (Franklin, Burdette, East, Mellard, 2015), some virtual school vendors require parents to watch a video that explains parent responsibilities but do not require actual training in these duties. Directors also reported that no standard exists that regulates across virtual schools what information is communicated to parents about their responsibilities.

In addition, COLSD researchers learned from surveys and interviews with parents that they desire clear guidance on what to consider when enrolling their children in a virtual school. Parents want to make, or help the IEP Team make, placement and IEP decisions that will best serve their children’s needs. Virtual school state superintendents agree that parents should be involved in the IEP process and stated that they strive to ensure appropriate infrastructure is in place to support successful virtual IEP meetings. The superintendents also indicated that a frequent challenge for them is to ensure parents understand the benefits, requirements, and challenges of learning in a virtual school.

REFERENCES

The following resources offer examples of COLSD research on the parents’ perspectives and engagement in virtual schools.

SOURCE and LINK	The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (2016). <i>Equity Matters: Digital & Online Learning for Students with Disabilities</i> . Lawrence, KS: Author. http://centeronlinelearning.org/publications/equity-matters-2016/
SOURCE and LINK	Burdette, Paula & Greer, Diana (2014). Online learning and students with disabilities: Parent Perspectives. <i>Journal of Interactive Online Learning</i> , (13)2, 67-88. http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/13.2.4.pdf
SOURCE and LINK	Franklin, Burdette, East, Mellard. (2015). Parents’ Roles in their Child’s Online Learning Experience: State Education Agency Forum Proceedings Series. (Report No. 2). Lawrence, KS: COLSD, University of Kansas. http://centeronlinelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/SEA_Topic_2_Summary_updated_July_2015.pdf

SOURCE and LINK	Franklin, Rice, East, Mellard. (2015). Parent Preparation and Involvement in their Child’s Online Learning Experience: Superintendent Forum Proceedings Series. (Report No. 2). Lawrence, KS: COLSD, University of Kansas http://centeronlinelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/Superintendent_Topic_2_Summary_November2015.pdf
SOURCE AND LINK	Tindle, K., East, T., & Mellard, D.F. (2015). Parent preparation and involvement in their children’s online experience: Vendor forum proceedings series (Report No. 2). Lawrence, KS: COLSD, University of Kansas. http://centeronlinelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/Vendor_Topic_2_Summary_February2015.pdf
SOURCE	Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, & Harvey (2016). Parental role and support for online learning of students with disabilities: A paradigm shift. <i>Journal of Special Education Technology</i> .
SOURCE and LINK	State Policies and Guidance (State Scans) http://centeronlinelearning.org/resources/state-policy-guide/
SOURCE	Currie-Rubin, R. J., Smith, S. J. (2014) Understanding the roles of families in virtual learning. <i>Teaching Exceptional Children</i> , 46, 117-126.
SOURCE	Smith, Ortiz, & Rice (in progress). “I do almost everything ... except for the actual work”: Roles and responsibilities of parents of virtual school students with disabilities. Lawrence, KS: Center on Online Instruction and Students with Disabilities, University of Kansas.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO: REFLECTION ON CONSIDERING A VIRTUAL SCHOOL

An important question to think about is *why* a parent might want to enroll their child in a virtual school. For some parents, the flexibility of the online instruction is desirable. Considerations of questions below can help parents discover the strengths of the virtual school and how they may support your child’s special learning needs. Of course, many answers are possible to these guiding questions below depending on your child’s situation and the different virtual schools:

- What is currently missing from my child’s brick and mortar setting that a virtual school can provide?
- If my child needs to make greater academic gains, how will a virtual school support my child’s achievement? How can the school provide support such as individualized instruction or special services?
- If my child needs to make greater social interaction gains, to what extent do students in the virtual school interact with each other during the typical instructional day? If my child needs more social interaction, how will a virtual school create ways for students to interact socially with each other?
- If my child is experiencing bullying, how does a virtual school ensure that cyber bullying does not occur? Instead of moving to a virtual school, can I call a meeting with the IEP team to discuss ways to support my child to address the bullying?
- How much time will I need to spend supporting my child’s learning?

If parents support enrollment in a virtual school, they must consider which school will best meet their child’s needs *and* will best engage their child’s learning. The rest of this brief

offers some ideas about how to think about whether virtual schooling will meet their children's needs.

PRE-ENROLLMENT

Finding a virtual school that offers resources and services that will meet your child's needs is very important. Before you enroll your child, you can look into some aspects of the virtual school to figure out if the particular school has what you are looking for in terms of offering your child *and* you support.

Parents must determine to what extent their child can learn independently because their child's independence will have major implications for the parents' level of engagement. Parents might be asked to do such things as help children: set goals; connect with and discuss the content; practice with the material; and understand mistakes. The less independent the child is as a learner, the more time and energy the parent will spend in instructional activities.

Students in virtual schools usually engage with assignment content and directions through reading, but many students with disabilities struggle with reading. This approach means parents may need to offer reading support along with teaching content and help students understand how to complete the assignments. Clearly, an important consideration is for parents to think about their child's reading abilities to determine the amount and types of support their child may need to meet the reading demands.

Based on interviews of parents of children with disabilities in virtual schools, COLSD staff found that parents wished they knew more about how virtual schools support students with special learning needs. Part of virtual school's flexibility is allowing students to work according to their own schedule, parents found that their child may not *see* or *hear* teachers or students in the class because most assignments and learning were set up to be independent instead of in pairs or small groups. This approach may not be supportive for students who need interaction to better access and understand the material. Parents also reported when student-to-student interactions did occur the interactions were often through a chat box. However, the chat box could not be enlarged so students with visual impairments struggled. Also, many students type quickly, so a student struggling with reading and typing will have difficulty participating with classmates through this particular feature that requires quick reading and responding skills.

The following provides examples of the kinds of questions parents of children with disabilities can ask to evaluate virtual school options to help make your decision.

MEETING IEP NEEDS

How does the virtual school talk about "special education?" Depending on your child's disability and severity level, it is important that you consider carefully what is best for your child. Virtual school district superintendents indicate that available online technologies can offer great opportunities for parent and teacher collaboration on meeting IEP needs. Consider information about:

- When will the IEP team meet with me to review my child’s IEP *before* my child receives services in the virtual school?
- If my child’s IEP requires accommodations and modifications, how will these be made and who makes them?
- How are teachers and related services staff alerted to the information on my child’s IEP?
- How much *meaningful* interaction will my child have with the teacher during the day? To what extent is my child expected to work independently?
- If my child’s IEP requires the use of special equipment (e.g. FM listening systems, calculator, audiobook reader) will the virtual school provide the device(s) or software and instruction about appropriate usage? If I have to get the equipment on my own, will they provide training for me, and my child, on the device?
- If my child requires an IEP related service (e.g. speech and language, social-emotional counseling, OT, or PT) how will those services be provided? Will sessions be with a person, virtually, or a computer program? Will the sessions be one-on-one, in pairs or triads, and/or small groups? How is the schedule determined?
- Will my child have a special education teacher assigned to support learning class content, understanding assignment directions, organizing materials, prioritizing tasks, and/or staying motivated to learn? If the school offers a case manager assigned to my child, how will that person ensure the IEP is carried out appropriately with accommodations and modifications, as necessary?
- Does the school offer parent training, provide a handbook, or support a parent resource group so parents of children with a disability can learn how to teach our children and achieve? Can the virtual school officials recommend other parents of students with disabilities in the virtual school I can talk with about their experiences?

RESOURCES

The following resources are examples of virtual state schools that offer information about how they handle IEP documents for students with disabilities.

SOURCE and LINK	North Carolina Virtual Public School - a curriculum and instruction document that includes information about IEP meetings to discuss whether an online course is appropriate for a student with disabilities and what additional support is necessary to accommodate any IEP modifications due to the online setting. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VxuJXZW_sjfSSuCZeSxeVJvr3Hs5nbuOy8QsVG55N4g/edit
SOURCE and LINK	Virtual South Carolina - an IEP review process prior to enrollment to determine appropriateness of online instruction for the student given the disabilities. https://virtualsc.org/students-with-ieps/
SOURCE and LINK	Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative - an IEP review process prior to enrollment to determine appropriateness of online instruction and whether the IEP accommodations can be provided through a virtual environment. https://www.vtvlc.org/policies/enroll%2ADment-in-vtvlc-for-stu%2ADdents-with-dis%2ADabil%2ADi%2ADties-iep%E2%80%8B504/

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

Some aspects of a virtual school are worthy of consideration whether your child has a specialized learning need or not. The COLSD staff found that parents think virtual schools should have a communication system in place that offers regular and consistent ways for teachers and parents to stay in touch about how their child is performing in each course. Easy ways exist for LMS to offer up-to-date information on each child's progress (e.g. how many hours the child has logged into the course, how many assignments are completed, what the child's current grade is in the course) so that parents can regularly monitor their child's learning. Vendors stated that instructors can meet with parents and share their screen in real time to show the child's progress and struggles. Instructors can generate a student report from the LMS as the parent follows along on the instructor's screen. This approach can help keep parents up to date on their child's learning and position parents to see and ask questions about the data.

Parents also want to be sure they will get technical support. For instance, parents and vendors agree that many parents want a virtual school that offers training sessions or resources to help parents understand how to teach academic material to their child and what to do when their child experiences challenges staying on task. Parents also want direct technical support if they run into such issues as connecting devices (mobile or computer) to the LMS or accessing course materials. Some questions for parents to ask themselves or the virtual school:

- What does a typical day in a virtual school look like for my child and for me?
- What types of community activities are available for my child to feel part of the school?
Does the virtual school have connections to my brick and mortar school for students to join their clubs or sports teams?
- If my child experiences difficulty in the courses, who will be available to help me know what to do?
- How comfortable am I in teaching academic material? Are "teacher textbooks" or guides (with answers to questions) available to me? How will problem-solving or critical thinking skills be included in the lessons?
- How will students learn to manage their time and schedule throughout the day?
- What online communication systems are in place for teachers and parents to regularly discuss or monitor progress (e.g. a grading platform in the LMS, email access to teachers, web-based platforms for meetings)? How often are teacher meetings scheduled (e.g. twice per grading period, once per semester, only when a parent requests)?
- Are the virtual school's courses approved by the state so that my child can get the appropriate educational program that meets state standards necessary for their grade level and/or graduation? What is the state requirement for mandatory hours per day or week for students in virtual school programs?
- Does the school offer help with technology issues (e.g. live chat line, tech support person)? Is this service available 24/7 or only during the instructional day?

RESOURCES

The following resources are examples that offer general information about virtual schools with limited reference to students with disabilities.

SOURCE and LINK	Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide Distance Learning – Policy Manual for Students http://accessdl.state.al.us/sites/default/files/documents/manuals/StudentPolicyManual7-13-12.pdf
SOURCE and LINK	Hubert, Olson, Jaudon, & Newell. (2014). Learning by Choice: Student Enrollment Options in Washington. http://www.k12.wa.us/GeneralInfo/pubdocs/LearningByChoice2014.pdf
SOURCE and LINK	Michigan Virtual University – Parent Guide to Online Learning http://www.virtualschoolalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Parent-Guide-MVS.pdf

As this document suggests, parents have a number of decisions to face as they consider a virtual school enrollment. Our research is limited about online learning and the benefits for students with disabilities. On the other hand, we believe that the guidance and resources included here can be valuable to parents and guardians and their children with disabilities. For further information on parent engagement for students with disabilities in online settings, please consult the website of COLSD at <http://centeronlinelearning.org>.

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