Parents' Roles in their Child's Online Learning Experience

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Introduction

Currently, online learning reaches millions of K-12 learners and its annual growth has been exponential over the past number of years. This growth has and will likely continue to lead to dramatic changes in the educational landscape. While online learning appears to hold great promise, a paucity of research addresses the pedagogical implications for students with disabilities (SWD). Researchers urgently need to conduct investigations that describe what is happening in the field and demonstrate how online learning should be designed and delivered to impact these students' educational outcomes. The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) has been conducting research in this area.

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 SWDs in K-12 online learning in a range of forms and contexts such as fully online schools, blended or hybrid instruction consisting of traditional and online instruction, and online courses;
2. To identify and describe major potential positive outcomes and negative consequences of participation in online learning for SWDs;
3. To identify and develop promising approaches for increasing the accessibility and potential effectiveness of online learning for SWDs; and
4. To test the feasibility, usability, and potential effectiveness of one or more of these approaches.

To meet the first two goals, the Center has conducted a number of activities. Exploratory research activities include case studies of two fully online schools; national surveys of purposeful samples of parents, students, teachers, and district and state administrators; interviews with members of individualized education program (IEP) teams; and a review of one state's student participation, retention, and completion data. Additionally, to describe the landscape of online learning for students with disabilities, the Center is conducting a series of forums with different stakeholder groups. The first forum was held with state department of education staff to provide an in-depth view from the state perspective. Other forums under

consideration include forums with district superintendents, online learning vendors, and other stakeholders.

Participants and forum topics

In the summer of 2014, COLSD staff began planning for the series of forums to shed light on the state of online learning and SWDs from the practitioners' perspective. The first forum was held with state department of education staff in a face-to-face gathering November 17th and 18th, 2014. Participants were staff members from six state departments of education and one local district administrator. A list of participants is included as an appendix to this report. The states represented at this forum were Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Virginia. These states were selected based on three factors: (1) Each state has a relatively detailed state policy on online learning. (2) Each state has state-level activity in special education and online learning. (3) Each state is geographically diverse. While staff from other states had asked to attend the forum, the forum process and resource constraints required that a limited number of individuals participate in order to gather in-depth information. Although the experiences and information from the participating states do not represent the nation as a whole, they do provide an informed sample. Other than Massachusetts and Florida, each state's director of special education attended. Massachusetts and Florida's representatives were educational specialists with knowledge in both special education and virtual education.

COLSD staff reviewed previous literature reviews and other research activities (e.g., case studies, surveys, and interviews) to determine the topics for this first forum. Staff gave suggestions for collapsing some topics and extrapolating concepts from others. The final eight topics covered at the forum included the following:

- Enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement;
- Parents' preparation and involvement in their child's online experience, including promising practices to support parents' roles;
- IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, parental notification, due process protections);
- Access to student data, including privacy concerns, sharing, integration, and instructional usage among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructional setting, instructor, administrator, provider, and vendor);
- Teacher preparation -- both preservice and inservice -- for the online learning environment;
- Integration of optimal evidence-based instructional practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments;
- Utilization of the online environment's unique properties and affordances (i.e., those features that would not be possible or practical in the offline environment) in the areas of collaboration, personalization of instruction, and multiple means of demonstrating skill mastery; and
- Differential access to online learning across the state (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access and assistive technologies).

Participants received a packet of materials prior to the meeting, including the agenda (see Appendix B), a list of the topics and questions to be considered, a draft of a Center publication entitled, "The Landscape of Online Learning," and the publication "Using Technology to Support At-Risk Students' Learning" by Darling-Hammond, Zielezinski, and Goldman. This latter publication can be found at https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/scope-pub-using-technology-report.pdf. The forum began with introductions and a comprehensive discussion of the importance of online learning and students with disabilities from each state staff member's perspective. Next, each state representative responded to a set of questions about the selected eight topics. In a round-robin fashion so each participant had an opportunity to describe his/her state's need, status, importance, and other perspectives pertaining to the topic.

For each of the eight topics, participants responded to six questions:
- How is the topic addressed in your state?
- How important is this topic?
- What direction is your state moving on this topic?
- What are the top challenges around this topic in your state?
- What is going well regarding this topic?
- What research question could have significant impact on this area?

As a closing exercise, participants described their top leadership challenges in regard to online learning for students with disabilities.

Parent Preparation and Involvement in their Child's Online Learning

This document, the second in the series of forum proceeding papers presents participants' responses to a set of six questions on the topic of parents' involvement in their children's online instruction. This topic was identified from COLSD's previous research on online learning, as well as other published and anecdotal information. The Center's initial activities found that significant parental issues included their varied roles and their levels of involvement. The contrast was made that in traditional educational settings, the parents' instructional role is more limited and less active and largely focuses on supporting classroom instruction (e.g., ensuring homework completion). For online instruction, however, the parental roles can be greatly expanded. The most common concern unearthed was how well parents were prepared for these roles as instructor, manager, instructional coach, and curriculum director (Deshler, Smith, Greer, & Rice, 2014). The SEA participants provided their views regarding this important topic and how their respective agencies were supporting parents in these expanded roles.

How is this topic addressed in your organization?

The parental role is specified through the local education agency (LEA) and the online vendor. Each entity appears to set expectations for parental roles and involvement. Participants reported that while LEA's are not 'hands-off' in garnering parent involvement of families using online school programming, the majority of the responsibility for informing parents of their active role is with the vendor. Several participants indicated that some vendors require parents

to watch a video that explains the parents' responsibilities and that regular meetings and face-to-face activities are scheduled for parents of students enrolled in online school. However, they cautioned that the dissemination of this information does not equate to understanding and compliance. Not all LEAs ask for the same level of parent involvement and commitment, nor do they use the same language describing the level and types of involvement. Some LEAs appoint parents as business managers to supervise their child's academic attendance and activities, while others expect them to serve an instructional coaching role. In general LEAs are still seeking solutions within their SEA agencies for increasing parent involvement and clarifying their LEA and parent's roles and responsibilities.

SEAs are involved to a different extent regarding parent involvement, from instituting parent training initiatives (AZ) to only addressing parent choice and special education concerns (OH). This variation in policy and practice certainly suggests that LEAs and online schools are functioning with different levels of autonomy, making it difficult to disseminate instruction for a uniform configuration or consistent approach of parent involvement and responsibility.

How important is this topic from your perspective?

All participants indicated that parent preparation and involvement was a topic of high priority. They linked this need to the difficulty most online schools seem to be experiencing in regards to appropriately integrating parents into online instructional and administrative roles. Their SEA experience was that parent focused education about on-line programs and the preparation and involvement required, has a significant impact on students' understanding, persistence, and success. Very little variability was noted in the participants' responses to this question, and the importance of addressing parent preparation and involvement difficulties was evident in participant's responses to all of the other questions posed regarding parent preparation and involvement.

What direction do you see your state going on this topic?

Although participants provided a variety of responses concerning their respective state's policy and procedural direction regarding preparation and involvement of parents with students in online programs, a consistent theme emerged. Participants indicated that one direction for their efforts is developing or expanding an orientation program and on-going support services for parents. These programs create or improve existing parent mentorship programs in an effort to provide opportunities for support, both online and in person (VA, GA, OH).

As one example, in Ohio some of the larger online schools currently have parent meetings scheduled for parents of students with disabilities only. Massachusetts uses a shared responsibility system to support student with disabilities. In their shared responsibility model, the LEA, or school of residence, is fiscally responsible for the student, but the online school has programmatic responsibility. Currently, parent preparation and involvement is solicited through their participation in their student's IEP plan. Parents are responsible for "coaching" the student according to an IEP. The integrated approach to creating and carrying out the student's

IEP is still under development, as they are soliciting feedback still from both administrators and families with online enrolled students.

What's the top challenge you face?

According to forum participants, many stakeholders or groups feel that significant challenges exist regarding parental involvement. These challenges touch on such topics as students' instruction, assessment, and procedures for ensuring local and state requirements are met. Simply stated, adequate parent involvement and communication is one of the most challenging aspects of utilizing online schools. No standard exists across online schools that regulates *what* is communicated to parents about their responsibilities or *how* that information is communicated. Some online schools require parents to watch a video that explains their role as manager, or coach, but do not incorporate a subsequent check for understanding or observation to make sure that parents are adhering to the requirements. In addition to this, parents do not have training to provide the same interventions and assistance needed to implement their child's IEP. The agencies, however, are not getting the necessary feedback from parents of students that are enrolled online in order to improve their approach for preparing and working with parents.

Several participants raised additional challenges more akin to the situations they are currently facing in their states. One challenge was the accessibility of online schools for all families. The participants noted that having the means, space, and wherewithal to provide educational coaching at home is a privilege that not everyone has (VA). The expressed concern is that online schools would likely be most accessible to English-speaking, middle to upper class families, and more challenging for a large portion of parents.

In addition, agencies and administrators are uncertain about shifts in responsibility for providing services or accommodations when the student is educated in the totally online setting. In a typical school setting, the school provides related services and accommodations. In an online setting, uncertainty exists about those same responsibilities that are beyond what the parent can provide for their children with disabilities. Does the responsibility rest with the online school or the local education agency (MA)?

Another challenge is how IEP related services beyond parent capabilities are provided (OH). IEPs are generally written to match the child's needs and what the school can provide, which is vastly different in traditional versus online settings. Interestingly though, in some states, IEPs are written by the online school, but the related services for students with disabilities, beyond what the parents can provide, are the responsibility of the LEA. This practice means that three parties have to consult and coordinate many facets of the students' instruction and related services to ensure that students receive the needed services, which is not the most efficacious system (MA).

What are the various stakeholder concerns?

A wide variety of potential concerns were expressed regarding parent preparation and involvement. Many concerns revolved around parents being unable to comply with the greater burden for their child's education than in a traditional setting, for several reasons. The most

common reasons cited were the inability to monitor parents to ensure that parents are choosing an online school for appropriate reasons, can effectively use the technology, and are implementing a student's IEP correctly. The concept of monitoring parental decisions is quite unique to the discussion of online instruction.

One representative noted that parents have expressed very strong opinions about the value of online instruction. In her experience, parents expressed either very positive or very negative feelings (FL). Some parents have been told that their children are ineligible for online school with very little reason given as to why their children are ineligible. Online schools declining students' access and enrollment without consistent exclusionary criteria is troubling (FL). A final stakeholder concern was that of responsibility for students with disabilities' IEP services; are LEAs, online school, or both responsible for assuring that IEP requirements and procedural safeguards are met?

What research questions could have a significant impact?

The discussion of parent preparation and involvement, like many others, brought up questions regarding best practices, what works, and what are the impacts. Because the option of online education is so new, as is the level of required parent involvement, an evaluation of what works and what doesn't work needs to take place in each state using their online schools. Participants wanted to know how to best support families taking part in online education. Furthermore, representatives are calling for guidelines and standards by which they can train and monitor parents as coaches of their child enrolled in an online program.

With an eye toward supporting diversity and making online schools equally accessible and feasible for all students, questions were asked about how to support participation among culturally and linguistically populations. Specifically, are other considerations and steps needed to ensure the access of online education for all especially in consideration of economic, racial, and linguistic diversity among families? Families with students with disabilities are also a major area of interest as the online school movement progresses (VA). Assessing how much parents of students with disabilities know about the online environment, and any advantages or disadvantages that environment could provide for their student, would help facilitate an understanding of appropriate conversations with parents of students with disabilities when online learning environments are an option (FL).

Implications

The SEA representatives agreed that parent roles have significantly shifted as technology and applications have expanded in the educational setting. For parents of students with disabilities, the expansion is not only a greater involvement (e.g., more than participation in assessment conferences, IEP planning, and transition planning), but more active instructional, curricular, and assessment roles in the decisions for their children's education. Thus, their preparation and involvement is a critical issue in all states that provide online schools as an option. Difficulties in preparing, communicating with, and monitoring parents in their important roles as coaches or managers are readily evident and difficult to address. This challenge is especially true regarding parents of students with disabilities, because three

parties- the parent, the LEA, and the online school- are expected to serve the student through collaborative efforts with one another in meeting the student's needs. The participants unanimously agreed that a delineated system for parent (a) preparation, (b) support, and (c) monitoring would be immensely helpful. As yet, the SEAs don't feel comfortable that this system has been developed or tested. In addition, another missing component is a set of best practices to facilitate a clearer understanding of each party's responsibilities. Finally, a promising approach is that parent programming and support is being increased and/or restructured in most of the states represented using a mentorship model. The mentoring model is advantageous in that parents who have successfully navigated the online school system are available to those learning the ropes.

The discussions lead to several questions for further investigations:

1. What information do parents need to make an informed decision about their child's participation in the online instruction?
2. What are the best options for preparing and supporting parents in their roles?
3. How do parents' roles and responsibilities shift across the age/grade continuum?

Franklin, T.O., Burdette, P., East, T., & Mellard, D.F. (2015). *Parents' Roles in their Child's Online Learning Experience: State Education Agency Forum Proceedings Series*. (Report No. 2). Lawrence, KS: Center on Online Instruction and Students with Disabilities, University of Kansas.

Reference

Deshler, D., Smith, S., Greer, D., & Rice, M. (2014, April). *The barriers, challenges, and opportunities of online learning environments for SWDs.* Presentation at the annual meeting of the Council of Exceptional Children. Philadelphia, PA.

Appendix A

Forum Participants

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Appendix B

Forum Agenda

OSEP and COLSD Forum
**Practices and Challenges in On-line Instruction for
Students with Disabilities**

NOVEMBER 18-19, 2014
AGENDA

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

8:30 – 8:45	Welcome	*OSEP staff and Bill East*
8:45 – 9:10	Introductions:	Your SEA experiences with online instruction (Questions suggested in the second cover letter)
9:10 – 9:15	Overview	*Explanation of how we hope this discussion proceeds*
9:15 – 10:30	Discussion	*Topic #1:* Enrollment, persistence, progress and achievement; Disaggregated by disability category
10:30 – 10:45	Break	Check in with the office; Refresh your brain
10:45 – 11:45	Discussion	*Topic #2:* Parent preparation and involvement in their child's online experience; Promising practices to support parents' roles
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch	Task: Evaluation and planning (Handout)
1:00 – 2:15	Discussion	*Topic #3:* IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, parental notification, due process protections)
2:15 – 2:30	Break	
2:30 – 3:30	Discussion	*Topic #4:* Effective and efficient student response data access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructional setting,

instructor, administrator, provider, and vendor) and addressing privacy concerns

| 3:30 – 4:30 | Discussion | *Topic #5:* Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment; Promising or negative practices that facilitate (negate) professional development |
| 4:30 – 4:45 | | *Wrap-up, suggestions for improving our process and preview for day 2* |

Wednesday, November 19, 2014

8:15 to 8:30	Review	*Review of yesterday and preview of the today's activities*
8:30 – 9:15	Discussion	*Topic #6:* Integration of optimal evidence-based instructional practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments
9:15 – 9:30	Break	
9:30 – 10:30	Discussion	*Topic #7*: Utilization of the online environment's unique properties and affordances especially those features that would not be possible or practical in the offline environment: collaboration, personalizing instruction, multiple means of demonstrating skill mastery
10:30 – 11:45	Discussion	*Topic #8:* Differential access to online learning within and across your districts (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access & assistive technologies)
11:45 – 1:00	Lunch	Leadership challenges: What are 2-3 questions that you need answered about online learning and students with disabilities to help you provide state leadership?

1:00 – 2:00	Discussion	Your views on: (1) The Center's future activities, (2) Value of this forum and (3) Stakeholders for future forums
2:00 – 2:15	Wrap Up	*Reimbursement issues and closing comments; Thank you and safe travels*