# Local Supervision of Online Learning

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

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

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

To meet the first two goals, COLSD has conducted a number of activities designed to develop understandings about the general status of students with disabilities in online learning. Exploratory research activities included case studies of two fully online schools; several national surveys of purposefully sampled parents, students, teachers, and district and state

administrators; interviews with members of individualized education program (IEP) teams working with students with disabilities who were completing online coursework; and a systematic review of one state's student participation, retention, and completion data. COLSD is making an additional effort to describe the landscape of online learning for students with disabilities through a series of forums with different stakeholder groups. The first forum was held with state directors of special education (or a designee) to obtain an in-depth view of the issues and concerns with students with disabilities in online learning from the state policy perspective. The second forum was conducted with virtual school district superintendents and other top-level district administrators. The responses obtained from these administrators are the topic of this paper.

## Participants and forum topics

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

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

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

The second administrator is the vice president of achievement for the National Education Board of National Charter Schools. Currently, he is in charge of achievement for

6,000 students attending grades K-5 in California, Wisconsin, and Tennessee. His schools have used various blended models since they opened in 2007. Approximately 11 percent of students in his network are identified as having at least one disability.

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

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

The fifth administrator represented Carpe Diem Schools—a multistate charter school network for grades 6 through 12. Schools in his network employ various learning models, but most are some type of blended learning. Percentages of students with disabilities in his schools range from 12 to 25 percent of the approximately 2,500 total students in the network.

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

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

8. Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments; use of the unique properties afforded in online environments
9. Differential access to online learning within and across your schools (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions on material access and assistive technologies)
10. Local supervision for online learning in general education and, in particular, for supervision in special education

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

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

## Local Supervision of Online Learning in General and in Particular of Special Education

This topical paper is the tenth and final in a series of superintendent forum proceeding papers and includes participant responses to a set of five questions revolving around the topic of supervision in online learning environments. The recent and rapid expansion of online learning has brought few opportunities for meaningful field experiences with experienced online administrators and most administrators are learning to supervise on the job (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). Therefore, for many, or even most, educators instruction using online resources and applications is a new experience and a change in their traditional roles, as is the experience for those persons supervising them in such roles (Hathaway & Norton, 2012; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

Significant issues in supervision include documenting the supervision of special education teachers online and coordinating the supervision among various leadership levels. Previous work at COLSD has identified that a typical career trajectory included traditional special education teachers becoming online teachers who then move quickly to online

coaching, leadership, supervisory and administrative roles (Rice & Carter, in press). Thus, the teachers turned supervisors may have very limited experience with online instruction and are then faced with having to evaluate online teachers. The question is whether they have a sufficiently well informed framework for making those evaluative judgments, which may have significant consequenes. Some of those judgments may be high-stakes decisions such as the promotion or retention of teachers. Along the way, administrators are faced with two challenges. The first challenge is adapting extant strategies and learning new ones about serving students with disabilities. The second challenge is sustaining teachers who are learning to teach online when they (as supervisors) may not have regular contact with the teachers. Instead, the administrators must learn to supervise by reading and interpreting data forms that may not be familiar to them. That is, students in an online environment create a great deal of data that is beyond just the percent of completed assignments or percent correct. All of these barriers have challenged the ability of administrators to create and implement best practices for supervision of special education teachers in virtual education settings.

## How is this topic addressed in your organization?

Participants shared similar methods of observation and supervision for the blended environment. The fully online environment is somewhat different, but the level of supervision seems to match what is being carried out in blended environments. Representatives also shared that the most critical pieces of supervision are implemented and overseen by the building principals rather than a higher-level district administrator. Supervision requirements set by state education agencies and ensured by superintendents, often only encompass a requirement of so many instructional minutes for each student per day. This requirement means a certificated teacher must be in front of a student for a set number of minutes per year as determined by the state, while the breakdown of how many minutes per course is generally determined by local school boards.

School principals assume more nuanced aspects of supervision in both traditional and blended learning according to several participants. Walk-throughs are one of the most common approaches supervision is completed for blended settings. In a walk through, a principal will enter a classroom and check that specific criteria are being met. A walk-through focuses administrative attention on student engagement, types of technology being used, accuracy of chosen technology for educational purposes, and whether 21st century skills are being practiced (e.g. creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving). One participant shared that their organization has a separate procedure for special education walk-throughs so that environmental considerations are also monitored in order to best meet the needs of students with disabilities. Multiple participants stated that principals are required to do a minimum of five walk-throughs per week, although most principals end up completing more than five. In some participants' organizations, the data gathered from walk-throughs are presented at quarterly data meetings in order to show and evaluate trends for teachers and schools.

In addition to the walk-throughs conducted and the data collected from them, some organizations have hired coaches from some of the vendors with whom they work for a large

portion of their online programming. For the schools and districts that have hired them, these coaches complete walk-throughs for the entire school once per week and track the data. With administrators they review the data and determine teachers who are having positive results, which teachers aren't and subsequently which instructors seem to need more support. Not only do teachers have access to continuous support through the coaches' services, but the organization also has continuous access to outcome usage data points.

Regarding fully online environments, the supervision procedures are similar to a virtual walk-though. One participant said that their fully online school employs content area specific instructional leaders (ILs), whose job is to support teachers much like a department chair would in a traditional school. The ILs conduct "spot checks" in which they enter a Google document and look for the four fundamentals for online learning decided by administration: (1) targeted feedback, (2) a 24-hour turnaround for grading assignments, (3) adequate communication with students and parents, and (4) adaptive programming to meet individual student needs. New teachers are checked more often (1x month v. 2-3x semester) than experienced teachers. IL's also ensure co-teachers are working well together and design professional development content for areas in which multiple teachers seem to be having difficulty based on data from spot checks and other sources.

## How important is this topic from your perspective?

Participants noted supervision in the online environment is not as important of an issue as many others discussed over the course of the forum. They reported not having observed that it's any more difficult than supervision of teachers working in traditional brick and mortar schools. Many of the tools that administrators use to evaluate educators can be used for both those teaching virtually or in a traditional setting, not only making supervision equitable for those in the online environment, but also allowing for comparison of the effects of supervision across environments.

## What's going well?

Perhaps because the discrepancy in practice seems to be smaller regarding the supervision of online learning and that of traditional learning environments, participants had more to say about the success of supervision in the online environment than anything else related to this topic. The use of student data in supervision, software systems to measure the effects of educator instruction, and the development of instructional leaders are all areas in which representatives felt their school/district was excelling. For example, North Carolina has an evaluation tool for teachers called Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), a customized software system that provides educators with tools to improve student learning and improve on their own effectiveness including the ability to yield customized reports that predict student success and can reveal patterns in subgroup performance.

Primary and secondary data are provided by such software systems. Primary data drives instructional choices and strategies and directly measures the health of an instructional model

or individual teacher instruction. Secondary data supports primary data, for example within a specific online learning program, (i.e., what factors are making this classroom or program successful). In addition, some schools use coaching rubrics for instructors and these rubrics help with evaluating student engagement, observable and measurable interactions with technology tools, teacher responsiveness, and appropriate collaboration.

Finally, in districts or schools in which coaches have been hired from the vendors of the online programming being used, teachers have continuous access to support. In addition to this support, contracting with the vendors enables directors to know more about how effective both their teachers and online programming are, which provides an objective view across schools and educators by both usage and impact.

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

Participants were not aware of their state's next move for improving supervision of online instruction, but one participant noted that most states are not current with their requirements of supervision in education. Another representative shared that a continuing challenge is informing all teachers, including special education teachers, about promising online teaching practices and making the use of those practices evident to an administrator or coach for evaluation purposes. The consensus was that special education teachers must balance the expectations and interactional norms that emerge in a resource room with those norms that develop in a general education classroom. The result is that special education teachers feel as if they really have two different jobs. This situation has resulted in losing special education teachers who are highly qualified in a specific subject. The teachers with subject matter expertise quickly see that teaching in a regular classroom is preferable because the workload is lighter. A major challenge in supervision then, is not to merely maintain rigor for students, but also to manage teacher stress and burnout. Connected to these challenges of supervision and support is the ever-present challenge of funding. One participant said having the funding available to hire sufficient instructional leaders to ensure they are not overworked is also a problem.

## What research questions could have a significant impact?

Several questions were raised during the discussion of this issue, most of which addressed improving the efficiency of the supervision practices already in place. These questions included how the efficiency and effectiveness of supervision practices can be improved, and whether or not any instruments are better suited for making special education walk-throughs an effective practice. In general, participants were interested in what's working well for other schools and districts and curious about how online versus traditional teachers compare based on supervision data. Finally, participants were interested in whether supervision should look different across platforms, and whether any differences are necessary for supervising instructors using various models. For example, sometimes students change

rooms to visit a computer lab and sometimes they stay in the same room with sufficient devices to deliver instruction.

## Implications

Participants acknowledged that supervision practices in online schools were primarily adapted from supervision in traditional learning environments. The discussion revealed many common practices both in physical and virtual classrooms including walk-throughs and data based professional development and supervision of instructors. These commonalities may be partly the result of state and other authoritative bodies such as school boards setting requirements that can only be conceived as being met by mimicking traditional supervision practices (e.g., instructional minute requirements). Administrators in this forum were also interested in different perspectives on whether or not or to what extent supervision should be different across different platforms (e.g., traditional, blended, or fully online). Although participants felt positively toward their supervision practices, they were curious about how other schools and districts are carrying out supervision and what successes they are having in that area. One significant challenge faced, especially in the virtual world, is having the funding necessary to hire the content area specific instructional leaders necessary to provide adequate supervision for fully online teachers.

From the discussions, several questions emerged:

1. How does the supervision data from teachers in traditional learning environments compare to that of teachers in online or blended learning environments?
2. How can the effectiveness and efficiency of supervision in online and blended learning environments be improved?
3. How should supervision differ across instructional environments (i.e. traditional, blended, and fully online?
4. Should supervision differ in rotational versus flex models of online and blended learning?

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Kennedy, K., & Archambault, L. (2012). Offering Preservice Teachers Field Experiences in K-12 Online Learning A National Survey of Teacher Education Programs. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *63*(3), 185-200.

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Appendix A

Forum Participants

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

**Sandy Albert**
Director of Exceptional Children's
Programs
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Appendix B

Forum Agenda

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

**MARCH 31 – APRIL 1, 2015**

**AGENDA**

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

**Tuesday, March 31, 2015**

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

**Wednesday, April 1, 2015**

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

8:30 - 9:15          Discussion *Topic #6:* Effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student response data among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructors, administrator, provider, and vendor) and addressing privacy concerns

9:15-10:30          Discussion *Topic #7:* Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment; and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development

11:15-11:30          Break

10:30-11:15          Discussion *Topic #8:* Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments; use of the unique properties afforded in online environments

11:30 – 12:15          Discussion *Topic #9:* Differential access to online learning within and across your schools (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access & assistive technologies)

12:15 – 1:00          Working Lunch – Discussion *Topic 10:*     Local supervision for online learning in general education and in particular for supervision in special education

1:00 – 1:15          Discussion     of your views on the Center's future activities

1:30 - 1:45          Wrap up:     *Our next steps with this information: draft a summary; share the summary with you for accuracy and completeness; draft a report on the topics and share with you for edits regarding accuracy and completeness; and complete revisions and disseminate.*
*Your closing comments*
*Reimbursement issues and our closing comments*
*Thank you and safe travels*