Supervision for Online Learning: General and Special Education

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

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

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

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

administrators; interviews with members of individualized education program (IEP) teams; and a systematic review of one state's student participation, retention, and completion data. COLSD is making an additional effort to describe the landscape of online learning for students with disabilities through a series of forums with different stakeholder groups to obtain an in-depth view, from different perspectives, of the issues and concerns with students with disabilities in online learning. The first forum was held with state directors (or a designee) of special education to obtain the state policy perspective. The second forum was conducted with virtual school district superintendents and other top-level district administrators to obtain the practitioners' perspective. Findings from these forums indicated that views from industry vendors were important, therefore, the third forum was conducted with vendors who provide platforms or resources for use in online settings, or support fully online or blended environments with courses and instructors. The responses gained from the vendors are the topic of this paper.

Forum Participants

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

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

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

with a variety of disabilities such as learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities, and cognitive, motor, and sensory disabilities.

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

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

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

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

Forum Topics

COLSD staff reviewed previous literature, revisited findings from previous research activities (e.g., case studies, surveys, and interviews), and evaluated responses from the first two forums to determine the topics for this third forum. As with the previous forums, the

population under consideration consisted of students with disabilities. Therefore, the responses reported are always in the context of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in online learning environments. The 10 topics covered at this forum included:

1. Enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement
2. Parents' preparation and involvement in their child's online experience
3. IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., free and appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, due process protections)
4. Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the blended and online learning environment and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development
5. Schools and vendors as data collectors and users; effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student usage data (e.g. performance scores, clickstream, pages accessed, etc.)
6. Addressing privacy concerns: Vendor access and use of school and student information
7. Integration of universal design for learning (UDL) into courses (e.g. options for how information is presented, the ways in which students can demonstrate mastery, supports for engagement)
8. Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices
9. Availability of students' strategy instruction in online environments (e.g. selection, monitoring prompts for strategy use that support student learning as in reading comprehension or memory strategies)
10. Supervision for online learning in general education and, in particular, for supervision in special education

Prior to the meeting, participants received a packet of materials including the agenda (see Appendix B) and a list of the topics and questions to be considered. The forum began with introductions and a discussion of the importance of considering students with disabilities in the context of online learning. Each vendor then responded to a set of questions about the selected 10 topics. The format of the meeting was framed as a conversation in which participants were encouraged to elaborate, explain, and engage in uptake with one another's comments. Representatives from COLSD moderated the discussions to provide all participants with comparable opportunities to share insights about each topic. Participants responded to three questions (see below) for all 10 topics, and an additional 2-5 questions relevant to each particular topic:

1. How is your organization currently addressing this topic?
2. What is working well for you on this topic?
3. What is the top challenge you face and the direction you see your organization taking on this topic?

The discussion questions serve as the headings in the following text.

Supervision for online learning in general and special education

This tenth vendor forum topic summarizes the perceptions of vendors regarding how online instructors are supervised in their instruction and use of various online tools. Most

online administrators tasked with supervising instructors are learning on the job because of the recent and rapid expansion of online learning (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). For online instructors, the use of resources and applications is a change from their traditional role and the approach of supervising them in these new roles is also novel (Hathaway & Norton, 2012; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). Little research describes how general or special education teachers are being supervised. Previous Center work identified that often, traditional special education teachers who become online teachers quickly move into leadership roles that include supervising other online teachers (Rice & Carter in press). This means that these supervisors did not teach online themselves for very long and now are tasked with evaluating teachers' online practices. The concern is that these supervisors have limited experience and may not be sufficiently well informed in making judgments on best ways of implementing online instruction and tools.

The virtual school superintendents and administrators also reported in a Center forum about supervision of online instruction (Rice, East & Mellard, 2015). They discussed the use of principals or vendor-provided coaches conducting traditional walk-throughs in blended settings as the most common approach to capture student engagement, types and appropriateness of technology in use, and whether 21st century skills are being practiced. For fully online programs, they use virtual walk-throughs, rely on content experts to spot check for targeted feedback, check for 24-hour turnaround in grading, adequate student and parent communication, and adaptive programming to meet students' needs.

How important is this topic to your organization?

All vendors are fully aware of the need for supervision and felt this issue was as important, if not more so, as in traditional settings. Many vendor meetings include teacher union representatives to provide input on the union's perspective on amounts of time and types of tasks being asked of teachers. They are sensitive to creating a balance of oversight that is appropriate for online environments. Vendors are accountable to districts using their products and services but they are mindful of creating reports about what is happening in the class that may inhibit teachers if the reports overstep supervisory boundaries and include data beyond the supervisory scope. They don't want teachers feeling like "big brother is watching" that may inhibit their interaction with students or course materials and tools.

However, they also want to be sure that teachers are actually using the available instructional tools appropriately and accurately. A shared view was that supervisors should witness real-time activities between students and teachers and interact with teachers about what is happening to create understanding and provide support or redirection as needed. One vendor recommended using a committee that is held accountable for implementing curriculum and instructional practices with fidelity. When teachers, administrators, and parents take responsibility for understanding the online curriculum and making sure its implemented with fidelity, that provides the greatest opportunity for students to succeed.

What is working well for your organization on this topic?

Supervision and feedback involves different approaches among the vendors. The virtual school vendor uses peer observation and feedback cycles to evaluate special education teachers' competencies. Sometimes announced ahead of time and sometimes unknown to the special education teacher, the peer can observe in real time or watch a recorded session and provide feedback about the lesson's events and interactions. These observations guide the special education teacher's implementation practice. This vendor also uses a peer feedback cycle as a way to mentor new teachers.

Another vendor tailored their student progress reports to numerous groups of a reading intervention program focused on students with disabilities. The district received regular reports on how the intervention was progressing, and schools, teachers, parents, and students also received reports relative to their level of interaction with the reading intervention. The vendor viewed this level of reporting effective for sharing students' progress and engaging with the varied audiences. Another vendor verified that part of their success is in sharing data with teachers, parents, and students so that everyone is aware of how well the programs are (or are not) working.

A final vendor discussed using the digital tools available to review the curriculum, the quality of materials, and the alignment of the assessments to the curriculum. A supervisor could also review threaded discussions or observe captured moments from a video during a lesson to look for particular practices or implementation of particular tools. This vendor believed that by analyzing lesson plans, student work, and course interactions, a supervisor could learn a lot about what was happening and whether students were learning to make evaluative judgments about the quality of the instruction.

What is the top challenge you face on this topic?

A top challenge of the virtual school vendor for supervising online instruction is the element of place. Often instructors work from home instead of a centralized location so the supervisors have no way to physically observe them instruct every day. The only way is to be online with them, which changes daily informal observations of a traditional school to intermittent check-ins for virtual schools. Participants expressed their familiarity with a similar unease expressed by some businesses reluctant to offer telecommuting to their staff, for fear they will not be as productive if they are out of sight. However, research indicates when the supervision is focused on information-sharing and not only monitoring of the work schedule, the worker is productive (Lautsch, B., Kossek, E.E., & Eaton, S.; 2009).

How is implementation feedback given to instructors and coaches?

For the vendor that provides online courses, they provide monthly data analytics updates (e.g. student and teacher usage, time on task, grades, feedback on assignments) on each course to their district partners. Another vendor that provides a LMS talked about the assistant superintendent of instruction's full access to the system to observe interactions and

read reports. The assistant superintendent can comment easily and quickly to teachers as necessary and that might help teachers become more vigilant and thoughtful about their practice. However, the vendor is mindful of how the ability to observe is "tricky" when considering a supervisory capacity because such observations might give the feeling of being under scrutiny and surreptitiously monitored all the time. That experience makes many people uncomfortable.

In an effort to reduce the paperwork burden often found in special education, one vendor discussed the ability to provide online feedback to the state when they request reports. Previously, organizing these regular reports that include so much student data could take up a large portion of educators' time. However, now the educator can use the data in the LMS to prepare the necessary reports and then email a link that provides a report, images, and graphics, which is easily understood and quickly indicates the level of implementation progress. This reporting option has greatly changed the way special educators structure their time and allow more timely, accurate reporting.

What approaches work best for school district supervision in blended environments?

The more that districts can get reports that include student data, the more transparent the district can be in their decision-making. Vendors have tools within their products that allow them to share collections of resources and create banks of lessons. By capturing these materials, the districts can supervise lesson planning and offer teacher-made common lessons for other teachers to use that they know are effective.

One vendor talked about being actively involved in a professional learning community (PLC) of hundreds of reading and writing teachers. The PLC allows them to learn from others about what is working, sharing ideas and exploring other ways to teach reading and writing. Another vendor shared experiences working in a smaller PLC of online and brick-and-mortar teachers teaching the same course. The online teachers met weekly to share their experiences and ideas to improve student outcomes and met with the brick-and-mortar teachers twice per month to share progress and ideas of how to support the learning in both environments. In this case, the vendor reported the PLC is a structured supervisory approach that fosters peer supervision and accountability. A final vendor uses a group of volunteer teachers willing to share lessons that they create using this vendor's resources. This approach was viewed as important to the vendor to understand how their product is useful or can be improved, but it is not a supervisory tool.

Another vendor talked about a school district in Nevada that uses "instructional rounds" for ongoing formative supervision with targeted professional development. In this district, administrators walk through their school building, spending five minutes in each classroom, to get a holistic sense of what is happening school-wide. At the end of the rounds, the administrators discuss their observational data, how they view the school culture, areas in which their school is strong, and opportunities for focused professional development to improve. This vendor thought that this sort of supervisory practice could be adapted to online

environments and provide the same opportunities for ongoing formative assessment that leads to focused professional development.

How are student response data included in the instructors' evaluation?

More and more states are requiring student feedback and data as part of an instructor's evaluation. To meet this initiative, the online school provider now includes student surveys at the end of each course to get student input on instruction they experienced. Most online systems offer student usage and mastery data that could be used for instructors' evaluation. One vendor that provides online courses discussed how they offer training on their system but they do not use this information to evaluate instructors. This vendor does not have data on what tools teachers use or how they use them in the courses they are provided.

Implications

An implication from this topical discussion is that teacher supervision has some different elements to the evaluation and feedback when viewed in the online and blended instructional environments. Vendors are very aware of the importance to offer supervision for instructors in online environments but how that supervision happens, especially for special education teachers is less clear. Several conversations occurred throughout the forum about the use of groups – whether groups of administrators conducting walk-throughs or groups of peers conducting PLCs or peer observations – as an effective structure to monitor and redirect implementation as needed. Incorporating students' engagement, progress, and completion is also considered an important element of providing a broad picture of a teacher's performance.

A strongly supported view was that evaluation judgments and professional development decisions should be based on as much relevant student data as possible. A variety of student data is important to consider: learning, achievement, engagement, completion, and qualitative statements. On the other hand, consideration of resources and materials used in lessons alongside the actual instructional approaches is also important. Vendors were interested in the fidelity with which the tools or features of their products were implemented. They view that such information is important to product development and testing.

Based on the discussion, additional consideration is recommended for topics including:
1. Which brick-and-mortar supervisory practices are appropriate to the online environment? If any, how do they need to be adapted to be responsive to the online setting for teachers working with students with disabilities?
2. What structure should PLCs take to make the most impact on improving teachers' practice to impact students with disabilities? Who should facilitate this work? How can educators ensure expertise and evidence-based practices are promoted?
3. What could vendors include (tools and services) that would help supervisors better monitor and support the work and work load of online special education teachers?

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Appendix A

Forum Participants

OSEP AND COLSD FORUM

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

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Appendix B

Forum Agenda

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

AUGUST 11TH AND 12TH, 2015

AGENDA

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

Tuesday, August 11th

12:00 - 12:45   Working Lunch
- Welcome: *OSEP staff and Bill East*
- Participant introductions: *a description of your organization; the targeted audience for your products; your role in the organization*
- Overview: *Explanation of how we hope this discussion proceeds*

12:45 - 1:45   Discussion Topic #1: Enrollment, persistence, progress and achievement for students with disabilities

1:45 - 2:00   Break

2:00 – 2:45   Discussion Topic #2: Parent preparation and involvement in their child's online experience

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

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

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

Wednesday, August 12th

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

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

instructional usage of student usage data (e.g., performance scores, dwell time, pages accessed)

9:30-10:15   Discussion Topic #6: Addressing privacy concerns; Vendor access and use of school and student information

10:15-10:30   Break

10:30-11:15   Discussion Topic #7: Integration of universal design for learning (UDL) into courses

11:30 – 12:00   Discussion Topic #8: Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices

12:00 – 1:00   Working Lunch – Discussion Topic #9: Availability of students' strategy instruction in online environments (e.g., selection, monitoring, prompts for strategy use that support student learning as in reading comprehension or memory strategies)

1:00 - 1:45   Discussion Topic #10: Supervision for online learning in general education and in particular for supervision in special education

1:45 – 2:00   Wrap up: Our next steps with this information: draft a summary; share the summary with you for accuracy and completeness; draft a report on each topic and share with you for edits regarding accuracy and completeness; and complete revisions and disseminate to you and interested parties.
Your closing comments
Reimbursement issues and our closing comments
Thank you and safe travels