



## Equity Matters 2015 Executive Summary

*Equity Matters: Digital and Online Learning for Students with Disabilities* is the annual publication from the Center on Online Learning for Students with Disabilities (COLSD). The publication highlights selected findings from COLSD's various research projects. The publication's core message is that to design and implement equitable digital learning systems, the needs of *all* learners, including those with disabilities, must be considered. An equitable learning environment requires the integration of sensible policy, effective practices, usable tools, and meaningful use of data and assessments.

This initial publication includes five chapters focused on providing the field with a better understanding of the research, policies and practices associated with digital, fully online, blended, and personalized learning. Chapter 1 frames the conversation by defining key terms and contextualizing the current state of K-12 online learning, with chapters 2–5 providing findings from the Center's research. The primary audiences for this publication include educators, education leaders, parents, teacher education faculty, policy-makers, digital curriculum developers, and researchers.

### Key Findings:

- Chapter 2 reports that state and territorial policies across the United States are lacking in the area of online learning and students with disabilities. Specifically, our policy scan found:
  - Parents in every state (and territory) can enroll their children in a fully or supplemental online learning environment.
  - Only 36% of the states and territories have documentation that guarantees that online learning is accessible for students with disabilities.
  - Only 25% of the states and territories have clear guidance detailing who bears the responsibility for providing Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in online programs.
  - Only 13% of the states and territories require a review of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) prior to moving (or enrolling) a student with a disability into an online setting.
  - Only 5% of the states and territories have clear guidance on the federal requirement of Child Find.
  - Only 2% of the states and territories have clear procedures for monitoring students with disabilities in fully online settings.
  - Finally, none of the states and territories scanned had guidance for supporting parental involvement in online settings.

- Chapter 3 reviews the changing factors of special education in online environments and their impact on local education agencies and teachers. Primary considerations from Center research include:
  - When a student with a disability is enrolled in a fully online environment, 88% of the time, parents are making the placement decision.
  - In a brick-and-mortar environment, lack of engagement is a critical influence on a student with a disability moving to an online environment.
  - Online environments and many blended learning environments are vastly different from their brick-and-mortar counterparts.
  - Evidence is lacking that instructional practices that work in brick-and-mortar environments readily transfer to online environments.
  - Student self-regulation is emerging as an important determinant of success in digital environments.
  - A critical need is evident for states (SEAs) and districts (LEAs) to review the applicability of their educational systems for implementing a student-centered approach prior to adoption of online learning systems.
  - Districts and vendors need to consider culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students—as well as parents—in the design and adoption of online learning systems.
  - Currently, there is a lack of teacher development in online education. Teachers need deep understanding of the learning process, pedagogy, and instructional design skills to respond to the rapid evolution of technology in the classroom.
  
- Chapter 4 highlights various topics associated with the changes taking place in online education and the impact of these changes on state education agencies and parents. Findings from the Center’s research indicate:
  - The lack of interoperable data across systems is limiting the ability of these digital environments to personalize and support *all* learners, especially students with disabilities.
  - Systems that meaningfully integrate critical demographic data, usage information, and learning outcomes could support better personalized learning environments.
  - The need for districts to consider the interaction of many users (e.g., learners, educators, and parents) prior to adopting new digital systems.
  - When students with disabilities enter fully online learning environments, parents tend to take on greater roles and responsibilities than they have traditionally in brick-and-mortar settings; in many cases, the parents report assuming the role of educator.
  - Online environments do very little to prepare or support parents in these new roles as surrogate educators.
  
- Chapter 5 highlights three critical topics that the Center determined required further discussion: Access to online education, student data and privacy, and graduation.

- Access to Online Education: While fully online education is available in every state in the United States, some online schools are openly marketing non-accredited schools. The Center found a greater need for transparency in the advertising of online schools. Specifically, the publication calls for establishing a national database of quality checkpoints, including accreditation status, so that parents can fully understand specifics about each online school before enrolling a student.
- Student data and privacy: The Center found a lack of consistent and clear data collection, as well as privacy policy, across the nation. The report calls for more open and privacy-compliant sharing of data being collected and used by both private and public online education providers. Specifically, by having cooperative, incentivized, and legislated data sharing, independent researchers could publicly report data-based findings on issues related to meeting privacy standards, designing accessible learning materials, and supporting the needs of all students, especially those learners with disabilities.
- Graduation requirements: The Center’s research found a growing concern with emerging policies and outcomes data associated with online graduation requirements for students with disabilities. This publication calls for states to consider developing focused research on online graduation requirements and students with disabilities. Moreover, states should consider providing some flexibility in these online graduation requirements.

Overall, the emergence of online education has precipitated impactful changes that could have both positive as well as negative effects across the K-12 education system. Students who are most at risk for failure—those with disabilities, and their families—are most vulnerable to these changes. Across the field, continued research and support for increased transparency is important across all stakeholders. Finally, states, territories, and districts beginning online, blended, and personalized education are encouraged to seek technical assistance in the design and implementation of these environments.



The contents of the annual publication were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education #H327U110011. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Celia Rosenquist.

**Suggested Citation:** Basham, J.D., Stahl, S., Ortiz, K., Rice, M.F., & Smith, S. (2015). Equity Matters: Digital & Online Learning for Students with Disabilities. Lawrence, KS: Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities.