



# Parents' Perceptions of Special Education Service Delivery When their Children Move to Fully Online Learning

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In recent years, the growth of online learning options and the availability of fully online educational experiences in all 50 states has presented new opportunities for students, particularly those students with disabilities. The exponential growth in K-12 online learning opportunities has brought new expectations for stakeholders—in particular, parents, educators, and policymakers—to accommodate this new digital reality.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) outlines provisions deemed necessary to ensure students with disabilities can access and benefit from public education including online instructional settings. A foundational piece of IDEA is the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a highly structured legal document that is meant to clearly articulate which educational opportunities, placements and services are necessary for students with disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) (Fish, 2008).

The main components in the IEP include, but are not limited to, (a) current levels of academic performance, (b) annual goals that can be measured, (c) methods for measuring annual goals, (d) what special education services are needed including related services and supplementary aides, (e) the degree to which students are with their peers in regular education, (f) appropriate accommodations, (g) the time for which services will be carried out, and (h) testing accommodations (Wood, 2002). Finally, an IEP team must discuss a full range of supplemental aides and related services so that students with disabilities can receive education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible (Etscheidt & Bartlett, 1999).

Given the growth of online learning we wanted to learn how families of students with disabilities described what happened with their children's IEPs, the development and implementation. The specific research question that we asked was the following: what do parents say happens to the IEP when they move their children to fully online schools? This paper describes parents' perceptions of what happens to the special education services for their children when they moved to fully online schools.

## **Review of Literature**

Since this study addresses what happens to the IEP document in the wake of school change, the literature review covers two topics. The first is what has historically happened to service delivery when students change schools *and* residences. The second is what happens when students change schools in the wake of school choice policies (particularly those school changes involving charter schools and homeschooling), but they *do not* change residences. The review concludes with a conceptualization of the online environment as a movement without a residence change.

### **Changing Schools *and* Changing Residences**

Because families have the right to take up residence in settings they see fit, student mobility can be attributed to either family-based or school-based reasons (Sorin & Lloste, 2006). Families may move for a number of reasons including change in parents' employment status, lifestyle and residential changes, and shifts in family structure (Skandera & Sousa, 2002). More

specific reasons for movement can include job loss, moving closer to family, divorce, or birth of a new child. Parents who move their children for school-based reasons are responding to issues around “social adaptability, engagement in curricula, academic difficulty, and safety” (Sorin & Lloste, 2006, p. 229). Other school-related issues for school changes include school absences, behavior problems, and low academic expectations.

When Hartman and Frank (2003) conducted an in-depth review of literature designed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student mobility, they discovered that non-promotional school changes are disproportionately experienced by students who tend to struggle academically the most. Hartman and Frank identified the following student characteristics associated with this phenomenon: lower socioeconomic status, minority, foreign-born, have experienced residential insecurity, were identified with a disability, were a migrant farm worker, or in the foster system.

### **Changing Schools *without* Changing Residence**

States are increasingly offering families school choice options. School choice encourages parents to look at education options that would not have been otherwise available. These school choice options can include open enrollment in magnet schools, pilot schools, voluntary metropolitan desegregation programs, vouchers programs, charter schools, cyber charter schools, or higher performing public schools (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). These options may come with a promise of enriched curriculum, a better student/teacher ratio, increased flexibility, or advanced technological applications. Parent choices for schools have created a new type of student mobility. When Rumberger and Larson (1998) examined the incidence of mobility of students grades 8 to 12, they found that 40 percent of the students who changed schools did not change residence.

Interestingly, parents of students with disabilities are among the demographic that are utilizing the school choice option at an increasing rate. Ysseldyke, Lange, and Gorney (1994) examined the characteristics of students with disabilities who participated in one of Minnesota’s school choice programs, Open Enrollment. This program allowed students to apply for a transfer between school districts. In a survey in which 248 parents of children with disabilities who applied for transfer were asked why they wanted to move their child within the same school district, five major themes emerged from the survey and phone interviews. Those themes included the following: 1) the child’s needs would be better met at the new school, 2) the child will receive more individualized attention, 3) the child is kept informed by new teachers, 4) the child will attend school with siblings and friends, and, 5) the child is dissatisfied with former school. Beck, Egalite, and Maranto (2014) also conducted a survey of one online school and found that parents of students with disabilities were *more* satisfied than parents of students without disabilities even though satisfaction was generally high.

Despite the evolution of school options and the increasing push towards personalized education for all children, each state must still act in accordance with IDEA to receive federal funding for their special education programs (Turnbull et al., 2002). Criteria from which student eligibility for special education, identification of a disability, and access to certain types of

related and supplementary services can vary considerably from state to state. Parents may not have the understandings they need to advocate in fully online settings and so they may have substantial amounts of teacher or teacher-like work without much support. For many parents this role was unexpected (Ortiz, Rice, Smith, & Mellard, 2017).

### **Online Learning as a Type of Mobility without a Residential Change**

Kello (2012) investigated variables that influence the choices parents made when considering home education or cyber-charter schooling through surveying parents that home school and parents who enrolled their children in online school. Findings from the study revealed that parents valued flexibility, the moral climate, and positive interaction with school personnel.

## **Methods**

This study was interested in developing phenomenological understandings about IEP development, implementation, and revision processes that occur as students move from receiving most of their instruction in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting to the online setting in which school work (e.g., online lessons) is completed at home under the direction of an adult who has parental responsibilities for the child. Specifically, we wanted to know what happened to the IEP and all its constituent parts (e.g., present levels of achievement, goals, accommodations, and services) when students with disabilities moved to online schools. We wanted to understand from the perspective of the parent what took place as their child transitioned into the online learning environment. Researchers collected data primarily through phenomenological interviews (Kvale, 1983, 1994, 2009). When engaged in such work, phenomenological researchers focus on both the phenomenon and those persons who have experienced it (Englander, 2012).

### **Participants**

In qualitative studies, participants should (1) authentically belong to the population the researcher has determined experience the phenomenon and (2) have experience with the phenomenon (Englander, 2012; Kvale, 1994). Participants in this study were parents of children in grades 2 through 8 that had a disability and had enrolled in a fully online program or school receiving special education services. These parents had children who were being served under IEPs in their traditional schools and whose children would have qualified for a continuation of services when their child moved into the fully online setting.

Research staff identified parent technical assistance centers in online schools in five states through state department of education websites. Some participants responded through these centers. To invite additional participants, principals of online schools in states with these centers were contacted and asked to provide information for parents that might be willing to participate. The goal was to contact schools that served students in at least one of the specified grades 2 through 8 and offered fully online services. When a principal agreed to assist in recruitment, a local staff member (typically a special education teacher or counselor) sent information to parents. Using this strategy, 11 parents and one grandparent were recruited to participate. The grandparent in the study was custodial and had responsibilities concomitant to

a parent, and we do not reference her differently from the other parents throughout this document.

Participants in the study were parents with children with a disability enrolled in a fully online educational program or school and receiving special education services. Parents were interviewed from five states (Georgia, Utah, Ohio, Kansas, and Wisconsin). Demographic information about the parents and their children is contained in Table 1. All the participants were female parents of male students. The following numbers of students were reported by their parents to be in the following disability categories: autism (4), emotional disturbance (1), other health impairment (4), specific learning disability (2), and speech impairment (1).

The amount of time students had been enrolled in a fully online school or program ranged from 6 months to more than 2 years. Three children had been enrolled for less than an entire school year. Three children were working on their second full school year online. Six of the children had been enrolled in a fully online environment for more than 2 years. In short, the parents varied in their experience with the fully online environment, but most parents had a school year or more of experience.

Table 1  
*Participant Information*

Parent's Race/Ethnicity	Child's Gender	Child's Primary Disability	Child's Grade
African American	Male	Autism	5
African American	Male	Other health impairment	3
African American	Male	Other health impairment	8
White/Caucasian	Male	Autism	5
White/Caucasian	Male	Autism	7
White/Caucasian	Male	Autism	8
White/Caucasian	Male	Emotional Disturbance	3
White/Caucasian	Male	Other health impairment	4
White/Caucasian	Male	Other health impairment	4
White/Caucasian	Male	Specific learning disability	3
White/Caucasian	Male	Specific learning disability	4
White/Caucasian	Male	Speech impairment	2

**Instrument Development and Data Collection**

Individual phone interviews with the 12 parents were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were completed in 60 to 80 minutes. The interview protocol was developed using the current literature on parent involvement in online learning generally and considered COLSD research on parent involvement and engagement in online learning environments for students with disabilities. The parents were specifically asked about the initial IEP, what happened when the online school was informed of the IEP, whether an IEP review meeting was held, and what the

circumstances were of the meeting. In addition, parents were asked what services, accommodation, and modifications they received in the fully online environment as well as the details of those services and accommodations/modifications. Finally, parents indicated whether they perceived those services accommodations/modifications as being helpful in working with their children.

### **Data Analysis**

During data analysis, one member of the research team organized the interview data around what happened to the IEP document itself (as opposed to the content) and suggested preliminary categorical or nominal codes based on the current research question. A meeting was held at which the three principal research team members evaluated and collapsed the codes into themes and then each member checked each other's themes. The researchers determined that the data for assistive technology, accommodation/modification, and other services was sufficiently expansive that the responses should be coded categorically. In a process like the first, one researcher suggested preliminary codes, and the other two researchers independently rated the first researcher's codes. Then consensus was reached among all three researchers where disagreement occurred. This process preceded for assistive technology, accommodation, modification, and other services until a consensus was reached and themes emerged that provided insight into the research questions.

### **Findings**

Participants in this study articulated several major elements that were directly aligned to the special education program and the accompanying services they found during their child's transition from the brick-and-mortar education environment to the online or fully online learning experience.

#### **Perceptions of Services Leading to Identifying an Online School**

For the families of students with disabilities in this study, the impetus for movement to the virtual setting was dissatisfaction with the brick-and-mortar school. Parents in this study emphasized that they did not move to the virtual setting because of its strengths, but instead they were looking to exit the brick-and-mortar environment because of negative experiences.

Parents expressed concern that the brick-and-mortar school was not abiding by the requirements of the IEP. Some of these complaints were about service delivery, while other concerns were about the kind and type of services and accommodations promised and whether these services would be enough to help their children be successful. One example of this type of parental preference for a specific service came from a mother in this study that strongly believed her child needed to use the Diagnostic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) reading assessment (Good, Gruba, & Kaminiski, 2002). She was upset when the traditional school that her child was attending stopped using it and moved to a different type of assessment. The mother found an online school that promised if her child enrolled, the child could use DIBELS. The ability to say what types of services and what materials were used to give those types of services was important to all the participating parents.

Parents described unsuccessful advocacy in the traditional school setting to receive either basic services or, at minimum, what their child's IEP required. The frustration expressed by parents indicated extensive time, energy, and even resources dedicated to ensure their child received appropriate services due to the needs of their child's disability. One parent described the process as a metaphor for going to war:

I have to admit that the school district we were in, it felt like going to war, as far as the IEP. Instead of collaborative, for the students benefit, it felt more like we had to fight for what we thought our son needed. CO.1., lines 100-103.

Many parents were angry because they felt like they had to take on a substantial amount of work for serving their child or for helping school staff understand their children's needs. They also did not always approve of who provided the services and under what circumstances.

We had to teach the teachers what to do. And there was always something new that came up with him. A lot of times he would be able to pass what they had for him in the IEP, but because he didn't have autism as the label, there were things not listed there that probably should have been. The teachers didn't try. They sort of pushed it off on the special education teacher. WI.2., lines 8-12.

Parents reflected on how different the approaches were between the two settings. Central to these differences was the process the two environments took. The brick-and-mortar setting appeared to create an adversarial environment, pitting the professionals against the parent.

[The virtual IEP development] was much better, I would have to say. Our experience transferring from our elementary school to our middle school [both brick-and-mortar], the special education team was a very different experience. They're understaffed at the middle school/high school level. We felt like we were the enemy, kind of. It was a pretty horrible experience. When [virtual school] took it [IEP] over and reviewed everything, we actually met with the Director of Special Education, who was a special education teacher. I don't believe the principal was involved at that initial meeting. The health teacher was, anyone who had had any contact with him [her son] or would be. It was very smooth. Everyone was on the same page [virtual school IEP team]. We [virtual school IEP team] reviewed the goals and things that we would need for the online environment. Every quarter they are assessing and reviewing his progress with his specific special education teacher. So, we communicate quite frequently about expectations and things that he needs for assistance. WI.1., lines 45-57.

Parents in this study made distinctions between the delivery of IEP services and the intended outcome of these services. Because the outcomes their child needed were not being realized, they pursued virtual school. In the end, the perceived limitations associated with the development and implementation of an appropriate IEP was the determining factor for the parents in this study. Parents in this study perceived that their brick-and-mortar school was

either not calculating an IEP that was likely to help the child learn or not implementing what they had agreed to, which led to the search for an alternative educational setting.

When we changed over [moved from a brick-and-mortar to the online school] we had to send his IEP there [to the online school], and then I think it was within one or two weeks that we set one up through the [online school]. We changed a lot of goals because, of course, being at home is way different than in the brick-and-mortar. He succeeded so well that first three months. He enjoyed school. WI.2., lines 57-64.

Some parents reported being ignored during the transition process or relegated to following the various steps of the established enrollment process, not allowing personalization to the specific needs of their son or daughter and their specific educational needs as documented in the IEP. One parent illustrated this challenge when she attempted to share information that she had on her child and his specific needs. During her initial conversations with the online school program she explained:

I tried sending the school every report that I thought would help them to identify needs, and they accused me of sending too much. I was trying to be transparent. They didn't want it. KS.1., lines 64-68.

Overall, parents expressed a level of input dramatically different from their brick-and-mortar experiences. Many parents contextualized their perspective on their involvement on the transition to the online environment by first stating the challenges experienced in the previous physical school. Their description of what worked in the movement to the online setting was almost always initiated with what did not work in the former school. Our interview questions did not specifically seek to make this comparison, yet parent after parent began with what situation they left, the frustration in how they were treated, and the efforts put forward to advocate for their child.

### **Perceptions of Orientation and its Relationship to Service Delivery**

As part of their move to an online school, parents in this study were provided orientation information to their role in the online setting to varying degrees. Some parents reported a dramatic reframing in their own role in their children's education.

Whenever I had questions [during the initial transition] on how I'm supposed to teach him a subject, the kindergarten teacher was available. For speech and OT [occupational therapy] we had gone to a community-based company. They taught me a lot about how I can do things at home. I don't remember if it was just kindergarten or first grade, but they gave me a lot of input about different things to try, how to calm him down, how to teach him. I don't remember if it was kindergarten or first grade, the IEP coordinator said to me, you're not in a brick-and-mortar school, so you don't have to do things like a brick-and-mortar school would. I think that was in first grade, and I think that's when things kind of changed a little bit, how I started teaching my son. CA.1., lines 60-70.

Others reported a more seamless orientation. Parents expressed high levels of comfort with the orientation processes when they participated and a sense that the experts were in charge and willing to support their son or daughter in their specialized needs outlined in their IEP. One parent described this experience through the related services that were immediately provided upon their son's orientation to the online classroom.

[Educators at the virtual school] were very accommodating, gave him access to all those subjects, plus accommodations for speech. He got speech and OT online. He got an extra resource teacher. And these are people that are highly educated. One is based out of Oregon, one of his therapists. Just excellent people. They were very accommodating. He needs the same opportunities that everyone else receives. NC.1., lines 60-67.

The remarks offered by parents centered on a sense of relief when the online school stepped in and made immediate promises to support their children. The level of support varied and was often unique to the online program. This experience is what the parents described when they said that the schools were so "accommodating." Basically, the schools called them, answered parent phone calls, and were nice. The schools also were willing to give whatever services the parents recommended. One parent had a child that she felt needed speech services, and she narrated the lengthy process she went through in the traditional school trying to arrange those speech and language services. In the online school, by contrast, she told them she wanted speech services, and she had them arranged by the end of the day. When we asked the parents about testing in such circumstances, they either said they could not remember the testing or that none had taken place. This situation was also the case for determining when and if assistive technology should be provided. The parents described the computer in and of itself as assistive technology or they did not know what we meant by "assistive technology."

### **Perceptions of the IEP Review Process**

While more parents reported some form of review of the IEP immediately, others reported instruction beginning right away without such a review. In these cases, the parents had little to say other than they recently began with the lessons. Parents described a varied review process differing in when the review took place, the participants, and what happened as part of the review. Parents expressed inconsistencies in what schools did as part of the IEP review, sometimes uncertainty about whether it occurred, and the process that was followed to either confirm or alter the IEP for the online setting. Other parents provided a detailed account of the specific process for the IEP review that took place within days or weeks of the initial enrollment. For example, one parent described a process in which her child's IEP was reviewed immediately:

It [the IEP] was reviewed when he first came in. We went through an IEP meeting from the school that he was in saying that we were moving him. And then when we got him into the online school after about two weeks they did an IEP for him for online schools because it's a different environment and a lot of the things don't correlate in an IEP in an online classroom. FL.1., lines 97-100.

Another parent expressed a similar sentiment:

I think it [IEP review by the online school] was within 30 days of moving [transferring to the online school] up here. UT.2., lines 64-66.

Typical timelines ranged from prior to the child's admittance into the online setting to anywhere between 30 and 60 days following the child's enrollment. No matter the details of the circumstances, parents were generally satisfied with the process in which the IEP was reviewed. However, some parents did not make clear whether they fully communicated the existence of an IEP upon enrollment in virtual school. One parent in our study was very clear that she was not asked about an IEP and she did not volunteer that her child had one.

Q: Did your child have an IEP?

Parent: Yes, however, for the online program we never had them abide by it. I don't even know if it came up.

Q: Did your child have a disability specified on the IEP when he was in the brick-and-mortar?

Parent: Yes.

Q: What were the disabilities named?

Parent: CP [Cerebral Palsy], hydrocephaly, digestive disorders. He had a walker at one point. CO.1., Lines 28-35.

In this case, the child had fairly substantial health issues. It is noteworthy that a child could have such challenges and the virtual school would not notice in their interactions with neither the child nor the parent. When we asked this mother why she enrolled her child in the virtual school, she said that it was so she could make medical appointments easier to manage. It was surprising that this issue, in her words, "did not come up" in conversations with virtual school staff. However, this is the mother who described her interactions with the traditional school around the IEP as "going to war." Her frustration could have led her to divert conversation about an IEP away from virtual school staff.

### **Perceptions of Service Delivery as Part of IEP Implementation**

Much of parents' involvement in carrying out the IEP centered on instruction. Parents expressed the need for them to provide support for their child in reading, lesson completion, and/or adjusting the demands of the assigned lessons. Since instructional elements are rarely defined on the IEP, instructional information was often only footnoted in the IEPs, if at all. Parents, then often made most of the decisions about instruction and applied accommodations and modifications as they saw fit, just as regular classroom teachers or school professionals do in traditional settings.

The classes that he has taken online, if he didn't have an IEP, I wouldn't need to do much of anything. But since he does have an IEP I can sit with him through them and read him everything. I know it depends on what online curriculum you're using, but the

ones that he's been using, if he can do it by himself then I wouldn't need to do anything other than to monitor that he's on track. WI.3., lines 109-116.

Accommodations were often the focus of what their child needed and what parents believed they provide. While not necessarily listed as an accommodation on the IEP, parents reported having to read to their child, identify additional resources to ensure their child comprehended the content, and worked with the schedule to ensure the child had the time to complete an assigned task. One parent explained her efforts in finding and then using supplementary materials to accommodate their child's learning needs. Applications on the Internet were often described to us by parents when we asked about assistive technology and supplementary services.

We use YouTube a lot. If we're doing science, whatever the topic is I can find something to augment what the book is saying or to replace what the book is saying if I think it's a more interactive type of lesson. Even for literature, if he has a story to read, sometimes I'll find something on YouTube that he can watch so that visual will help him comprehend what he's reading. I think that's the only electronic support that we use. CA.1., lines 348-356

When parents discussed their children's coursework, they often began to recall labor intensive services the traditional school had provided. For example, one parent shared how her son used to receive the support at school and how she, as his mother, had to continue the service at home, serving in the role of an instructional aide. In this instance, and in many stories parents shared, the supports teachers or aides in the brick-and-mortar setting had provided were being assumed by the parent to ensure meeting the specifications of the IEP, and of course those needs of their child.

No. I do know, they're supposed to read to him or allow him to read out loud because that's the only way he comprehends is to hear, and they must sit and make sure that he is reading it. Because I'm there. Either I'm reading or I'm listening to him read. But I make sure that it's being read out loud. FL.1., lines 236-241

Parents described how they filled any visible void in their child's instruction. In some instances, parents confessed a lack of knowledge in determining what IEP-specific services were required, and instead of pursuing an IEP review, parents filled the perceived void. Some parents indicated concerns or fears of having to return to the brick-and-mortar setting if too many questions or requests were asked of the online provider. They didn't feel like they had the leverage to be too persistent or demanding for services in the online environment. As an alternative choice, most parents reported seeing the need and attempting to address the challenge on their own.

Almost everything [what the parent assisted with] except for doing the actual work. And again, up until just recently we even did the readings together [parent and child]. Sixth grade and seventh grade when it was for say reading or social studies we would get to the page where they tell you ok now read such and such and do pages such and such.

We would sit down together [parent and child] and read the chapter together. He [her son] would read one section or one page and then I would read a page and he would read a page. So, I was even going as far with helping him read the material up until just recently. GA.2., lines 129-138.

From the initial need to transition to the online setting to the day-to-day instructional supports, parents believed that they were ensuring their child received a unique and specialized learning experience premised in the IEP and the services it prescribed. Parents assumed such heavy responsibility on their part was necessary to make online learning a successful experience. While some of the supports were not directly aligned to the IEP, parents echoed the need to be an integral part of their child's learning experience and their qualifications to provide such services came from their status as the parent.

I truly believe parents are the primary first teacher of children and even though I might not have an M.D. in education, I think we know our children best. There are good teachers out there, don't get me wrong. But I don't think any teacher is going to know your child more than you if you care. As a parent, we're able to catch those issues that are there and see things that are missing, and then it is our job to go ask the teacher for help. WI.2., lines 349-353

Note how the parent providing this explanation was the same parent who said the traditional school was untenable because she was having to do too much to help the teachers understand what her child needed. Indeed, almost all the participants had a narrative arc like this. Whatever happened in the traditional school that was so unacceptable was suddenly less burdensome, even desirable when the parent had the child at home. Whether the services were outlined or promised in the IEP or simply something they determined their child needed, parents desired a responsibility to carry out the IEP and provide the specialized instruction, even though none had preparation or experience in such services.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we interviewed 12 parents across six states about their experiences and that of their children in the K-12 online learning environment. Through a series of interview questions, we learned that the transition from the brick-and-mortar to the online setting was one that centered on the IEP. To begin, parents reported seeking additional school options due to challenges in the services being provided, or not provided, their child with an identified disability. Learning that fully online education was an option, parents shared that these schools appeared to listen to their concerns and responded with an option that parents interpreted as a safe place removed from the issues the brick-and-mortar environment presented.

One of the initial steps in the transition to the fully online learning environment was a review of the student's current IEP. Parents indicated this experience was generally a positive one. After the initial review, the IEP did not appear to serve as a primary resource for the daily and weekly online learning experience. Instead, parents reported that much of the day-to-day instruction

and portions of the unique and specialized services indicated in the IEP were assumed by the parent within the home. Interestingly, while parents were being asked to commit more time to their child's learning, including supports they did not believe they were particularly qualified to address, their satisfaction with the online learning experiences were overwhelming positive. Feedback from parents suggested direct control over their child's learning played a part in parent's willingness to assume more instructional involvement if not leadership.

Further, they did not see how they could return to the traditional school and expect things would be better or improved. At least in the online school, they experienced usually at least one sympathetic listener and a far easier process of revision of services on the IEP that better reflected what the parent wanted. This resulted in a scenario in which the parent would say that they left the traditional school because they had to make all the decisions, but then say they loved online schooling *because they could make all the decisions*. This decision-making power began when the parent realized they did not necessary have to disclose the existence of an IEP.

This work reinforces Sorin and Lloste's (2006) findings that emphasize parents that move their children for school-based reasons are often seeking to address challenges in academics, behavior, or learning expectations that are not being met within the current educational program. The online setting appears to align with historical research on student mobility, but with the added twist that parents almost universally gain more responsibility for providing the learning support when the coursework begins. These findings also extend the work of Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, and Harvey (2016), which found that parents are often the decision makers in selecting the online school for their son or daughter. What we know now is that decision is often made in frustration and anger. Finally, our findings mirrored those of Beck, Egalite, and Maranto's (2014) survey that found that parents of students with disabilities reported high satisfaction with online schools. However, the findings also demonstrate why parents (Ortiz, Rice, Smith, & Mellard, 2017) describe being overwhelmed and frustrated. Parents of students with disabilities in this study were not entirely satisfied with their situation in the online school, but the reason why they came to the school and their current ability to make most of the instructional decisions are so valuable that they do not deign to complain.

Since parents seem to be providing most of the accommodations and making the decisions about instructional elements, they are unlikely to find fault with themselves. The perception of increased quality came from the fact that parents were more able to control many elements of the instructional delivery. However, when we asked questions about assessments or tests to see if these services or supports were needed, parents could not recall any such assessments. That is why one parent could say "my child needs speech therapy" and have it added to the IEP the same day. That personal investment was tested as parents found themselves providing or managing the delivery of most of the services.

At first blush, our findings from this study might align with the growing school choice initiatives since the parents spoke so highly of the online school's acceptance of them and their willingness to abide the parents' wishes (e.g., Kello, 2012). However, perusing all the parents'

narratives revealed that the online school may not be providing services to any greater degree than the traditional school. The online providers are perceived as being nicer and more accommodating. This feeling may be because the online school pursues all the communication online and, therefore, the tension that might build up when people interact in the same physical space might be less. In other words, the expectation that interactions would not be face-to-face was perhaps less daunting or intimidating for parents who had not historically had positive interactions with the school, although no parent in this study said such a thing directly.

### **Conclusion**

Any educational transition is potentially difficult, particularly for a child with a disability and those family members working to support the change. Unfortunately, the move to the online setting was one that occurred during times of turmoil and conducted under stress. Because of these circumstances, parents who, due to their willingness and ability to move their children to online school, desired a great amount of input in the decision-making process and were placed in a situation in which they became the primary providers special services and the needed support. They did this because the school was unprepared to provide those in some cases; in other cases, parents were unable to successfully identify needed services and/or supports and then communicate the needs to the school after the child was enrolled. Since the children were working online, teachers were either not positioned to see the needs or did not have training as to how to identify or recognize these in online learners.

In practice, online schools need to be aware of the reasons why parents are selecting the online option, including the cloud of mistrust they may have over their children's educational experience and the need to feel more in control. If the IEP is perceived as primarily an administrative tool, less so as a basis for the educational experiences for students with disabilities, online settings need to be prepared for an initial and immediate IEP review. Online personnel should be prepared to orient and support parents and their students specific to what the IEP warrants. However, they should also reconsider their screening and assessment practices and the ways in which those processes are conveyed to parents. Services that are offered should be warranted through data collection and evaluation processes. Further, parents need more information about IDEA: what the terms mean, what services can be provided, and how due process should operate.

For research, the field needs more studies of parent expectations of online versus traditional schools, the processes that would best support the movement, and the role both the traditional and online schools can play in assisting students as they move to the online environment. Questions remain regarding if research on student residency changes has currency in the online environment or if too many distinct components are included (e.g., enrollment, orientation, IEP review, and instructional supports and accommodations).

In terms of policy, this study provides state entities and local educational agencies with information that should guide decision making about parent support requirements for online schools. Clearly, it is important to help parents understand IDEA principles to a greater degree.

It is also important that parents have access to advocates at various levels who can help them negotiate with both traditional and online schools so that children do not have to change schools out of frustration.

### **Limitations**

This work sought to learn what parents perceived happened to the IEP when students moved to fully online learning. As a qualitative study relying on interview data and parent-provided artifacts, there are, of course, limits to the generalizability of these findings. First, parents were invited because they responded to an invitation from their parent technical assistance center or because a principal helped us make contact. This method did not necessarily yield a random and representative sample of parents in similar situations, which limits generalizations of the findings. Second, the accuracy of the parents' reports and their descriptions, such as the amount time they waited for an IEP meeting were not verified or corroborated with another source. Nevertheless, our findings are noteworthy because they show what commonalities can emerge when parents from widely different state and local contexts discuss what happens to the IEP when they move their children online. Finally, this study did not look at learning or other outcomes in its pursuit of parental perceptions. We cannot make statements about what services and supports "worked" or did not. Further study on this topic will provide a broader, robust paradigm of related policies and practices and serve as a stronger foundation for policy development, technical assistance, resource development, and research.

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