Research Methodology for Table of State Policies and Guidance

Center on Online Learning
and Students with Disabilities

The Process Behind the Policy Table

In September of 2012, researchers at the Center for Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) conducted a search of all 50 U.S state Departments of Education websites for policy and guidance documents (e.g. state documents and documents created by thers, but provided by the state) that addressed online learning for students with disabilities. In some cases, several official state websites include documents produced by universities or research centers that were not written by the states, but their presence on the website was treated as an indication of state endorsement. The goal was to catalog and share all relevant state-level policies, rules and/or guidelines.

Listings in the Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning reports served as an initial guide for locating all relevant state documents. In addition, an independent search of state websites was conducted.

The search strategy was to locate any policies and documents that contained any key words for students with disabilities, including individualized education plan, individualized education program, IEP, special, exceptional, disability, or disabilities, and any key words for online learning- distance, online, blended, or virtual. All documents containing one or more of these words from both categories were identified as potentially relevant. Additionally, if a policy or guidance document was general in nature and appeared to refer to all students and online learning, it was included because, logically, policies or guidance documents that apply to all students include students with disabilities.

All related text passages found using the search strategy were recorded and categorized by a panel of four reviewers. Categories were chosen after a review of the literature and discussions with individuals engaged in online learning across the country. These categories were used to organize all text passages and all text passages were included in the table. All text passages were,

first, independently summarized by topic by each reviewer. Then, the four reviewers came together to collapse their different categorization schemes into a smaller number of convenient broad topics. The resulting seven topics are:

1. Placement and enrollment (text about how any student is enrolled or how placement decisions are made for students with disabilities)

2. Allowable providers of services (text providing any description of acceptable providers, mandates for use of only approved providers, and so on)

3. Accommodations (text describing the variety of methods of providing instruction to any student)

4. Access or accessibility (text about how access to online classes in general must be provided or mention of federal and/or state accessibility guidelines)

5. Funding for services (text that describes criteria for use of, or sources of, funds for online education for students with disabilities)

6. Administrative duties (text that describes which entities are responsible for specific functions of providing online learning, such as funding, IEP development, assessment, or reporting)

7. Graduation or exiting (text that describes any graduation requirement for online learning and expectations for students with disabilities).

These topics were used to produce the State Policies and Guidance table that includes the relevant text and links to the full documents from which the text was taken.

There are some limitations to the categorization format used in the table. The seven topics used were chosen for convenience and are not meant to represent research findings or themes in the sense of how the term is used in qualitative research. Additionally, for the sake of simplicity, each text passage was assigned to a single topic, even if more than one topic was referenced in the passage. Consequently, some may find that a policy or guideline segment fits better in one category than another. Decisions about topics and placement of each text passage under a topic were reached through consensus among the expert reviewers.

In some cases, the ultimate decision for placement in a single topic was subjective. For example, Kansas has a policy that deals with student enrollment in advanced placement courses online. The policy mandates that if a student is enrolled in at least one advanced placement course online, the district that provides the course will receive 8% of the base state aid per pupil for the student. One could list this passage under the placement and enrollment category because it deals with student enrollment or under the funding for services category because it deals with payment to districts. The panel of reviewers chose to label this as a funding for services policy, judging that its primary purpose was as a part of state aid legislation.

The State Policies and Guidance table is not comprehensive. It includes only those policies and guidelines that can be found on state websites. Some states have no policies or documents listed, but there may be official policy that doesn't appear on their official website. States were contacted and provided with the policy and guidance information collected by the Center in order for them to review our summaries. They were asked to respond with their approval or suggestions. Additions and corrections are invited as we move toward a complete cataloging of state policies related to online learning for students with disabilities. Searching for published state policy and guidance is an ongoing Center activity and as additional policy or guidance information is discovered, it will be included in the interactive policy table.