

Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities:  
Online Vendor Forum Proceedings Series (Report No. 2)

# Parent Preparation and Involvement in their Children's Online Experience

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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 these 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 representative from 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 representative from 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 Americans who are blind. 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 representative was from the 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.

### Parents' Preparation and Involvement in Their Children's Online Experience

This topical paper is one in a series of vendor forum proceeding papers and includes participant responses to a set of six questions regarding parent' participation and involvement

with their student with disabilities in fully online or blended learning environments. This topic was identified from COLSD's research as well as other published and anecdotal information. For example, COLSD's initial research activities revealed parental concerns regarding their varied roles and levels of involvement in online settings compared with traditional school settings. When 119 parents of K-8 students with students with disabilities in online settings were surveyed, parents identified roles such as helping their child with learning content, behavioral skills, and organizing their work time as new responsibilities that were critical to supporting their children in online settings (Burdette & Greer, 2014). In addition, the majority of respondents reported they were challenged to find time to personally support their children's content learning, oversee their studies, and help them with the technology. Moreover, half of the respondents reported having to spend more than three hours per day helping their child with schoolwork. However, most parents indicated they received quality support from the school to help their children and generally felt well prepared to make online instructional decisions for their child. These findings are contrasted by Rice's (2015) work, a content analysis of testimonials from online curricula. These company testimonials and materials generally depicted parents as helping their children with online learning and stressing that this work would be time-saving. This content is in direct opposition to the time-consuming labor parents reported in Burdette and Greer survey. While one expects a company's advertising materials to be positive about its product and services, the unfortunate situation is that the focus of the advertisements is the exact opposite of what parents really experience on these particular issues while other positive aspects presumably exist upon which these advertisements could be built.

When Rice and Carter (2015) interviewed teachers at a large part-time virtual school, they found that teachers are heavily reliant and very appreciative of parents who can successfully navigate new instructional, monitoring, and technological support roles. However Borup, Graham, and Davies (2013) found that the amount of time parents help their children with online coursework is negatively correlated with achievement outcomes. A possible explanation of these finding is that parents spend more time providing assistance when the student is not doing well as opposed to when they are being successful. Educators at the state level are aware of the concerns around parent preparation to support online learning. According to the state superintendents of special education who participated in a November 2014 forum, orientation and on-going support services to mentor parents in their new roles for online environments were viewed as very useful (Franklin, Burdette, East, & Mellard, 2015).

#### How important is this topic to your organization?

Representatives from the vendors recognized the importance of the roles that parents play in helping their children with disabilities be successful. Some even thought that this topic about parent participation was "very important" and tightly connected to students' online learning. In practice, participants' involvement with parents was variable. For example, three of the vendors have minimal interaction with parents through their products or services. These vendors, however, recognize that student learning and achievement information will be shared with parents and thus are sensitive that their reports are likely shared.

### What's working well for your organization on this topic?

One vendor representative who developed a family portal indicated that tool was working well. Parents are able to review how much time their child has spent working online, their grades, and if they are on track or falling behind. The portal also regularly emails progress, achievement, and engagement reports to parents. The intentions of these efforts are to build strong and lasting relationships with parents by offering orientation training on what their students will experience in their online environment. Another vendor representative discussed a new initiative to offer a Learning Coach Central that will be a part of their LMS to house ideas and resources that parents can access. Another vendor offers parental access to grades as well as full access to what the child experiences instructionally, in practice with the content, and the instructor feedback.

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

A challenge representatives from many vendors identified was getting parents more engaged and active in students' learning. According to the participants, a lot of parental resources exist, but they do not access them as often as the vendors would like. Also the vendors have a shared view that parents who cannot access these resources may not be proficient in English. According to the representatives of the vendors, lack of English proficiency is a barrier for involvement in their student's learning that is generally beyond the responsibility of the vendors.

One vendor recognized that since some disabilities may co-occur among family members, they have a product version that is geared to families in which the family members may encounter similar challenges (e.g., low reading comprehension) as the student. The other two vendors indicated that their products involve parents in monitoring their child's performance in the online curriculum and active involvement in decisions about curricular activities and objectives.

The participants described efforts to create a curriculum geared for parents who will support their child's online coursework at home and a desire for parents to be as comfortable in the teaching/support role as possible. Another representative described a vendor's "family portal" that allows parental access to current information about their children's performance. Another participant discussed their ongoing exploration in product design to include consideration of the variety of parent roles to foster parent involvement and engagement. Finally, representatives also discussed the need for the industry to develop better ways to visually represent student performance so the information is clearly understandable to both students and parents.

The participant from Texthelp discussed efforts to break what they see as a cycle of literacy failure by offering literacy software that supports students in working independently so they rely less on their parents. Finally, another vendor representative discussed the challenge of framing parent roles as supportive and not as a mere monitor who makes the child complete

assignments. Employees at this forum are exploring approaches so parents can work more collaboratively with instructors to help their child learn. Nevertheless, a challenge to this idea is student privacy. Participants wondered how they could give parents access to course information and learning artifacts from their children while preventing access to information about other students in the class. In collaborative projects involving multimedia, the parents would see other students' work and would easily witness students' interactions.

### How are parents prepared for their varied roles?

Vendors agreed that parents' cultural and educational background and previous experiences in either online environments or even status as a homeschooling parent influence how prepared parents might be when they come to the online environment. One participant explained community outreach programs and what they referred to as "parent training" on new technology that focuses on particular subgroups of parents to support their understanding of how to help their children. One representative from an online school vendor discussed how parents are more prepared for IEP meetings in the online environment because parents are usually more aware of their children's performance than parents are in traditional settings. In such cases, parents have been working with their child and accessing the family portal to follow their child's progress. Another vendor talked about special education teachers working with parents during meetings to prepare student reports in the moment. The instructor can share their screen with the parents and in real time show the parent their children's progress in different areas of the course. From this, they can generate reports from the learning management systems (LMS) as the parent watches. In this way, parents are positioned to see the data, ask questions, know what areas of the IEP the teacher has addressed, and better understand the final report once it is generated.

### How could parents be better supported in their roles?

Representatives from the vendors seemed to agree that parents needed ongoing support, whether to learn about how to share information about their child with the instructor or to get training in new technology being added to the online environment. One participant indicated that parents needed to learn how to support their child using technology and not only to learn content. Several vendors agreed that parents could provide richer background on their child so that the "learner profile" could include such information as student motivation and preferences for learning. An interactive channel could be available for parents to indicate behaviors they are seeing at home and ask if the behaviors are also showing up in the courses. This level of information sharing would help keep a thread across future courses to make instructors aware of each child's unique learning needs.

### Implications

We can draw several implications from the vendors' discussion of parent preparation and involvement in their child's online experience. One key idea is that representatives of vendors agree that parents should be actively involved in their children's learning. Vendors



should support parents' involvement through focused product development with parents such as learning management tools that foster parent engagement and provide resources and ongoing direct training for the various parental roles in online learning. These products and platforms should remain agile to support the continual updating that occurs in the online environment so parents can be continually prepared to support, manage, and administrate courses to a higher degree.

While a key implication is to keep parents actively involved, another implication is to do so in ways that are motivating to parents to persist. Vendors must continually seek ways to help ensure parents' access to resources and that training is convenient and engaging so that parents will more readily take advantage of the supports. One might expect that if vendors can find ways to create a space for parental voice in the online environments, they can promote collaborative approaches to learning among the parents, students, and instructors. The challenge in these approaches is ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of other students. One of the great potentials of online learning is the collaborative nature of assignments and projects. In those interactions though parents could learn about other students' work and grades.

Participants engaged in a lively discussion about how IEP meetings are conducted online and that they can allow more opportunities for parents to be informed and involved in the decision-making. Implications of this discussion are that active parental involvement in student learning and detailed course data impacts a student's IEP goals. This active parental involvement has policy implications to clarify what data are needed to indicate that IEP goals are met, how to establish new goals, and how to determine if an IEP is still necessary.

What is clearly missing from the discussion are the ways in which vendors conceptualize parents around their cultural and educational preparation for online learning. Indeed the discussion was clear that some parents were considered to be more or less a better "fit" for supporting children than other parents. Parents who were not native English speakers are considered a greater challenge because of their limited English comprehension and expression. As a result, high amounts of effort were being directed at ensuring that students using the program do not need their parents to complete their coursework. Another course of action might be to design supports that are in languages other than English, provide coursework that allows for a variety of culturally relevant examples, and leverage the trust that linguistically diverse parents have to have in their children in order to bring them to a foreign country and participate in non-traditional schooling (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013).

Based on the discussion, additional consideration is recommended for topics including:

1. What guidance would be informative to parents as they consider different online vendors and their offerings, or even if a fully online program would be a good match for their child?
2. What kind of preparation do parents need for the instructional, management, and administrative roles they are expected to take for their child with a disability?
3. How can vendors motivate parents to take advantage of preparation opportunities?



4. How can vendors foster more interactive data sharing and decision-making between parents and instructors?
5. What kind of visual displays of data are most helpful to parents in understanding their children's performance?

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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 11<sup>TH</sup> AND 12<sup>TH</sup>, 2015

**AGENDA**

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

**Tuesday, August 11<sup>th</sup>**

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 12:00 - 12:45 | Working Lunch <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Welcome: <i>OSEP staff and Bill East</i></li><li>• Participant introductions: <i>a description of your organization; the targeted audience for your products; your role in the organization</i></li><li>• Overview: <i>Explanation of how we hope this discussion proceeds</i></li></ul> |
| 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.<br>Dinner plans?   |

**Wednesday, August 12<sup>th</sup>**

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| 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*