

Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities: Online Vendor Forum Proceedings Series (Report No. 3)

IDEA Principles in the Online Environment

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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 learner management system (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 (UDL) 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.

IDEA Principles in the Online Environment

This third vendor forum topic summarizes the perceptions of vendors regarding the implementation of IDEA principles (i.e., individual education plan [IEP], free appropriate education [FAPE], and least restrictive environment [LRE]) in online settings. Very little research

has focused on the implementation of IDEA in online learning environments, regardless of whether these environments are providing blended, fully online, or hybrid instruction (Greer, Rice, & Dykman, 2014). The little research that has addressed IDEA principles has done so in the context of targeted interviews and surveys that intended to provide a broad view of the online experience for K-12 students with disabilities. For example, Rice and Carter (in press) interviewed administrators from an online school and found that administrators did counsel some students with disabilities out of online learning. Rice and Carter (2015) also found that teachers and administrators sometimes had the perception that brick-and-mortar schools sent students with disabilities to online schools as a way to circumvent their obligations to educate difficult to serve students with disabilities. Other research found that the learning materials in online courses are too difficult for many students with disabilities to read (Rice & Deshler, 2015; Rice, 2015) and that these students fail to meet educational targets and complete the course (Deshler, Rice & Greer, 2014). These findings raise concerns for implementing FAPE and LRE successfully in online settings.

Virtual school superintendents and school administrators, during a previous forum the Center conducted, indicated that online settings offer ways to implement IDEA principles by providing teachers easy access to and use of student data and allowing teachers latitude in how to use the educational materials to best meet students' needs (Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015). They reported that their schools use continual progress monitoring of students as they progress in a course, tracking student responses to inform instruction and determine assignments.

State Education Directors of Special Education, in another forum that the Center conducted, reported that they are unsure if online programming is meeting the needs of students with disabilities to the same degree as traditional schools or if special education teachers have been able to successfully adapt students' IEPs to the online environment. In addition, no consensus was evident across the states on how to conceptualize IDEA principles or monitor the progress of their implementation in online programs (Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015). The Center talked with vendors about the cross section of IDEA principles and their products and services to shed some light on this topic from their perspective.

How important is this topic to your organization?

For the vendors offering virtual schooling or educational software, implementing IDEA principles was a priority issue. However, for vendors offering customizable platforms, learner management system or related products, this topic was less of a priority. Vendors discussed accessibility to their courses and materials as being very important for their students and one vendor talked about meeting IDEA requirements was more complicated than meeting Section 508 accessibility rules. The complications were reflected in the many other important aspects that are involved in educating students with disabilities (e.g., comprehensive evaluations, IEP development, providing related services, and protecting the due process and procedural safeguards in IDEA).

What is working well for your organization on this topic?

Several vendors are exploring how to incorporate accessibility options, conducting product tests for accommodations, or working with the Center to conduct research on how students with disabilities respond to courses. One vendor who offers curated digital learning resources discussed exploring ways to embed tags (metadata that describes an item and allows the item to be found with keywords) on resources that indicate its accessibility and readability. Currently this sort of tagging is cost prohibitive and teachers are not skilled in using this sort of tagging data.

Another vendor discussed a long-term process of testing their learner management system for usability-support and accommodations. For instance, they have tracked student data on allowing more time for taking a test and allowing different times to take a test in courses. One vendor is involved in a formal research study with the Center to look at the accessibility of their courses and how students with disabilities make achievement gains. Within this study they are looking at which multimedia source features tools that the students find helpful in supporting their learning needs. Finally, one vendor discussed how the IDEA laws are working well because they require local school districts to provide assistive technology when needed and require publishers to make their content accessible.

What is the top challenge you face on this topic?

A vendor who provides curated learning resources reported that students currently face a major challenge in accessing a dictionary to look up a word. This task is a challenge because students must leave the application material they are using (whether text or read aloud) and access a separate dictionary application instead of being able to access a dictionary within the passage. This vendor thought that students' cognitive focus might "break" because of switching between these applications and thus negatively impact their reading comprehension. These added steps may impact the learning of students with disabilities who struggle with reading or sustaining a focus on written information.

Another vendor who offers a learner management system product expressed a challenge in addressing accessibility demands without any additional external financial support or investment for product development. His belief is that a great potential exists for technology to support LRE implementation that allows students with disabilities to access the materials with equal facility as students without disabilities. To this participant, an obvious disparity exists when technology for learning is only made available to general education students. The vendor believed that students with disabilities will not and/or cannot make use of the current technology included in the learner management system and that improving the system was beyond the company's current budget.

A third vendor involved in offering virtual schooling offered that including online learning in the reauthorization of IDEA would be useful. Currently states have different expectations over such issues as whether entering an online school represents a new placement and therefore requires a new IEP meeting. However if online learning was addressed

in the federal legislation states would have a framework for reviewing and determine new policies and procedures to address students with disabilities in online settings. This vendor also discussed the challenge of ensuring that parents understand the impact of virtual school environments on their child’s learning because while the child may still be getting related services, that child’s school day looks very different compared to a day in traditional schooling.

What do LRE, FAPE, and personalized instruction mean to your organization?

Viewpoints about a LRE standard were varied. One vendor described some confusion in assessing whether products or services are considered accessible because measuring technical accessibility in ways that make sense for LRE is difficult. A few vendors in the industry engage in usability testing but that takes specialized expertise that not many vendors have. The participant noted that some Requests for Proposals (RFPs) require descriptions of how vendors provide accommodations, but others only require the vendor to check “Yes” or “No” to identify whether their products are accessible, which means that vendors may have their own standards of accessibility and usability.

Another vendor advanced an argument that virtual schools do provide a LRE, especially for students with autism or emotional behavioral disorders. The argument that LRE is provided is derived from the participant’s understanding that in cases of behavioral difficulties, problem behaviors diminish in an online environment because the social interactions that may prompt particular reactions or behaviors are not present in the online setting. Vendors providing instructional services directly to students described their involvement in FAPE when they document student progress and provide that data to teachers to help them know if and how their students are struggling. This data can also help the vendor determine how their tools can be improved and their investment strategies.

An interesting discussion ensued about distinguishing personalized instruction that online environments can offer compared to the type of individualized instruction expected in an IEP. Some vendors thought that no difference should be made between an IEP and personalized instruction. In this perspective all students could be offered personalized instruction to meet their unique learning needs because online programs have the inherent capacity to capture great amounts of student data useful for diagnostics and decision-making in personalizing instruction. Other vendors, however, indicated that IEPs involve more formalized procedures and that the students with IEPs receive more support compared to students without IEPs. Learning may be personalized but not providing the level of supports expected for students with disabilities and an active IEP. One vendor pointed out that IEPs are usually focused on deficiencies but personalization is often focused on proficiencies and that makes a difference in applying the data. Finally, one vendor indicated that the industry needed to define what is meant by *personalized learning programs* to help clarify how this supports any and all students’ learning needs.

Have you been involved in due process issues?

Most vendors have not been involved in any due process issues, other than the vendor providing virtual school programs. The few times this vendor was involved the Office of Civil Rights and the state had received complaints that were resolved through mediation and due process hearings, much as a traditional school would experience. Another vendor did talk about spending time with special education directors to learn about their issues and provide them tools that might support improvements. Vendors rarely, if ever, attend IEP meetings but they do support special education teachers with training on their tools so teachers can know how to use the tools to personalize learning to meet students' IEP goals.

How is your staff involved in IEP development?

Two vendors who provide either virtual courses or instructional services directly to students answered this question. One vendor meets with local district staff to determine if particular courses will meet students' unique IEP needs and to identify guidelines on what constitutes acceptable progress in their program. The other vendor includes trained staff in meetings in the virtual school helping to manage the special education issues as needed.

What is your staff's role in eligibility assessments?

Only the vendor offering virtual schooling was involved in assessing students' eligibility for special education services. This vendor was very involved, contracting with evaluators around the country to conduct in-person evaluations in areas such as psychology, assistive technology, physical therapy, and speech and hearing. Their schools, usually charters, conduct child find or response to intervention (RTI) procedures that rarely involve the state or a local district.

A vendor who offers learner management systems and personalized learning programs discussed the reality of different states having different regulations. Therefore this vendor relies on the principles and framework of UDL because UDL promotes accessibility for all students to materials and learning and to using data to revise the learning approach to best meet all students' needs.

Implications

Some implications can be drawn from the vendors' forum on implementing IDEA principles in the online environment. One clear implication is that when vendors are involved in providing instructional services directly to students with disabilities, they are aware of and involved in implementing LRE, FAPE, and IEPs. Vendors providing resources or platforms to clients may be aware of implementing IDEA principles but are less involved in FAPE and LRE processes. Vendors also believe that online settings can, and do, offer students with disabilities LRE, FAPE, and IEP support. However, some industry confusion exists over the difference between personalized instruction for meeting IEP requirements and the capacity for personalized instruction inherent in online programming, or whether such a difference exists or

is warranted. In addition, some confusion was indicated about whether an online environment that does elicit anti-social behaviors was addressing LRE because the behaviors were not occurring previously or whether the online environment constituted a highly restrictive environment.

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

1. What are the metrics vendors should use to determine if their products and services support implementation of IDEA principles?
2. Who is responsible for training educators to better use the tools and materials of the vendor to implement IDEA principles?
3. Where can vendors get support and incentives to provide products and services that better meet students with disabilities' unique accessibility and learning needs?

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

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| 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