

Access and Coordination of Related Services

Mary F. Rice, Theron (Bill) East and Daryl F. Mellard

October 2015

Online learning currently reaches millions of K-12 learners and its annual growth has been exponential. The 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, related policies, and their application in online learning as they pertain to students with disabilities has received much less research attention than is necessary for 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 working with students with disabilities who were completing online coursework; 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. The first forum was held with state directors of special education (or a designee) to obtain an in-depth view of the issues and concerns with students with disabilities in online learning from the state policy perspective. The second forum was conducted with virtual school district superintendents and other top-level district administrators. The responses obtained from these administrators are the topic of this paper.

Participants and forum topics

In the summer of 2014, COLSD staff began planning a series of forums to shed light on the state of online learning and students with disabilities from the perspective of various practitioners and stakeholders. This second forum was held with virtual school superintendents and other virtual school administrators in a face-to-face gathering March 31 and April 1, 2015. Due to their configuration as online schools, some of these institutions enroll students across the country. These administrators were selected for participation on the basis of three factors: (1) Status as a top-level official of a large blended learning program. (2) Status as a supervisor in states that have high levels of participation in online learning, even though school enrollments vary in size. (3) Responsibility for schools that represented demographic diversity. Although the experiences and information from the participants do not represent all administrators of virtual schools in this country, they do provide an informed sample.

The five forum participants represented two public school districts (Mooresville, NC and Detroit, MI), two national charter schools (Carpe Diem Schools and Rocketship Education Network) and one state level program (North Carolina Virtual Public School). The two charter school administrators represented programs in multiple states: Arizona, California, District of Columbia, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin. Collectively their schools enrolled students from kindergarten through 12th grade and included eight to 40 percent of the enrollees as students with disabilities. A list of participants is also included in this report (Appendix A).

At the time of her participation, the first administrator was the special education director for a school district of 6,100 in North Carolina. Her district had been involved in online/blended instruction since 2008. In the fall of 2015, that district was expected to be a full 1-to-1 with laptops or tablets in every grade (K-12). Roughly 12 percent of the student body in her district had been identified as having at least one disability. Currently she is a special education director for a different school district in North Carolina with 20,000 students that is also 1-to-1 with laptops and tablets in grades 3-12.

The second administrator is the vice president of achievement for the National Education Board of National Charter Schools. Currently, he is in charge of achievement for 6,000 students attending grades K-5 in California, Wisconsin, and Tennessee. His schools have

used various blended models since they opened in 2007. Approximately 11 percent of students in his network are identified as having at least one disability.

The third administrator was included because of her recent history of employment with the Education Achievement Authority in Detroit, Michigan, which is a statewide reform charter district. As of 2015, six high schools, and one K-8 school were in her district. She is currently working with Operation Breakthrough in Kansas City, Missouri, one of the largest early learning centers in the region. Percentages of students with disabilities in the schools she works with range from 8 to 40 percent.

The fourth participant is an administrator at the North Carolina Virtual Public School, the nation's second-largest fully online supplemental program. Her program has 35,000 students, approximately 10 percent of which are identified with at least one disability. In addition, her program operates a unique occupational course of study program aimed at transitioning students from school to work and post-high school training, especially directed toward meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This program has 7,400 students and 14 percent are students with disabilities.

The fifth administrator represented Carpe Diem Schools—a multistate charter school network for grades 6 through 12. Schools in his network employ various learning models, but most are some type of blended learning. Percentages of students with disabilities in his schools range from 12 to 25 percent of the approximately 2500 total students in the network.

COLSD staff reviewed previous literature, revisited findings from previous research activities (e.g., case studies, surveys, and interviews), and considered responses from the first forum of state directors of special education to determine the topics for this second forum. As in the previous forum, 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 and IDEA notifications
3. IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., free appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, due process protections)
4. IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., eligibility assessment, IEP development)
5. Access and coordination of related services for students with disabilities
6. Effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student response data among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructor, administrator, provider, and vendor), along with privacy issues
7. Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment, and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development

8. Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments; use of the unique properties afforded in online environments
9. Differential access to online learning within and across your schools (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions on material access and assistive technologies)
10. Local supervision for online learning in general education and, in particular, for supervision in special education

Participants received a packet of materials prior to the meeting, including the agenda (see Appendix B), and a list of the topics and questions to be considered. The forum began with introductions and a comprehensive discussion of the importance of online learning for students with disabilities from each participant's perspective. Next, each administrator responded to a set of questions about the selected ten topics. The participants determined the order in which they wanted to use to describe their organization's current status, needs, values, and other perspectives pertaining to the topic. 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. A representative from COLSD moderated the talk to provide all participants with comparable opportunities to share insights about each topic. For each of the 10 topics, participants responded to five questions:

1. How is your organization currently addressing this topic?
2. Of the (10) topics in our discussion list, how important is this topic?
3. What is working well for you on this topic?
4. What are the top challenges you face and the direction you see your organization taking on this topic?
5. What research question could have a significant impact on your policy or practice?

Access and Coordination of Related Services for Students with Disabilities

This document, the fifth in the series of forum proceeding papers, presents school administrators' responses to the set of five questions on the topic of access and coordination of related services for students with disabilities. These related service providers include, but are not limited to, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and orientation and mobility specialists. Traditionally, students receive these services from a provider during the school day as outlined in the student's IEP. Access to related service providers is required by law and based on student need. In addition to providing services, related service providers continually assess students and determine if related services should continue and at what frequencies. Increasingly therapies are being provided as teleservices, which is part of the larger telemedicine/telerehabilitation/teleintervention movement (Bernard, 2014). In this format, the student and the therapist are located in separate locations. An audio or video connection is established between the service provider and the learner and perhaps a person with the learner who assists with implementation and monitoring.

When related services are necessary, this support (in whatever format) is ideally embedded into other disability supports that students receive (Bonner & Barnett, 2004). However, incorporating related services properly has proven difficult in traditional schools because in general a shortage of professionals exists who have been prepared to provide related services and those providers who do exist are not always skilled in coordinating their services with other services and support that students are receiving (Jakubowitz, 2011; McDonough, 2005).

Initial research activities at COLSD found that coordination of related service providers for students with disabilities has been a source of great difficulty in online settings as well (Rice & Carter, in press). In one project with regional special education directors in online schools, researchers at COLSD learned that the shortage of related service providers, which is already acute and expected to become more profound, presents additional difficulties for students who are engaging in online learning because responsibilities for families to help students travel to appointments increase when students are no longer in a brick and mortar school. Another source of difficulty arises from the fact that online learning courses are increasingly used in rural areas as a way to grant access to coursework, yet these rural areas also experience the greatest shortages of qualified personnel (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015).

Confusion in service coordination in the online education setting occurs when service providers are contracted privately or through agencies with the online learning institutions rather than being employees of the schools themselves (Rice & Carter, 2015). Due to the contract employment configuration, schools do not feel like they are able to have consistent communication with related service providers that work with students in their schools (McDonough, 2005). COLSD researchers also uncovered concerns with billing and accounting practices for compensating related service providers (Rice & Carter). Specifically the special education directors interviewed during one study felt that related service providers billed for services that were not actually given to students. The suspicion of billing inaccuracies was a central concern for administrators in virtual schools in both rural and urban areas.

How is this topic addressed in your organization?

When asked how access and coordination of related services was handled in their respective online educational environments, the responses varied according to the program setting (rural, urban, or suburban). The administrators that worked with students in rural settings were frustrated, citing problems with shortages of related service providers as an issue that threatened their schools' ability to comply with IEPs. On the other hand, administrators in schools that served students that mainly lived in urban areas indicated that finding related service providers and working with them was less of a struggle. Two administrators from blended programs had not changed from a traditional model of service delivery to an online or teleservice delivery model and they reported few concerns. In addition, an administrator from the larger part-time online learning program does not have to provide the related services—the traditional school does, and so her concerns were mostly centered on participation in the IEP development in general.

Several administrators also explained that they had difficulty maintaining contracts with related service providers because of dissatisfaction with the services or management. Particular points of concern included inconsistency in personnel as providers and billing disputes. Services were regarded as inconsistent or fragmented. Oftentimes, different service providers would appear for each appointment rather than having the same provider work with students and their families over a period of time. The inconsistency was especially likely in teleservice delivery formats. One administrator in particular was concerned that his school had been billed for services when those services were not provided. Often service appointments were missed because of scheduling difficulties or students and parents not logging in to receive them. The program administrator was frustrated with having to pay a provider on a contract basis even when that provider was not able to work with the child (e.g., due to absence).

How important is this topic from your perspective?

When asked if this related services topic was critical as measured against the other topics, the administrators indicated generally that the topic was important, but was not at the top of their priorities as online educators, nor did they think that it should be.

What direction do you see the school(s) you are in charge of going on this topic?

Most of the administrators said that they were working to make sure that they could find and maintain relationships with related service providers that were reliable and professional. When circumstances required a contract with an agency rather than the providers themselves, they worked to make sure the same provider could work with a student and/or family each session as much as possible.

Even the administrators from blended schools that were still delivering related services on site mentioned that they were making greater efforts to avail themselves of technological resources to enhance the experience. An example of these resources includes voice to text software.

What's the top challenge faced?

Administrators who were experiencing challenges stayed focused on their relationships with companies and making sure that the same person performed services and/or therapies each time.

Overall, the administrators in every school are concerned about integrating the related services into the schools and the learning plans for individual students. Currently, these providers are more peripheral than desired, even in the blended schools in which services can be rendered on site. The administrator of the part-time program was willing and interested in ways to be a part of more comprehensive and coordinated services for students with disabilities; however she was also constrained by the fact that the school only has responsibility for a small part of student learning during the day and only for specific courses.

What are the various stakeholder concerns?

In addition to concerns about the integration of these providers into the service plans for students who qualify, one of the administrators reported that she has to respond to parental concerns when related services are provided as teleservices with virtual therapists. When the related services are provided over the Internet, rather than face-to-face, parents often have to attend the appointment and help the provider by orienting students, keeping students on task, or providing feedback to the virtual provider. Some parents embrace opportunities to be part of provided services, which is often necessary when these services are provided over Internet. Other parents find this responsibility to be involved in the related service frustrating and/or they have a hard time envisioning what their participation in these related services should look like. The crux of the problem, as the administrators explained it, is that some parents perceive new policies and practices such as these changes as a school's attempt to skimp on costs. In reality, these online service costs are comparable in price according to administrators because of expenses associated with equipment upkeep and data tracking. In response to parent concerns about teleservices, the compromise that most administrators make to ameliorate the concerns about the quality of related services provided online is to offer these services to parents who are amenable while working to keep face-to-face services as an option for parents who would prefer that method.

What research questions could have a significant impact?

The major research issue according to the administrators was how to determine whether these services were effective for students, and if so, under what conditions. Some aspects of effectiveness that were critical included learning outcomes and the relationship between services and increased inclusion in educational and social activities and achieving desired rehabilitation outcomes. Far fewer research questions were suggested in this area than for other topics. Here are the questions the administrators asked.

1. What is more critical to student success: inclusion practices or related services?
2. What is the effect of related services on student learning outcomes?
3. What is the impact on related service providers' status as non-contract employees on online school cultural and workplace structures?
4. What factors facilitate the contract and maintenance of related service providers?

Implications

In a traditional school, a related service provider may be assigned to one school or even several schools. When a provider enters the school and tries to locate the child for an appointment, if the child is absent or unavailable, the provider is able to find another child in the same building or travel to another school to see a different child. In the online education environment, the situation is more complicated. The provider who logs on for an appointment and finds the child unavailable cannot simply go and meet another child. That is why it is critical for families who sign up for teletherapies to keep their appointments. In addition, a provider in a traditional school might have a set schedule of hours to be in a building to complete

paperwork, provide consultation, conduct evaluations, and may even have other responsibilities to observe students in classrooms, attend IEPs or other parent conferences, or supervise students. Providers who work online are doing so remotely and therefore the only responsibilities they are likely to have are in regard to directly working with assigned students. However the fact that teletherapists can only be asked to deliver services at particular times also likely means that teletherapists have larger caseloads than therapists working directly in schools.

The contract nature of the employment ameliorates the concern for individual billing issues in traditional schools (Medicaid billing is the only billing that providers report), but in an online learning environment in which freelance-type contracts are the norm, issues around whether payment is due for children that do not make their appointments is of prime concern. According to IDEA a child cannot be denied future services for missing appointments and so virtual schools are in a difficult financial and legal position.

Differences in responsibilities because of distance account for much of the difficulties in imagining ways to help related service providers who are providing services via the Internet become integrated into the children's lives and the school in general. As a response, administrators have an interest in acquiring data that demonstrate that related services promote positive student outcomes, particularly learning. Such evidence of a connection to student learning was described as their top priority. However, the billing issues and the inconsistencies in finding and delivering these services make linking services to achievement very difficult, if not impossible for the time being.

These administrators clearly see value in their schools as vehicles for inclusion *vis a vis* personalization, rather than as educational institutions that manage related services separate and distinct for students with disabilities. Administrators feel challenged because they do not consider related services an aspect of the educational environment that they can control directly. Instead, these schools work to be compliant with laws regarding related services while focusing on what they consider malleable factors of achievement that are within their control. Practical battles over differences between individualization and personalization of learning emerged in other topics during this forum (see papers #3 and #4), and tension was also highly evident in discussions around the topic of related services

Also apparent was the need to build stronger working relationships among the online learning schools, the related service providers, and the agencies that provide them. The focus of concern was articulated in terms of the quantity and quality of services students receive and the compensation for such services. Although administrators reported being impressed with the knowledge and skills of some individual providers, unease existed regarding their professionalism in general. Engaging in more research around this topic seems necessary to find ways for the work of related service providers to fit into service plans for students with disabilities in online learning environments in more holistic and meaningful ways.

Interestingly, no mention of guidelines or standards regarding telerehabilitational or teleintervention services was made during the course of the discussion. Such guidelines and

standards began emerging around 2010 from the American Telemedicine Association (Bernard, 2014). The practice guidelines are not specific to service delivery in K-12 settings or to children, but they provide guidance for the types of knowledge, skills, and dispositions providers should have and the kind of collegiality and professionalism necessary to work with families and other agencies. The primary sources the administrators used to identify responsibilities and obligations were from disability laws, and that these laws are interpreted as administrators understand them in traditional school settings. Helping online education administrators learn about these guidelines and consider their use in online schools is a technical service that might prove fruitful for identifying more skillful providers and for building relationships of trust through shared dialogue regarding clinical and professional ethics.

Finally, related service providers have not provided research accounts *from their perspective* regarding what happens with student clients in online schools. Future projects should consider obtaining these perspectives for a richer picture of what happens before, during, and after related service delivery. In addition, research in K-12 online learning has not sought out perspectives of families of students with disabilities receiving related services. We do not know how they feel about working with different providers each time versus the same provider, nor do we know how they experience opportunities to be part of the therapy sessions in peripheral or even central ways. In summary, future work should consider finding out how these providers impact the achievement of their clients, and other aspects of client well being. Other questions along these lines might portend to billing issues, to providers professional development and preparation to work with young people through the auspices of a school, and how they see their roles in the comprehensive support network of a child or adolescent. Finally, the interconnectivity of students, parents, related service providers, and educators in the virtual environments must be studied in greater depth.

The contents of this manuscript series, “Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities: Forum Proceedings Series” were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Cooperative Agreement #H327U110011 with the University of Kansas, and member organizations the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). However, the contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

This report is in the public domain. Readers are free to distribute copies of this paper and the recommended citation is:

Rice, M., East, T., & Mellard, D.F. (2015). *Access and coordination of related services: School Superintendent Forum Proceedings (Report No. 5)*. Lawrence, KS: Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities, University of Kansas.

References

- Bailey, T. R., & Zumeta, R. (2015). How states can help rural LEAs meet the needs of special populations. In Gross, B., and Jochim, A. (eds.). *Uncovering the productivity promise of rural education. The SEA of the Future, 4*, (pp. 40-54). San Antonio, TX: Building State Capacity & Productivity Center at Edvance Research, Inc.
- Bernard, J. (2014). American Telemedicine Association: 2014 Fall Forum. *International Journal of Telerehabilitation, 6*(1), 53-54.
- Bonner, M., & Barnett, D. W. (2004). Intervention-based school psychology services: Training for child-level accountability; preparing for program-level accountability. *Journal of School Psychology, 42*(1), 23-43.
- Burdette, P. J., Greer, D., & Woods, K. L. (2013). K-12 online learning and students with disabilities: Perspectives from state special education directors. *Online Learning, 17*(3), 1-7.
- Jakubowitz, M. (2011). The time has come for speech-language pathology license portability!. *International journal of telerehabilitation, 3*(2), 27-30.
- McDonough, P. M. (2005). Counseling and college counseling in America's high schools. *State of college admission*, Alexandria, VA: National Association of College Admissions Counseling.
- Rice, M., & Carter, R. A., Jr. (in press). When we talk about compliance it's because we lived it: Online educators' experiences supporting students with disabilities. *Online Learning Journal*.

Appendix A
Forum Participants

OSEP AND COLSD FORUM

Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Sandy Albert

Director of Exceptional Children's
Programs
Rowan Salisbury Schools

Eliz Colbert

Executive Director
North Carolina Virtual Public School

Theron (Bill) East, Jr.

COLSD Principal Investigator and
Executive Director
National Association of State Directors of
Special Education

Mary Esselman

Executive Director of Assessment and
Program Evaluation
Kansas City Missouri Public Schools

Daryl Mellard

COLSD Principal Investigator
Center for Research on Learning,
University of Kansas

Adam Nadeau

Director of Schools for Nashville and
Milwaukee, and Director of
Achievement
Rocketship Education network

Richard J. Ogston

Founder
Carpe Diem Schools

Mary Frances Rice

COLSD Graduate Research Assistant
University of Kansas

Celia Rosenquist

Project Director
National Initiatives Team
Office of Special Education Programs, U.S.
Department of Education

Skip Stahl

COLSD Principal Investigator
Senior Policy Analyst
Center for Applied Special Technology
(CAST)

Appendix B
Forum Agenda

OSEP and COLSD Forum
**Practices and Challenges in Online Instruction for
Students with Disabilities**

MARCH 31 - APRIL 1, 2015

AGENDA

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

Tuesday, March 31, 2015

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 12:00 - 12:45 | Working Lunch <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome: <i>OSEP staff and Bill East</i>• Participant introductions: <i>Your district experiences with online instruction</i>• Overview: <i>Explanation of how we hope this discussion proceeds</i> |
| 12:45 - 1:45 | Discussion <i>Topic #1: Enrollment, persistence, progress and achievement for students with disabilities</i> |
| 1:45 - 2:00 | Break |
| 2:00 - 2:45 | Discussion <i>Topic #2: Parent preparation and involvement in their child's online experience and IDEA notifications</i> |
| 2:45 - 3:30 | Discussion <i>Topic #3: IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, due process protections)</i> |
| 3:30 - 4:15 | Discussion <i>Topic #4: IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., eligibility assessment, IEP development)</i> |
| 4:15 - 4:30 | Break |
| 4:30 - 5:15 | Discussion <i>Topic #5: Access and coordination of related services for students with disabilities</i> |

5:15 - 5:30 *Wrap-up, suggestions for improving our process and preview for day two.
Dinner plans?*

Wednesday, April 1, 2015

8:15 - 8:30 Review *Review of yesterday and today's preview*

8:30 - 9:15 Discussion *Topic #6: Effective and efficient access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage of student response data among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructors, administrator, provider, and vendor) and addressing privacy concerns*

9:15-10:30 Discussion *Topic #7: Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment; and promising (or negative) practices that facilitate (or negate) professional development*

11:15-11:30 Break

10:30-11:15 Discussion *Topic #8: Instructional practices: Integration of optimal evidence-based practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments; use of the unique properties afforded in online environments*

11:30 - 12:15 Discussion *Topic #9: Differential access to online learning within and across your schools (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access & assistive technologies)*

12:15 - 1:00 Working Lunch - Discussion *Topic 10: Local supervision for online learning in general education and in particular for supervision in special education*

1:00 - 1:15 Discussion of your views on the Center's future activities

1:30 - 1:45 Wrap up: *Our next steps with this information: draft a summary; share the summary with you for accuracy and completeness; draft a report on the topics and share with you for edits regarding accuracy and completeness; and complete revisions and disseminate.
Your closing comments
Reimbursement issues and our closing comments
Thank you and safe travels*

