

A Response to the Pandemic from the Global Community: Effective Instructional Practices

To gain an understanding of special education teacher experiences and effective instructional practices during the pandemic, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Division of International Special Education & Services (DISES) surveyed its members with a 10-item online questionnaire. Fearing catastrophic COVID-19 transmission and community spread, schools throughout the world closed overnight, forcing teachers to transform their classrooms and instruction from in person brick and mortar schools to virtual. Education leaders scrambled to find research on best practices to guide K–12 virtual instruction. They found limited research, with some suggesting positive effects on student achievement and most negative (Freidhoff, 2019). Consistently, the literature showed that intrinsically motivated students who self-regulate and monitor their learning are successful in virtual classes (Cavanaugh et al., 2013; Clifford, 2018; Freidhoff, 2019; Rice, 2017). Yet, not all learners are self-regulated, especially students with disabilities.

DISES distributed the survey to members via email. Fifty-two teachers responded, with 90% from the United States and the remaining 10% from Australia, Japan, Uganda, and Jamaica. Of teachers, 41% resided in urban schools, 33% suburban, 18% rural, and 8% transitioned between multiple school environments. Most teachers (92%) worked in inclusive schools that educated both students with and without disabilities. Of teachers, 51% taught elementary aged students, 15% secondary students, and 33% pre-k and adults with disabilities. A majority (70%) felt the transition to virtual instruction was difficult, citing issues with accessibility, internet and computers as primary reasons. When teachers were able to connect, they used Zoom, email, phone, and text to engage with parents to help students access learning materials and complete assignments. Of teachers, 70% indicated they communicated with parents and caregivers frequently. They relied heavily on parents to assist them throughout virtual learning. One teacher stated, “giving parents specific instructions and task analysis” helped her student. Another teacher shared, “parents sitting side-by-side modeling what the child is to do” was necessary. Collaboration with parents on effective behavior management systems that wrapped strategies from home to school was noted as important, and “one on one meetings with parents” facilitated instruction and on task behaviors. One teacher wrote, “a reward system that parents and teacher agree upon to help motivate the student” enhanced on task behaviors and assignment completion. Parents then practiced skills and generalized these skills to the real world. Teachers reported barriers when students didn’t participate in learning and efforts to reach parents were unsuccessful. Teachers

also noted that communicating with non-English speaking families was difficult without an interpreter.

Results of this survey echoes what we know about K-12 virtual schools: parent involvement plays a key role. Virtual K-12 schools typically provide asynchronous instruction with established curriculum and instructional materials. Teachers facilitate learning by providing feedback and engaging parents, who often serve the role as learning coaches. Research investigating best practices in K-12 virtual and blended learning highlights the importance of parent collaboration (Avendano, S. M., & Cho, E., 2020; Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014; Burdette, P. & Greer, D., 2014; Clifford, 2018; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). Parents who participate in the learning process by modeling self-monitoring and self-regulation, reinforcing instructional strategies, and encouraging and rewarding students enhance their child's skills and improve learning outcomes (Clifford, 2018). Below are recommended strategies to engage parents to assist students with disabilities during virtual and blended learning.

Learning Coach

There are many distractions at home, including the internet, phones, video games, and more. A learning coach ensures a student's workspace is distraction free and monitors on task behaviors so that students with disabilities engage in academic curriculum and instruction (Avendano & Cho, 2020). This is especially important when academic demands are difficult or non-preferred. A learning coach encourages and rewards students for assignment completion and holds students accountable. A coach helps students develop skills necessary to become self-regulated learners. Learning coaches invest considerable time collaborating with teachers. Many parents work and don't have the time, patience or skills required to be a learning coach. Virtual schools recognize the realities of parenting and the important role of learning coaches. They advertise, recruit and employ learning coaches. In fact, Michigan requires every student enrolled in virtual schools to have a mentor or learning coach. Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (2020) states that, "mentors serve as the liaison between the student, online instructor, parents, and administration. Some mentors are part-time paraprofessionals, and mentors often fill other roles in the school, such as a teacher, counselor, media center specialist, and even an administrator. Many people have the misconception that online learners don't have the benefit of the traditional human relationships established in the face-to-face classroom. In fact, the mentor provides that personal connection for students learning virtually: effective mentors work with the students every day, support them and build trusting relationships. Many students come to see their mentors as teachers, regardless of the mentor's educational preparation to teach. In some schools, mentors are part of the school's multi-tiered system of support and do more than support online learning. They engage with others in the school, contributing to a vision of the whole student and his/her

personalized learning. Mentors are one more adult who knows the student and provides perspective and support.” Borup (2020) provides guidance to districts who are considering employing learning coaches, who he argues are most successful when they develop positive relationships with students. Borup shares characteristics of successful learning coaches in his blog, which is on the following link: <https://michiganvirtual.org/blog/why-mentors-matter-a-conversation-with-jered-borup/>

Parents need to understand the time requirements involved in virtual learning, and their role in their child’s success. The Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute provides a parent guide and requires parents sign a contract that articulates expectations. The parent guide is located on the following link.

<https://michiganvirtual.org/resources/guides/parent-guide/>

Learning Coach Training

Learning coaches play a significant role in virtual schools and must be prepared. Most virtual schools have learning coach training programs that teach parents and coaches about learning management systems, technologies, netiquette, anti-bullying policies, and most importantly how best to support student’s self-monitoring and self-regulation necessary to be successful in virtual school (Currie -Rubin & Smith, 2014). Avendano & Cho (2020) recommended that training programs teach learning coaches how to: organize a student’s workspace to minimize distractions; maintain a visual calendar to track assignments and due dates; have a schedule that helps students plan for transitions, keep a checklist to keep track of assignments; help students manage time by using visual timers. The Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute welcomes administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders interested in their learning coach programs, which they call mentor programs, to contact them at mvlri@michiganvirtual.org. The Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (2020) publishes information about training programs and the following link provides resources: <https://michiganvirtual.org/resources/guides/mentor-guide/>

Pre-Instruction Meeting: A pre-instruction meeting with a teacher, parent, learning coach, and student establishes rapport and serves as a building block for positive relationships. Understanding parental concerns and goals for their child ensures that stakeholders are on the same page. Since students with disabilities often require positive behavior intervention supports and extrinsic rewards for motivation, gaining an understanding of student interests enhances a teacher’s ability to individualize token economies and behavior management programs (Avendano, S. M., & Cho, E., 2020; Clifford, 2018; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014;). Currie -Rubin and Smith (2014) recommend asking questions about a student’s family, such as siblings, pets, activities, and interests. Communication about course expectations, requirements, assignment and work submis-

sion, grading, and communication methods before instruction is critical (Avendano & Cho , 2020). Misplacing synchronous class login information is common for students with disabilities (Barbour & Reeves; Clifford, 2018). Therefore, it's important to help parents and students organize synchronous class login information. In order to support students with disabilities, ongoing communication helps learning coaches collaborate with special education teachers throughout virtual learning (Currie -Rubin & Smith, 2014; Smith & Rice,). Expectations about how and when ongoing communication will occur are established during the pre-instruction meeting.

During the pandemic, many families suffered economically, emotionally and physically. A pre-instruction meeting helps teachers uncover family needs and connect families with social workers, counselors and community resources. The Diverse Learning Cooperative provides resources such as letter templates and ways to enhance teacher and parent communication and equity at <https://diverselearnerscoop.com/covid19-connect-with-families/>

Assistive Technology

Many students with disabilities have difficulties reading. Above grade level text and visual distractions make reading and understanding challenging. Virtual school curricula often have advanced text and complex vocabulary without scaffolded and differentiated supports that facilitate decoding, vocabulary and comprehension (Clifford, 2018). Asynchronous instruction does not allow students to construct meaning through social contexts further exacerbating comprehension (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Clifford, 2018). Synchronous instruction, that capitalizes on social interaction and peer to peer learning has potential to improve comprehension. Making text accessible through assistive technology and engaging with parents and students to ensure they understand how to use assistive technology is critical. Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (2020) provides the following presentation with suggested assistive technology: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xtl2-9RNHZgCI8T_zl9RaX-e7RZ2ph352850lIVsApwo/present?slide=id.g80706c2f42_0_426

Ongoing Communication: Ongoing communication between a special education teacher, learning coach, and student is important. Collaboration about strategies that help students remain on task, academically engaged and motivated, especially with difficult and non-preferred academics, prevents academic disengagement and failure (Serianni, and Coy, 2014). Frequent communication with special education teachers at the beginning of the course helps learning coaches and students better understand strategies that enhance self-regulation and academic skills (Avendano & Cho , 2020). Since self-monitoring and self-regulation are necessary skills to succeed in virtual school, helping students set goals and track their progress is important. Supports can be scaf-

folded until independent self-monitoring is achieved. Continual teacher feedback about academic progress and goal achievement ensures stakeholders accurately understand student skills. Communicating behavior management plans with parents to implement at home strengthens the generalization of skills (Burdette and Greer, 2014).

The following websites list apps and technologies that facilitate communication:

<https://www.common sense.org/education/top-picks/best-messaging-apps-and-websites-for-students-teachers-and-parents>

<https://www.common sense.org/education/teaching-strategies/power-up-your-parent-teacher-communication>

<https://www.common sensemedia.org/guide/special-needs/s/math/advanced>

Michigan Virtual Research Institute created the following blog to connect mentors and share best practices <https://michiganvirtual.org/blog/tag/mentor-forum-blog-series/>

Special Considerations English Language Learners (ELL)

Developing trusted relationships with parents who don't speak English enhances parent collaboration and student outcomes. School provides a lifeline for services for some ELL families, especially families who immigrated from countries where they sought refuge or experienced trauma (Breiseth, 2020). Translation issues create communication barriers, adversely impacting collaboration. Breiseth (2020) recommends engaging school parent liaisons and translators to assist with communication. There are many apps and technologies that also assist teachers with communication. Google and Microsoft products have translation embedded in their suite of products. Some asynchronous and synchronous learning platforms also offer captioning in other languages. Information about these technologies are shared on the following websites:

<https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/coronavirus-ells-families>

<https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2020/05/how-support-english-language-learners-during-e-learning>

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*Note: For purposes of this article, parent refers to any adult caregiver

Written by: **Catherine Creighton Thompson, PhD**
DISES Communications Committee Member