

Online Learning and Students with Disabilities: Parent Perspectives

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Abstract

While research has been conducted on parental involvement in K-12 online learning, none of this research relates specifically to the parents of students with disabilities. Thus, researchers developed a survey around the following constructs: parental roles, instruction and assessment, communication and support from the school, and parental challenges. Researchers then distributed the survey to parents who had a child with a disability enrolled in an online setting. This article describes the survey findings based on 119 qualified responses from across the United States. In general, parents were pleased with the outcomes that their children were experiencing in online learning, but some issues still exist for educating students with disabilities within this environment.

Online learning has many faces including fully online schools and a variety of blended options. As described in *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning* (2013), fully online schools are those in which students are enrolled primarily or completely in an online school. Fully online can be charter or non-charter district schools. A second type of online learning is blended learning. In a blended learning environment, students attend a physical site for more than just state assessments. Blended learning includes a subcategory of online learning called supplemental online programs. These programs provide a small number of online courses to students who also attend a physical school (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2013).

Parental Roles in Traditional Learning

Although U.S. schools have always relied on parental involvement to support their children's education, the look and degree of this involvement has evolved over the years (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Communicating, parenting, decision-making, collaborating, and teaching at home are types of parental involvement that have been shown to "help parents . . . become engaged in productive ways" (Epstein & Sanders, 2006, p. 87). Research reinforces parental involvement as a way to significantly impact student academic and social/emotional outcomes. Cox found that when parents are actively involved in their children's learning, children are more engaged in academic tasks and are able to perform better academically (2005). Evidence

suggests that parental involvement empowers children to control their environment and provides an improved sense of intrinsic motivation for the learners (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). Likewise, the parents appear to bestow their beliefs and transmit their educational values from themselves to their child (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). Although these findings are based on traditional learning in a physical building, one could expect similar results when studying parental involvement in online settings. However, little research has been conducted on parents of students learning online, and even less research on parents of students with disabilities in learning online.

Parental Roles in Online Learning

In online learning, teachers are rarely the lone provider of instruction (Tucker, 2010). Instead, teachers work closely with parents to help students achieve their learning objectives (Frey, 2005). All types of students, including those with disabilities, are involved in online learning (Archambault et al., 2010). Additionally, parents' involvement in K-12 online learning is as important to student success (Black, 2009) as it is in all learning environments (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). Black (2009) reported that in a fully online learning environment, parent encouragement, reinforcement, and modeling had a positive impact on student academic outcomes. However, he also found that parent instruction was negatively correlated to student academic achievement. This negative relationship was particularly relevant because within fully online learning environments, parents have consistently been described as their child's "learning coach" (Black, 2009; Ingram, Smith, Pace, & Johnson, 2014; Klein, 2006).

From the limited research that has been conducted on all parents in online learning, the following parental roles have been identified: providing instruction; conducting administrative tasks (e.g., recording attendance and progress in a learning management system); and motivating their children (Bogden, 2003; Huerta, Gonzales, & d'Entremont, 2006). However, none of this information exists relative to the parents of students with disabilities. Since students with disabilities need unique programs and schools must involve parents of these students according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), parental involvement of students with disabilities is an important area of study. Therefore, this study was designed to extend existing research to the parents of students with disabilities. Additionally, the study sought information about student instruction and assessment, school communication and support, and parental challenges.

Methodology

Sampling

Many variables exist across settings for students with disabilities in online learning. Variables include different enrollment policies across states and districts, different attributes of the classes and homes in which learning takes place, and different methods of instruction and assessment. The sampling methods employed in this research did not strive to mediate this variability, but only to recruit a similar ratio of parents to total population for each state.

In order to reach a wide population of parents across the country, researchers asked state directors of special education in all 50 states for recommendations of teachers who (a) worked with at least one student with a disability in an online learning environment and (b) might be interested in taking part in a research study. Based on the 2010 Census, an effort was made to recruit a common ratio of teachers to total population (e.g., 6 teachers from Illinois; 4 from Virginia, 3 teachers from Arizona, etc.). This method of recruitment led to approximately 45% of

teacher recruits from the seven states with the largest populations. In May 2013, one hundred and twenty-five teachers were recruited; 86 participated (69% participation rate).

The 86 participating teachers each were asked to recruit five parents who had a child with a disability who was receiving special education services in the class(es) that had online components. The parents were contacted via email and asked to complete an online survey. The survey was delivered using Qualtrics survey methodology. From September to October 2013, 148 parents were recruited and completed the survey. However, 29 responses were excluded from the analysis because parents reported either (a) they did not have a child in an online environment, or (b) their child did not have a disability. Thus, the online survey included 119 qualified parent responses (with 46 students in K-8 grades and 73 students in 9-12th grades) for an overall response rate of 80%. A copy of the instrument is posted at <http://centeronlinelearning.org/oesp-description/>.

Instrument Development

The online parent survey was designed based on the literature of parent roles in physical schools (i.e., brick-and-mortar) (Cox, 2005) and the limited literature on their roles in online learning (Archambault, et. al., 2010). Survey items were written to address the following conceptual categories and constructs: (a) parental roles in educational activities, (b) instruction and assessment, (c) communication and support from the school, and (d) parental challenges. The survey was provided in both English and Spanish and employed skip logic so respondents accessed only appropriate questions (e.g., if a parent indicated that their child was in fully online learning, they did not access the questions that referred to the blended learning environment). Survey items included multiple-choice responses, rating scales, and open-ended questions. The multiple choice items included content regarding instructional and assessment practices and the amount and quality of school/home communication. The rating scale items were scaled on a four-point scale for which 1 = a positive response and 4 = a negative response. As a content validation activity, a draft of the survey items was sent to directors of all six Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIC) funded through the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The PTIC staffs, which include parents of students with disabilities, met in a focus group. The staffs reviewed the surveys and provided oral and written evaluative feedback regarding item content, language usage, length, and format. This validation activity occurred through two iterations of focus group meetings.

Analysis

Research staff tallied the frequency distribution of participants' responses on each multiple choice and rating scale survey item and reported percentages. Distribution histograms were created based on this information. Research staff coded responses to the open-ended questions for content congruence. These data were analyzed separately for K-8th grade and 9th-12th grade. The data were also analyzed separately for blended and online learning, but no differences were found in those responses.

Results

Student Demographics

Of the 119 qualified responses, the primary disability most often reported for students in an online learning environment was specific learning disability (29%). Autism (13%) and other health impaired (13%) were the second and third most frequently reported disability condition. Parents also reported their child's primary disability as speech or language impairment (9%),

intellectual and multiple disabilities (both 8%), and emotional disturbance (7%). Very few parents reported their child's primary disability as hearing impaired (<3%), orthopedic impaired (<1%), traumatic brain injury (<1%), and or visually impaired (<1%). No parents reported that their child's primary disability was deaf-blindness or deafness, and 8% reported not knowing their child's primary disability. Figure 1 depicts the primary disabilities of students being served in online learning environments, as reported by these parents.

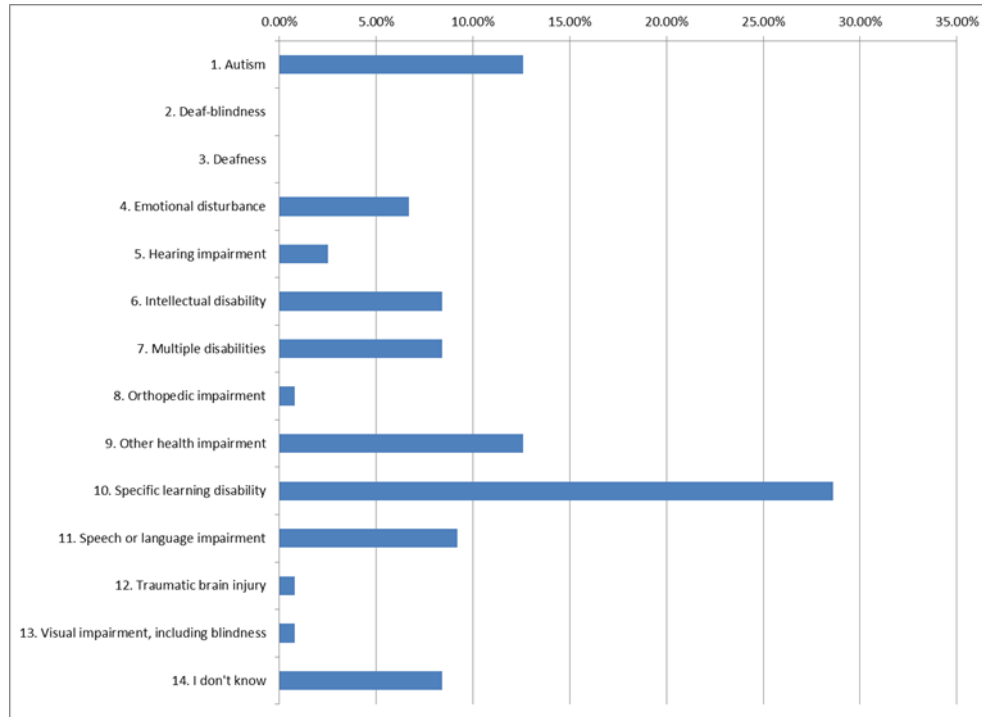


Figure 1. Primary disabilities of students in online environments (as identified by their parents).

Thirty-nine percent of parents reported that their child was in Kindergarten through 8th grades; 61.3% said that their child was in high school (9th through 12th grade). In the results that follow, when a substantial difference in data exists from the two groups of parents, findings are reported separately.

Fifty percent of parents reported that their child participated in a fully online setting (a formal program where the child is enrolled full time in an online school), and 50% of parents reported their child participated in a blended environment (a formal education program in which their child learns a portion of the full course of study online and the rest in a supervised building away from home).

Instruction and Assessment

Special education instruction and services. Nearly three quarters (71%) of the parents reported that a certified special education teacher was assigned to their child to support the provision of special education and related services. However, 18% reported that no special educator was assigned, and 10% reported not knowing this information. According to federal law, special education is defined as “specially designed instruction ... to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (IDEA, 2004). Typically, this specially designed instruction is

developed or provided by a certified special education teacher. Of the parents who reported having an assigned special educator, 40% of the children received services online, 31% received services face-to-face, and 20% received services both face-to-face and online. In an open-response area on the survey, a few parents noted that their child received special education services over the telephone or through text messaging. Interestingly, three parents asked to discontinue their child's individualized education program (IEP) in order for their child to participate in online learning. These parents' children were enrolled as high school students.

Parents were asked to select all of the special education and related services provided to their child in an online environment. More than one quarter (26%) of parents reported that their child did not receive these services online. Approximately the same percentage of parents reported that their child received speech-language therapy, case management services, content-area instruction, or skill-based instruction online. Other choices were selected less often. Figure 2 shows the percentage of special education and related services provided in an online environment, as reported by parents.

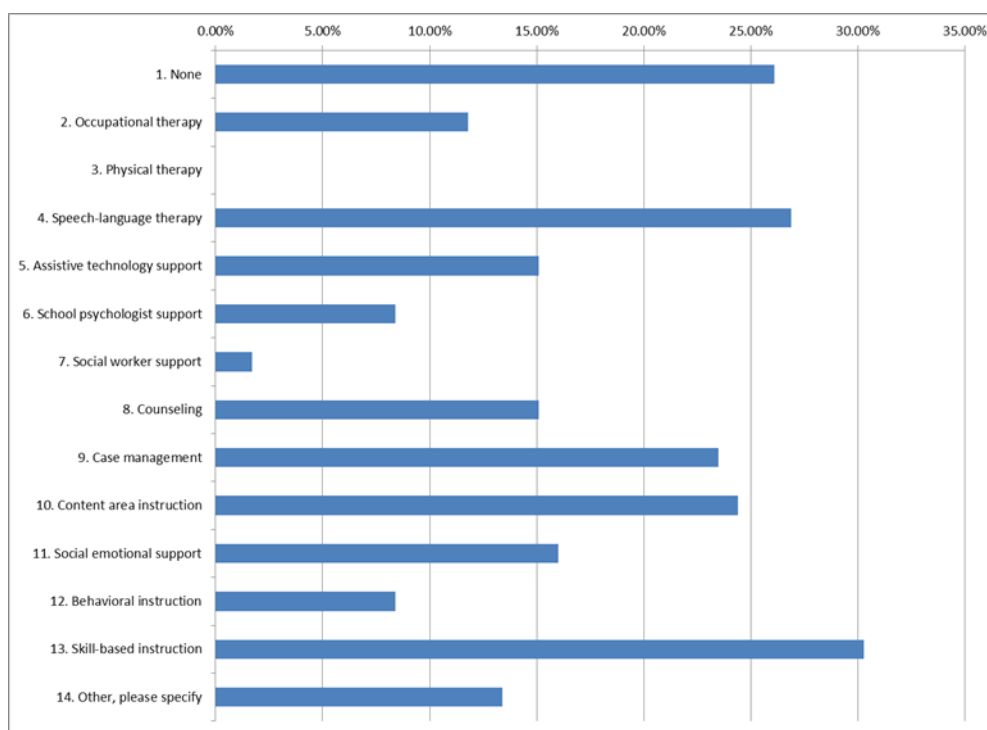


Figure 2. Types of special education and related services received by students in online environments (as identified by their parents).

Academic content instruction. Parents reported that their child enrolled in English or reading classes more frequently than any other subject (73%). The second highest online course enrollment was math (69%). Slightly fewer parents reported that their child took science or social studies online. In English or reading, 41% of the students took courses below grade level. In math, 37% took courses below grade level. Very few students took either course above grade level (i.e., 6% in English/reading and 9% in math). See Figure 3.

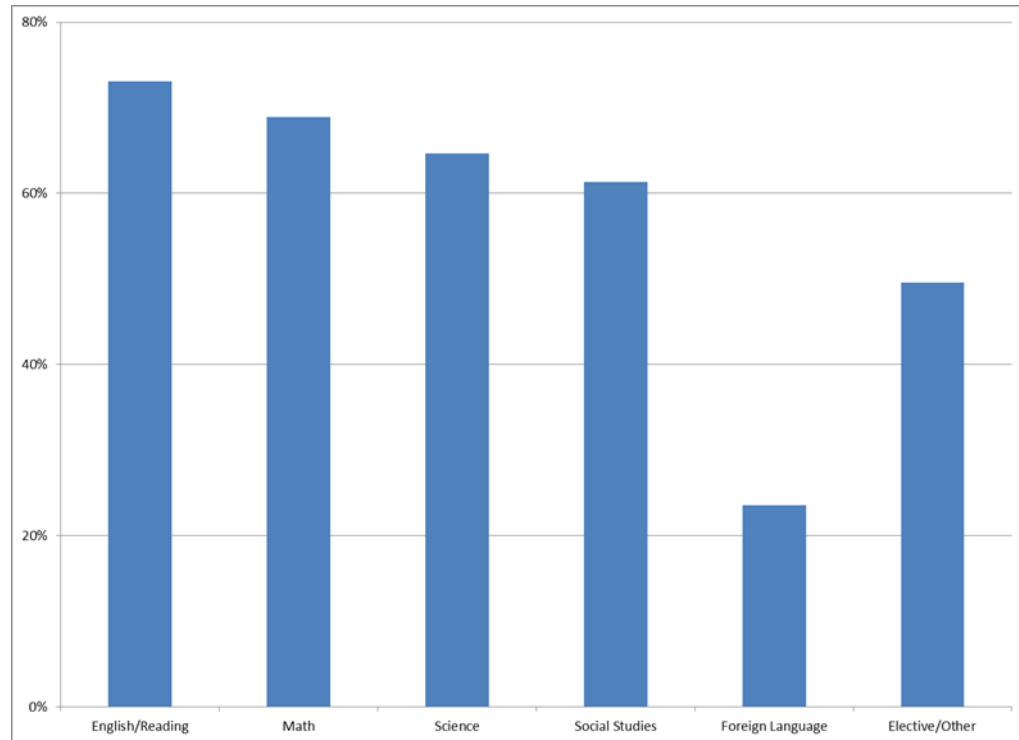


Figure 3. Classes taken by students with disabilities in an online environment (as identified by their parents).

Assessment practices. Differences were noted between parents' responses at the K-8 and 9-12 grade levels. When asked how their child would take state assessments (either online or face-to-face), more than 30% of K-8 parents said that they did not know, and another 21% said that their child would not take the assessments. Finally, 22% reported that their child would take the assessment face-to-face, and 17% reported that their child would use a combination of face-to-face and online methods.

K-8 parents were more aware of how their child would take in-class or unit tests. Specifically, 60% reported that their child would take these tests online, 19% reported face-to-face, and 8% reported both face-to-face and online. Figure 4 shows the formats that K-8 students would use to take state and class assessments.

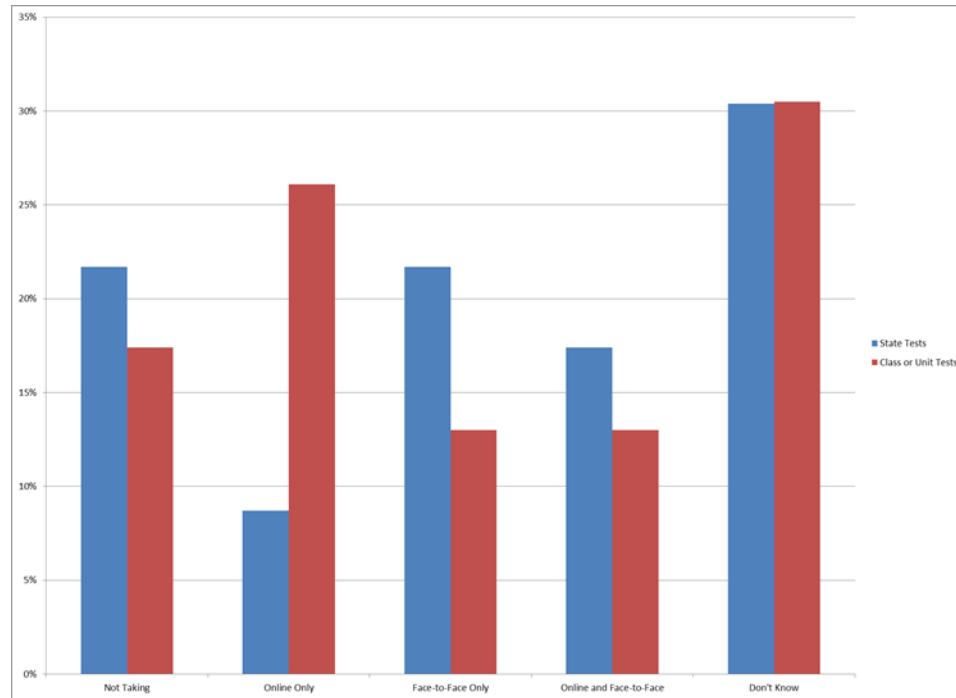


Figure 4. Means by which K-8th grade students would take state and class assessments (as identified by their parents).

High school parents also reported how their child would take state assessments. Thirty-eight percent reported that their child would take the state assessment face-to-face. Again, a relatively large percentage (14%) reported that students would not take the state assessments, and 32% of parents did not know how their child would take the assessments.

For class or unit tests, 34% of high school parents reported that their child would take the tests online. Slightly more than 16% of the parents reported that their child would not take class or unit assessments, and 27% of parents did not know. At both the high school and K-8 levels, more parents reported that their child would take state assessments face-to-face than online. Conversely, at both levels, more parents reported that their child would take class or unit assessments online than face-to-face. Figure 5 shows the formats that high school students would use to take state and class assessments.

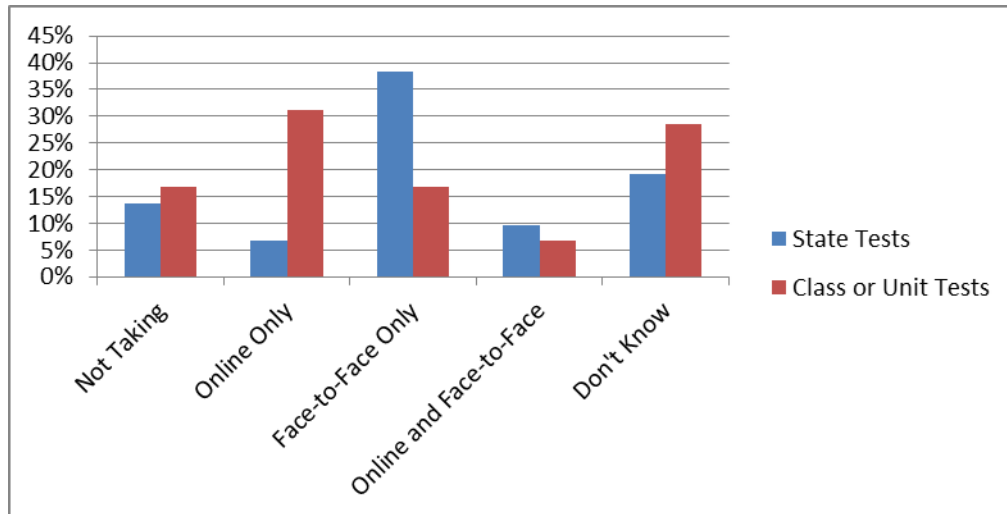


Figure 5. Means by which high school students would take state and class assessments as identified by their parents).

Instructional practices. Parents reported that most instructional methods used in online settings were useful. The instructional methods selected by most parents as “useful” included video (82%), audio (77%), and games (71%) (See Figure 6). Some parents did not believe that the following instructional methods were used: social media (39%), lecture (16%), simulation (11%), discussion (10%), and games (9%) (See Figure 7).

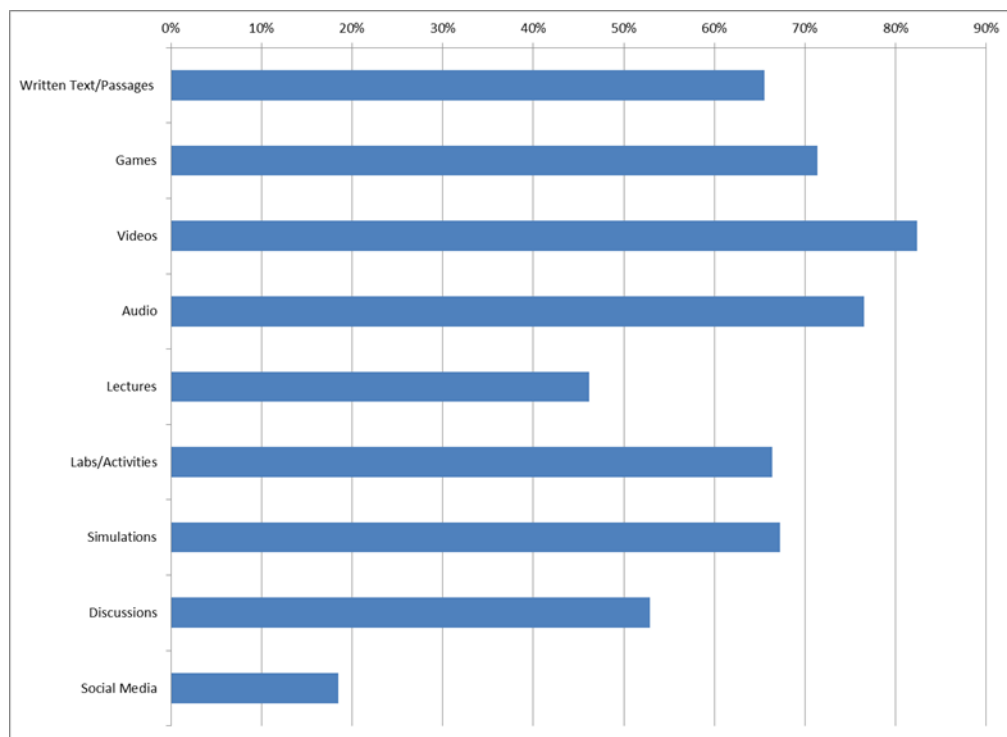


Figure 6. Usefulness of different online instructional methods (as identified by parent-respondents).

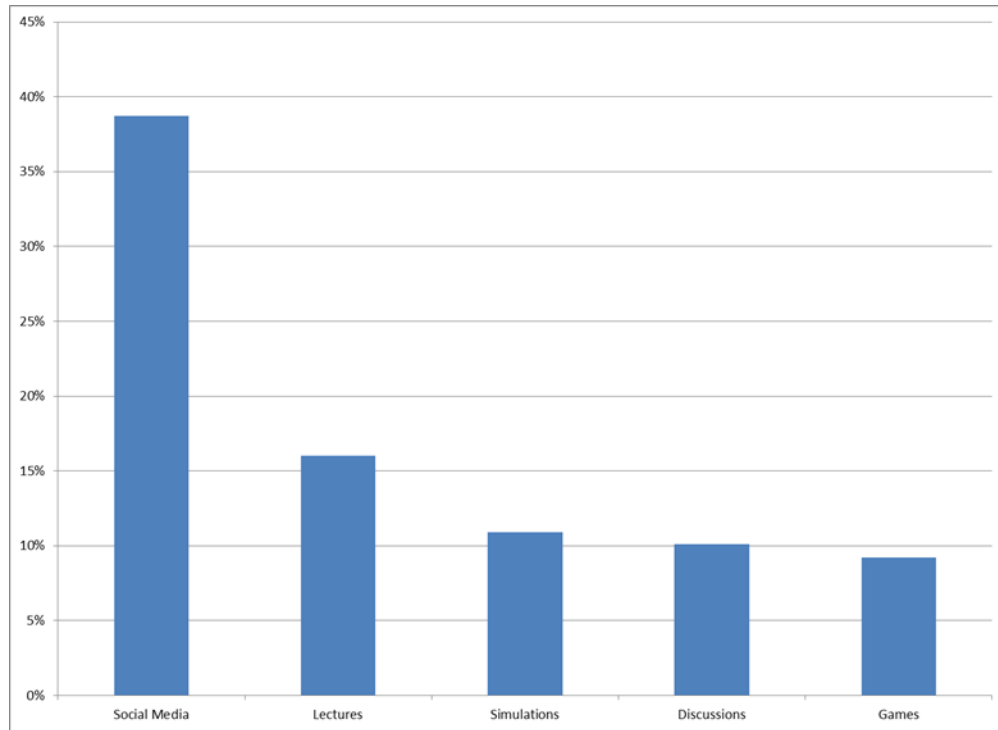


Figure 7. Instructional methods not used in online instruction (as identified by parent-respondents).

Challenges

Analysis of data across disability categories, participation rates in fully online or blended environments, courses taken, and perceived usefulness of instructional methods revealed relatively comparable results for the two subgroups of students (K-8 and high school). However, perceived parental challenges did vary for the two subgroups. For parents of high school students, 34% reported that they did not experience any challenges in supporting their child's online work. However, in K-8, only 28% of parents reported not having any challenges (See Figure 8). Additionally, the comments of parents of K-8 students were qualitatively different from parents of high school students. The former group reported challenges with not having the time needed to personally support their child with technology, learn the content, and oversee their child's studies. The parents of high school children reported challenges more focused on their individual child. For instance, comments regarding parental challenges from this group included, "Comprehension of large reading assignment," "He clearly doesn't understand why he's [had] to take that online course," "She receives 7 hours of therapy over the course of the week during school hours. This really interferes with the amount of schooling she can get done while her medication is still in her system," and "Navigating the differences in what's on the course schedule, the course homepage, drop box, etc. They are often labeled different titles." The variety of challenges that parents encountered was closely related to the perceptions they had about their roles in online learning.

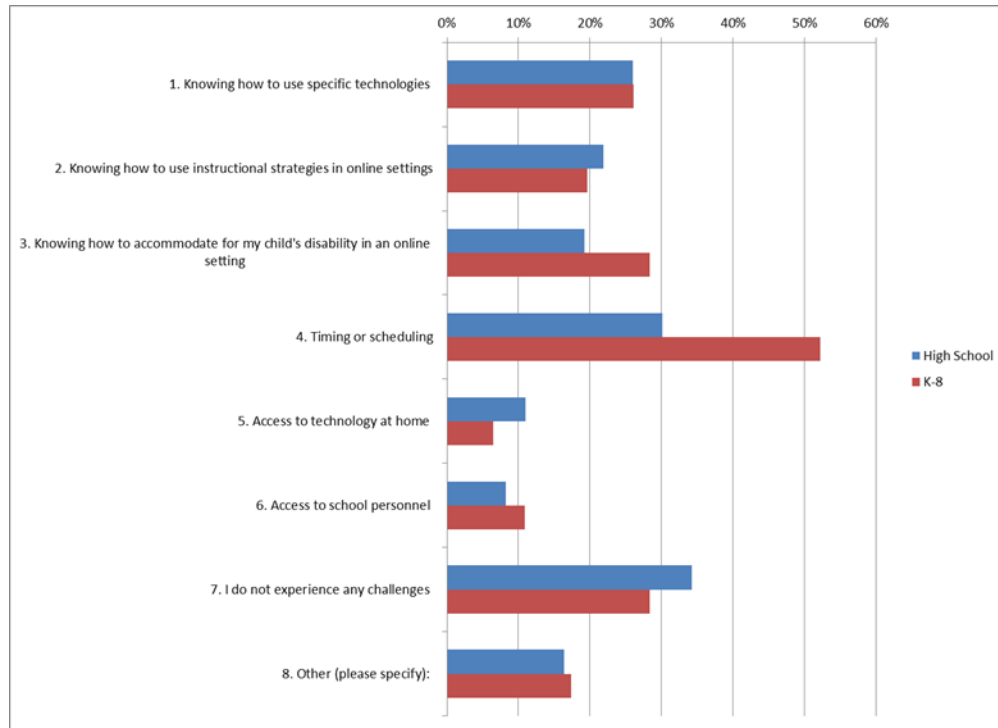


Figure 8. Challenges faced by parents of students with disabilities in online environments.

Parent Roles

Parental roles in their child's education have changed with the advent of online learning. For example, with online learning, parents often take on the roles of educator and administrator (Ahn, 2011; Bogden, 2003; Huerta & Gonzales, 2004; McCluskey, 2002). Knowing that parents' roles have changed, researchers asked parents to select from a list all of the roles they perform in their child's online education. Of the six roles specified, most parents (from 59% to 77%) selected five roles. These five roles can be summarized as helping their child with learning content, behavioral skills, and organizing work time. The only role that most parents did not select was supporting their child with "speech, physical, or orthopedic exercises." See Figure 9 for the roles that parents reported they performed.

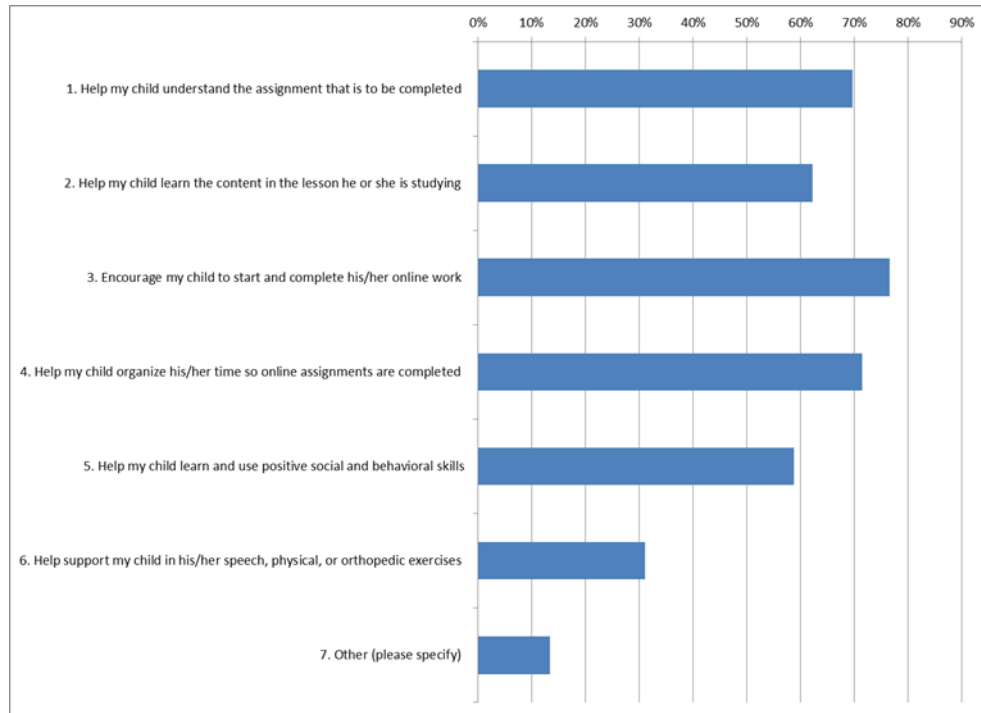


Figure 9. Roles performed by parents of students with disabilities in online environments.

Overall, 27% of parents reported spending more than three hours per day helping their child with schoolwork. Not surprisingly, this amount of time differed drastically between high school (15%) and grades K-8 (50%). Overall, 26% of parents reported spending less than 15 minutes per day helping their child (37% in high school; 8.7% K-8). See Figure 10 for a comparison of the amount of time high school parents and K-8 parents spent helping their child.

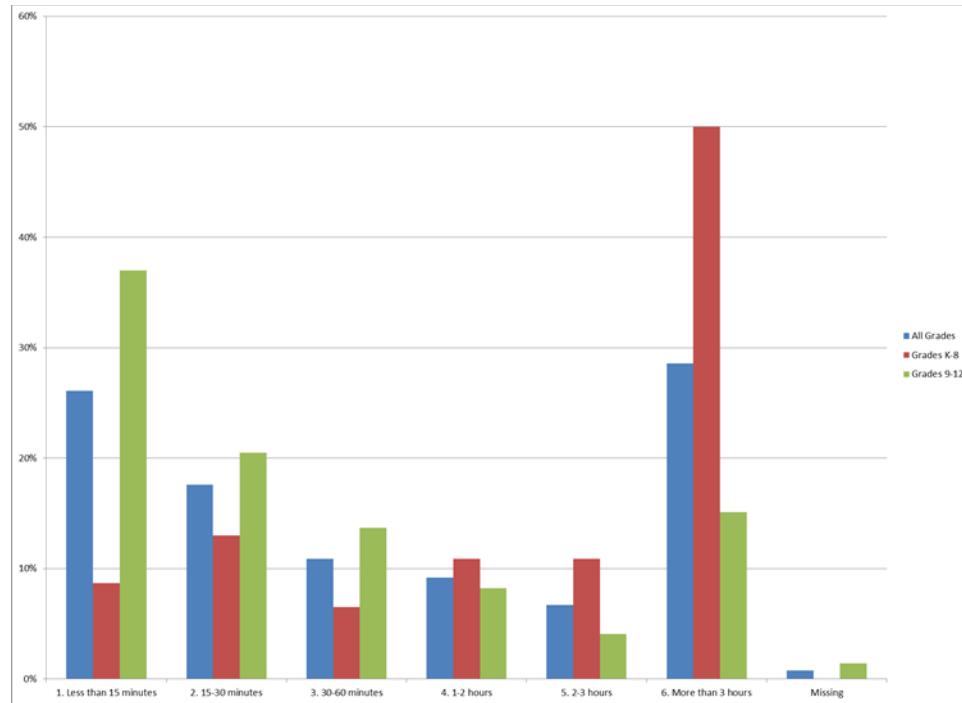


Figure 10. Amount of time spent daily by parents in support of their child with a disability in online learning.

Parents also reported the amount of influence they thought they had in seven areas related to their child's education. The top three areas selected were scheduling their child's work time (68%); family-school communication (63%); and making decisions about assessment times, types, and accommodations (51%). One or two parents noted influence in the following areas: student behavior; ensuring equal access to the curriculum; setting daily and weekly goals; and time management. See Figure 11.

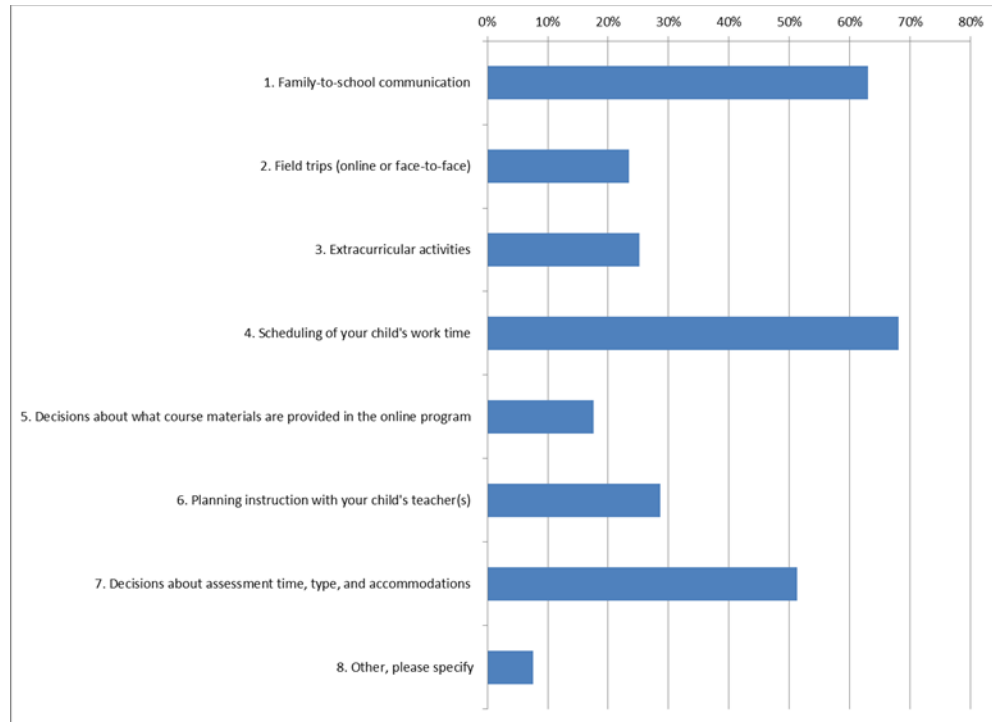


Figure 11. Parental areas of influence in children's online education.

Communication and Support from the School

In order to support children with disabilities in an online setting, parents must have access to and support from the school. For example, parents have reported that without support from their online school, they would not be as able to assist their child with schoolwork (Smith & Burdette, 2014). When asked how often they talk to their child's teacher, 33% of K-8 parents reported communicating with teachers 2-3 times per month; 26.1% reported communicating once a week. The remaining parents reported communicating with teachers less often or not at all. Twenty-one percent of parents of high school students reported that they communicated with their child's teacher once a month; 19.2% reported communicating 2-3 times per month; 16.4% once a week, and 16.4% 2-3 times per week. The remaining parents of students in grades 9-12 reported communicating with teachers less often or not at all. See Figure 12 for how parents responded to the question about frequency of communication with their child's teacher.

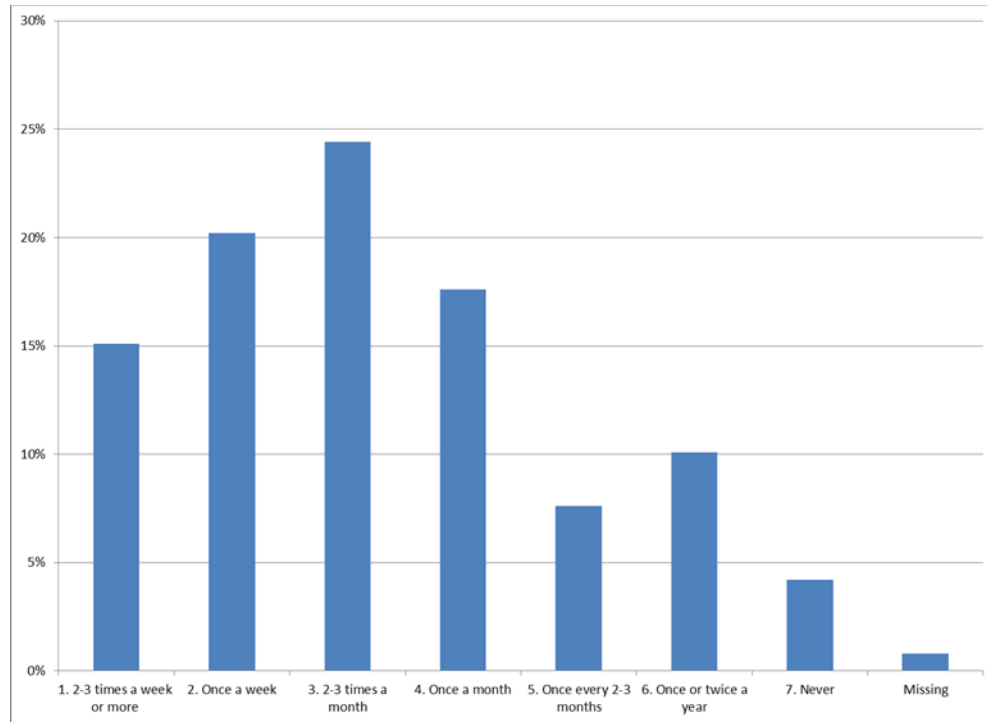


Figure 12. Frequency of communication between parents and teachers (as identified by parents).

When asked what means they used to communicate with their child’s teacher, both groups of parents (K-8 and high school) responded similarly. Responses included online, face-to-face, both online and face-to-face, and other. Forty percent selected “other” and included “phone calls” as a means of communication. Most parents also included online, email, or a form of intranet mail within their child’s online learning system. See Figure 13.

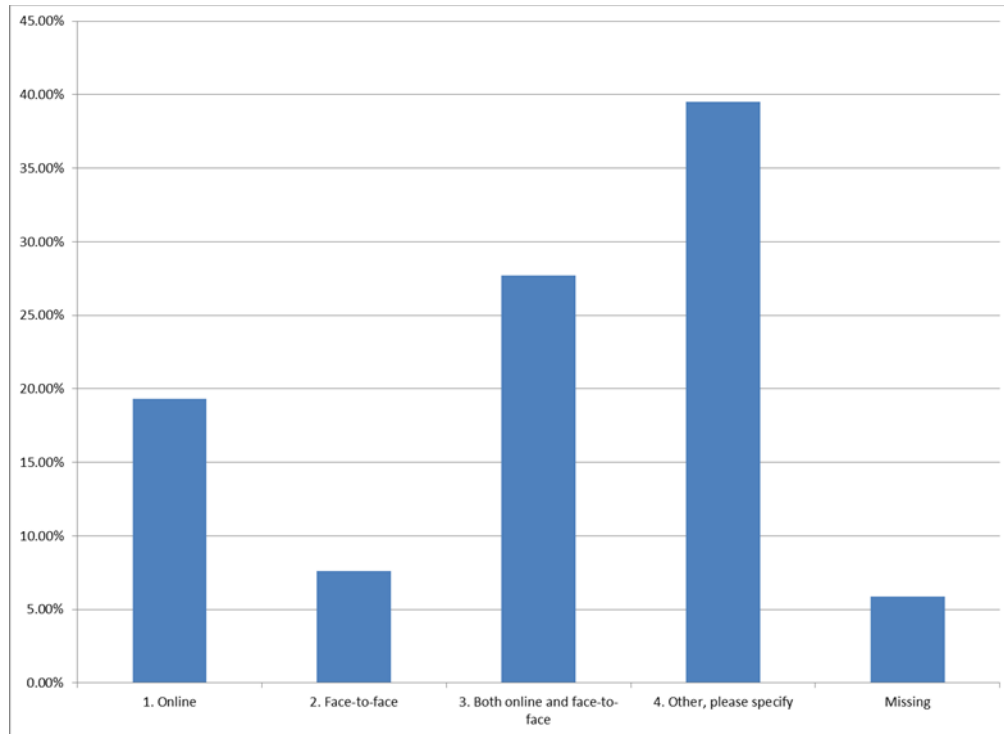


Figure 13. Methods of parent-teacher communication (as reported by parents).

Parents were asked how frequently their child's school used eight different best practices to support their child's online education. Four of these best practices dealt with providing different kinds of training to parents. Most parents said that schools seldom provided any of the trainings that were mentioned. The other four practices dealt with school-home communication. Parents provided a more positive picture related to this group of practices. In particular, most parents said that the school frequently did the following:

- communicated with them on an individual basis to help support their child's online education,
- provided timely feedback about their child's online learning, and
- encouraged them to contact school personnel if they had a concern.

However, when asked how often the school communicated with them along with other parents, most parents selected sometimes or seldom. See Figure 14 for more information.

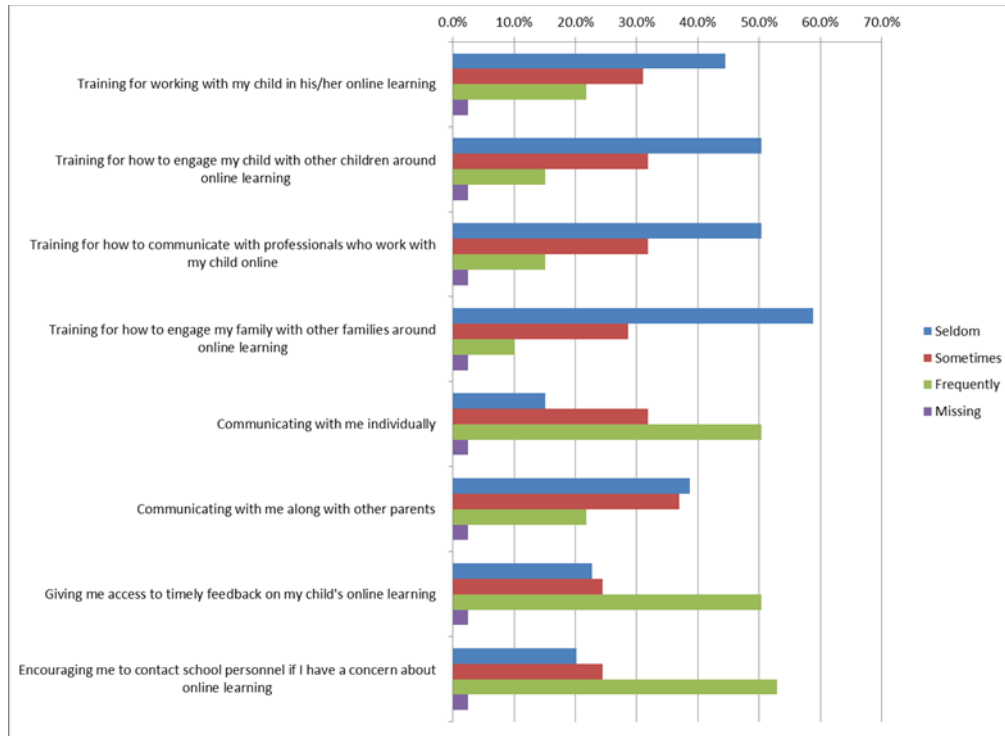


Figure 14. Frequency of best practices used by school (as identified by parents).

Parents were also asked the degree to which they agreed with the following statements:

- The quality of support you receive from your school to help you work with your child in an online environment is very good; and
- You are well prepared to make decisions regarding the online instruction for your child.

No remarkable differences were noted between the K-8th grade and high school parents' responses. Sixty-two percent of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that the support they received was very good. Twenty-four percent were neutral regarding this support, and 11% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Sixty-six percent of the parents reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed that they were well prepared to make online instruction decisions for their children. See Figure 15 for a breakdown on how parents responded to these communication questions.

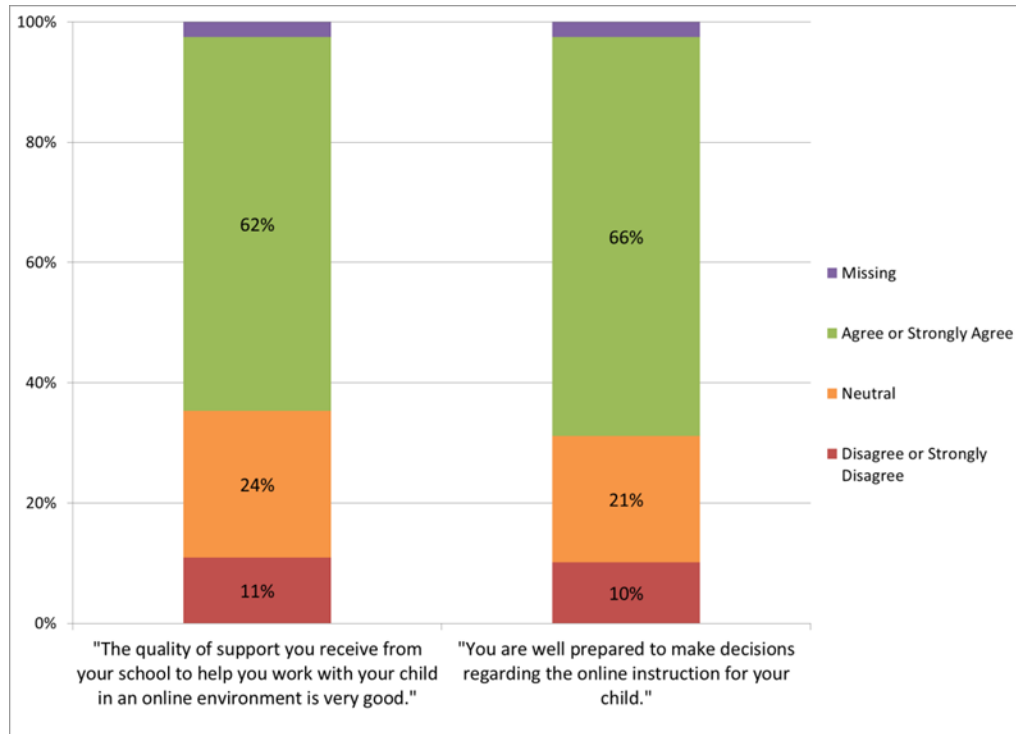


Figure 15. Percentage of parents reporting their level of agreement with two statements.

The final communication question centered on the type of information the family received prior to enrolling in online instruction. Parents were given a list of five choices and asked to select all that applied. The choice most frequently selected was “guidance for planning/participation in online learning.” However, many parents also selected each of the other four options: course or program materials, information about accessibility features of the online program, information about the code of conduct for online environments, and information describing your roles and responsibilities as a parent of a child involved in online learning. These findings held true for both parents of K-8th grade and high school students. However, parents of high school students provided additional comments about the type of information they received. Comments included:

- “Our school has a lot of information available online, but none is specific to special education.”
- “My [child] started [online school] 6 years ago. At the time I was discouraged from putting him in online classes. It is not like that anymore.”
- “I think it was not particularly necessary to receive specific info, but I would have appreciated knowing what materials would be used during the year.”
- “We looked at several schools and the one we choice [sic] made sure we were aware of everything and part of why we went with them.”
- “We were discouraged by our local school when we requested the online class. I assume that was because they would have to pay for it. Once the local brick-and-mortar school agreed to allow my son to take an online class, then we were given a short checklist to complete that addressed student readiness for taking online classes.”

Additional Parent Comments

When parents were asked in an open-response item if they would like to share anything else in the survey, 62 of the 119 parents responded. In general, parents made positive comments regarding the quality of the teachers; the flexibility of online learning; improved independence, social-emotional growth, and academics; and fewer distractions. Forty-seven of the 62 comments (76%) were positive in nature. For example, parents wrote:

- “I am so THANKFUL that I gave it a shot! ... He actually came out of his shell through his online experience and he became a different person ... more sociable, outgoing, happy, positive, confident, and spirited kid. He came alive through a learning experience I was told would isolate him and it was far from the truth. Our school is so supportive, they go above and beyond...”
- “My son thrived academically after beginning his online classes and became more motivated to do the work since he could work at his own pace and not with the distractions of the classroom. ... We saw a positive change in his attitude toward learning and that is a wonderful thing.”
- “The text-to-speech, working at own pace (w/in the lessons), flexibility in lesson presentation, and e-books- text to speech, are all huge, important reasons we school online.”

Thirteen comments were either neutral (e.g., “When my daughter has an assignment that she enjoys doing, she will do it. When it’s something she doesn’t want to do, she won’t do it.”), or they indicated uncertainty about what happens in the online environment. Parents only gave six negative comments, and two of those were within otherwise positive comments. The six negative comments reflected the following experiences: online education was confusing, online education was a difficult environment for their child to learn and socialize in, some teachers seemed unprepared to teach students with disabilities online, and parents were expected to make the necessary accommodations for their child.

Discussion

The comments parents gave to the open-ended question, “What else would you like to tell us about your child's experiences in the online environment?” support other findings from this survey; that is, parents are generally pleased with the outcomes that their children are experiencing in online learning, but some issues still exist with educating students with disabilities in online environments.

Instruction and Assessment

For instance, regarding the instruction and assessment construct, the finding that approximately one quarter of the respondents believed that a special educator was not assigned to their child or did not know if one was assigned could be cause for concern. Another troubling finding is that more than 21% of parents reported their child would not take state assessments. This finding warrants further investigation since education laws require all students to participate in state assessments. Another area of concern is that approximately 40% of students taking English or math online are taking the course below grade level. These findings are important for students with disabilities because almost all students are assessed on grade-level state standards. Thus, the state assessment scores of online students with disabilities may fall below the scores of students enrolled in grade-level courses.

One finding that may be of particular interest to educators and curriculum developers was the percentage of parents who reported that the following instructional methods were not incorporated in the instructional activities: social media (39%), simulation (11%), discussion (10%), and games (9%). Since social media and simulations are relatively new tools, this finding may be expected. However, discussions and games are common instructional tools in physical schools and have been considered best practice for many years (Hattie, 2009).

Parental Roles

Most parents described their role as helping their child with learning the content, behavioral skills, and organizing work time. All of these roles are typical roles performed by teachers, related services providers, and administrators. Twenty-seven percent of all parents spent more than three hours per day helping their child with schoolwork. This amount of time dedicated to teaching is nearing the amount of time teachers in the U.S. spend with their students in an instructional role. Half of these parents were working with their child in a blended environment, but half were in a fully online environment. This instructional approach begs the question, are parents prepared for this teaching role? Some parents (27%) also reported that their child did not receive special education and related services online. Unfortunately, survey results do not specify the percentage of parents tasked with providing special education and related services including unique instructional methods to meet their child's individual needs. Since most parents are not certified special education teachers, and special education teachers must meet certain standards and receive high quality professional development that is sustained and intensive (IDEA, 2004 §300.18), if parents are expected to provide these services, this situation could be considered an IDEA compliance breach.

Communication

If parents and teachers of students in online learning are to have meaningful dialogues, parents would benefit from training in effective communication. Such training is especially vital given that many parents in online learning have taken on the role of instructor. Although many parents reported receiving guidance for planning/participating in online learning, most parents said that schools seldom provided any training opportunities. Additionally, while the majority of parents (67%) felt they had an influence over parent-school communication, 33% of K-8 parents reported communicating with teachers only 2-3 times per month and 41% of high school parents communicated only 1-3 times per month. Even with such minimal communication, most parents agreed that the support they received from the school was very good. Thus, parent-school interaction might be a good starting point for improving parental involvement. For example, schools could provide training to parents in how to provide their children with encouragement, reinforce positive behaviors, and model particular tasks, all of which would support student outcomes (Black, 2009).

Next Steps and Future Research

Schools can use the information from this survey to improve parent engagement. Specifically, data can help current educators understand their changing roles and how to better support the parents of online students. Data can also be used by schools of higher education to better prepare teachers for working in online environments. Finally, researchers can use the data as jumping off points for areas that need deeper study. Some of the questions raised by this study include the following:

- How can communication between schools and parents be improved to support students with disabilities in online environments?
- What methods of communication can best support parents in their role of learning coach?
- Are online students with disabilities appropriately included in instruction and assessments? How can schools ensure that this will happen?
- How can education agencies ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education when education takes place in an online environment?

Limitations

For a number of reasons, results from this study might not be representative of all parents involved in online learning. Thus, caution must be exercised in considering the generalization of the findings. For example, researchers were unable to randomly sample from all participants and obtain the sample size they desired. Another consideration is that online learning varies dramatically between online providers, and particularly for the many forms of blended learning. These differences occur not only from state to state and district to district, but from school to school, teacher to teacher, and among home learning environments. This survey methodology did not allow for differentiating from these varied online instructional environments.

Researchers have reason to believe that respondents may have misinterpreted some of the terms in the response lists. For instance, while the instructional method of simulation in online environments is currently a cutting-edge technology, simulations are not widely used. However, more than 67% of respondents reported that it was useful.

Finally, based on the comments made by a respondent whose survey was later discarded, researchers believe that some respondents may have considered the face-to-face portion of their child's learning when responding to this survey, not the online portion. As future researchers consider replications or extensions of these findings, one procedural approach would be including an interview (e.g., phone, face-to-face, online video) methodology on a representative sample of the respondents as a means of cross-validating the information reported in the survey responses.

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