

Researchers conduct extensive examination of online learning for students with disabilities

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Across the nation, online education is becoming an increasingly important part of the school experience for many students. Yet close

attention is not always paid to how this new educational horizon affects students with disabilities.

Researchers at the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities have issued "Equity Matters: Digital and Online Learning for Students with Disabilities." The expansive report analyzes the online education policies of all 50 states and five U.S. territories and combines those findings with other research projects in the center to support recommendations for how to improve online and blended [learning](#) for all [students](#).

The report takes a wide view at online and blended learning for students with [disabilities](#). In its five chapters it explains transformative change, provides a scan of policy for all 50 states and five territories regarding [online learning](#) for students with disabilities, details [special education](#) in online environments, explores the changing structure and roles within education and finally, examines access to online education, issues of data and privacy and graduation. It is available online.

The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities is a partnership of the Center for Research on Learning, the Center for Applied Special Technology and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. It is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education.

The goal of the report is to provide a perspective of what is happening nationally in online learning, especially as it applies to students with disabilities. It is intended for educators, administrators, parents, policy makers and all stakeholders in education.

"We know from our research that there are still many involved in K-12 education that don't know this is taking place. So in the first chapter we include a foundational understanding of the field," said James Basham,

associate professor of special education at KU and one of the report's lead authors.

Federal and state policies can directly affect students' experiences, and the report's second chapter provides a detailed analysis of policies regarding online learning and whether they consider students with disabilities. Researchers asked nine questions and, overwhelmingly, the data showed states do not account for needs of students with disabilities in their online learning policies. For example, only five states showed evidence that they provide examples of appropriate accommodations in an online learning environment for students with disabilities.

"While many states know this imbalance is going on, some don't. And most states don't have well-defined policies on making this work for students with disabilities," Basham said. "But almost all states have some sort of online learning happening."

Chapters three and four take a close look at the needs of students with disabilities and the changing roles of educators and parents in an online learning environment. Research shows that roughly 80 percent of the time a parent decides to place their child in a virtual school or online environment because they are not happy with the "brick and mortar" school experience. In those situations, research has also shown that parents take on a greatly expanded role as an educator.

The report's final chapter addresses special topics, including access to online education. The authors call for creation of a database of accredited online schools for the benefit of students and parents. Highly competitive educational companies can open online schools, which might not always meet the educational standards of the state. Parents may not be aware of a failure to meet accreditation in many cases. Access to data is another key topic. Competitive education services companies often tightly guard their data to avoid litigation and maintain

proprietary advantages. That impedes researchers and government's ability to understand whether they are providing valuable education to students.

"There is a notion that a great deal of data exists, and it can tell us more about online learning," Basham said. "Every click a learner makes creates data. But it's not necessarily being used the right way, and it doesn't travel across platforms, making it very difficult to access."

The researchers call for more access to online schools' data to help assess if the needs of students with disabilities are being met as well as to determine what is and is not working in the expanding world of [online education](#).

Finally, the report addresses graduation. While each state's requirements are different, many new concerns are born with the increasing requirement for students to take part in some online learning. Chief among those is the possibility that some students might technically not be able to graduate if they are required to take an online course and no considerations are made for their disability, which could prevent them from completion.

The goal of "Equity Matters" is not to criticize educational shortcomings but instead to highlight issues that should be considered in order to improve online learning for every student, Basham said.

"Students with disabilities offer a unique opportunity for designing learning systems that can address their learning variabilities from the outset, not as an afterthought, and, in doing so, more effectively encompass the needs of all learners—those with disabilities, and those without," the authors wrote. "The Center researchers encourage stakeholders to work together to research and design better online learning environments for all learners."

More information: Equity Matters: Digital and Online Learning for Students with Disabilities. [centeronlinelearning.org/pub ... al-publication-2015/](https://centeronlinelearning.org/publication-2015/)

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