Virtual Schooling for Students at Risk: Interventions for Success

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Introduction

Because the majority of today’s online high school teachers have prior or concurrent teaching experience in traditional school classrooms (Dawley, Rice, & Hinck, 2010), the views expressed by classroom teachers about teaching students who are at-risk for failing or dropping out are relevant to the online setting. The 2010 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (MetLife, 2011) stated that 91% of surveyed teachers placed a high priority on strengthening programs and resources that will help high-need learners meet college and career readiness standards. Further, “teachers in schools with many high-need students value a range of resources to address the different learning needs of individual students …including access to online and other technology-based resources to help personalize education (MetLife, 2011, p. 2).”

Although 13.6% of all K-12 students being served have a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a), the exact number of students with disabilities being served by virtual school programs has yet to be definitively determined because many virtual schools are not credit-granting and report grades to a students’ on-ground school, which maintains IEP data are often not shared with the online school. While online programs have begun to serve students with special needs and effective practices have emerged (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010), the national cadre of teachers and leaders who have specific expertise in online programs for students with disabilities is severely limited. Most online teachers have little or no experience working with students with disabilities, let alone in an online setting (Rice et al., 2008). Current professional development programs for online educators focus on accessibility issues such as captioning media and making web pages accessible for screen reading software; they do not focus on understanding the unique needs of students with disabilities as learners (Fichten et al., 2009; Weir, 2005).

Students at risk for dropping out of school, including those with and without disabilities, are increasingly choosing virtual schooling. From the literature on at-risk students, we have identified five areas of impact that can contribute to student engagement in school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007, 1999; Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2006; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; NLTS2, 2005; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002 ). These 5 Cs are learner Control, a flexible and rigorous Curriculum, a safe Climate, a Caring Community, and Connection to students as individuals and their future goals. An analysis of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL, 2008) professional standards for quality online teaching and the Council for Exceptional Children’s standards demonstrates shared priorities and ideals that can support better practice in meeting the needs of at-risk students through virtual schooling.

Five general themes are evident in the at-risk literature that can impact practice. First, students need to understand the connection between what they are learning and the skills they need outside
the school setting. Second, they need to be provided with a safe and supportive climate in which to learn. Third, students need to understand and learn how they control their learning and behaviors. Fourth, students need engaging curriculum grounded in effective teaching strategies that supports their learning. Fifth, they need to be part of a caring community that values them as a person and learner. Based on these five themes, The 5 Cs of Student Engagement Model was proposed as an active model with each area influencing the other to provide a relevant learning environment to support students. Addressing four objectives promotes increased student success in online courses. Each of these objectives relates to one or more of the 5 Cs of connect, climate, control, curriculum and caring community and is supported by recent research findings in virtual schooling. The objectives address curriculum, control, connection, and a caring climate and community. The alignment of the professional practices from organizations representing special educators and virtual school educators is promising as it indicates that many of the current effective practices used by highly qualified teachers support the 5 Cs.

In an effort to better understand the connection between the 5 Cs and virtual schooling, the professional standards from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) were reviewed (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009: International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 2008). These two organizations represent special education (CEC) and virtual schooling (iNACOL). Because CEC has multiple sets of standards specific to disability categories, the set of standards for students with disabilities in general education coursework were chosen to study. It was felt that these standards would best parallel with the iNACOL standards for quality online teaching. An informal review of the two sets of standards to determine their alignment with the 5Cs was conducted.

Since effective practices in curriculum are central to providing good education programs, it seems reasonable that Curriculum has the most number of standards aligning with the 5 Cs. Further analysis of the standards areas’ alignment indicated that 47% in the iNACOL and 33% of the CEC standards align with the 5Cs. This alignment of the professional practices from the organizations representing special educators and virtual school educators is promising as it indicates that many of the current effective practices used by highly qualified teachers support the 5 Cs. This is good news because as more and more at-risk students with or without disabilities enter into virtual schooling, their teachers will require the skills to effectively teach them. In addition, as more educators work with these students in virtual schools they will realize they are able to teach students at risk and that at-risk students can succeed in that environment. Another useful outcome of analyzing the commonalities among CEC and iNACOL standards is that essential skills may be identified and incorporated into professional development programs.

Further research is needed to further define these skills but this alignment can serve a foundation on which to build. This review of professional standards designed to guide online teaching and teaching of students with disabilities demonstrates shared priorities and ideals that can support better practice in meeting the needs of at-risk students through virtual schooling. Virtual school administrators and teachers can learn from special educators how to better serve students with disabilities, as well as others at-risk for dropping out, and special educators may come to more widely recognize virtual schooling as a viable educational option for their at-risk students.

References


About the Presenters

**Dr. Cathy Cavanaugh** is Associate Professor of Educational Technology in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Her work focuses primarily on studies of learning environments. She is the 2009 recipient of the Research Award from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning and has been honored as an education innovator by Intel. Dr. Cavanaugh has worked with virtual schools, school districts, and education agencies in several states and countries.

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