



# E-Learning Access For Special Needs

The expanded use of virtual education offers potential benefits for children with disabilities, once obstacles to greater participation are lifted and questions about what works best for such students are answered.

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BY NIRVI SHAH

**W**hen Seph Koutsoukis was in a classroom at an elementary school in Simpsonville, S.C., he floundered. For Seph, who has autism, on-the-spot questions from teachers were a source of embarrassment. He was easily distracted by the lights and sounds in the colorful, occasionally loud room.

But for two years, 10-year-old Seph has taken online classes through the South Carolina Connections Academy, a charter school based in Columbia, S.C. He watches lessons on his home computer and talks with his teachers by phone and email.

His mother, Kelly Koutsoukis, says Seph's self-esteem and demeanor are so improved because of his new school arrangement that people ask if he still has autism. Seph can focus on his schoolwork because he isn't copying out the rest of his class when he should be concentrating, she says. He isn't anxious about being called on by the teacher and looking dumb in class. Now when he answers a question during a live virtual class, only the teacher sees what he says.

"This was the first time somebody has ever said, 'What can we do for your child?' instead of 'This is what we're going to offer,'" Ms. Koutsoukis said of the accommodations the public online school has made.

Virtual classes have been a blessing for Seph, and students such as Jasmin Floyd. Ms. Floyd, 18, just graduated from Woodstock Academy in Woodstock, Conn., but took several classes through the Maynard, Mass.-based Virtual High School Global Consortium. That allowed her to stay at home without exacerbating her fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, a painful condition that causes extra bone to form in her muscles and other connective tissues.

Not all online classes are welcoming to students with disabilities. The courses may not be accessible to them, or the students may never be offered the courses in the first place.

A report last year by Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education concluded as much.

"One of the findings from the group at the Forum was that students with disabilities have been systematically denied admission in places," said Paula Burdette, Project Forum's director, although she doesn't believe that's because of outright ill will.

"I don't think it is a conspiracy," she said. "I think people with sometimes the best intentions don't know what to do."

However, a 2003 letter from the U.S. Department of Education is explicit on the issue of virtual classes for students with disabilities. Although there isn't any specific federal guidance about online or virtual schools, wrote the then-director of special education programs, there also isn't any need for special rules because online or virtual schools must abide by all the same requirements set for other schools in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Years since that letter, obstacles between students with disabilities and online education persist, enough so that the Education Department has recognized the need for guidance and research about online courses for such students.

The department is in the process of selecting a creator for a Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities and is putting about \$1.5 million behind the center.

"The expanded use of online learning offers potential benefits to children with disabilities but also poses significant challenges," the May 5 *Federal Register* notice about the project reads. The center's goal is to research how students with disabilities participate, or don't, in online courses in kindergarten through 12th grade, what the positive and negative outcomes for online learning are for those students, and effective ways of teaching children with disabilities online.

"Just because it goes into digital format does not make it accessible," said Yvonne Damings, an instructional designer and research associate for the Center for Applied Special Technology, or CAST, in Wakefield, Mass. She worked on a panel that was reviewing standards for online courses.

"Giving somebody access to something does not mean they're going to learn from it," she added.

Indeed, said Patti Kalabate, a universal design for learning fellow at CAST, "too often what's happened is online courses end up just being what used to be in printed text, now hosted in an online

17%

Conservatively, the proportion of Florida Virtual School students with disabilities

3,363

Students with disabilities in Pennsylvania cyber charter schools (13.7 percent of total enrollment)

2,400

Students with intellectual disabilities who took new blended courses last year at the North Carolina Virtual Public School (9.5 percent of total enrollment)

ZERO

Known students with disabilities to have taken online classes with the Kentucky Virtual School

Asian Crisis For Education Week

Photo Courtesy: Education Week

## ON BOARD WITH ONLINE

Tessa Falchetta, a rising 9th grader who lives in Grove City, Pa., has taken online classes in the past and will be taking them again when she starts school in the fall. Tessa has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dysgraphia, and general anxiety disorder.

“If done right, online learning can afford students with learning disabilities new opportunities. But ... there are schools that will look to shortchange students.”

—MARCIE LIPSITT  
National Center for Learning Disabilities

formal. It isn't any more accessible in that format than it was when it was in a textbook.”

While features such as videos and graphics might seem to automatically bridge that gap, these enhancements may be useless to a student who has visual problems or other needs.

“You have to do a lot of proactive thinking,” Ms. Ralabato said. On the flip side, warns one advocate, is the use of online classes as a substitute for teaching students with disabilities in other ways.

“We do not want to see technology used in place of best practice ... or to see technology compensate for shortages or to save on budgets—motivations that are less than addressing the best interests of students,” said Kim Hymes, the director of policy and advocacy for the Council for Exceptional Children in Arlington, Va.

for Learning Disabilities, which is based in New York City.

“While I absolutely believe that high-quality and rigorous online learning can offer children new opportunities, I have pretty serious concerns about online education being used to supplant direct teacher instruction,” she said, especially in self-contained classrooms for some children with disabilities.

“If done right, online learning can afford students with learning disabilities new opportunities,” Ms. Lipsett continued. “But with all things in education and children who have learning disabilities and individualized education programs, there are schools that will look to shortchange students with disabilities.”

Getting a solid grasp of how many students take online courses is its own challenge. While Alabama tracks how many students with disabilities take online courses, some states and virtual schools don't, even though the programs are years old. When Project Forum asked states how many students with disabilities enrolled in online courses two years ago, one state chose not to respond because the topic was “too controversial.”

And in Kentucky, the state-run virtual school that opened in 2000 will, for the first time, collect information about a child's disability status starting with the 2011-12 school year.

Other schools gather data on students with disabilities but know it is incomplete. Florida's state-run online school, the largest state-sponsored virtual school in the country, collects information about whether students have disabilities—but only if the students volunteer it.

Because it is a school of choice, students decide whether to dis-

Online classes have grown rapidly into an entire industry, with for-profit companies and nonprofits offering courses for entire schools and individual families. In addition, school districts and states have their own virtual schools.

Despite the proliferation, students with disabilities often don't take the courses, because in many cases, the classes themselves or the types of classes offered weren't designed with those students in mind.

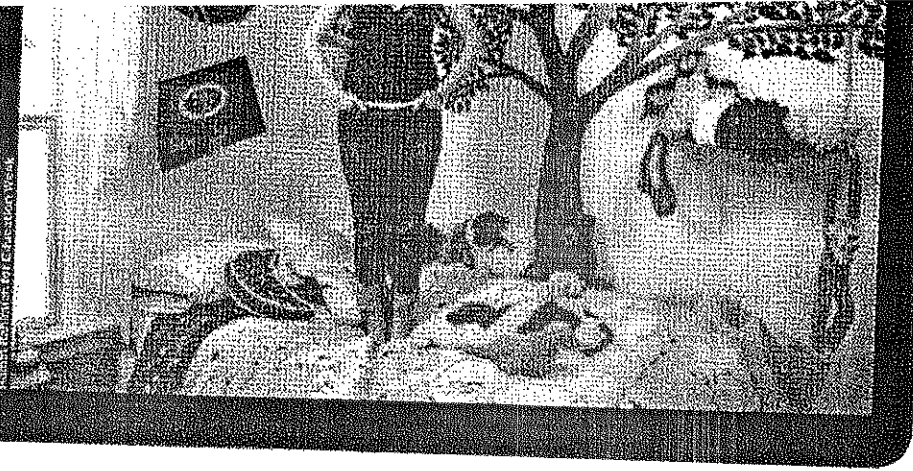
For example, in Alabama, which has one of the largest state-run virtual schools in the country, just 217 students with disabilities took at least one online course last school year, although Alabama, through the Montgomery-based, state-run Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide, or ACCESS, delivered 34,000 online courses to students. The school was created to offer foreign language and Advanced Placement courses to students in rural parts of the state.

If little or no access is a problem in some places, too much access, with little teaching, is a problem elsewhere, said Marcie Lipsitt, a parent advocate in Michigan for the National Center

SOURCES: Florida Virtual School; Pennsylvania Department of Education; North Carolina Virtual Public Schools; Kentucky Department of Education

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# VIDEO

## The Student Experience

Here from rising 8th grader Tessa Falco, who lives in Grove City, Pa., and who takes classes through the Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School. Tessa, who has dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and her mother, Estine Falco, talk about why online learning is the best fit for Tessa, its challenges, and how the lessons are tailored to her needs.

www.edweek.org/education

## About this report

In a special report, the first installment of a new three-part series on virtual education that builds on Education Week's 2010-11 special coverage, examines the growing e-learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

English-language learners, gifted and talented students, and those at risk of failing in school. It shows the barriers that exist for greater participation among special populations, especially students with disabilities, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of online education for these groups of students. It also takes a look at the new funding tactics schools are using to build virtual education programs for special populations and the evolving professional development needs for these types of efforts.

close their disabilities, and last year, 17 percent of the Florida Virtual School's more than 50,000 students did so, said Jeffrey Jacobson, who oversees special education for the school.

"We have a pretty good mix of that number in more around 40 percent. That's what we're getting from kids that identify themselves later and [from] talks with teachers," he said.

What the numbers do tell the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School is that students with disabilities are struggling with their online classes. Of those students, only 30 percent successfully completed their courses, Mr. Jacobson said.

This fall, the school will launch a pilot program in which six teachers certified in special education will work more closely with students who have identified themselves as having disabilities. Their teaching loads will be smaller than for other Florida Virtual School teachers, Mr. Jacobson said, to foster stronger relationships between the teachers and their students.

"They can now spend the time to do direct instruction. Let's say [the students] need help every day. If you have 120 students you can't do that," he said, adding that the total for those teachers will probably be about 75 students.

"If the students' not calling you," he said, "you can call the student every week."

computers, said Casey Fowler, who taught some blended courses at Shelby High School, about 60 miles west of Charlotte. Lessons might have been delivered on smartboards, for example.

When the class was studying osmosis, they soaked gummy bears in salt water and tap water, remembered Jamar Petty, 18, one of Ms. Fowler's students.

"We were trying to see what was going to happen and what was the effect," said Mr. Petty, who has learning disabilities. "One of them got bigger than the other." He said he had never done experiments like that before.

The Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School, based in Norristown, Pa., has developed its own method for teaching life skills virtually, special education teacher Stacy McGowan said. Overall, about 15 percent of the students at the 3,500-student school have disabilities.

For several hours a day, Ms. McGowan teaches her students live from her home. They have webcams to see her, and she can see them -- and everything they're doing.

"When we're working on counting money, I like them to use real money. Their mom or dad, or whomever, moves the webcam so I can see the money," said Ms. McGowan, whose classes are typically no larger than 15 students. "One time we were working on tying shoes. We put our foot in front of the webcam."

The idea to teach classes this way was Ms. McGowan's, said the virtual school's chief executive officer, Jordane Jones Barnett.

"She developed that model by asking the question, 'How do I do life skills in a virtual environment?'" Ms. Jones Barnett said.

## BLENDED APPROACHES GROW

In other states, the era of virtual learning has spawned distinctive courses and teaching methods for students with disabilities.

During the 2010-11 school year, North Carolina launched a new method of teaching life-skills courses for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The classes combine in-person teaching and online instruction.

For more than 2,000 students statewide, their special education teachers were paired with teachers from the 25,000-student North Carolina Virtual Public School, based in Raleigh. The virtual school teachers delivered much of the core content of a subject -- this past year, it was Algebra I, Biology, and English -- and classroom teachers helped ensure the lessons were as accessible as possible for the students, said Michelle Lourey, the curriculum and instruction division director for the school.

The course content and design were a big shift away from the traditional lessons in those classes, she said. While students still learned how to count money, which chemicals may be poisonous, and how to grocery shop, they also did science experiments and studied "Homes and Jukes" via online lessons created with the principles of universal design for learning, or UDL. Those principles call for developing curriculum in a way that gives all students an equal opportunity to learn.

If there was a chunk of text for students to read, they could click on it and it would be read to them, for example, said Freda Lee, a state consultant for students with intellectual disabilities.

Although recorded or live lessons from the NCVPS teachers were delivered online, there were many days students weren't sitting at

## MEETING SPECIAL NEEDS

While online classes could be larger, even when they are for students with disabilities, Ms. Jones Barnett said that isn't her school's approach.

Because virtual schools are still in their relative infancy, she said, the teaching requires innovation, "and not being afraid to meet the needs of your students."

The Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School seems ideal for Tessa Falco, 13, whose disabilities are very different from those of the students Ms. McGowan teaches.

Tessa has a limited short-term memory, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and dysgraphia, which affects her ability to write, form letters, and spell, said her mother, Estine Falco.

In rural Grove City, Pa., Ms. Falco said, traditional brick-and-mortar schools haven't been able to address all of Tessa's needs. After two years of that situation, Tessa, for 8th grade, will go back to online schooling, which she did as an elementary school student.

While Tessa has the option of attending live classes, that can be a challenge because it's often difficult for her to stay on task, Ms. Falco said.

With the virtual school, which helped accommodate Tessa's difficulty with writing, "she'll read her book, and do her work," her mother said, "and if she has a question, she'll call the teacher."