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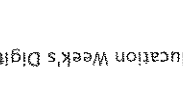
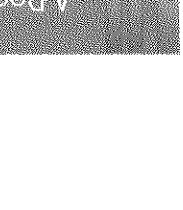
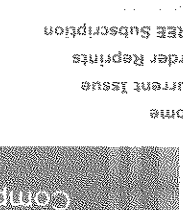
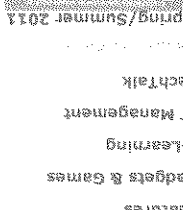
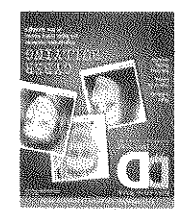
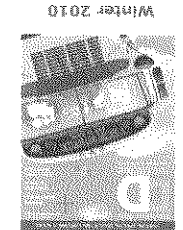
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Inclusion & Assistive Technology

to grow, more parents of children with special needs have begun to consider cyber schooling as a viable alternative to traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

The Parent's Role

But, while certain aspects of online learning may work well for students with disabilities, experts say more thought and research are needed to make sure those students receive the support they need to be successful.

In Kyle's case, a flexible schedule has helped him work when he feels most productive, says Strouse, and communication with his teachers and special education case manager through instant messaging allows him to receive immediate help when he needs it.

Still, the transition into a cyber school shifts a significant amount of responsibility to the parents, Strouse says. Her husband stays home with Kyle during the day, but not all parents have that luxury, she points out.

Tips

1. Parents are key. Before enrolling in a virtual program, parents of special education students should be aware that they will be taking a much more active role in their child's education. Researching programs and talking with each school beforehand can help both students and parents transition into a cyber school environment more easily.

2. In reach for all. Virtual schools should make sure that the digital curriculum they choose and the activities that students do are accessible for all students. They are responsible for providing any assistive technology necessary to accommodate students with special needs.

3. A team effort. Parents, virtual general education teachers, and virtual special education teachers must be prepared to work together to evaluate and implement a student's individualized education program, or IEP.

4. Each student is different. Although some students with special needs may thrive in an online-learning environment, it's important to continue to evaluate how each student is doing to determine whether virtual learning is the best choice for that student.

assigned a special education case manager, and both Kyle and his parents began adjusting better to the school. In fact, received his first A in a course in three years, his mother says.

As online learning for precolligate students continues

"It does require a parent to be very upfront and knowing about what's going on," she says of such schooling. "It's going to require a lot of time." Jennifer Sims, the senior director of academic services for K12 Inc., an online-course provider based in Herndon, Va., says that parents are an essential part of the equation in virtual special education.

"For students to meet their full potential, you really need the involvement and the support not only of everything the school provides, but also parents who want to work with a partnership with teachers," she says.

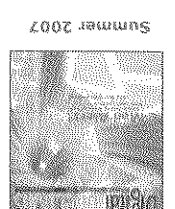
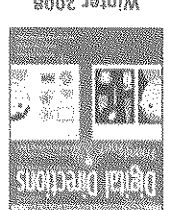
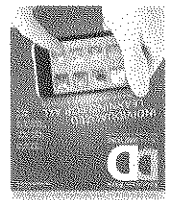
Some students in special education benefit from the more personalized approach that high-quality online learning can offer, says Sims.

Jamie Pagliaro, the executive vice president of business development for the New York City-based *Rethink Autism*, a Web-based professional-development platform for parents and professionals working with children with autism, agrees.

"I think kids with autism and kids with special needs are a prime candidate for online learning because of the level of individualization that they need," he says.

Virtual Challenges

Paula Burdette is the director of Project Forum for the Alexandria, Va.-based



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National Association of State Directors of Special Education, or NASDE. The project provides information on emerging issues in special education, such as delivering such services through virtual education. Burdette pooled information about that subject recently.

Some of the issues and questions that arose centered around the roles and responsibilities of teachers, students, and parents; financial matters; educational services across state lines; implementation of each student's individualized education program, or IEP; evaluation of special education virtual teachers; how to ensure flexibility in virtual curriculum; and parent training in supporting online learning.

Burdette points out that online learning can be advantageous for students who struggle with social and behavioral problems that may be triggered by being in busy social settings, such as regular classrooms, for extended periods of time.

At a forum held earlier this year by the NASDE, 18 experts including special education directors, virtual school directors, parents of students in virtual special education, and researchers discussed the benefits of online learning. Topics included ongoing virtual feedback between student and teacher, the self-paced curriculum, the ability to create online portfolios, the lack of peer distractions and conflict, and the potential for cost-cutting as benefits of serving students with special needs virtually.

But there's a long way to go before virtual special education reaches its full potential, says Jeff Diedrich, the director of Michigan's Integrated Technology Supports, or MITS, program, a statewide effort to support assistive technology. "We're still in our relative infancy," he says.

"Special education is often an afterthought, and particularly with online-learning environments, there's so much that could be supportive for students with disabilities," says Diedrich. "And yet, it's not often a consideration when developing a course or acquiring materials to use in the online course." Heidi Silver-Paculla, a task leader for implementation support for the Washington-based Center for Implementing Technology in Education, echoes Diedrich's concerns.

"Virtual schooling can be as inaccessible as physical schooling if accessibility is not built in," she says.

For instance, many assistive technologies that students with special needs may benefit from—such as screen readers or audio transcripts—are high-bandwidth applications. Without a powerful Internet connection at home, those assistive features are unavailable to students. Emiliano Ayala, an associate professor in the department of educational leadership and special education at Sonoma State University in California, says many more questions need to be answered before virtual special education can move forward.

"For me, virtual environments are simply a tool that should help support effective teaching and learning, so it's important not to adopt a technology simply to adopt a technology for its own sake," he says. "Regardless of the environment we're talking about, are we being thoughtful about how we approach teaching and learning in a way that will support students?"

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