A publication of The Center on Online Learning
and Students with Disabilities

Perspectives from State Special Education Directors on Online Learning, 2013

Center on Online Learning
and Students with Disabilities

2013 Survey Results

inside.

What are the major topics that this white paper includes?

- Methodology
- State guidance and policy
- Educational and related services
- Beliefs about online programs and student learning

INTRODUCTION

To date, online learning has reached millions of K-12 learners, and its continued growth is leading to dramatic changes in the educational landscape. While online learning holds great promise, a paucity of research exists on the pedagogical implications for students with disabilities. Researchers urgently need to conduct investigations that demonstrate how online instruction should be designed and delivered to improve student outcomes.

In January 2012, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), funded the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities to begin these important investigations. Specifically, OSEP charged the Online Center with the task of conducting research that would make online learning more accessible, engaging, and effective for students with disabilities.

As part of this research, the Center conducts surveys with a variety of stakeholder groups (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, and students). Survey questions are designed to collect information on trends, policies, practices, and perceptions of online learning and students with disabilities. This document reports findings from the surveys conducted in 2012 and 2013 with state directors of special education.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The 60 directors of special education from all states – including Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, and eight U.S. jurisdictions – were asked to participate in the Center's 2012 and 2013 surveys. In 2012, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) distributed the survey through Zarca, an online survey tool. Reminders to complete the survey were sent out four times, and 46 state directors responded. The 2012 survey included questions about the demographics of online students, state policies about online learning, and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Analysis of the 2012 survey results indicated that some of the survey questions were not clearly worded. Thus, those questions were revised prior to the survey's distribution in 2013. Additionally, the 2013 survey was revised to delve more deeply into state policies and the provision of services to various categories of students with disabilities. The 2013 survey also included questions that measured the knowledge that state directors possessed about various aspects of online learning.

In 2013, the Metriri Group (an organization that conducts and evaluates educational research) distributed the survey through email. Reminders to complete the survey were sent out five times, and 49 state directors responded. Throughout this report, you will see changes in the types of questions that were asked from one year to the next.

SURVEY FINDINGS

STATE GUIDANCE AND POLICY

In 2012, 27 of the 46 directors of special education responded that their state had publicly available guidance for educators, parents, or students related to the general provision of online education.

In 2013, directors were asked if their state provided guidance in the following areas: (a) general information related to the selection of online learning services for students with disabilities, (b) general information related to the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for an online setting, and (c) best practices in the use of online learning technology functions. State directors reported the following:

- Regarding the selection of online learning services, 33 of the 49 directors indicated that their state did **not** provide guidance in this area; four directors did not know.
- Regarding the development of an IEP for an online setting, 34 of the 49 directors indicated that their state did **not** provide guidance in this area; five directors did not know.
- Regarding the use of best practices in online learning technology functions (e.g., text-to-speech, discussion boards, and access to the Internet), 31 of the 49 directors indicated that their state did **not** provide guidance in this area; six directors did not know.

Of the directors who reported that their states **did** provide guidance, the following information was also reported:

- Regarding the selection of online learning services, 12 out of 12 states provided this guidance to educators; 10 out of 12 provided it to parents; and 7 out of 12 provided it to students.
- Regarding the development of an IEP for an online setting, 10 out of 10 states provided this guidance to educators; 6 of 10 provided it to parents; and 4 of 10 provided it to students.
- Regarding best practices in the use of online learning technology functions, 12 out of 12 states provided this guidance to educators; 4 of 12 provided it to parents; and 4 of 12 provided it to students.

Of the 49 state directors who responded in 2013, 28 reported having a written state policy on online learning for K-12 students, and another four directors said that their state policy was under development. Of the 28 directors who reported having a written policy, 25 said that their policy applied to students with disabilities.

PROVISION OF SERVICES

In 2012, the survey asked whether the states collected data on who was being served and about which students from what disability categories were enrolled in online environments. Specific questions included:

- Does your state have data on which students with disabilities are receiving their instruction through an online environment?
- Does your state have data on which students with disabilities receive some or all of their re-

lated services through an online environment?

- Students from what disability areas participate in any online environment (i.e., online program, supplemental course, or other blended program)? (The 13 disability categories from the federal law were supplied.)
- If known, please give the percent of all students in each disability category who are served online. (e.g., If 25% of all students with learning disabilities are served online, you would enter 25 for SLD below.)

Findings from the 2012 survey suggested that while many state directors felt they had an understanding of the disability categories being served in online settings (i.e., specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, autism, and other health impairments), most states did not actually collect data on students with disabilities in online settings. Since states did not collect the data, for the 2013 survey, one of the questions was modified to read, "Do students from all disability areas participate in an online environment (fully online or blended)?" This question produced mixed results: 15 directors responding said "yes," 13 said "no," and 21 said they didn't know.

RELATED SERVICES

In 2012, state directors were asked if they had data on which students with disabilities received some or all of their related services through an online environment. Only four of the 46 directors reported having this data. Thus, the 2013 survey was modified, asking them to select specific types of related services most often provided to students with disabilities. Given the choices of speech-language services, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and other related services, 18 state directors reported that speech-language services were most often provided online. Eighteen state directors did not know which related services were most often provided, and 11 reported that no related services were provided through an online environment. No directors selected occupational or physical therapy as the related service most often provided online. Two directors selected the "other" option and provided the following comments: "We considered speech and had an interpreter for a while" and "We are having conversations about this now."

"18 state directors reported that speech-language services were [the related service] most often provided online."

BELIEFS ABOUT ONLINE PROGRAMS AND STUDENT LEARNING

The 2013 survey also asked state directors to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: (a) In most online programs, there is a process by which students are able

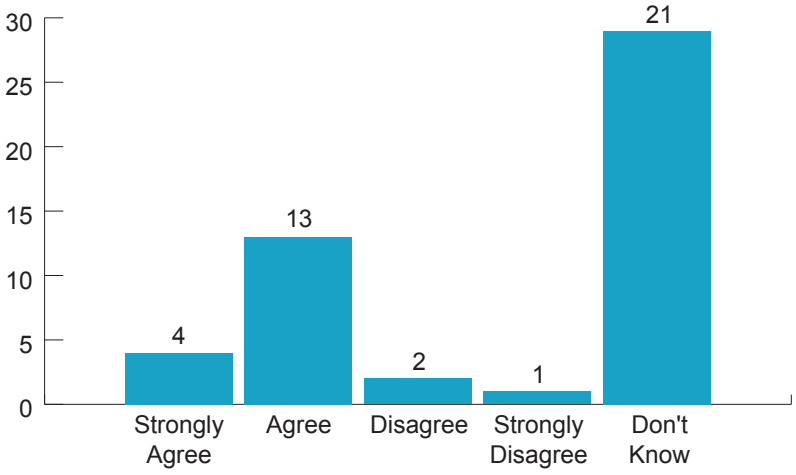
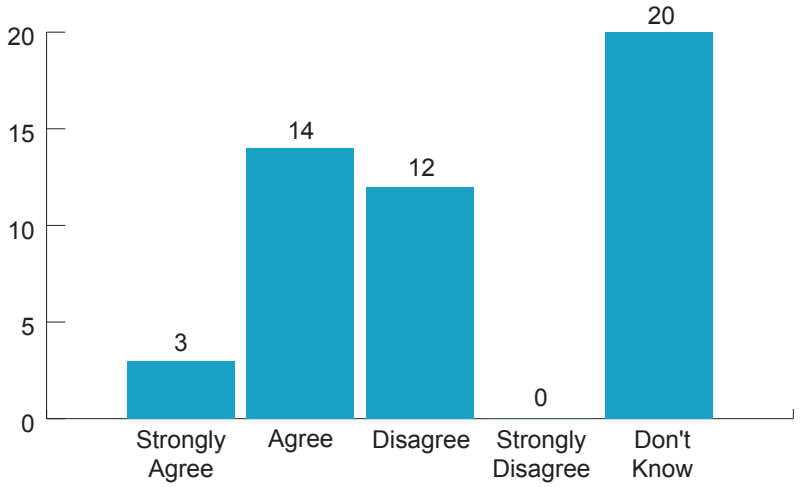


FIGURE 1
Level of agreement by state special education directors with the statement, "In most online programs, there is a process by which students are able to disclose their disability that ensures privacy," as measured by total number of responses.

FIGURE 2

Level of agreement by state special education directors with the statement, "Most online programs support students with disabilities in seeking any accommodations that would increase the probability of student success," as measured by total number of responses.



to disclose their disability that ensures privacy; (b) Most online programs support students with disabilities in seeking any accommodations that would increase the probability of student success; and (c) The range of digital content (e.g., videos, simulations, models, images, electronic textbooks) offered to all students by most online programs is sufficient to accommodate variability of needs among students with disabilities. According to the results, most respondents did not know if their online programs ensured privacy, provided accommodations, or provided a range of digital content (see figures 1-3). The 2013 survey asked state directors to indicate their beliefs about the success that online programs can provide for students with disabilities. Specifically, directors were asked their level of agreement with the following statement: "When students with disabilities have the support of their classroom teacher, the probability of succeeding in the online class is quite high." Nine state directors strongly agreed with this statement, 15 disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. Twenty-three did not know (Figure 4).

In order to determine whether state directors were familiar with the retention of students with disabilities in online courses, a statement was added to the 2013 survey that asked state directors to respond to the following: "Most students with disabilities who enroll in an online course complete it." Four directors agreed with this statement, six disagreed, and 39 did not know (Figure 5).

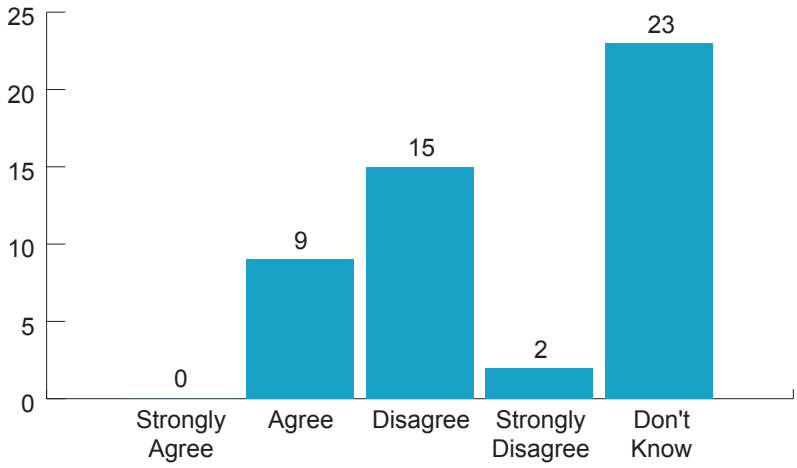
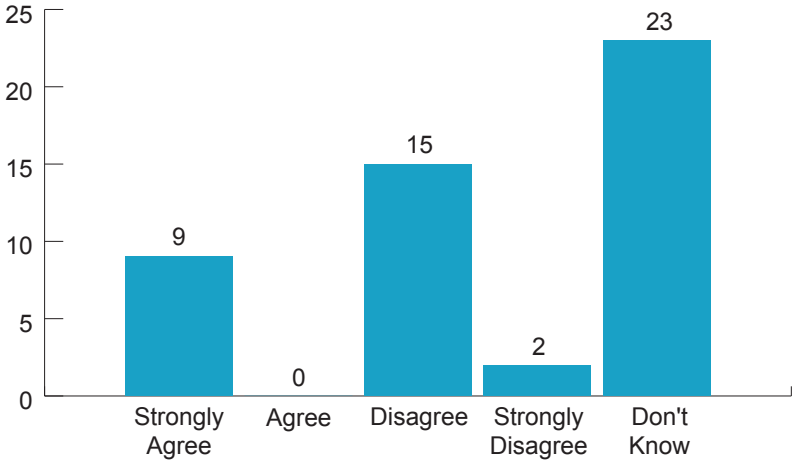


FIGURE 3

Level of agreement by state special education directors with the statement, "The range of digital content (e.g., videos, simulations, models, images, electronic textbooks) offered to all students by most online programs is sufficient to accommodate variability of needs among students with disabilities," as measured by number of responses.

FIGURE 4

Level of agreement by state special education directors with the statement, "When students with disabilities have the support of their classroom teacher, the probability of succeeding in the online class is quite high," as measured by total number of responses.



Finally, in the 2013 survey, directors were asked to evaluate the importance of various online practices relative to the success of students with disabilities. The practices included in the survey were all considered promising practices, according to the literature surrounding online learning. Table 1 depicts how the 49 respondents rated each promising practice relative to the success of students with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

While state policies and practices related to K-12 online education and students with disabilities are in their infancy, these survey findings highlight the diverse knowledge base, beliefs, levels of policy development and data collection around online learning across the states. States vary on the amount of data that they collect and analyze in order to determine if current practice and policy are supporting the needs of students with disabilities (see figures 1-5). Additionally, many respondents are not aware of the importance of some foundational practices for online learning programs; for example, flexibility, sense of community, etc. (see Table 1). Without the basic knowledge about promising practices, how online learning affects students with disabilities, and state data regarding student participation and outcomes in online learning, key state special education staff may have difficulty making policy and practice decisions.

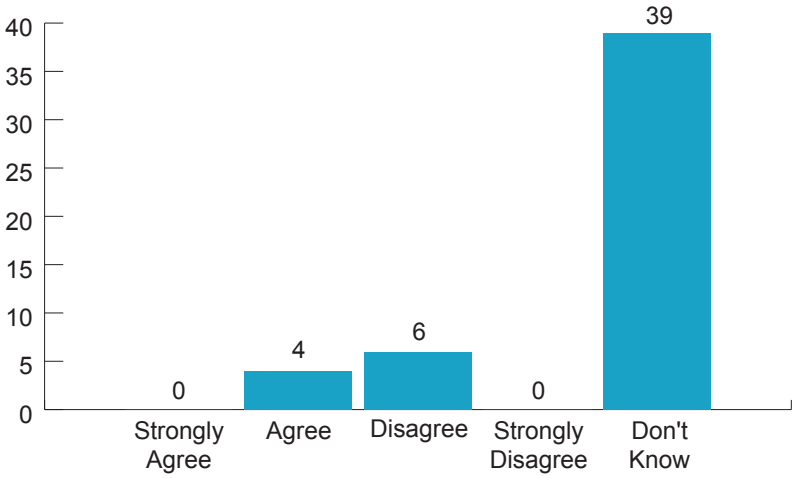


FIGURE 5

Level of agreement by state special education directors with the statement, "Most students with disabilities who enroll in an online course complete it," as measured by total number of responses.

TABLE 1
Promising practices in online learning for students with disabilities.

PROMISING PRACTICES IN ONLINE LEARNING	EXTREMELY OR VERY IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY OR NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT
Flexibility in time (e.g., learning can take place outside of a regular school day and throughout the entire year)	30	16	3
Flexibility in place (e.g., students can learn outside of the classroom)	34	13	2
Flexibility in path (e.g., instruction can be tailored to the needs of each student)	41	6	2
Flexibility in pace (e.g., students can learn at their own pace)	40	7	2
Flexibility in content (e.g., students can have access to core, elective, or supplementary course content that would not otherwise be available)	39	7	2
Flexibility in mode (e.g., the range and mode of academic content is not restricted to physical textbooks or supplementary materials onsite)	38	9	2
Sense of community (e.g., online learning communities enable students to interact about schoolwork with peers, teachers, and experts more easily and regularly)	27	17	5
Student orientation to the online environment prior to the experience	45	3	1
Choices within the online learning system	40	8	1
The guidance of an adult at the student's side (physically)	36	11	2
A blended learning option to combine the online learning with supplementary, hands-on, or other activities	36	11	2
Adaptive learning built into the online system (e.g., system uses learning analytics to adapt the user experience)	39	7	3