

Professional Learning: Accessibility and Assistive Devices in Virtual Environments

Professional Learning (PL) is central to the success of any educational program, and ongoing sustainable engagement with educators proves critical to ensuring success and implementation. Adhering to cites standards, such as the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching, the ISTE Standards for Educators, and the Professional Learning by Learning Forward, supports the development of well-designed, successful PL programs to support virtual learning.

In general, educators need opportunities to better understand topics related to accessibility, course design, and virtual teaching to ensure students with disabilities have access to learning opportunities in virtual environments. It is critical to address issues related to teaching students with disabilities in virtual environments, as well as how to provide accessible educational materials (AEM).

This guide, developed in concert with multiple virtual programs, school district leaders, and professionals in virtual learning non-profits who support students with disabilities, includes:

- [Topics to Consider](#)
- [Best Practices to Support Educators](#)
- [Sample Professional Models for Virtual Learning](#)
- [Professional Learning Planning Guide for Accessibility and Assistive Technologies](#)

Topics to Consider

Many educators have little background or experience teaching in virtual settings or supporting students with disabilities in remote settings. PL should focus on topics that maximize learning for students with disabilities. Consider the following:

- Virtual Instruction
 - Can educators identify critical considerations for both asynchronous and synchronous lessons to support student engagement for all learners?
 - Can educators identify and implement strategies to support small- and large-group instruction?
 - Can educators identify strategies and technologies to support accessibility for students with disabilities in virtual environments?
- Accessible Features
 - What are the built-in accessibility features in student devices?
 - How can students access features in software programs or learning management systems?

- How and when should students use such features?
 - How do educators design accessible content and courses?
 - Where do educators gain tech support and/or training?
- Assistive Technology Devices
 - What are Assistive Technology (AT) devices?
 - What training do educators, students, and families need to use AT?
 - How do teachers support students who use AT in virtual or remote learning environments?
 - Where do educators, students, and their families gain access to tech support?

Best Practices to Support Educators

Virtual schools should provide educators with a variety of PL practices to support students with disabilities and their families, including:

- Intense training/student teaching: Provide direct instruction on teaching in virtual environments followed by a requirement of student teaching online. (Please see North Carolina Virtual Public School example)
- Mentors: Provide an experienced mentor for the first year of virtual teaching.
- Instructional Coaches: Provide coaches, who are available in real time or via office hours, with expertise in accessibility and specific technologies to support educators.
- Online Courses: Provide online courses for teaching in a virtual environment and considerations for students with disabilities enrolled in online learning.
- Online Hubs: Schools can provide resources online and make them available to educators 24/7. Suggested resources for a hub include:
 - Tutorial Information: Focused on accessibility and course design
 - Training Videos: On-demand videos of educators demoing the new or best examples of accessibility and assistive technology tools
 - Portal where educators can share best practices and ask for support

Sample Professional Development Models for Virtual Learning

These models of virtual learning programs exemplify quality PL. In each, PL is ongoing with the support of coaches and mentors to support implementation and continuous learning. In one model, educators are required to student-teach in a virtual setting for eight weeks in advance of teaching their own classes. Each model emphasizes ongoing training and support for accessibility tools, features, and accommodations for students with disabilities.

eSchool Garnet Valley, Glen Mills, PA

In 2015, [eSchool Garnet Valley](#) expanded its educational offerings to include original credit, accelerated, and credit recovery options via online and blended learning formats. The online and blended courses are open to all grade K-12 students who reside within the district boundaries regardless of learning style, background, or special education needs. Courses are also available to students outside of the district

over the summer. As a result of the new virtual options for students, PL was provided to all educators, so they would be available to teach online/ hybrid courses and include specific support for students with disabilities.

Professional Development Model

The district has eight instructional coaches who are primarily responsible for staff PL. The Professional Development Plan is developed and revised regularly.

- All new educators work with an instructional coach during their first year.
- All educators are trained on Effective Digital Instruction (EDI). EDI training focuses on using best teaching practices and leveraging technology to design and deliver content to students in any format. The four themes of EDI are:
 - Designing Learning Experiences
 - Building Interactions
 - Presenting Content
 - Accessibility/Differentiation
- Educators are paid to complete the EDI and Open Education Resources PL modules. They also receive compensation to write or revise the curriculum to create digitized courses, so students have access to the same content whether they take the course face-to-face or virtually. Educators develop the curriculum based on state standards and the administrative team vets the courses. Every course goes through an intensive audit to make sure it follows the end-of-course rubric, (built using the [Quality Matter rubric for K-12](#)) which includes a review for accessibility.
- [Online support resources](#) are available to all educators, including resources to support a hybrid teaching model.

North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS)

[NCVPS](#) is part of the state's Department of Public Instruction and partners with local schools and districts to meet state education priorities via virtual courses. The supplemental program offers high-school-level courses to high school and middle school students from public, private, charter, and homeschool settings. As a supplemental program, enrollment in NCVPS is a school/district decision and diplomas are awarded by the school of record.

Professional Development Model

- All educators are required to successfully complete a 16-week Educator In Training (TnT) program consisting of eight weeks of course work and eight additional weeks of student teaching in a virtual classroom with a veteran educator.
- All PL [courses](#) are free to educators. Courses provide ongoing support and training for educators in relation to online tools, pedagogy, and effective use of technology for teaching and learning goals.
- An Accessibility, Exceptional Children, and ELL Program Resources web page is available to all educators via a Professional Learning Hub. Tutorial information demonstrates how to use accessibility features found on hand-held and desktop devices. The web page also includes

tutorials on accessibility checkers and transcript tools. A second web page in the Hub, titled Just In Time (JIT) Professional Learning Resources, contains accessibility guidance for educators and other staff members in their state.

Mountain Heights Academy (MHA), Utah

Founded in 2009 to meet the needs of students and families looking for an alternative to traditional, in-person schools, [MHA](#) is an online public charter school, which functions as its own Local Education Agency, and offers a no-fee, tuition-free, full-time program to any in-state students in grades 7-12. The school also offers a part-time program where any student can take individual courses during the school year or over the summer.

Professional Development Model

- Onboarding for new educators includes assigning a mentor educator/anchor educator. Mentors contact and meet with each new educator as often as is needed until they are comfortable in their role. Each educator is a member of a department with a department team lead who continues to mentor and manage the team.
- MHA has a written Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for each technology tool. A library of tutorials created by instructional coaches can be accessed 24/7.
- Coaches are also available for department meetings or individual appointments to provide coaching on technology tools.
- Several "Ignite" sessions are offered at every schoolwide in-person professional development meeting. During these sessions, educators demonstrate technology tools and/or pedagogy best practices to leverage technology's promise to improve education. Sessions are recorded and placed in the tutorial library for future reference.

For more information about each of these virtual learning programs, visit the [CITES Virtual School Program Overview document](#)

Professional Learning Planning Guide for Accessibility and Assistive Technologies

[Access this template to review questions and resources to develop PL programs that ensure accessibility and assistive technologies are fully utilized by students, educators, and families.](#)



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