

## CITES | Virtual Learning Project

# Family Engagement to Support Students with Disabilities in Virtual Learning

The CITES Virtual Learning Project focused on promising practices related to educating and supporting students with disabilities and their families in virtual school programs. Central to this work was identifying what technologies are used in these settings and how students who require assistive technology (AT) to access instruction are supported.

“At a recent meeting, one of our parents shared, ‘My kids and I hear more from the virtual teacher than we do the teacher in the building.’” — DeLania Tonks, Principal, Mountain Heights Academy, Utah

Like in any educational environment, families play a key role, and virtual schools are no exception. Offering families options for communicating with school personnel impacts the success of the program for students with disabilities. Fortunately, virtual schools provide families with numerous models and options to ensure communication throughout the academic year.

## Expectations for Families

Expectations vary greatly, from a welcoming orientation meeting to providing full-time support for a student while they work at home.

- Welcome Meeting/Parent Orientation: Some schools make this mandatory and in person.
- Learning Coaches at Home: A caregiver or family member is identified as a learning coach and provides support/supervision to the student in the home.
- Virtual Fridays: This model is district-based and allows students to experience classes virtually so they can make educated decisions about whether they will take face-to-face or virtual courses in the future. Families are expected to support this model by ensuring an adult is available to supervise.
- Contracts: Many virtual school programs provide a contract to describe expectations and best practices, which is signed by both families and/or students.

# Communication

Schools provide multiple avenues to communicate and share student progress with families. Examples of technologies used for virtual program/family communication include:

- Phone (voice or text)
- Email
- Parent app included in the learning management system (LMS)
- Help desk
- Survey: Feedback from families
- Survey: Teachers complete monthly surveys to track students who may be falling behind.
- Student Information System (SIS): Provides parents access to grades and progress.
- Digital newsletters

## Communication Policies/Schedules

Many virtual schools dedicate scheduled times for school personnel to either communicate with or meet directly with families. In addition, some schools have strict policies regarding the time frame for grading assignments to help avoid students slipping behind. Options highlighted include:

- Meetings
  - families meet with teachers or counselors once a week
  - monthly teacher conferences
  - on-site meetings every 2-4 weeks for students participating in a hybrid program
- Grades
  - sent weekly
  - digital 24-hour grading system with all grades posted within 24 hours of assignment completion
- Progress reports
  - every 4 weeks
  - bi-weekly
  - quarterly update from the case manager on the special education team

## Additional Supports for Families

Virtual school programs provide in person and virtual opportunities for families to engage including;

- In-person activities for the entire family
- Center for Parent Information and Resources
- Focus groups for parents, provided virtually or in person
- Family engagement liaisons: Liaisons meet with families at a neutral location, such as a coffee shop. Positions are staffed by retired teachers or students from a local university.
- Student services team, including a social worker, who reaches out to families as needed

## Challenges

- Students with disabilities are not identified.  
Families may not disclose a disability, and therefore a student may be in a full-time virtual program without an IEP/504 plan and their required services. Virtual programs cited cultural considerations as one reason families did not disclose concerns or requests for evaluation.
- Families do not understand their rights or the services that may be available.
- Families may not have transportation to school sites for meetings, training, or in-person assessments.

## Resources

- [CITES Family Engagement Literature Review](#): The literature review includes key terms related to family engagement in an inclusive technology ecosystem, research questions and the research methodology for the literature review findings. The conclusion summarizes the review's main points and offers recommendations for next steps.
- [Center for Parent Information and Resources](#) (CPIR): The CPIR supports parent centers around the country to help them provide support and services to the families they serve. Family-friendly information and research-based materials are key topics for Parent Centers.
- [Understood](#): This organization, dedicated to helping those who learn and think differently discover their potential, provides an overview of accessible features often recommended in 504 plans. Many resources are specifically intended for families.



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This content was developed under a grant from the US Department of Education, #H327T180001. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer: Anita Vermeer, M.Ed.



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