CITES | Virtual Learning Project

Leadership 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.

> "So my advice would be, 'Start with your administrative team, and understand why you're doing this.' Our goal was to offer different options for students, and to build them in a way that's accessible for any student at any time and in any learning format." — Sam Mormando, Director of Technology, Innovation, and Online Learning, Garnet Valley, Glen Mills, Pennsylvania

Quality leadership is critical for all educational environments, and virtual schools are no exception. The Center on Inclusive Technology and Education Systems (CITES) developed a set of leadership practices to enhance the development of a balanced and inclusive technology infrastructure that supports students with disabilities.

The leadership practices identified in the CITES framework, although developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and for brick-and-mortar schools, are applicable to virtual schools and offer guidance to all schools as they develop virtual learning options for their students with disabilities. The framework provides guidance in five key areas outlined below.

Create Vision & Goals

An essential role of leadership in education is to work with staff, students, families, and the community to create a vision for a system that helps all students with disabilities reach their potential. Vision statements and associated goals should address the need for a flexible/accessible learning environment. Steps to ensuring this include:

- Coordinate an inclusive team that includes Assistive Technology (AT) leaders, Information Technology (IT) leaders, Education Technology (EdTech) leaders, as well as special education educators and family members.
- Ensure the vision statement addresses the needs of students with disabilities. Examples include:
    - Address the unique needs of learners.
    - Provide an accessible and flexible learning environment.
    - Provide opportunities for students to customize their educational opportunities, including giving students and their families choices in what, how, when, and where they learn to find success.
- Communicate with families and staff.
  Technology provides multiple ways to share information with staff and families, including, email, parent apps in a learning management system (LMS), newsletters, and in-person gatherings.

Develop a Strategic Plan

Since technology is key to the success of virtual schools, the intersection between Information Technology (IT), Educational Technology (EdTech), and AT is critical to the success of students with disabilities. For example, the plan should be clear regarding how AT, EdTech, and IT work together to create equity and accessibility for all.

- Understand how the selected devices, LMS, and commercial software embed accessibility features to support students with disabilities.
    - What accessibility features, such as text-to-speech, are provided, and how do they support students with disabilities?
    - How are assistive technology devices such as expanded keyboards and switches supported?
- If using a published curriculum for online learning, research vendor's Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT).

- How are students with disabilities supported in the environment? What accessibility features are included?

Measure for Continuous Progress

Virtual schools have many options to collect data, given the technologies available in their infrastructure.

Examples include collecting data on:

- Requests for support from students, families, and teachers
- Tool usage by students, families, and teachers (eg. How often are parents accessing the help desk to reach out to teachers and administrators, and what are the most common requests?)
- How often are teachers viewing online resources, such as instructional videos or webinars?
- What is the relationship between hours of professional learning received and student outcomes by tool usage?

Develop Learning Outcomes for Professional Learning

Virtual schools are dependent upon their educators being fluent in not only teaching virtually, but also using technology to address the individual needs of students, including those with disabilities. The document *Professional Learning to Support Students with Disabilities in Virtual Learning Environments* found on the CITES website.

Plan Infrastructure

Collaboration in the development of a virtual school infrastructure plan is necessary in order for students with disabilities to succeed. In sites committed to serving these students, the communication between those responsible for AT, EdTech, and IT will be evident.

Signs that a team is devoted to the success of students with disabilities include:

- IT staff understands and speaks to accessibility and AT.
- Those responsible for procurement begin the conversation by addressing accessibility features and the support for AT.

Center on Inclusive Technology & Education Systems

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