

## CITES | Virtual Learning Project

# Professional Learning 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.

Virtual school programs provide a variety of models and resources to support professional learning (PL), specifically related to providing opportunities for students with disabilities. As with all quality PL, ongoing sustainable engagement proves critical to ensuring success and implementation. Schools, in general, would like to understand more about topics related to accessibility, course design, and virtual teaching to ensure students with disabilities are able to maximize their learning in virtual environments. In addition to topics to consider, descriptions of three professional models provided by virtual school programs to support teachers and students with disabilities, are described below.

In addition to the considerations, we provide examples of professional learning practices from [eSchool at Garnet Valley](#), [North Carolina Virtual Public School](#), and [Mountain Heights Academy](#).

## Topics to Consider

Many teachers 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:

- Virtual Instruction
  - Educators will identify critical considerations for both asynchronous and synchronous lessons to support student engagement.
  - Educators will identify and implement strategies to support small and large group instruction.

- Educators will identify strategies and technologies that support inclusion of students with disabilities in virtual environments.
- Accessible Features
  - What are accessible features?
  - How to access features in software programs or a learning management system
  - How and when to use features to support students with disabilities
  - How to design accessible courses
- Assistive Technology Devices
  - What are Assistive Technology (AT) devices?
  - How do the devices operate?
  - When should they be leveraged for learning?

## Best Practices for Supporting Teachers

Virtual schools provide teachers with a variety of professional learning practices including:

- Intense training/student teaching: Provide eight weeks of instruction on virtual teaching followed by eight weeks of student teaching online.
- 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 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 teachers 24/7.

Suggested resources include:

- Tutorial Information: Focused on accessibility and course design
- Training Videos: On-demand videos of teachers 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 in Virtual Schools

## eSchool Garnet Valley, Glen Mills, PA

In 2015, this district 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, professional learning was provided to all educators so that they would be available to teach online and/ hybrid courses.



## Professional Development Model

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

- All new teachers work with an instructional coach during their first year.
- All teachers are trained on Effective Digital Instruction (EDI). The 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
- Money previously spent on purchasing textbooks was reallocated to pay teachers for professional learning and course development. Teachers are paid to complete the EDI and Open Education Resources professional learning modules. Then they are also paid 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. Teachers develop the curriculum based on state standards. The courses are vetted by the administrative team. Every course goes through an intensive audit to make sure it follows the end of course rubric (which is built using the Quality Matter rubric for K-12). The [Quality Matters rubric](#) includes a review for accessibility.

- [Online support resources](#) are available to all teachers, including resources to support a hybrid teaching model.

## North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS)

This virtual school is a part of the state's Department of Public Instruction and partners with local schools and districts to meet state education priorities via virtual



courses. It is a supplemental program offering 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. NCVPS offers fall and spring courses, year-long courses, and summer semesters.

## Professional Development Model

- All teachers are required to successfully complete a 16-week Teacher In Training (TnT) program consisting of eight weeks of course work and then eight additional weeks of student teaching in a virtual classroom with a veteran teacher.
- All professional learning courses are free to the 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 the educators via a Professional Learning Hub. Tutorial information demonstrates how to use accessibility features found on handheld devices and desktop devices including Apple devices, Chromebooks, and Windows machines. The webpage 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 supports for teachers and other staff members in their state.

## Mountain Heights Academy, Utah

Founded in 2009 to meet the needs of students and families looking for an alternative to traditional, in-



**Mountain Heights Academy**  
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person schools, this online public charter school, which functions as its own Local Education Agency, 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 teachers includes assigning a mentor teacher/anchor teacher. Mentors contact and meet with each new teacher as often as is needed until they are comfortable in their role. Each teacher 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.
- At every whole school in-person professional development meeting, several "Ignite" sessions are offered. During these sessions, teachers 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.

## Resources

[National Standards for Quality](#): The standards serve to provide a foundation for professional development related to virtual teaching, as well as developing accessible materials and courses for students with disabilities.

[NSQ Online Teaching Professional Learning Portal](#): Creates a framework for schools, districts, and state agencies to support online and hybrid instruction for every teacher who needs such mastery. Professional development materials, based on the NSQ standards, are suggested once educators complete a self-evaluation.

[Quality Matters](#): Provides free and for-pay [professional development opportunities](#) for online learning, including resources dedicated to accessibility.

[Digital Learning Collaborative](#) (DLC): The DLC provides resources, such as webinars specific to online teaching and accessibility.

[Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance](#) (VLLA): An association of virtual programs that provides resources, services, and expertise.

[Research and Reports from Members of the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance](#): Tools, research, and reports developed by virtual schools across the country provide guidance for professional development and the inclusion of students with disabilities in virtual settings.



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