

NEPC REVIEW: SPECIAL EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING: SUPPORTING STUDENTS THROUGH THE PANDEMIC (EXCELIN EDUCATION, JUNE 2020)



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September 2020

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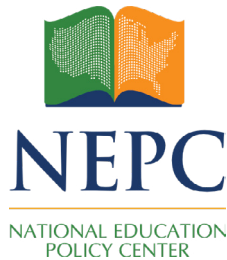
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Executive Summary

A recent brief published by *ExcelinED* provides recommendations to education policy leaders for the delivery of special education services during the COVID-19 school closures. As the brief notes, education secretary Betsy DeVos declared in April 2020 that the core features of implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act must remain in place—that no waivers for the delivery of special education services were allowable. The brief also points out that families and advocates are deeply worried about learning progress and loss of learning because of the national pandemic. The brief then provides four sets of “best practices” for school and district leadership. Its recommendations, however, assume that current knowledge among school professionals is sufficient to make the desired special education and technological leaps. In fact, the necessary knowledge and capacity are barely emerging. Meanwhile, the recommendations do little to address the unequal distribution of resources in schools, which include access to well-prepared teachers and related services personnel qualified to teach students with disabilities, particularly using distance learning approaches. Given these concerns, coupled with the lack of research anchoring its recommendations, the brief offers little to policymakers or practitioners currently struggling to make distance learning work during the pandemic.



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I. Introduction

ExcelinED published a brief in June 2020 titled *Special Education and Distance Learning: Supporting Students Through the Pandemic*.¹ According to its website², ExcelinEd is a private, nonprofit education organization, which claims to focus on educational equity and quality through public and private education innovation. Its Board, led by Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, includes members as diverse as Joel Klein, the former Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, and Eric Cantor, the former Majority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Virginia’s seventh district. The website identifies interests in charter schools, public school choice, education scholarship accounts, tax credit scholarships, and vouchers. The website also names early literacy, the Every Student Succeeds Act, school and student reporting, and standards and assessment among its foci.

Secretary DeVos’ Special Education directive underscoring that no waivers to the Individuals with Disabilities Act³ (IDEA) are allowed⁴ is offered as a rationale for the brief. However, the authors do not return to it later in the brief. They assert that districts need policy guidance that emphasizes principles to guide selection of service delivery strategies that account for the specific contexts in which they provide service. The brief frames its recommendations as responding to concerns expressed in interviews ExcelinEd conducted with students with disabilities, parents, teachers, advocates, and national organizations. It recommends four types of “best practices” (p. 1) that districts can use to address the needs of students with disabilities. These are: establishing common guidelines for collaboration of members of each student’s IEP team and families, leveraging technology and available resources thoughtfully, focusing on mastery of concepts and skills, and distributing classroom tools and resources to students. The brief offers three additional recommendations for when schools reopen: assessing students for instructional loss and learning, training educators in distance learning,

and conducting special education audits to determine district capacity to deliver services remotely in anticipation of potential service delivery challenges in the future.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

ExcelinEd underscores the expectation that students can learn and make academic progress in the current pandemic context. The brief promises to offer solutions and best practices to education policymakers and leaders to meet the challenges of delivering special education services during the pandemic. To do so, the brief suggests, requires coordinated action between district leaders and teachers informed by frequent family/school communication, the provision of needed services, and accommodations to facilitate learning.

The brief urges readers to rely on guidelines posted by states for special education services, five of which are highlighted as examples. It also references the recommendation by the National Council of Learning Disabilities to maintain strong communication and partnerships with families. While noting that parent and student rights under IDEA remain in place, the brief advises that services may be delivered differently during the pandemic. It goes on to encourage careful selection of technology to support online learning so that available technologies match student needs.

A number of suggestions are made to address teaching needs, including ensuring that educators have training in distance learning. The knowledge, skills and dispositions required for distance learning, however, are not identified. The report also highlights the importance of materials that teachers may have left behind in their classrooms that can facilitate online learning. It encourages district to open buildings so that teachers can retrieve the teaching resources they need. For instance, the brief suggests that local schools, following CDC protocols for social distancing and health safety, may be able to use schools as distribution centers for loaning therapeutic, educational materials for use at home. The brief also suggests that school buses could also serve to deliver materials to homebound students.

Finally, the brief provides recommendations once schools reopen. ExcelinEd bills assessment as the first component of addressing instructional loss. A final recommendation to local district leaders is to conduct an audit of existing special education services to determine what can be effectively delivered remotely. Suggesting that there are benefits associated with teletherapy that address personnel shortages and the challenge of reaching students in a face-to-face delivery system, the brief opines that such services could be continued after the pandemic subsides and schools are open for face-to-face learning.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The brief's rationale for its findings and conclusions are derived from interviews with families in Washington, D.C. The authors conclude that parents and advocates for individuals with disabilities were concerned about the degree to which educators and special services

support personnel can meet students' special education needs and program plans during the pandemic. The brief frames its recommendations as addressing family frustrations. It offers selected policy references to substantiate its claims.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The *ExcelinEd* brief lists no references at the end of the document, although the authors do offer hyperlinks in the text to online websites, some of which offer guidelines and guidance connected to published research. The brief does not provide any systematic review of either state department or professional organization online advice, guidelines, or tools.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

ExcelinEd has tapped into the concerns that families, educators, and policymakers express in a number of popular and news media about local capacity to offer an effective system of distance learning supports. One of the recommendations focuses on mastery learning without connection to the 40 years of intervention research in special education that focuses on the design and implementation of individualized approaches to learning.⁵ The last recommendation encourages districts to distribute classroom tools and resources to students. However, neither the ConnectED survey of Washington, D.C. families, conducted by the DC School Reform Now organization⁶ and cited in the brief, nor the interviews that *ExcelinEd* conducted are discussed in any detail in reference to this recommendation.

Readers may find the brief's set of recommendations disjointed and unconnected. Further, the credibility of the recommendations is limited, given the lack of research evidence. There are a number of research reports on distance education for students with disabilities that could have been cited. For instance, CAST, a nonprofit educational research development organization in existence for more than 20 years, has an array of online resources compiled from the research literature and is easily accessible for families, teachers, local district leaders, and state and federal education agencies⁷. A number of research papers published over the past five years document evidence-based distance education approaches for students with disabilities⁸. However, the existing research base is not referenced.

The recommendations made in the *ExcelinEd* brief are not explicitly tied to their interview data. Some quotes from interviews were interspersed in the brief with no evidence that the quotes were representative of comments from some or most of the interview transcripts. The brief reports that almost half of the families participating in a ConnectED survey felt that their children will not receive "appropriate services" during the COVID-19 pandemic. No information is offered about that survey's demographics, size, or geographic distribution. Credible interview and survey research requires some description of the processes used to reach conclusions. In contrast, ParentsTogether⁹ surveyed 1,500 parents in May of 2020, finding that income disparities seem to predict access to computers or tablets, access to distance learning, the utility of distance learning, and availability of special education services.

The issues that families raised in interviews were not clearly addressed by the recommendations.

The brief references nine state websites that offered examples of a specific practice or policy that addressed educating students with disabilities during the COVID pandemic. By June, a number of states offered guidance to their local school districts on state websites. It was not clear why guidelines from North Carolina, Minnesota, Georgia, Tennessee, and Indiana were hyperlinked in this document. No evidence suggested that these states had more advanced, specific, or expansive guidelines than other states. A brief examination of these states' ranking on the nine elements that the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education tracks based on annual data collection from each does not suggest that these states might serve as models.¹⁰

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusion

A number of print and Internet media across the U.S. have reported on the distinct differences and inadequacy of services to students with disabilities.¹¹ Families have experienced vastly different supports and services across local school districts as well as across states. The brief's recommendations do not cite research. *ExcelinEd* makes no distinction between the vast range and broad variation of student needs. Nor does it note the deep expertise needed on the part of teachers who work with them¹². The most important support that districts can offer those teachers is the opportunity to consult with and design learning modules in collaboration with instructional technology experts. The technology expertise is likely in short supply in schools and districts. Individualized accommodations and supports can be provided through consultation with special educators or other related services providers like speech/language therapists, behavior analysts, and social workers.¹³ *ExcelinEd*'s brief does not offer guidelines for the teaming efforts needed to offer just-in-time learning based on student need. Students with significant support needs require more intensive instructional and behavioral supports. Delivering their services at a distance poses considerable challenge.¹⁴ At home, parents of students with disabilities report considerable stress in maintaining attention to digitally delivered instruction, developing routines that facilitate learning, and encouraging perseverance for remaining engaged in learning tasks¹⁵. The kinds of resources needed by families who are providing 24-hour support to their high-needs children will go far beyond the recommendations offered in this brief.

Instead, the brief emphasizes the importance of educational time focused on concept and skill mastery. Without explicit connection to the learning trajectories or approaches to learning indexed in research, this recommendation lacks evidence. While the brief connects this recommendation to the use of universal design for learning (UDL) in competency-based learning, no evidence is offered to confirm that UDL and competency-based instruction complement each other in the design or delivery of instruction. While the brief's discussion of competency-based learning emphasizes student agency in choosing content and activities, it lacks evidence, as does the discussion focused on demonstrating progress and receiving feedback.

There was no rationale offered for having selected the states identified in the brief. A number of states have issued clear guidance for districts and families. A number of federally funded and advocacy organizations have compiled resources to support online learning, including developed online modules for teachers to enhance their design and implementation of online learning¹⁶. However, the recommendations in the *ExcelinEd* brief do not necessarily build on those recommendations. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has announced that there will be no waivers affecting core IDEA tenets during the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁷. Yet, families, educators, and related services staff remain concerned about the capacity of local school agencies to respond to the delivery of special education services at a distance¹⁸. This brief does little to dispel or respond to those needs.

While noting that parent and student rights under IDEA remain in place, the brief advises that services may be delivered differently during the pandemic but no more detail is offered. No evaluation tactics follow to assist educators and other decision makers to develop their skills and competencies in making these selections.

ExcelinEd has a long history of promoting competency-based education. The brief points readers to its website; however, there is a wealth of materials to sort through to find specific detail that is actionable for educators and families.¹⁹ It is not clear from the brief or the website how competency-based educational approaches touted by *ExcelinEd* promote individualized learning supports or interventions that are linked to research evidence for students with disabilities. Coupled with the lack of evidence for online learning, there is concern that readers may act on recommendations in this brief without understanding the lack of evidence for effective online learning for students with disabilities.

The suggestions made to address teaching needs could be useful for districts that have not yet figured out how to deliver materials to students. It assumes that enough materials exist to distribute to all learners and that families would have the ability to learn to use the materials

There is concern that readers may act on recommendations without understanding the lack of evidence for effective online learning for students with disabilities.

for academic engagement. These ideas may well work for some school districts with populations that have access to transportation, where safe protocols exist for traveling in the community, and where schools are located in areas that are relatively close to their students' homes. But no attention to districts with fewer resources is reflected in the recommendations.

Assessments designed to help teachers gauge student readiness for review or introduction of new skills and curricular knowledge are important tasks to begin the new year. In addition to IDEA's requirements that students referred to special education must receive an unbiased, multidisciplinary assessment to determine eligibility for special education services, ongoing assessment of learning progress and adjustments to student's learning plans are part of delivering "an appropriately ambitious²⁰" plan for educating students with disabilities. To do this at a distance, for students with extensive support needs, requires highly skilled educators. Information to inform and support the work of educators and their students is lacking.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Little about this brief connects districts, schools, and teachers to their responsibilities under the law during the suspension of face-to-face schooling. In order for families and students to receive the services they need, teachers, schools, and districts need guidance to ensure that what they offer will meet the needs of their students and their right to a free and appropriate education. Policy guidance at this time needs to address the complex issue of curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities. While extant special education research offers some evidence to ground the decisions that local policymakers and practitioners make, this brief does not begin to explore the complexity of the issues that districts and schools face. The authors must assume the responsibility for exploring what is known about the efficacy of forms of digital learning in response to specific student needs and capacities. While the report implies that the field is sufficiently developed to sustain their recommendations, few examples of successful programs exist; much remains to be learned. Even sets of questions that special educators could ask to inform their choice of interaction with their students would be helpful. This brief does not provide support for that work.

This brief offers minimal support for policymakers who need to consider how to fund the research and development work that lies ahead as distance learning continues. We need educators engaged with families in rapid design and innovation cycles, collecting data, sharing what they are learning, and improving opportunities. That approach to policy innovation is missing in this brief despite its relevance to the current crisis. Nor does it help local authorities make the decisions that are needed to advance reasonable approaches to teaching and learning.

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