Chapter XIII
Cyber Schools and Special Needs: Making the Connection

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ABSTRACT

Cyber schools for K-12 students are growing in number. It is vital that appropriate strategies are devised to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. The PA Cyber Charter School serves 468 students who have individualized education plans. Parent surveys were thematically analyzed and revealed six predominant themes including: communication, interests, focus, less-stigma from the special education label, education differences in comparison to other methods, and cyber school shortcomings. The study also utilized the action research model to determine and present the techniques and strategies that are working in the PA Cyber Charter School for their students with special needs. Teacher-tested documents included in the appendix were based on the study, and a model for special needs strategies in the cyber learning environment has been established through this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Cyber Schools

Twenty-two states thus far have established cyber schools to administer curriculum for students who range from kindergarten through twelfth grade (Borja, 2005). In the state in which this study was conducted, “There are 12 cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania educating about 13,245 students this school year. That’s up from about 10,000 students last year.” (Duncan, 2006). A cyber charter school is ultimately responsible for demonstrating that the goals for the school, and therefore the students,
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are met or the school will “cease to exist” (Center for Charter Reform, 2002). The school’s charter is revoked if it does not perform.

Miron, Nelson, and Risley (2002) established areas of cyber charter school innovation:

- Providing an innovative way to reach at-risk students who have dropped out of traditional schools.
- Offering a wider range of classes to their students. Students can be offered different (often advanced) instruction compared with courses that may be available in their local district’s schools.
- Providing structure and assistance to parents who were previously home schooling their children. Enrolling formerly home-schooled students in cyber schools increases the amount of public oversight and guidance.
- Enabling students with health/medical/social problems that preclude attendance at a traditional school to continue their education from home or from a hospital or rehabilitation center. (p. 116)

Exceptionalities in the Online Learning Environment

Cyber charter schools are required to meet all federal laws and regulations for special education including the individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA), no child left behind (NCLB), the americans with disabilities act (ADA), and Section 504 of the rehabilitation act.

The RPP International (2000) national study suggests that a slightly smaller percentage of students with disabilities are enrolled in charter schools (8 percent) than in public schools (11 percent). In 1998, Cyber Village Academy was started by Neima and Bilyk as the first online charter school to serve Minnesota students who had health impairments. Unfortunately, they struggled with software that was built for college students and corporate training; the lessons could not be edited and they were not engaging (Bilyk, 2005). That same year, the first cyber charter school in Pennsylvania, SusQ-Cyber was formed.

According to Miron and Nelson’s (2000) executive summary of research on Pennsylvania’s charter schools, the schools received, “high marks from parents who said that their students’ special needs were not well served in other schools which suggests that parents with students with special needs are generally satisfied with the progress their children are making in charter schools.”

Purpose

Miron, Nelson, and Risley (2002) encouraged research in cyber schools and special needs students:

Some charter schools appear highly successful in serving students with special needs, while others appear unable (or according to some critics, unwilling) to serve such students. It is worth further examination of charter schools’ strengths and barriers to serving students with special needs, particularly in schools with radical new formats such as cyber-schools. (p.128)

With cyber schools on the rise, more special needs students will be receiving their educations in this format. Without a map, the new special education teacher in the cyber environment will find herself lost. There is a tremendous gap in research that needs to be filled with practical techniques derived from practitioner-based learned experience and techniques that work for students with special needs.

METHODOLOGY

Role of the Researchers

During Hipsky’s work as an educational consultant for the Tri-State Area School Study Council, she
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