

How virtual charters meet the needs of students with disabilities

NEWORLEANS—Like any brick-and-mortar public school, virtual charters must comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Still, providing a full continuum of special education services in a virtual setting presents some unique challenges.

Key points

- Accentuate communication, progress monitoring to engage students.
- Collaborate with local districts to serve students on broad geographic scale. ■

For instance, students with disabilities attending virtual charters may reside in various geographic areas, making it difficult to track down local service providers to meet their needs.

Furthermore, despite limited face-to-face interaction, virtual charter staff still must adhere to students'

individualized education programs.

Christie Hollins Jackson addressed these and other obstacles facing virtual charter schools during a Q&A session at the 2015 National Charter Schools Conference.

Jackson is the senior manager for special education at Louisiana Connections Academy, a K-12 virtual charter school that serves approximately 1,800 students throughout the state.

Her answers — edited for length and clarity — are included below:

Q: *What challenges do you face when providing services and supports to students with disabilities in a virtual charter school?*

A: We have to contract out for special education services, and we actually send these contractors to areas where our families and students live. So, for example, it can be difficult to find an occupational therapist in rural Louisiana. But we reach out to some of our local school districts and rely on their support to help us identify contractors and professionals who would be interested in serving in those particular areas.

Q: *How do virtual charter schools ensure students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment?*

A: Our contractors report to our central office their observations and professional opinion of what students with disabilities need in a virtual environment. We take that information — coupled with students' history and reports from their teachers — to make sure we provide students FAPE. ■

For example, if we find out from a contractor that a student needs text-to-speech software, we will make sure that the computer we issue to the student is equipped with such software.

Q: *How do you conduct an individualized education program meeting in a virtual setting?*

A: We conduct a lot of our IEP meetings via phone conference because everybody is in different places. We have all of the required members of the IEP meeting call in on a designated conference line at our office. Parents and students also have the luxury of using Adobe Connect for IEP meetings. In this case, parents log in and we can share the IEP with everyone who comes into the Adobe Connect room — the structure is similar to a webinar presentation. Of course, we always invite our parents to come into the central office if they want to have a face-to-face meeting.

Q: *How does "school at home" differ from home-school?*

A: I love this question because sometimes parents get confused about the differences between the two. We are a public school, so we follow all state policies including statewide test-taking and attendance procedures. We require our students to attend school for six hours in a 12-hour time span, five days a week. This involves logging onto their computers and completing assignments. We collect data on how much time students are on the computer and how much time it takes for them to complete an assignment.

Also, we want to make sure that the students themselves are actually the ones completing the assignments. So every two weeks, our teachers call the students and might quiz them on a particular assignment. We want to make sure that we keep that conversation and connection going with the student and the family so that if something happens, we can address it.

It is kind of a sticker shock when we get families who are not quite used to the rigor. But they love the flexibility of the school.

Q: *Is the federal government writing policy to address special education in virtual charter schools?*

A: Not that I know of. We are still operating off of the traditional policies and procedures that are written for the brick-and-mortar schools. However, I can say that in Louisiana, conversations are being held. We are talking to our state leaders — we're kind of setting the tone for virtual schooling in Louisiana and they want to hear from us. The state wants to afford our families and students more educational options. Hopefully, we will have some policy in place in our state, and hopefully that will trickle over on the federal side. ■