Chapter 1.29
Strategies for Teaching Students with Exceptional Needs in Cyber Schools

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ABSTRACT

Cyber schools for K-12 students are growing in number. It is vital that appropriate strategies are devised in order to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. The PA Cyber Charter School serves 353 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 to 12th grade (Borja, 2005). A cyber charter school is ultimately responsible for demonstrating that the goals for the school and, therefore, for the students 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.

Pennsylvania now has 11 cyber charter schools (a 12th has applied for a state charter) with more than 10,000 students enrolled statewide, an increase of 50% over the previous school year in which 6,885 students were enrolled in cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania, accounting for about 45% of all charter school students, according to state figures (Chute, 2005).

Miron, Nelson, and Risley (2002, p.163) 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 previously were 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.

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 (2001) national study suggests that a slightly smaller percentage of students with disabilities is enrolled in charter schools (8%) than in public schools (11%). 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 couldn't 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 et al. (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 himself or 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.

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