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NATIONAL NEWS

Training Educators for Virtual Special Education

Education Week

By: Michelle R. Davis

August 22, 2011

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/24/01edtech-profdev.h31.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/24/01edtech-profdev.h31.html?tkn=SNUFC6LOYbca%2FiEARdfs9kKPgcqA3tudYdqt&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-EL0811-EWH)

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Special education teachers who work with students in a virtual environment often need professional development that goes beyond traditional offerings to find tools and strategies that work without face to face communication.

For many online schools, that challenge means providing special education teachers with intense professional development, often weekly, to make sure they're meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Such professional study usually takes place online, using Web-based conferencing tools and virtual classrooms, during a teacher's work day. The presentations—on everything from assistive technology to online individualized education programs, or IEPs—also can be recorded and accessed during a teacher's off hours.

But whether online or face-to-face, professional development is a critical component in supporting special education students in an online classroom, said Maurice E. Flurie, the chief executive officer of the 4,800-student [Commonwealth Connections Academy](#), based in Harrisburg, Pa.

"In a brick-and-mortar school, student populations are more stable, and teachers have more time to determine what a student's gaps and learning needs might be," Mr. Flurie said, referring to his sometimes-transient population of students. "In our environment, we need to be able to identify student needs sooner."

Tailored Training

To start with, virtual special education teachers must have the same training that all new online teachers need, said Carrie McClain, the assistant director of special education for the 8,500-student [Georgia Cyber Academy](#), in Atlanta. About 10 percent of the school's K-10 enrollment is categorized as special education students.

But special education teachers in a virtual setting need to go beyond what online teachers in general learn. They must be taught to conduct an IEP online, for example, to take advantage of all their communication tools, and to be aware of a wide range of assistive technologies and how best to incorporate them into an online curriculum. While parents can request in-person meetings and a school will comply, discussions often take place online or over the phone.

In professional-development sessions, Georgia Cyber Academy's special education teachers learn about the various applications that allow them to share an IEP document with other teachers and parents, how to change the instructional model of a class based on a student's needs, and how to create a behavior-intervention plan that fits into a virtual school, Ms. McClain said.

"A behavior intervention plan from a brick-and-mortar setting that says the student needs to work on keeping his hands to himself in the hall is no longer appropriate," she said. "We need to make adjustments based on the change in the learning environment."

Much of that professional development is done through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous web conferencing sessions for teachers, sometimes featuring experts and guest speakers. During the last school year, special education teachers at Georgia Cyber Academy received between 15 minutes and an hour of professional development per week, Ms. McClain said. For special education teachers employed by Connections Academy, an online education company based in Baltimore that operates 23 virtual schools in 22 states, there are weekly professional-development opportunities as well, said Marjorie M. Rofel, the senior director of student services. Special education teachers new to teaching at Connections Academy schools also enroll

in the company's special education "teacher university" for their first two years.

"It's targeted professional development for new virtual teachers," Ms. Rofel said. About 11 percent of Connections Academy students have IEPs, she said. Such plans are required under federal law for students with disabilities.

The university covers a variety of topics, including assistive technology and supplementary instructional programs, and helps teachers form an online cohort of colleagues to use as a sounding board, Ms. Rofel said.

Connections Academy's professional development for special education teachers typically takes place during the work day. Because of the way online teachers work, schools don't have to shut down or find substitutes when teachers are in a professional-development session, Ms. Rofel said.

"They do it during their regular day, often around lunchtime, so they can sit at their desks," she said. Since it takes place during their work hours, teachers do not receive additional salary or stipends for their professional development work, she said.

Year-Round Help

Special education teacher Kathryn P. Weaver said she gets year-round professional development at Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania. The special education team meets weekly, in person, to discuss new policies and regulations. The school also provides themed topical training. During the past school year, it focused on how to support students' transition from school to work, from school to higher education, and to independent living.

Because the school is virtual, there's not much opportunity to provide hands-on job training for students with particular needs—for example, to teach a cooking class aimed at independent living, Ms. Weaver said. But the professional development she received got her thinking about what she could do to address the issue.

She was able to link students to local social services and job-training programs. She discovered methods of connecting students to college disability offices. The professional development also inspired Ms. Weaver to challenge her students to think about money management, how to calculate a tip, and how to get around their communities on their own.

Ms. Weaver presented her 8th grade students with an activity that awarded them \$200 in virtual money and asked them to plan a three-course dinner party for eight friends. Using a grocery store website, students calculated food costs and planned "upscale" parties, she said. The following week, she gave them the same challenge, but limited their budget to \$50.

"A lot of students realized that here are their math skills at work in the real world," she said.

For Cindi Madej, a special education consultant with the [Columbiana County Educational Service Center](#), based in Lisbon, Ohio, the lens through which she views professional development is a bit different.

Her organization provides services to 11 school districts, and she seeks out professional learning opportunities for special education teachers who teach in a face-to-face environment but are looking for more online resources.

"School districts are having to meet accountability standards for students with disabilities," Ms. Madej said, "and they're having this frustration, for example, that a student with normal intelligence is not meeting the language requirements based on a linguistic" disability.

Districts are seeking out technologies that might help, such as software that might read text to a student. During the past school year, Ms. Madej brought in an expert who presented teachers with an array of technologies, including iPods, hand-held devices, and educational software and trained them on their use with special education students.

Teachers received in-person training on the technologies and had access to a website with shared resources. The teachers developed a plan to use the new technology and chose to focus on four students with learning disabilities. The teachers were also trained to collect and analyze data, Ms. Madej said.

The center plans to conduct similar professional development with special education teachers in other districts.

"Teachers were so eager to sign up this year based on feedback from teachers last year," Ms. Madej said. "When they found some successes, they were spurred on by it."

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Exclusive: Cheat on the FCAT? South Fort Myers High student says no

Florida News-Press

By: Mary Wozniak

August 22, 2011

<http://www.news-press.com/article/20110823/NEWS0104/108210384/Exclusive-Cheat-FCAT-South-Fort-Myers-High-student-says-no>

South Fort Myers High School senior Jada Bryant-Roland has been waiting all summer to hear from the state Department of Education whether her academic record has been cleared, or smeared.

The decision is in: Smeared.

The 17-year-old learned Thursday the state was upholding its invalidation of her Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test because of possible cheating.

Bryant-Roland, her stepfather Alan Reinmiller and her mother Deborah Reinmiller said they were told their appeal was denied, not because there is enough evidence to prove she was cheating, but because there isn't enough evidence to prove she didn't. The apparent guilty-until-proven-innocent policy is the result of the state using a forensic testing company for the first time this spring to check the 4 million tests taken.

An honor student the last two years, Bryant-Roland is one of 50 students in Lee County and about 7,500 across the state accused of cheating on the FCAT, the key to their educational future. A student that doesn't pass won't graduate.

The suspect scores were invalidated and the students left in limbo wondering where they stand academically.

Bryant-Roland spent the summer taking, and scoring well on, the SAT for college entrance, looking into possible colleges and applying to several. Her goal is to become a pediatrician.

She is afraid her future is ruined because she will be stigmatized as a cheater.

No one will say what the ramifications are for students who stand accused.

The Lee County School District won't comment on the situation.

"Because this involves a specific student, all of the information surrounding it, including the investigation, is considered part of the student's record and, therefore, cannot be provided and/or discussed publicly," Joseph Donzelli, district spokesman, wrote in a Friday email. "Student records are exempt from public disclosure."

The state Department of Education did not respond to a list of emailed questions, despite requests over three days.

However, the Lee school district appears to have washed its hands of the case now that the state has weighed in, emails between school officials and Alan Reinmiller show.

"Now the Dept. of Education has made its decision, I do not know how to help you further," Richard Itzen, district director of the Department of Accountability, Research and Continuous Improvement, wrote Reinmiller on Friday.

"At this point, it seems that questions regarding the Florida DOE decision should be directed to them."

The parents are upset because they believe they and their daughter were not kept informed throughout the decision-making process.

"I don't think it's fair," Deborah Reinmiller said. "I think we should have been more involved in the process from the start."

Did Bryant-Roland cheat?

"No, I did not," she said.

She said she doesn't even know how students could cheat during the test. Texting would be obvious. Monitors walk up and down the aisles. The minute a cell phone rings, the test is taken away from the student and invalidated.

But a computer program says statistically, she and the rest of the accused students most likely cheated.

Testing threshold

There are lots of ways to do it, said Steve Addicott, vice president of Caveon Test Security of Salt Lake City, Utah, the state's consultant.

"These days students are able to text without looking," he said. "I don't have to be sitting next to someone peering over their shoulder."

There also are ways for tests to be pirated and end up on the Internet, for students to pay for answers or have a proxy take the test for them, he said.

The company has worked with 14 states, and each has its own testing threshold, Addicott said.

The state education department decided to invalidate the test scores "of students whose results were so similar that they exceeded the threshold of one chance in a trillion when tests are taken normally," states a department memo on the student invalidation and appeals process.

Bryant-Roland believes the school stood behind her. Her teacher told Bryant-Roland she didn't think the student cheated.

This was Bryant-Roland's third time taking the reading part of the test. She has passed the math portion.

Her stepfather said she has test anxiety and both parents tried to coach her out of it.

"I know my daughter. I've watched her from year to year do better," Deborah Reinmiller said.

Separate Interviews

School and FCAT officials interviewed Bryant-Roland in June with her mother present. Bryant-Roland said she was told her test was similar to the incorrect answers — not the correct answers — on another student's test.

That student was interviewed separately.

Bryant-Roland said the student was sitting several rows away in the back of the room, on a diagonal from her seat.

The interview began with a questionnaire with queries such as: Did she talk to anybody about the test answers?

"After that we went to a room, just me and my mom," Bryant-Roland said. "They asked us even more questions."

Did she know the other student?

"They basically asked me whether I knew him enough to cheat off him," Bryant-Roland said. She knew the student's name but not the student.

Other questions: Where was the teacher? Were there distractions in the room?

"When I was in the interview, I kept asking them, how did this work?" Deborah Reinmiller said. "They explained to me about a flag that goes up."

She responded, "Well what happens when you're wrong? You're wrong this time and I want to know how you are going to fix this. Are we going to have to roll over or do we have any rights?"

School officials told the student and her mother they would ask the state to investigate her case.

But they also told her she had a better chance of being struck by lightning than having the two tests turn out that similar.

"They also told me she had to take the test over in October," Alan Reinmiller said. He didn't understand why when no final decision had been made.

Will keep fighting

After the interview, there was silence for two months while the family waited and worried.

Reinmiller finally sent an email Aug. 8, the first day of school, to Rita Effing, district testing coordinator, demanding something be done and asking her to explain the process to clear his stepdaughter or confirm she was cheating.

Effing wrote back, telling him his stepdaughter's name was on a list of students whose test invalidations would be appealed, explained briefly how the process works and the deadlines involved.

"The only way Jada knows that is because I spoke to somebody. Nobody took the time to tell her," Reinmiller said.

Now that the verdict is in, Reinmiller wants to know if any other accused students were successful in getting their tests validated.

"In terms of State appeal decisions, as far as I know, they have not released the majority of decisions at this time and I am not aware of successful appeals," Itzen wrote him Friday.

"You know, I'm sitting here wondering about the rest of the students," Deborah Reinmiller said. "You know they (education department) probably don't even have the manpower to investigate each one of their cases. They came up with the system, the computer said that, and that's it."

Alan Reinmiller said he will fight the state's decision.

"I will not stop, until I prove her innocence, even though she has never been found guilty," he wrote to Effing on Thursday. "I have at least 20 good years of life left to be a squeaky wheel."

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STATE NEWS

California charter school association gets \$15-million grant

Los Angeles Times

By: Howard Blume

August 23, 2011

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-charters-20110823.0.4517250.story>

The grant is the largest yet to the California charter schools group and the biggest of its kind from the nonprofit set up by the founders of the Wal-Mart Corp.

The state charter school association has received a \$15-million grant from the Walton Family Foundation to add 20,000 more charter school students in Los Angeles and 100,000 statewide.

The grant, scheduled to be announced Tuesday, is the largest by far to the California Charter Schools Assn., and also the largest of its kind from the nonprofit established by the founders of the Wal-Mart Corp.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has more charter schools — 183 last year — and more charter-school students than any school system in the country, and that growth spurt is poised to continue despite countervailing pressure from reduced education funding and political resistance from teacher unions and other critics.

The charter association "has been very effective in a very difficult political environment where there's very well-organized opposition to the growth of charter schools," said Jim Blew, who heads the foundation's education efforts. "And creating this growth with the restricted funding levels of schools in California also is very difficult."

Charters are independently managed and free from some of the restrictions that govern traditional public schools, including having to abide by a district's union contracts with teachers and other employees.

Wal-Mart has opposed unionization in its own operations, but the Arkansas-based foundation does not require charters that it supports to do likewise, although most charters are non-union. The foundation also supports providing government funding to allow low-income students to attend private schools; such publicly funded vouchers are not legal in California.

"We are most concerned about low-income areas where the education system is not working," Blew said. "The goal is explicitly to create competition to incentivize all public schools to improve.

"The growth of charter schools in Los Angeles has created a different dynamic," he said.

The foundation for the first time is funding initiatives within L.A. Unified itself, contributing about \$2 million over the last two years toward developing a teacher- and school-evaluation system that includes student performance on standardized tests.

The three-year charter growth targets, if successful, would result in up to 18% of L.A. Unified students — about 110,000 — attending charter schools. As charters have hired more teachers, the membership clout of United Teachers Los Angeles has shrunk, with an increasing number of union-contracted teachers losing work at traditional schools.

About 60% of the charter association's \$15-million budget derives from philanthropy, including from the Michael and Susan Dell, Bill & Melinda Gates, Fisher and Broad foundations. Member schools pay \$5 per student, and the association also charges fees for some services.

The association helps entrepreneurs start charter schools, lobbies government bodies and provides ongoing support to charters in such arenas as legal defense, increasing funding and demanding public facilities for charters.

Equally important, said Chief Executive Jed Wallace, is either improving or shutting down low-quality charters. "We're very serious about this issue of quality," he said.

The Obama administration has praised the group for supporting the closing of low-performing charter schools.

More charters, however, need to reflect the association's rhetoric, said Dean Vogel, president of the California Teachers Assn. He said too many charters are not equally accessible to disabled students or those learning English, a problem that still needs to be resolved.

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NYC Program Means Real Public School Choice for Students

Education Week

By: Thomas Toch and Neil Dorosin

August 19, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/19/01toch.h31.html?tkn=OTSFifdytrLVBwORnP4hy4MV6FfrkjJYNpnr&cmp=clip-edweek>

In a few weeks, 98 percent of New York City's 79,000 rising 9th graders will be entering public high schools that they've selected from more than 650 options throughout the city's five boroughs.

New York's ambitious high school selection system isn't perfect. But it has liberated thousands of students from failing neighborhood high schools, transformed the city's high school principals from bureaucrats to entrepreneurs, improved the perception of public schools among middle-class families, and helped raise the city's graduation rates. At a time of renewed advocacy of private school vouchers, New York's choice system is a model strategy for harnessing the power of the marketplace to better serve students and stimulate improvement through competition within public education.

Of the small number of cities that permit students to select their public schools, most make school choice optional and relatively few families participate. New York City has taken the bold step of requiring rising 9th graders to select their high schools, a strategy that has created a far more vibrant public school marketplace than exists anywhere else in the country.

As one measure of the scale of the system, over a single fall weekend last year, more than 32,000 families attended an annual citywide school fair at Brooklyn Tech to talk to representatives of hundreds of high schools.

The number of New York high school options has tripled in a generation, thanks in part to former Chancellor Joel I. Klein's replacement of many of the city's dysfunctional comprehensive high schools with smaller alternatives, and today students are able to select schools with themes ranging from animal science to architecture, hands-on engineering, film, Latin, and expeditionary learning.

Some of the schools are selective. [According to *The New York Times*](#), about 30 percent of city high schools screen students using grades, test scores, attendance, and other measures. Some give preference to in-borough residents. But half the seats in many high schools and all of the slots in others are open to any student, making New York's choice system more egalitarian than many. (There's a separate system for admission to Brooklyn Tech and seven other elite magnet high schools, as well as auditions for the city's famous performing-arts high school.)

And New York's brand of public school choice is fairer, less bureaucratic, and more transparent than other models, thanks to the introduction of a new school-selection system in 2004. School choice started in the city in the 1970s as a way to counter middle-class flight from public schools. But the school-selection process dragged out over three rounds of bidding over many months (sometimes into the beginning of the following school year), gave the final say in admissions to principals (thereby opening the process to political influence), and left 35,000 students in schools they hadn't selected, damaging the district's reputation among the very middle-class families it sought to recruit.

But in 2004, school officials launched a new choice process featuring a computerized matching model [designed](#) by Harvard economics professor Alvin Roth. (Alvin Roth and Neil are co-founders of the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, a nonprofit organization.)

Derived from matching markets in medical residencies, kidney donations, sororities, law clerkships, and Internet auctions, the new system requires students to select a dozen schools; the mathematical formula behind the system eliminates waiting lists and the opportunity for favoritism (the school system's computer rather than principals now has the final say on where students go) and greatly increases students' chances of attending schools they've selected.

The number of students attending schools they hadn't chosen plummeted from 35,000 in 2003 to 790 in 2009. This past spring, more than 65,000 of the city's rising 9th graders were granted one of their top five choices for 2011-12, and after the completion of a supplemental-selection round, [only a small fraction](#) had to be administratively placed because they couldn't be matched with schools they wanted.

The percentage of students placed in a top-five choice in the first round was down a bit this year—for a good reason. Choice officials included graduation rates in school profiles for the first time, and students applied in greater numbers to schools awarding more diplomas. That's no surprise. Markets with informed consumers tend to work more efficiently, rewarding the best products and providing buyers with the most value.

Measures such as the "A-F" school rating system introduced under Chancellor Klein give New Yorkers information that's often lacking in other cities. And the annual extravaganza at Brooklyn Tech is part of a larger communications strategy that includes boroughwide fairs, parent workshops, a 531-page guide, and an extensive website.

But the city's education department needs to continue to expand information on schools and improve its performance in helping students navigate the high school selection process. The system currently relies heavily on undertrained and overextended middle school counselors who often work with 350 students each. Strengthening the counseling corps and launching a broader communications campaign about the choice system would reduce students' missteps under the program, including applying only to a handful of schools or to selective schools beyond their reach.

A core challenge is ensuring that there are enough strong high schools in the city for every student. Klein's efforts to close failing comprehensive high schools (using the results of the annual high school selection process to both target failing schools and create popular alternatives) helped on this front. But there are more dysfunctional neighborhood high schools to close, and a number of the city's new, smaller options aren't yet rigorous enough.

Still, New York City has demonstrated that there can be a vibrant marketplace of schools that leverages choice and change—within the public school sector.

Thomas Toch is a co-founder of Education Sector, a Washington think tank, and co-author of "Matchmaking," a report on the New York City public school choice system. Neil Dorosin is a co-founder and executive director of the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, a nonprofit consulting company that helps school districts design choice systems; Dorosin was the director of the New York City high school choice program from 2004 to 2007.

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New year, new hopes for D.C. schools

Washington Post

By: Editorial Board

August 22, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/new-year-new-hopes-for-dc-schools/2011/08/22/gIQA7qHPXJ_story.html

“MUCH TO CELEBRATE, and even much more work to do.” That was the apt observation of D.C. Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson as she welcomed students to the start of a new school year. Gleaming new facilities, schools fully staffed and a seamless opening day stood in refreshing contrast to those sad years not too long ago when the first day of school in the District meant chaos and confusion. Such progress, though, cannot mask the daunting challenges still facing the system; more than half of its students are deficient in basic skills, and that must be a spur for even more vigorous changes.

Monday was the start of school for 45,000 children in the public school system and another 30,000 who attend public charter schools. Thousands of volunteers worked over the weekend to help ready the schools, and across the city students were welcomed into facilities that had undergone transformational renovations. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan was on hand with Ms. Henderson and Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) to set the tone of possibility.

Less visible but no less significant are the efforts underway to improve classroom instruction and make the curriculum more rigorous. Foremost here is the start of the transition to more demanding [Common Core State Standards](#) aimed at better engaging students and boosting their achievement. Also being launched is better professional development for teachers and staff.

It's been five years since the District upended its dysfunctional system of education, abolishing the old school board and making schools the mayor's responsibility. Though much heavy lifting was done by former chancellor Michelle Rhee — closing schools, overhauling the administration, weeding out bad teachers — it is clear that reform is still a work in progress. Just look at [the latest test scores](#) showing fewer than 50 percent of public school system students proficient in reading and math.

Ms. Henderson, partner and heir to the reforms started by her former boss, makes no secret of the need for continued “radical changes.” Accordingly, she is right to welcome as a potential “[game changer](#)” the Gray administration's initiation of an [independent study](#) of how the two tiers of education — the public school system and public charter schools — serve the city.

That there are too many schools for the number of students is pretty well established; so is the fact that a lot of schools simply aren't up to snuff. Why not undertake an effort that encourages the growth of schools able to provide quality education while getting rid of those that fail? Whether those schools turn out to be charter or part of the traditional system is inconsequential compared to the urgent need to offer every child a decent education.

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