Virtual Special Education: Issues and Answers

EAST: Hello, I'm Bill East, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education or NASDSE. I want to welcome you to our fourth conference in NASDSE's 2010-2011 Professional Development Series. Speaking for Bambi Lockman, NASDSE's president and our board of directors, I want to thank the many states that are participating in our series this year. I also want to thank the Pennsylvania state director of special education, John Tommasini and James Palmiro, director of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network for making it possible for NASDSE to bring this conference to you from WQED station in Pittsburgh.

Our conference coordinator for this year is Christine Cashman. The topic of this conference is Virtual Special Education: Issues and Answers. As we all know, technology is having a tremendous impact on education in so many ways. One trend is developing quickly across our country is providing education with a virtual delivery system. While virtual special education has been successful, there are many issues that we need to address.

This conference will feature the successful North Carolina Virtual Public School. The special education process including compliance and accountability issues in special education will be features. Now I'd like to introduce you to our outstanding presenters that we have for you today. First of all, Mary Watson, Mary is the director of the exceptional children division with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. She is a former NASDSE board member, and was president in the 2008 and 2009 school year. She has experience in the State Education Agency as section chief for monitoring an audit among other things.

She has been a general and special education teacher at the preschool, elementary, and middle school levels. She has a BA in elementary education from Appalachian State University and a master's in elementary education, special education, and administration. And she is known as an outstanding national education leader. Thank you so much for being with us today, Mary.

WATSON: Thank you, Bill. Thank you.

EAST: And to my left is Bryan Setser. Bryan is the executive director for the North Carolina Virtual Public School and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Since he has started the public virtual school in North Carolina, the standards and test scores have been rising dramatically.

He's a member of a number of committees and boards. I'll name two or three of those, the International Association for Online Learning State Committee, the National Virtual Leaders Alliance, Leadership for Innovation Committee of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina School Technology Commission. But what you really need to know is he's been on the firing line just like many of you as a principal and assistant superintendent.

Bryan was a presenter at the 2010 NASDSE Annual Conference, and our members are still talking about the great job he did there in educating the state directors of special education about virtual education. Welcome to our conference, Bryan.

SETSER: Thank you, Bill.

EAST: We are going to use this format for today. There are ten questions that I will ask our panelist to address. We will talk about virtual education, what does it look like? What does North Carolina's model specifically look like? How is it different from other models that we see in other states? How do services like on a daily basis? We've had in our satellite series, our professional development series, conferences on response to intervention, a response to instruction. An important question nowadays is how does that happen in a virtual environment? So we'll address that.

We'll also address what technology is needed to make it happen. And for those of you that are special education administrators and are so concerned about accountability and data collection, we'll address accountability issues in this environment. We'll look at nonacademic factors, such as providing related services and sports and clubs and so forth. Then we'll talk about how important is it to have parents onboard, and what should they know and be able to do as they get involved with the program?

And then one important area for special educators is having dispute resolutions in the special education process. So we'll spend some time talking about that. And then we'll end our conference by asking the presenters to talk about their experience, what has it meant to them, and what recommendations would they have for schools and for districts and for states that are considering starting a virtual public school? So that's the format for our conference today. We're going to start by going to Mary and let her introduce the process that she and Bryan and others in North Carolina used to get this started. So, Mary?

WATSON: Thank you, Bill.

EAST: Thank you.

WATSON: We're very fortunate in North Carolina to have North Carolina Virtual School. North Carolina Virtual opened in 2007 with Executive Director Dr. Bryan Setser, and immediately, we learned that students with disabilities were signing up. Of the thousands of students enrolled early on in North Carolina Virtual, a large percentage of those were students with disabilities. Our east local exceptional children directors meet in regions across the state and also have statewide meetings, and Bryan was invited to speak at some of these meetings. And we heard early on of some of the successes of the access students have in a virtual environment.

As we looked at that a little more and talked to Bryan, Bryan and I would meet at certain, at state meetings and discuss what's happening with students with disabilities in the virtual school. I was just really excited about what I was hearing. And you'll hear more about his background and sensitivity to the needs of all learners in any environment. So we started discussing a partnership with our special ed division and

the Virtual School to provide access to the general education curriculum to students with disabilities at the high school level so that our struggling learners and students with cognitive disabilities would have access to general education courses at the high school level, leading to the regular diploma.

So we pulled together a group to start looking at the courses and the delivery of such courses in a virtual environment. And in that group, we had virtual educators, general educators, and special educators who work with these children on a daily basis to look at our essential standards and develop courses beginning with algebra, English, and biology. We piloted those in the fall and just had success beyond what even, what we were expecting with students. And you'll hear more about that in our presentation today.

EAST: Okay. Thank you, Mary. As I said, we're going to address ten questions, and these are questions that we thought you might want to hear as you go about your work in local school systems and across the states, across the country. We hope we'll answer a lot of the questions that you have, but we know we won't get to everything. So if you have questions after this conference, if you use the NASDSE website at www.nasdse.org, and send us your question, and we'll try to get it answered for you. Okay. Let's go right into our questions then, and we'll, I'll address this one to, Bryan will start us off. What is education in the virtual environment?

SETSER: Well, I would start my comments by saying that like many members in our audience, I was very new to that question in 1994. I had my first Internet connection, certainly a computer at home, and the school system in which I was working had asked several of us to launch into a grant to teach teachers how to use laptops. Apparently, a lot of kids were starting to use this technology. And if you remember around that time, we were also entering into the standards movement in education. Folks wanted to really make sure that we were assessing state tests and national tests.

So to do that work, I think I begin my comments by really beginning with the fundamental question that was circulating at that time. And it's basically, we were asking this question in my classrooms and the schools that I was experiencing this question in, can all students learn? And many people at that time were, well, not if they had a disability, or not if they are from a disenfranchised group, or not if they don't have parent support.

But today, if you ask that question to members of our audience, 100% would stand up and say, absolutely, all kids can learn. Now that may be a result of the Accountability Movement that may be a result that people finally believe that. But what's interesting, when I go out in online environments today is we add one word to that question. Can all students learn online? Now we get the same responses, believe it or not, that we got in the mid-'90s. Some say, well, it depends. They've got to be highly motivated students.

Or maybe if they're from exceptional children's background, they're not going to do as well as a regular-ed student. I'm here to tell your audience, I firmly believe, and I've seen the powerful results of all students learning online. So one of the exciting things to work with NASDSE and with you organization, Bill, is that we get the

opportunity to talk about what this looks like for kids who are getting unprecedented access to the Internet.

First of all, we have students who access computer Internet courses during the school day. They do that through our courses at North Carolina Virtual Public School, they do that through software programs, and they do that through local virtual organizations. So I think one of the things in answering that question is how do students access this content during the school day? In a classroom, before school, during a career and technical education lab as we're going through a lunch period, those are some of the ways that students are accessing the material.

But what's really been exciting in recent years is these digital natives, these young children, who are Skyping with their grandparents or who are, own Facebook and sharing interactive video chats. They're expecting that when they enter the schoolhouse door. So what's happening in parents are going out and saying, okay, a prerequisite, as we found in the National Technology Plan recently, is a computer. We've got to get the access out there.

We've got to have a device, whether that's a hand-held, a mobile device, so we're accessing these environments outside of the school day as well. And one of the really exciting frontiers to sort of put a cap on this question and look at terms of how people are going to access it in the future is on mobile devices.

We should have the ability for students to learn 24/7, so they're not just dependent on their exceptional children's teacher at the schoolhouse, that they can enter into exciting partnerships like Mary and I have done in North Carolina, where they access the expertise of the exceptional children's teacher during the school day in combination with our virtual teacher and then after hours or on a portable device, at any time where their learning is convenient for them.

EAST: Mary, you have anything to add here?

WATSON: I'd just add to that the access and again to reiterate that students have exceeded our expectations in what they're able to do. As Bryan pointed out, students who have grown up in the digital age, even students with disabilities with limiting physical handicaps sometimes, are able to access in a digital way that we, that exceed our expectations.

EAST: Okay. Good. Well, my second question is kind of related to the first, and, Mary, you addressed a little bit of it in your introductory comments. And the second question is, what has been North Carolina's experience in virtual education? So I'd like for you to address, you know, how did it begin? How did it progress from your earlier time in '94 up until the present? How is it funded? How is it different, you know, from the traditional program that you have there? So here it is. What has been North Carolina's experience? Bryan, do you want to start off again?

SETSER: Absolutely. In the summer of 2007, I was an assistant superintendent in a bedroom community to Charlotte, North Carolina. And the virtual school was launched as an idea by then Lieutenant Governor Beverly Purdue and our current governor now. That first summer that we launched, we had mixed results, and one of the real

successful stories in our state was a district I was fortunate enough to be a part of with current Kentucky's Commissioner of Education Terry Holliday. One of the reasons we were successful is we never thought that virtual education was the solution in and of itself for our students.

We felt like a blended model was, where our expertise at the schoolhouse could support what was going on online. So even before the term blended learning was in vogue, we were doing that with strong student support level plans at the district level. And therefore, I was overseeing principals with their student support plans at the building level. When I came onboard in the fall of 2007, we really launched a concerted effort to ask three things of districts.

We wanted to know what's working well in the virtual environment, what do you see that needs improvement, and how can we help you with student support and blended learning? The answers to those questions really led us to what was going on with our courses. One of the things I recognized very early was that we had a lot of old school virtual going on, and that's an interesting term in 2007. But a lot of people thought that just going online and pointing and clicking was online learning.

And it was deeply impersonal, and people thought of it as a way to manage information but not to actually learn. So early on, we said that's not how we want to engage students or teachers or anybody in our environment. North Carolina's model really became about how to mix synchronous learning, meaning real time, with an instructor, with asynchronous learning, meaning when the students were on their own in accessing content and providing information. How could be bridge those two worlds?

So we invested in products like avatars and collaborative tools, and we talked about student experience online. We got feedback from our students. We got feedback from our teachers and our educators. And we changed the platform. From 2008 and 2009, our environment became one that was two-way. You hear the term a lot of times, Web 2.0. And what that essentially means is information comes to you, but how do you interact with it? Now this is commonplace in 2011. Many of our audience members love to book their planes online. They love to shop online.

So why can't learning happen online? Well, it certainly can. So what we're finding is as these environments have improved and changed, so has North Carolina's model. Recently, we're working with companies to put our applications and our software on iPads or Netbooks. Why would I want to purchase four or five different units on real dissected animals in anatomy and physiology, for example, if I could have the hands-on experience with one or two examples, and I could repeat that example over and over again on a device?

What if I miss school? What if I had multiple snow days, and I couldn't take part of that anatomy lesson? Virtual education allows you to refresh, and as Toffler says, learn, unlearn, and relearn. That's what we all should be doing throughout the course of our life. Other things that started to happen with our model is we started to think about simulations and gaming and how we could practice things in an online environment. I would much rather have a student kill the patient online than in real life.

So what we're doing is modeling lessons after what we're seeing at companies like Lockheed Martin, who are investing heavily in how to prepare nurses for this online environment. The same lessons need to happen at the education level. So our model is one that is blended. We depend heavily on student support from the local LEA, and

we depend heavily on the tools to give students multiple experiences to practice learning at all times.

WATSON: Bill, I was one of those educators that thought of online or virtual learning as the early models Bryan was showing in the example, that it was point and click and read. And I thought that would only pertain, I was one of those believers that thought it would only be for certain students. And as I listened to him, as he was talking to our special ed directors about opportunities for students, for all students, and saw some of these screen shots that you've seen with the avatars and the real-life environments and some of the opportunities for one-on-one assistance with the student.

But they wouldn't have to raise their hand where all children were looking. They were in a virtual environment. They could receive assistance, supplementary aid services, sometimes one-on-one tutoring in a lesson, and no one else would know that specifically except for the student. I got really excited about the potential for our children.

EAST: I had a couple of follow-up questions that I know people might be interested in. First of all, I know North Carolina is a pretty good-sized state, and but I'm interested in how fast has this grown? You mentioned starting in 2007. How many students are you dealing with now, and how is that going? Is that trend toward fast growth?

SETSER: North Carolina is the fastest growing state virtual school in the country. We started that first summer with 4,000 kids. Now we serve over 60,000 unique students and almost 80,000 course enrollments. Now there's a distinction there in that students can take multiple courses, so that explains the numbers. But I think what's important to understand is as parents and students begin to learn this way, our marketing really, the core of it was word of mouth because student would have this great experience with engagement, with flexibility, and they had rigor in their courses.

They were, you know, succeeding on state-level tests. They were succeeding on advance-placements tests. And they began to share those stories with their families. And then those families came to the schoolhouse and wanted that kind of flexibility. So we're really a partner in the state of North Carolina in that way. What's been exciting for students with exceptionalities is that as we've begun to work in these environments, if I need to do a modification where we're doing dictate describe, we can archive those lessons in our environment.

If I need to do proximal seating, I can have individual e-tutor sessions set up for that student during a session. If I need to have a student work on a certain modified plan, in our simulated environments or in the environments we're creating with mobile application, students can have their education customized. So to that extent, what I think we're learning in this virtual environment is that exceptional children's divisions around the country as well as virtual divisions around the country have the same mission, educate all students in multiple ways.

EAST: You know, a person new to virtual education might think, and you're talking about avatars and other technologies that, well, we could never do that. We don't have the millions and millions of dollars that it might take. How have the two of you seen the

cost of virtual education, has it been manageable, or is it most of the technology already there anyway? Would you address that, the cost? Because I know that's going to be a question on everybody's mind.

WATSON: I'm going to let Bryan take that one.

SETSER: I think there's two important distinctions. Much like in the face-to-face environment around instructional materials, you can pay a lot of money for gurus. You can pay a lot of money for textbooks and consumables. Or you can figure out ways to train the trainer and build capacity of your own staff.

In the virtual environment, there are software programs certainly. There are teacher-led programs, which is a cost. There are programs that offer freeware, what we call open applications, like Google or things that we're seeing across the university setting, like Khan's Academy, a young man out of MIT that decided he was going to put lessons online, and anybody could access them for free.

But I call this approach to money the two ships, meaning scholarship and leadership. It takes educators to do the research and read and understand what's having the impact for the relative cost of value. And finally it takes leaders to execute that within the budget they have. I think it's a misnomer that on its surface, virtual ed costs less, but with the right leadership, you can leverage resources in a way you never have. And I'll give you an example.

We might train several special education sessions in face-to-face settings and provide mileage and food. Or we might do that in a kickoff scenario and then do the middle sessions virtually and come back in the end face to face. That's the same way we're delivering courses out in the LEA to students. So the costs equal out with the wrong leadership. With the right leadership and partnership, Mary and I have found ways to leverage our resources at the maximum input with really the minimal cost output.

WATSON: Mm-hmm, I would agree.

EAST: All right. Before we get into special education in specific, I got one more follow-up question. You've talked a bit about what it looks like in North Carolina. But I know there are other models. You know, you talk about a combination model of general classroom in a public school, then virtual. What are some other models out there that people need to know about?

SETSER: Sure. I would direct our listeners to the International Association of Online Learning's website. North Carolina, along with 11 other sites are featured in a recent publication. And in this publication, *Lessons Learned from State Virtual Schools*, you'll find supplemental programs like ours that provides on average just two courses of the entire high school build to a student's diploma. In other words, we don't grant a diploma. We provide supplemental services. You'll find other examples, like Florida Virtual or Connections Academy, which leverage a diploma, and the students actually go through the entire process, but they're supported at their home sites as well.

And then you'll find models that are computer-based products that allow students in the home school environment or the charter, the private school environment, to assemble part or all of their diploma online. I think the right conversation is not whether face-to-face or online is better. We need to look at the 2009 report rather from the United States Department of Education that says, you know, when you look at 50 data studies going back 18 years, roughly the age of the Internet, that online learning, particularly when it's blended with face-to-face support is better or above standard with face-to-face results.

So I think when people go down this journey and do some research, iNACOL is a fabulous place to start, but also, you want to contact states and organizations who've done the work. And I think Mary and I have found out in our relationship that you don't present yourself from my vantage point as an EC expert or an exceptional children's expert or from her example as a virtual expert. You partner together to learn from the people who are experiencing this effort.

EAST: Okay. Thanks. Let's go to question three now and focus a bit on special education. How is special education provided in a virtual environment? I believe we're going to Bryan again to start this one.

SETSER: Sure. Well, I think one of the things that I was passionate about very early on was making sure that our teachers, when they were inducted, were taken through an IEP and 504-induction process, not just with documents, but with best practices from other teachers and showcases on the tools that would be used with students. When that teacher is primed in that way, there's an expectation that they interface with the local school. Now what this means is they become a part of the IEP team. So the IEP team prior to virtualization, if you will, often had suggestions on how the virtual, excuse me, how the face-to-face services would be delivered.

Now those expectations might be in a separate classroom. They might be in a separate setting. They might be with a small group. They might be read-aloud instructions. But they were basically coming up with strategies. In my opinion, virtual is the same. It's a strategy, a host of strategies in which to deliver those services. So you're seeing opportunities for students learning the material during the school day off site, and then the teacher is working with them individually on their modifications.

Now how are they doing this? They're working through a host of technology services. They may tape a lesson, send it to a student. They may logon at the same time and walk a student through this scenario or this series of activities that meets their modifications. They may find applications of which there's hundreds on iTunes and other places for special education services, speech to text, text to speech, sign language, you name it.

People are getting really inventive about how they take the services that were offered in the face to face and then translate them to the online environment. And I think Mary can talk about how our teachers have come together so that we have a combination of expertises in the classroom setting itself.

EAST: Would you do that, Mary?

WATSON: Sure. In the virtual environment, special education is truly an individualized education, and I believe that virtual education is individualized for every student, whether they have an IEP or not. There's that much flexibility. And as Bryan alluded to, in the development of some of our courses that were targeted specifically for special education students, we brought together teams, where the teachers team together, the virtual specialists, the special ed specialists, and the content specialists, not always harmoniously.

I don't want to say this was a love fest every day because they had their struggles because they each have their allegiance to their disciplines. But through a summer of working together in these teams, they're very proud of what was produced, and it's been accessible to students and a great outcome in our pilots and now rolling out in actual use.

SETSER: And, Bill, if I may, I want to give an opportunity to hear from one of our teachers.

EAST: Oh, okay.

SETSER: I think, you know, it's one thing for Mary and I to be talking heads and talk about this seems like a great partnership, and we're talking about success. But a lot of times, the people actually doing the work and dealing with that are important to hear from. And this is one of our teachers who's had the opportunity to work with our occupational course of study students in a blended environment.

[Video played]

LESLIE: Hi, my name is Leslie, and I'm a teacher at the OCS Blended Learning Program. I wanted to tell you about the power of this program and the absolute passion that I now have for it. It has literally been the most rewarding experience that I've had in my years of teaching. So each day, we post an announcement that's relevant to the work they're doing in the course, and the students just can't wait to come and see what that brings. They'll do online interactive activities. Sometimes it might be something that they're going to do there in the classroom with their teacher.

Either way, the teachers are reporting to us that they're not only learning the material, but they're loving it. We're hearing from parents that say that their student that may have had a behavior problem before or just didn't enjoy coming to school can't wait to get up and go see what that day brings. Some students are disappointed that after they finish the online course with us, the next course in the sequence might not be an online course because it hasn't been developed yet, and they just are so disappointed that they won't be taking those courses online.

It has been just such a positive thing, and I hope that it continues to grow and reach these students on such a wonderful level because we're taking doubters, people that didn't believe that these students could learn, and we're showing them not only are they learning, but they're learning some of the most difficult concepts for even our regular education kids. Who would've thought they could explain the difference between mitosis and meiosis or calculate the predicted outcome of inherited traits using

Punnett Squares? It's just a fantastic experience, and I hope that it continues for many years to come.

WATSON: Bill, if I may comment on some of the teachers' comments, one thing that I didn't talk about earlier is that over the last year, we have actually raised the standards for our students with significant cognitive disabilities so that they are truly learning the same content standards as all other students. So you heard the teacher using the terms meiosis, and we had doubters, teachers as well as parents, saying that these students could never learn this material.

But through the virtual environment, they have been able to be very successful. I know I keep saying that, but this was also in a year where we raised the standards significantly in all of these courses. It's still taught for many students so that they have a functional approach more applications in the course to real-life experiences, but it is the same content standards that all students are getting in English, biology, and algebra. So it's a true testimony from one of our teachers.

EAST: Well, again, I have a couple of follow-up questions, you might imagine. So that's the content for the general and special education that you're, just been addressing for student needs and related service. How are related services handled in a virtual environment?

WATSON: I'm not ready to speak to related services.

SETSER: I think with . . .

WATSON: No TPT speech.

SETSER: . . . I think with the related services, once we find out from the IEP team how the student is working in the virtual environment, we have a Baldridge quality orientation, where we have pluses and deltas or SWOT analyses that are done by our department chairs. And they're provided backup to the virtual staff. Now what the virtual staff is going to do with that information is they're going to contact the resources both within their own division, meaning at the virtual school, and also within the school environment.

So if we need some sort of assistive device, if we need some sort of supplementary tutor at the school site, if we need some sort of caseworker to be involved on a related service issue, that is organized in such a way that it flows back from the teacher to what we call a distance learning advisor at all of our school sites, and that distance learning advisor is either in the IEP team themselves or communicating with it.

EAST: Oh, okay.

SETSER: So that's one of the ways we handle that process.

EAST: Okay.

WATSON: We are, through some of our universities, providing speech services in a virtual environment, specifically.

EAST: Are there other areas of the special education process that would be different? You know, I'm thinking about, okay, a child is in a virtual education environment getting general education, and he's not doing too well. And so that progresses over time, and there's a consideration that, well, maybe he needs some special help. Maybe he needs a referral to special education. What would happen in that instance?

SETSER: Well, I think going back to that team process, speaking very specifically to it, if we find out in our relationship in our occupational course of study students, for example, where the exceptionality teacher is the teacher who has that expertise, but our math teacher or our science teacher has the instructional part of that teacher of record relationship. Then they're going to communicate on what that specialized service is. So when they find that gap or that deficiency, they're working back at the school site on how to bring that service in.

Now if that needs to be a face-to-face support, sometimes it is. If it needs to be a virtual tutor that appears twice a week to work on speech and enunciation patterns over our technology, that's what it becomes. But it's a common conversation among those two individuals on the resources of both organizations. I think as states are planning, I think as districts are planning out there, part of getting into this environment is defining how that works in each of the courses, learning lessons from what we've dealt with.

What are the price points on those services? What can you expect from a virtual school to provide, and what can be expected from a face-to-face school? And when we run into gaps or challenges, we record, track data. How many of those situations occurred? What's the relative cost of support both human and financial? And then we change that environment for the next semester.

I think one of the points that's often lost in a virtual environment is once you've found a gap or related service issue, and you get time to work on a solution, we have a lot of technology tools where we can bring in experts in any discipline with related services much faster than they can do in the face to face. So think of this much in the same way that districts leverage surrounding districts for help on contracted positions or services. Now you can do that in a virtual way as well.

EAST: You know, as we're thinking about all this as participants in this conference, and we look at, across special education, and as well as general education, I think about what's going on now across this country. And it brings us to the question related to multi-tiered system of supports or some people call it response to intervention or response to instruction. And you ask the question, well, can that process be used in t virtual environment? And if you've had any experience with that, would you address that? Mary, would you start us off with a response?

WATSON: Sure. You mentioned the different terms that are used across the country, with the RTI acronym, responsiveness to instruction is the term that we've used in North Carolina because we believe that it's about instruction and designing appropriate

instruction to meet the students' needs. And as you've heard from Bryan and I talking about virtual, that certainly could be a solution for some students who may be struggling.

Also students who are already in the virtual environment and may need some extra instruction or extra help in a certain topic can receive that through one-on-one assistance or through tutoring in the virtual environment and other methods I'm sure Bryan could address virtually. But it is a part of our system now. Responsiveness to instruction is part of the education system geared at making sure we have that core education for all students, so that all students can be learners. And that's our goal also with virtual education is finding a way that all of our children can be learners.

You know, the premise of the multi-tiered system of support is that 85% of your students should be learning at high levels. And we've certainly seen that virtual is a way that can help us do that in the core instruction, but also for those students who may need extra interventions, who may be in that next 10%, who need some other assistance. They can do it while in virtual or virtual may provide that extra assistance in the brick and mortar school.

SETSER: I would follow up on Mary's comments by saying that it starts with high expectations. I mean, we go into every preparation with our exceptional children's students expecting all of them to achieve and learn. So when that happens, you're going to find out after a four-week period or a six-week period that now you have to personalize or differentiate instruction. So some of the things we use, you know, viewers are seeing this on the screen now.

You can go to iTunes, and you can plug in for special education services on communication, hearing, language development, organizational skills. So one of the things we're doing with response to instruction, when we dip below that 85% or we have a student in that situation, is give them an ongoing personal learning network. Now I'll explain that a little bit further.

The reason Facebook has five million users, the reason people logon every day to find out what people are doing, to share information, to share key links, to share discounts, prices, all of this it because they're coming accustomed to this digital conversion we're all in of having things on our person all the time. It's not just about the screenager generation and their texting. Look at adults. In fact, you know, I would kid you, Bill, and, Mary, when we all walked in this morning, we were looking at our Blackberries or our Palm Pilots.

So it's this expectation that not just e-mail is coming to us, but also applications. That's a big part of it. Also when you're talking about RTI, let's go into one of those applications. So if you need to have an application that is text to speech, or you need to provide personalized instruction through a tutoring program, we're talking about interventions on a daily, hourly, minute basis. We're not talking about a team sitting in a room in the face-to-face and saying, well, we need to do something. And three days later, we enact a plan, and then maybe the plan works.

We're talking about instantaneous responses to the interventions kids need. That's what's exciting about the virtual education environment. And I would take it a step further in that we don't forgo face-to-face support. We really are about sitting down with the kids on their machines, on their devices and saying, you know, how do you get

access to things like chacha.com? That's a website where I can ask it any question for free, and an answer will come back to me.

Who were these questions addressed to before Google? They were addressed to teachers, right? And teachers now are that guide on the side, not the sage on the stage anymore. They're helping students access and consume information. And that's really what it's been about. If you're talking about behavioral interventions, students who spend time in our world engaged with our technologies are better behaved. I can show you countless data points in our system of students who have been engaged with the technology.

I can point to organizations outside of ours, like in Arizona or Arkansas, where they put WiFi on school buses and discipline rates have plummeted. That's not just for exceptional kids. That's for all kids. The message Marc Prensky sent five years ago still rings true today, engage me or enrage me. And I think what this partnership has done is engage these kids, engage these families so that we can respond to interventions on a daily basis.

EAST: You know, I was thinking, it, I listen to both of you talk about, you know, the RTI Movement across the country, and teachers having to learn new skills of documenting the progress of students, sharing that information with all stakeholders including the parents, so there's transparency, and everybody's onboard with where an individual child is in his or her education.

It seems to me that personnel that are already accustomed to the virtual environment and sharing information back and forth anyway would have a leg up on being able to provide data, utilize data with stakeholders, and just the whole transparency issue is, you know, enhanced.

SETSER: Yeah, Mary can certainly comment on this as well, but in 2004, as I was transitioning out as a building-level principal, we were talking about putting IEP online. Well, that is no different than just putting a textbook online. All you're doing is putting text into an environment that's digital. But with the advent of Wikis and Base Camp or SharePoint or all these project management tools, teachers are giving real-time feedback on documents and changes for the needs of students and the needs of stakeholders, and then they're getting updates to their mobile phone on that just happened.

So this notion that we have to wait for student success to happen, or we have to wait for all of our teachers to get it, we are so wired and connected now, that really what we're talking about is checks and balances across the system. So I think what's happened with Mary and I's partnership is Mary will find out information in the face-to-face setting, we'll provide a virtual solution, it works, it doesn't work, we meet again and come up with another strategy or solution. But that's allowable because we're serving partnerships across the state because we have the virtual tools to make those decisions.

WATSON: And naturally, we're the progress monitoring required in the problem solving model and the responsiveness to instruction, just what Bryan was talking about, for teachers to adjust the instruction, they have to have that immediate feedback, and

through the virtual environment, they have that ability to teach and assess, teach and assessing and keep adjusting the instruction for the students.

EAST: All right. Bryan, you've been touching on the next question all day, so we might as well just get to it. And it's all about the technology that's your expertise. You know, what technology must be available in a virtual environment for teachers and students to make this successful? And there's those things that must be available. Then there's all this other things that will, that you been talking about that would enhance the environment. So would you start us out by addressing that question?

SETSER: Well, I think it goes back to philosophy again. I think when I go into school districts, I'll go into districts that allow every technology, and then I'll go into districts that are kind of in between. They're allowing some of it in. They're testing other parts. And then I'll go into districts that believe we shouldn't allow any technology. So one of the centering points, one of the level setting points is to really speak with districts about what are the tech specs you need? Certainly, you need network access, whether that be wired or connected network access or wireless, you need that.

Secondly, you need devices. Kids need to be able to practice an experience these tools. And then third, back to the two ships, right, you need scholarship on the best ways to learn these things, and then you need leadership to go in and schedule and make that applicable for students. Now that's just during the school day.

Outside the school day, you need to do things like take needs assessment inventories of what technology you already have. Why are we buying a bunch of machines, as Clayton Christensen says, don't do in the book *Disrupting Class*? Why not assess where kids are as they've done in Louisiana for Katrina or in Singapore for SARS, and then find out how we need to supplement those machines and devices with our students?

Finally, you need to come up with a hit list of research-based impactful tools and objects for technology. Some, you're going to have to buy. Some you can lease. We're seeing great success, for instance, in a community called Mooresville Graded School District, outside of Charlotte, where they're leasing devices. So students get updated with the recent devices every few years. That's smart leadership. That's smart planning led by their superintendent Mark Edwards and others.

So I think as we're looking at the baseline, it's about three things. What does your network look like, what does your device look like, and what does your curriculum look like? But to tie all that together, some of the fantastic examples are what kids are doing at home. I mean, we have exceptional children students at home playing Wii Fit and working on kinesthetic learning and working on the things that they're doing with interfaces and gaming devices. We have examples where in the palm of our hands, we have more computing power than takes place in some rooms at a school.

So if we look at research by Ruby Payne out of South Carolina that suggests kids from homes that are economically disadvantaged or kids from homes that are, you know, in a situation where they might not initially be a part of the digital divide or the participation gap, they'll buy a smartphone, right? They'll have that tool on them. Are we using that? Are we reaching out to families in that way? So I think we've got to get smarter in districts about the leadership piece and the scholarship piece because

people are doing this work. We need to connect them with other people who are doing it.

EAST: Mary, do you have anything to add?

WATSON: That's all Bryan with the technology. He teaches me every time we're together.

EAST: Okay. Let's go on to our sixth question then. And, you know, I know a big issue, Mary, in special education is how we handle the accountability and reporting requirements. And maybe they're the same in the virtual environment, or maybe they're not. But let's address that a little bit. How do we address the many accountability-reporting requirements of the IDEA?

WATSON: Well, Bill, that is very important, and I've been in special education since the first public law, 94-142, where we did it all by paper and pencil and had registers to keep up with students with paper and pencil, and we've seen it evolve over time. And I take it a little bit to the same comparison as banking. You know, in the '70s and '80s, we went in our car to the bank, got out of our car, walked in, had our checkbook ledger, wrote out a slip, and processed our banking transactions, which are very accountable.

I think of my bank account and the responsibilities of my banker being equally as accountable as we have to be in reporting our data to the federal government and keeping up with the students and their IEPs. And think how that's evolved. I mean, I was one of the folks that said I would never use one of those bankcards. And now, you know, we're point and click and taking care of all of our bank account. And the banker is accountable.

And it's somewhat that way for us in states working with the technology and in virtual environments is we still have the same levels of accountability. We have the responsibility, as you know, with even more reporting requirements than we've ever had, but we have the technology to help us in some ways with that. So I see it as the same. It's just evolving and how we're going to be able to do that. And we're not there yet in North Carolina with all of our reporting requirements, but certainly, through the virtual, we have a better opportunity with that.

SETSER: Yeah, I think I would follow up on this piece by, you know, talking to our viewer audience about, it sounds like we've come up with a lot of solutions, and we certainly have. But you have to be willing in this environment to sort of fail forward, I always tell my staff. You have to try things. You have to pilot them. You have to beta test them just like a great company does. And you have to figure out what's the value proposition? So I think what I would urge the viewers to do is go to any high school today when school's letting out, and watch what happens in the parking lot.

You're going to see that parking lot lit up with cell phones and devices because it's been shut down while they've been at school. And in about an hour's time they're going to network with everybody on what's happening, not just socially, but what requirements there are, what homework is due, who's meeting to do this study group, and we can't assume that everybody's just playing on these devices.

A lot of intellectual capital is being translated on these devices. When you take that to a monitoring perspective during the day, our standard form of monitoring is to meet. But what I'm espousing is you can have an e-learning community, where those meetings don't always have to be from 3:00 to 5:00 after school every day. You can share documents, secure, restricted documents that protect FERPA, that protect FAPE.

You can do all of that online just like the banking industry and the military industry have translated their processes.

EAST: And, Bryan, you were talking about security, and that reminded me of another question I wanted to ask Mary. You know, we're so accountable for security of things, you know, in our states like the state testing program.

WATSON: Right.

EAST: You know, how is that handled in North Carolina? Do these students come into the school to take state tests, or is that done online, or how do you do that?

SETSER: It's back to the partnership, the three models I described earlier. With our model, they take the test on the school site. In other words, we prepare them for the test, and that's where they take it. In the model of computer-based instruction, they also take it on the school site. In a degree or, excuse me, diploma-granting virtual school, the virtual school often arranges a satellite site or a kiosk site where people come, and they have proctors and security just as if it were in the face-to-face environment.

So I think for the people that worry about academic integrity, that depends on how you set up the supports. If you want to let kids learn online exclusively, and you don't have any checks and balances, they're going to practice the same sneaky maneuvers that they did in the '50s or the '20s. They'll get people to write their papers for them. They'll get people to go on their behalf and take the test. But if you set in controls where they have to post their own rubric on a video cast or a podcast, that's very hard to fake that you don't know the material because it's you.

If the people listening in the audience think that all that stuff can be doctored via Photo Shop, okay, then let's get together, and let's have assessments real time, face-to-face, and let's provide all the other supports on the learning and the assessment virtually. So there's way you can do this in a way that free-service models are doing it every day.

EAST: So is it fair to say that in getting our act together, we need to assemble all the people that have a direct investment in whatever it is, like state testing and so forth, to address all these issues? Because really, from my experience, we've addressed these issues before, you know, when we were all in the same building. We just need to do that, you know, so we make sure that in a virtual environment that those same issues are covered.

WATSON: Bill, we've also gone to web-based IEPs to the student level in North Carolina, and that takes care of all of our federal data collection requirements. And so through the technologies now, all the securities are built in. It's just like the old locked

file drawer. There are only certain people that have access to those students' records, and it's again, just transformational what we're able to do with that.

EAST: Well, Mary, and, Bryan, let's go to our seventh question. You know, a concern I hear often about virtual education is the concern about a loss of social interaction with peers and with adults. And another related concern is around extracurricular activities around school, like clubs and sports, you know, how is that handled, and does a student give that up by being in a virtual environment? So question seven is how are the important nonacademic factors considered in a virtual education delivery? Bryan.

SETSER: I think I would start by talking a little bit about the generation we're in. My son is, you know, seven years old a year ago, and he comes to me and says, Dad, I need your debit card, right? And I'm like, what do you need my debit card for? And he's like, well, I need $599 to logon to Club Penguin. It's the social site where everybody's making friends and making igloos. Now I went to the site, and it was $5.99. But let me tell you why I tell that story.

A, he knew where the site was, and he was already on it. B, he didn't know about the monetary amounts. That's what a teacher, that's what myself as a parent needs to do. And now I need to take another step. I need to monitor what he's doing on there. But the technology is neutral. The technology is not good or bad, less social, more social. It still takes adults to work on the processes to use it. So I'll give you a couple more examples.

If you hear a story on the news, and it's broadcast on the media, that Facebook cost a couple their marriage, I would argue Facebook had nothing to do with that marriage ending. The couple did. So we've got to make sure that we're not blaming technology. It's the same thing that's happening with students and their social interactions.

My daughter recently, you know, posted an inappropriate picture on Facebook. It was a picture of her in a swimsuit in the summer. A lot of people would say, well, what's the big deal? Well, we had a conversation about how she represents herself. What people need to understand is there's a digital dossier, a footprint they're creating every day on these machines.

And you need adults and educators to teach each other how to do that. If they're spending too much time online, like these stories you hear in other countries and in the U.S. where kids are spending seven, nine hours online, and they're not eating, or they're working themselves into a frenzy because they're shutting down, who's the parent in that relationship? Who's the teacher? Who's the guardian? Who's teaching digital citizenship? That's our job.

So when we talk about do they have, you know, less social interaction? No. Many studies have shown that students will actually participate more in an online environment because they don't fear the ostracism of a classroom hand raise or what somebody might say. But what we've got to do a better job of as educators when we get into this space is to really meet kids where they are. And if they're playing a video game, and they're interacting with people across the world that we don't know, we as parents have to cognizant of that.

Teachers have to be cognizant of that. But technology companies are getting smarter too. They're creating systems. I can think of thinkEd and My Big Campus, where social media is just shared within an educational setting. Those are the types of solutions that make sense. They allow districts and schools to take baby steps.

Now in terms of other interactions, you know, when we talk about are we less social, or are we more social, you know, I have this story from a friend of mine, Phil Emer from Raleigh and the Friday Institute, talks about how his daughter asked him a calculus question, and he had a master's in engineering, and he needed 30 minutes to go find the answer. Now where he went and found it was on a piece of paper. But he came back, and she'd found it in six minutes by communicating with her friends.

So some people will say, well, that's cheating. Well, what was she doing? She was applying her knowledge to go find an answer from among a peer group, no different than a stud group, and to find a process for how to complete that assignment. Now adults and people in the social critic industry of all this social media that's out there, and educators in this industry that'll talk about, well, you got to be careful because you're letting people have too much access, and we're already seeing these multi-tasking studies where multi-tasking doesn't produce academic results.

Well, I'm not going to try to learn calculus. I was an English major, by the way. I'm not going to try to learn calculus while I'm multitasking. I'm going to set ground rules for myself, because I have the personal discipline. Where did I learn that? From teachers, from my parents, so we've all got to do a collective job about realizing when the social communication is appropriate and realizing when it's not. And then we set ground rules.

One final note on this, Bill, I was a school principal. And when somebody wrote a profane word on the bathroom wall, we didn't close down the school. What we did was educate, punish, discipline, and then educate again. And we restored the ability of that student to go to the bathroom. I certainly hope we're about restoring those opportunities for kids to learn over and over again.

EAST: Mary, why don't you take us into the discussion about the second part of my question, about the extracurricular activities, clubs, sports, you know, how's that handled with students in a virtual environment in North Carolina?

WATSON: I want to first talk a little bit about the social network, and then go into that. You know, with just talking about students with disabilities and the IEP process, we have for years said that the IEP needs to be, or the IEP planning needs to be about more than present levels of performance and annual goals. You need to be looking at the whole child. And how many times have you had IEP meetings with parents, and you ask what are your hopes and dreams?

What's happened to me several times, and the parent says, I want my child to have friends. I want them to have somebody to invite to their birthday party. And that's where I think, for some children, this has been able to help children connect to people in a way that they have not been able to before. And if I may, I'd like to share a letter that we got from a teacher in one of our classrooms.

She writes, I had a call on Monday morning from a parent of one of our students in the virtual classroom. Mom was in tears. She said her son had been kicked out of

three schools prior to coming to ours, and due to his autism, he had never had a friend. She said he used to beg her to stay home. She would send him to school crying most days. She said he had a pretty good year last year, but this year, with these online classes, he loves school.

He never complains about coming, and for the first time in his life he has friends. She said he spent from 12:00 to 6:00 on Sunday afternoon online chatting with video that he figured out how to do himself with his other classmates. She walked by his bedroom, and he was laughing and having conversation with friends. She was overjoyed. This is what it's all about, and I want to thank each of you for your help with this program. Isn't that great?

EAST: That's great. Thank you for sharing that.

WATSON: And then, you were asking about sports and other extracurricular activities. In the North Carolina model, as Bryan has talked about, it's a blended model, so students are connected in some way to a brick and mortar traditional school. They may not be taking their classes there, but if they have, if they wish to participate in clubs and activities, they have that opportunity.

And I don't know if Bryan has talked yet about the distance-learning advisor that's at the school, that can help with those connections, but that certainly is an opportunity for all students in North Carolina who are in the public school system. And the virtual school is part of the public school system.

SETSER: Yeah, it's a good segue to the distance-learning advisor's role. I think whether that person is paid or contracted or part of the school staff, the distance-learning advisor is helping that student navigate their blended course load, part online, part face to face. So in North Carolina, one of the great state policies we've passed, and I would say to our audience, you have to get involved at the policy level as well, is we eliminated seat time if that student was in an e-learning course for credit.

So what that means is a student can come to the school for first period at the face-to-face setting, and then they could go home and work for the rest of the day, then play soccer of football at night, and then logon to their online courses in the evening. We already accept this as normal at the college level. You know, the first thing that happens when many of the viewer audience goes to grad school is they all gang up on the professor and say, do we have to come and sit here every night or for four hours?

They want opportunities to learn online. They want opportunities for flexible learning. Our students are screaming for the same thing. They don't want to sit in a desk in rows and be talked at. They want options. So it's real important from a policy level to work with that distance-learning advisor in our case and say, how do we construct this student's schedule in a way that makes sense?

When we relate that to exceptional children's services, the whole areas of homebound and looking at students' needs in a blended school day, half in their core courses at the school setting and half at home. Or working with students that are out on a 504 for a broken arm, these are the types of things that we've seen incredible success with. We had a Morehead scholar in North Carolina last year, one of the highest honors

at UNC Chapel Hill. She was facing very tight competition for valedictorian and for the Morehead finalist, and she broke her leg in the fall as a soccer player.

She needed three AP courses to remain competitive. We were the solution. She took our courses instead of the face-to-face offerings where two of the courses were not offered at her school. She would've never competed for that scholarship if she didn't have this as an option. So I think what it's about at the end of the day is students have the best of both worlds.

They can access the things that all of us romanticize about high school and middle school from the prom to the football Friday night. But they have choices and options where they don't have to settle for courses that are only offered during their school day.

EAST: Tell us the term you use again in North Carolina for that key person in the school that kind of coordinates this.

SETSER: It's a distance-learning advisor.

EAST: Distance-learning advisor, okay.

SETSER: And in most of the other states, they have somebody akin to this role.

EAST: Okay. Mary, you brought this up when you read the letter from the parent. So the question eight, you know, what is the role of parents and family members in the virtual education environment? So would you begin that discussion for us?

WATSON: Certainly. And, you know, like a lot of things in special education, it varies. Parents can be very involved, especially for the students who are not gaining as much access in that seat time in the school. But also for the parent who's very busy with their own schedule and doesn't have as much time one on one with the student, there are still opportunities through the school and through the district-learning advisor that students can access virtual environment.

But as far as parents being informed, I think it opens doors that have not been opened. Bryan talks about the digital footprint, and that's something that, you know, that I've really learned from him is that once the student is working in the virtual environment, the records are there. So the parent has access immediately to what's going on in the classroom, can follow up, can see the grades. There's a much more open world for parents to be involved in the digital world. They don't have to always get in their car and come to the school to be a part of what's happening. And Bryan can talk more about that.

SETSER: Bill, I would add, it starts in today's times at the preschool level. My, I have a six-month-old son, and he's enrolled in a Spanish immersion preschool. And at that preschool, the preschool blogs, they have live webcams that I can look in and see what's happening with my son. This is a conversion that we're all moving towards. If the viewing audience reads some of the reports we're going to reference at the end of

this session, you'll see what's happening with the American landscape in terms of how we're going to learn digitally moving ahead.

But I think two key points are these in terms of how parents are involved. Low tech is still a great way to reach parents, phone dialers, texting, the ability for them to always be communicating with their virtual teacher. But we also have software products that allow parents to chat into us during the day, and we may not even be online at that time as virtual instructors. But when we get home that evening, we have a transcript of what the parent asked, and then there's an expectation from our team to immediately respond to the parent.

Now sometimes, they're going to respond by just chatting in answers. Sometimes they're going to chat in that they'll be online tonight, and can they use their webcam to connect with our virtual instructor? When parents say, mm, I kind of depend on the school to have that access, or I don't have access to these technologies, the teachers make the adjustment, and they set up relationships at the school site for when they can use those tools or that connectivity.

So I think what we're entering into is an era of on-demand access, right? And how do we provide that around the clock to people who need it? I can think of things happening in the corporate space right now, like Restaurant.com or Groupon, or Amazon.com. What's happening with those companies is they're learning how learners learn. So when I flew into Pittsburgh here tonight or last night, I'm expecting that when I get back, Expedia and Amazon will send me some things about my visit, or what would I like to do? Or like to see some deals on Pittsburgh.

It's not going to be too long before learner's footprints are tracked in the same way. There's already companies working on that. So parents have all kinds of information fed to them about their child's progress, about their assessment, and they can respond much more rapidly than they can in the face-to-face environment alone.

EAST: Okay. Well, thank you. Let's go to the ninth question. And, Mary, I don't think we can leave this out, and I want to come to you first for your response. What if the special education process is going along well, special education related services are being provided, and all of a sudden, there's a disagreement. And so there's some dispute over services or something about the child's education. How are disagreements around special education services handled in a virtual education environment?

WATSON: That's a really good question because that is, it's going to happen. It does happen. In North Carolina, at the state department level, we have implemented a facilitation program where LEAs may request a facilitator for IEP meetings, whether it be in traditional school or virtual school. We provide that at no cost to LEAs, so we have really reduced disputes in a great way by offering this facilitation, which is, we consider just a tool for the IEP meeting.

Also the district learning advisor that Bryan was talking about has a role in bringing folks together if that, if there's a dispute with the student who's in the total virtual environment, and the school staff there. So that could be done through just coordination of the teachers in the virtual environment, the parent, the student at the school level. But it is really not a lot different than traditional school other than you may have more opportunity to bring people into conversations with a virtual environment.

EAST: Okay. So if I get this quickly, assuming what Bryan said earlier about the different types of virtual schools, is this true? If the responsibility for the child's education lies with the brick and mortar school, you know, we handle that just like we always do whether they get some of their virtual, classes virtually or not. Would it be true to say that if the diploma-granting option, they get all of their education through virtual, then that entity would be responsible for all of the special ed process including complaints, mediations, due process, the dispute resolution options? Is that true?

SETSER: It is in a diploma-granting virtual school, they often employ exceptional children's points of contact coordinators, directors, and they oversee virtual counselors, if you will. Now that term strikes people as odd or strange, but really, it's about on demand. So you have access to this counselor via text, phone, Web products, and they come in and work with parents and families. I think some of the things that Mary pointed out are dead on.

You know, when we talk about settling disputes, I want to be very clear to the viewing audience that we have great examples of people being compliant. We have people that are learning about that process, and then we have people that are not compliant. The trick is what do you do about it? How do you monitor it? How do you support it, and how do you coach folks? I think a really important point is if we find out, which most state virtual schools have a structure where their teachers are contracted.

They're not tenured because they're getting their benefits from the face-to-face setting because many virtual teachers are teaching a full load face-to-face, and maybe one course virtually. What's happening is we have the ability to recycle that teacher. So if a teacher is not doing what's right on behalf of students, we don't wait until the end of the year. We get another teacher that's been trained in those types of services in that classroom immediately.

That's a luxury the face-to-face always doesn't have. So when you look at the national landscape on teacher tenure and teacher accountability and all of the conversations going around about value-added assessment, you are going to see a day when teachers are providing services, period. You might see teachers who just do exceptional children's services on interventions. You might see blended models like we use, where you're part of a team.

But those processes are being worked out now in North Carolina, in Florida, Michigan, Idaho, some of these state virtual school leads, they're being worked out with private companies like Connections and K12, and with charters like City Prep Academy. So we've got multiple players in this space figuring out that they have tools at their disposal to provide support to parents and students at any time, and in resolving conflicts, resolving settlements or any kind of request from the Office of Civil Rights, we have even more data, more transparency than we've ever had because we're partnering with virtual environments.

EAST: Okay. Thank you. I'll say to our viewers, you know, I've learned a lot today. And I hope you have too. I hope we've answered some of your questions. I know there may be many more. And I know those of you that are not operating with a virtual

education environment may be thinking, well, what should I do to get started? Who do I talk to? What resources do I need?

All those kind of questions may be running through your mind. So I've challenged our presenters for our last question to really think about that and think back to your experiences of how you started the program and how it's evolved over the years, and address what are your recommendations for states or local districts that are considering using a virtual education delivery system? Mary, do you want to start us off with this one?

WATSON: Certainly. My first advice is to have conversations with various people. And certainly, there are a lot of things that Bryan and I have not done that we probably want to do, and every time we're together, I'm learning things, and hopefully, he's also learning about special education. But for the special educator, I think sometimes it seems overwhelming. Our plates are so full, and how could we ever reach out and start something in virtual? The issue is find the partners that can help you with that.

Certainly, I don't have the knowledge that Bryan has about virtual education and about technology. I was so proud when I learned to use my Blackberry and still learn, as a matter of fact, last night, he just showed me an application I didn't know I had on my Blackberry. But Bryan has all the knowledge and expertise needed for the virtual environment for us to partner. So I think we have to learn in all aspects of education to build that stakeholder group. Don't try to know it all.

Try to find the people who can help you and partner with you to know that. Use your skills and expertise where they can be used in the, as Bryan talked about, the ships, the leadership piece. And it may take several ships to get this off the ground in your state. But my advice is don't try to do it all by yourself or even, you know, we have staff that work with us on this that are also part of that ship entourage. It's not something you can do on your own. You have to build that stakeholder group and find your partners in the process. As we go back, we're going to be looking for money.

EAST: Okay. Bryan, do you want to add to that?

SETSER: You know, I think we do a lot of presentations together, and we talk to different groups. And one of the common questions is, what characteristic, if I was getting into this, as a virtual leader or as an exceptional children's leader do I need to have? And I always say to people, I'm bad at a lot of things. But I am really good at learning. And I think it starts there. You got to read. You got to pay attention. You've got to look at data. Spend time learning.

You know, one of the things that we're showing the audience here as we close tonight is the work that Mary and myself and Bill and others did with the Project Forum with NASDSE. You know, this group actually produced a report on virtual K-12 public school programs and students with disabilities, some of the issues, some of the recommendations. Now you don't go into that thinking I'm going to try to do all of this. You go in there, and you say, okay, bite this elephant off one bite at a time. How can I make sure that I focus on these things, begin to strategically plan around them, and really begin to learn? I think that's always the starting point.

I think it's real important for you to read national sites that are aggregating all this information. You know, I focus and write for *Ed Reformer* quite a bit. I focus researchers here. I write a blog here. You can certainly follow my blogs. But one of the things I've been talking about recently is that, you know, I'm sure when the cavemen and cavewomen happened upon fire or happened upon the wheel, I'm sure there was a caveman lobby saying, but we don't want to do that. We've been taking mastodon meat back and forth from the water well for five years.

We have to be open to change. We have to be open to looking at these sites and saying, okay, there's a lot of writers here talking about blended learning, online learning, learning for disadvantage, learning for special ed, learning for AP, learning for credit recovery. How can I learn these things? And then I think what you do is you look at what's happening in your state, Keeping Pace Report, it's published every year for the past seven years. It's at kpk12.com.

Find out who your partners are in your state. They may be a state virtual school. They may be a charter school that's virtual. They may be a private virtual school. But reach out to those folks locally. Have discussions. Learn what you can from them. You know, Mary is being way too modest on her involvement in this. I go into every virtualization of these EC problems wondering, am I being compliant? Am I being legal? Am I up on the latest research in exceptional children's legislation?

We don't do things in isolation. We collaborate. We work together. We trade documents back and forth. We vet each other's content. And as Mary said, it's not always a bed of roses. I mean, people get upset because they think they've got a solution, and they've tried it before. But that's where leadership comes in. It's usually Mary and I settling those disputes and sort of saying, okay, if we can meet in the middle here, and we can move forward, and we can have a continuous learning cycle, then we're going to be doing things for the better.

And then, I think how you get started, I mean, I think we have websites at NCBPS.org that have worked with districts and organizations to help them get going. We have blueprints on how you plan, whether it be leadership, technology, curriculum instruction. You can certainly reach out to us. And a lot of times, you know, we have the same capacity issues that other states have. But we do know who's doing that work in your state, and we do know who's a leader in that with a for-profit or a nonprofit that's close to you.

So I think it's about reaching out to folks and connecting. And kind of my close on this, you know, folks in the audience may be very familiar with Facebook, but some people may be looking at Twitter as tool. And they wonder, why would anybody want to know in 140 characters or less what's going on? I don't follow Twitter for that reason. I follow people in my field. I follow gurus in special ed. I follow gurus in assessment because that gives me quick access to information reports, links that I can build my capacity as a leader with.

And I think that's what we've got to model. We've got to be learners first, then leaders. And if we really dig into some of these reports and some of the websites we discussed today, I think we're going to have a starting point. Then I think it's about connecting with other leaders who are doing the work. And then developing your own plan for the need of your kids and your communities.

EAST: Bryan mentioned several resources there, and I hope you'll go to those and use them. He mentioned the book that, from the NASDSE's Project Forum. I remind you again to use the NASDSE website, www.nasdse.org to learn more about NASDSE, more about our professional development series, and to look this book up . . . just online, it's free, it's downloadable, and we hope you will go to it and use it. All right. One last chance, does any additional comments from either one of you presenters?

WATSON: Bill, I just think in special education, we've had a lot of experience working with partnerships, and I think this is a great opportunity for us to continue that work and appreciate NASDSE's leadership, especially through the publication of this document through Project Forum and giving us this opportunity to share. People are really going to have to think differently and look at the possibilities. And I think special educators are practiced at doing that.

SETSER: My closing remarks, Bill, would be to thank you and NASDSE that, for being a student-centered organization. When I work in the virtual world, lots of adults try to shut down our resources because they are the gatekeepers of what they want to do for kids. NASDSE has been the opposite. They've said, come in, partner with us. Let's work on reports together. Let's understand these issues. We're showcasing our work here tonight, and I hope that's just the beginning because we certainly appreciate, are appreciative of the opportunity to showcase what we've been able to do with kids in North Carolina.

EAST: Well, I want to thank Bryan Setser and Mary Watson for your excellent presentation today. I feel challenged as we leave this conference to go learn more and to be a better ambassador for this work, to be better equipped, to help people that have questions. And I know I'll be better equipped to tell them who to go to because of the resources that you mentioned earlier in your presentation.

You know, to our viewers, technology offers education and a world of opportunity to expand our delivery systems to more adequately meet the needs of the diverse population of students that we're seeing today. We should cease the opportunity that technology offers, but be smart about it. We should listen to the lessons learned by people like Bryan and Mary who are leading the way.

We hope the information from this conference will provide food for thought, promote stakeholder planning, resulting in wise decisions about virtual education, leading to better outcomes for all of our students that we serve. Thank you so much for participating with us today. We look forward to seeing you on a future telecast.