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Online Learning and IDEA Educational Environments (Ages 6–21): Determining Educational Environments for Students With Disabilities

Introduction

This document provides technical assistance (TA) to state education agency (SEA) IDEA Data Managers and other SEA staff to support their work with local district personnel who must categorize and report the educational environments of students with disabilities, including those engaged in online learning. For students with disabilities who participate in online learning, it can be difficult to determine which educational environment to report as required in the U.S. Department of Education’s *EDFacts* File FS002 (Children with Disabilities [IDEA] School Age). This document is a TA tool to use when considering the time students with disabilities spend in online learning and how that time should be counted when reporting IDEA educational environments. In addition, the tool provides and explains several common online learning scenarios for students with disabilities, along with the recommended educational environment code (see Appendix A).

A review of selected states’ policies¹ with regard to students with disabilities and online learning showed that many different types of online learning options exist, ranging from state-funded, full-time programs to part-time, supplemental programs or blended learning environments (IDC 2015). This TA tool does not discuss all possible online learning options but focuses on the environments where students with disabilities access online instruction/curriculum.

¹ The authors found multiple terms similar to online learning, including blended learning, distance education, online education, digital learning, e-learning, etc. They chose the term *online learning* to be consistent with the OSEP-funded [Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities](#).

Definition of Online Learning

The [Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities \(COLSD\)](#), an OSEP-funded TA center, defines online learning as “education in which instruction, content, knowledge, and skill acquisition are mediated primarily by network technologies such as the Internet” (COLSD, 2012). Online learning is not limited to location (e.g., classroom, school, district, state, country) or even time (courses can be on a set schedule or open 24/7). According to Connections Academy (2016), in the 2013–14 school year, more than 2.7 million K–12 students were taking part in some type of online learning—an increase of 80 percent since the 2009–10 school year. In that same period, the number of districts offering online learning increased from 50 percent to 75 percent, yet access to online learning varies because individual schools and districts may have their own policies that dictate online learning time and/or place. Students (with and without disabilities) access online learning through virtual schools, including public, charter, or private schools, and, in many cases, such students rarely, if ever, attend class in a brick-and-mortar building. Similarly, homeschooled students may regularly engage in online learning by accessing one or more online courses. Students enrolled in their neighborhood schools increasingly engage in online learning within their school building. Students can also access online classes in diverse ways such as through a home computer, a local library computer, or a tablet at a coffee shop. The wide variety of online learning models makes classifying the educational environments for students with disabilities engaged in online learning challenging and often confusing.

Time Inside the Regular Classroom

Eight educational environments are reported in *EDFacts* FS002, and three of the eight environments are based on

the percentage of time a student is inside the regular classroom. The eight environments² are:

1. Inside the regular classroom 80 percent or more of the day
2. Inside the regular classroom no more than 79 percent of the day but no less than 40 percent of the day
3. Inside the regular classroom less than 40 percent of the day
4. Separate school (public or private school for students with disabilities)
5. Residential facility (public or private school for students with disabilities)
6. Homebound/hospital
7. Correctional facilities
8. Parentally placed in private school

Because online learning models differ in the opportunities they present for interaction with other students (with and without disabilities), determining if online learning time for students with disabilities can be considered time inside the regular classroom may be challenging, yet it is critical for accurate data reporting. The remainder of this document provides information to use when determining educational environments for reporting purposes for students with disabilities engaged in online learning.

Appendix A provides an overview table and specific scenarios to assist with classifying the time students with disabilities spend in an online course. These scenarios were developed based on interviews with state staff; review of resources, including state policies; and the authors' collective experience. Both in the development of the scenarios, and throughout the

development of this document, these facts were considered:

1. Online learning applies to both general education and special education.
2. Few states have detailed student- and course-level data to help determine if time spent in an online learning environment is considered time in a regular classroom.
3. Students often access online learning in a variety of settings (e.g., library, home, classroom, coffee shop), and students may or may not have opportunities to interact online with other students or the instructor in real time. Because most SEAs do not have this information, this paper does not address online interactions.

General Considerations

SEA personnel should pair the guidelines below with the scenarios in Appendix A for a more complete understanding of educational environments, and, specifically, coding educational environments, as related to varieties of online learning. Many students engaged in online learning fall into the first two categories below, but circumstances around online learning detailed in categories 3–6 must be considered before making a final classification about students' educational environments.

1. Generally, when students with disabilities participate in online learning in a course open to students with and without disabilities—that is, the course is unrelated to the student's disability—that online learning time should be considered time inside the regular classroom.
2. Generally, when students with disabilities spend time in an online learning environment with no specific requirement as to the location for participation—that is, students may participate in online learning at any location at their discretion to complete the class or program requirements—that online learning time should be considered time inside the regular classroom.

² Access www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/file-specifications.html for more details on each year's file specifications, including file FS002.

3. If there is a prescribed location where students must be while participating in online learning, then whether this time is considered inside the regular classroom is based on the actual setting and whether the students who are participating in the prescribed location are students with or without disabilities. If both students with and without disabilities are enrolled in the online course, personnel should refer to state policy/guidance as to what constitutes the makeup of students with and without disabilities in a “regular classroom.”
4. Online learning course content does not determine the educational environment. The time in the online learning environment is determined to be time inside the regular classroom—or not—based on both the location where students with disabilities access the online course and the characteristics of other students who are, or may be, participating in the course.
5. When students spend more than 50 percent of their school day in a **separate** school for students with disabilities, regardless of their participation in other locations that may be less restrictive, the educational environment for the students is separate school. The same is true for residential facilities. Time spent in online learning for students in those placements would not change the more restrictive educational environment categories established by the individualized education program (IEP) team.
6. For students placed in homebound/ hospital settings, correctional facility, or parentally placed in a private school, participation in online learning does not change these more restrictive educational environments that have been established by the IEP or Services Plan. Students in these settings may participate in online learning, but time spent in online learning, even if that online learning time would be considered a regular class environment based on information shared in this document, would not change their educational environment for reporting purposes. They would be classified as being in homebound/hospital settings, correctional facility, or parentally placed in private school.

Conclusion

Online learning opportunities and the numbers of students with and without disabilities engaging in online learning are increasing rapidly. Because the educational environments of students with disabilities must be reported, it can be challenging to correctly determine the educational environment for such students who are engaged in online learning. When determining the educational environment of individual students with disabilities taking online courses, consider (a) if other students without disabilities are taking the course, (b) where the course is held, and (c) if the student with disabilities in question has been placed in a less restrictive setting by the respective IEP team when engaged in online learning. Appendix A and the scenarios that follow provide the reader with more information to determine the correct educational environment codes. It may be helpful to share them with local agencies.

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Appendix A

Location Where Online Learning Is Provided	Characteristics of All Students at This Location	How Time Spent in Online Learning Environment Should Be Counted
Location is at students' discretion	Students with and without disabilities independently select where they will access the online learning.	Time inside the regular classroom
Special education resource room or special class	All are students with disabilities and access online course in special education resource room or special classes.	Time outside the regular classroom
Designated classroom or other location within the school building or campus	This is a mix of students with and without disabilities.	Time inside or outside the regular classroom (Classification will be based on the makeup of the enrolled students and state guidance for defining regular class.)
	Students with disabilities access course in isolation from students without disabilities (not student choice).	Time outside the regular classroom
Off-campus location (e.g., public library, community center, local career tech education school, etc.)	This is a mix of students with and without disabilities.	Time inside or outside the regular classroom (Classification will be based on the makeup of the enrolled students and state guidance for defining regular class.)
	Students with disabilities access course in isolation from students without disabilities.	Time outside the regular classroom
Off- campus location specifically intended for children with disabilities	All are students with disabilities.	Time outside the regular classroom <i>(However, if children attend this location for more than 50 percent of their school day, the educational environment is separate school.)</i>

Scenarios: Descriptions and Examples of Educational Environments for Online Learning

Location Is at Students' Discretion

When students can determine the location from which they can participate in an online class, this typically means (a) the class does not require students to be in any particular educational setting to access content and (b) there is no anticipation that the class requires specialized assistance (e.g., specially designed instruction) or accommodations. In that case, the online class should be considered time in a regular classroom when calculating the percentage of time a student is inside the regular classroom. However, if the online class has enough flexibility that specially designed instruction or accommodations may be provided, and the IEP team made arrangements for specialized instruction or accommodations during this online class, these factors affect the classification of the educational setting (see Scenario 3). When making the determination to calculate the percentage of time inside the regular classroom, IEP teams typically make their decisions on whether a particular environment is time inside the regular classroom based on whether there are students without disabilities in the class receiving general education. The file specifications from *EDFacts* instruct that time spent outside the regular classroom receiving services unrelated to students' disabilities should be considered time inside the regular classroom. When students choose where they will participate in the online class, the location is not related to the students' disabilities; therefore, the time is considered time in a regular classroom when determining the education environment.

Scenario 1

A student with a disability enrolls in a general education online class for which no specially designed instruction or accommodations are required. This online class has no specific time when the student must be active online but

has specific content the student must complete during the grading period. The student is allowed to access content online at any location where Internet access is available.

Educational Setting for Scenario 1

Because participation in this class is not related to the student's IEP, time spent by the student completing this course is considered time **INSIDE** the regular classroom when calculating the percentage of time in regular education.

Scenario 2

A student is taking world history online, and according to the IEP, the student requires extended time to complete exams and a large screen monitor to access the content. This online class has no specific time when the student must be active online, but it has specific content the student must complete during the grading period. The student may access the online content at any time and from any location where Internet access is available as long as required accommodations (large screen monitor) are provided.

Educational Setting for Scenario 2

Though the student requires accommodations to participate in this general education online class, none are such that the student cannot participate in the same way as a student without a disability. As a result, time spent by the student completing this course is considered time **INSIDE** the regular classroom when calculating the percentage of time in regular education.

Scenario 3

A student with a disability is taking a course on self-regulation to meet an IEP goal. This course constitutes specially designed instruction and is intended for students with disabilities. The student may access the

online content at any time and from any location where Internet access is available, but there is no interaction with students without disabilities for this class.

Educational Setting for Scenario 3

Because this course is designed specifically for students with disabilities and does not include students without disabilities, this class is considered time OUTSIDE the regular classroom when calculating the amount of time in regular education. Part of the rationale for considering this time OUTSIDE the regular classroom is that even though the student may take the class at any location, any interaction the student has that is specific to the course content would only be with other students with disabilities.

Special Education Resource Room or Special Class

A course that is provided within the special education resource room or a separate classroom for students with disabilities is identified and reported as time outside the regular classroom. In a resource room or a special education class, the only students are students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who are taking an online course in this setting do not have the opportunity to interact with students without disabilities.

Scenario 4

A student is participating in an online reading course. This course is delivered in a resource room in accordance with the student's IEP. Only other students with disabilities are in the setting.

Educational Setting for Scenario 4

Because the student is taking the course in a setting with other students with disabilities, this is considered time OUTSIDE the regular classroom.

Classroom or Other Location Within the School Building or Campus

When the location of the course or class has been assigned to a specific location within a building or on the campus, there are several factors to consider when determining the reporting environment for the location. Those factors include who is in the class with students with disabilities and why the location was selected. (Refer to state regulation/policy/ practice/guidance to determine the proportion of students with and without disabilities that define a regular class.) If students are taking an online class where the proportion of students with and without disabilities defines the class as regular education based on SEA/local education agency (LEA) policy or guidance, then that environment will be time inside the regular classroom (see Scenario 5). If, however, the proportion of students with and without disabilities does not meet the definition of a regular classroom, then that course would be considered time outside the regular classroom (see Scenario 6). Occasionally, students with disabilities participate in a course for which they are the only one in the classroom, and the IEP team designated this setting as needed to provide specialized instruction. In this case, the setting would also be time outside the regular classroom (see Scenario 7).

Scenario 5

A student with a disability is participating in a virtual math class with live instruction. To attend the math class, the student goes to a computer lab on campus where there are several other students taking this same math course virtually. The student's IEP does not require the specific course based on the student's disability, but does provide several accommodations for this class.

Educational Setting for Scenario 5

This situation would be considered time INSIDE the regular classroom because the student is with general education students for the course, and the student's IEP specifies the accommodations the student needs to successfully access the course content.

Scenario 6

A student with a disability is participating in a virtual module that is self-paced for a required biology course. The IEP requires that the student take this course within a special education classroom because the specialized instruction and support the student needs to complete the course cannot be delivered in the general education classroom.

Educational Setting for Scenario 6

This situation would be time OUTSIDE the regular classroom because the student participates in the course in a setting where only students with disabilities are located. The student has no opportunity to interact with students without disabilities.

Scenario 7

A student with a disability is taking a foreign language course virtually. According to the IEP, the student participates in the course at a time no other students are present and receives specialized instruction and services to participate in the class due to the student's learning needs.

Educational Setting for Scenario 7

This situation would be time OUTSIDE the regular classroom because there are no students without disabilities with whom to interact, and the location/setting was determined by the IEP team.

Off-Campus Location (Public Library, Community Center, Local Career Tech Ed School, etc.)

When the location is off-campus, there are several factors to consider: who else is in the same location and the purpose of the location. If the number of students with disabilities taking the online course is such that it would not be considered a regular class, the course becomes a special education setting and should be reported as time OUTSIDE the regular classroom (see Scenario 8). If the composition of students with and without disabilities is such that it would be considered a

regular classroom based on SEA/LEA policy or guidance, then even though the class is not held on a traditional campus but rather in a vocational school or even a public setting such as the library, the time would be counted as time INSIDE the regular classroom (see Scenario 9).

Scenario 8

A student with a disability accesses an online course as part of his or her transition plan (e.g., effective study skills, note-taking strategies). The student and five other students with disabilities use the computers at the local library on Saturdays to take the course.

Educational Setting for Scenario 8

This course time would be counted as time OUTSIDE the regular classroom because all students have disabilities.

Scenario 9

A student with a disability accesses an online course at a satellite campus of a local community college as part of a dual-enrollment agreement. Most of the students taking the course are students without IEPs, and the student with disabilities does not need accommodations to participate.

Educational Setting for Scenario 9

This course time would be counted as time INSIDE the regular classroom.

Off-Campus Location Specifically Intended for Children With Disabilities

Sometimes the nontraditional location is a setting designed specifically for students with disabilities. To attend classes in this location, the student's IEP must specify this setting.

Scenario 10

A student with a disability is placed by the IEP team in a school for students with disabilities. This student accesses distance education courses (at home, at school, and/or in the community) in a location of his/her choice,

but also attends the separate school for students with disabilities more than 50 percent of the day.

Educational Setting for Scenario 10

This educational environment is considered a separate school because the student spends more than 50 percent of instructional time in a separate school for students with disabilities.