Helping Online Students Be Successful

Parental Engagement

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Jered Borup
George Mason University

Chawanna Bethany Chambers
George Mason University

Rebecca Stimson
Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

MICHIGAN VIRTUAL LEARNING
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About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual™*, formally *Michigan Virtual University®*, to establish a research center for online learning and innovation. Known as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute®* (*MVLRI®*), this center is a natural extension of the work of *Michigan Virtual*. Established in 1998, *Michigan Virtual's* mission is to advance K-12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of *MVLRI* are:

- Research — Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- Policy — Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- Innovation — Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- Networks Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

Michigan Virtual dedicates a small number of staff members to *MVLRI* projects as well as augments its capacity through a fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside *Michigan Virtual* staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

Executive Summary

Online course enrollments have grown rapidly in the last 20 years, despite increasing evidence that online courses have higher attrition rates than face-to-face courses. Parental engagement has been shown to be correlated with student performance in traditional face-to-face courses. As a result, parental engagement also has the potential to increase student performance in online courses. Unfortunately, little is known regarding the types of parental engagement that online teachers or on-site mentors value, the obstacles that parents/guardians encounter when they attempt to fulfill their engagement responsibilities, or ways that online programs can work to increase parental engagement.

To address this need, we interviewed 12 on-site mentors from schools with high online course pass rates. We also interviewed 12 online teachers we sampled based on on-site mentors' recommendations. Our analysis of the interview transcripts found that both teachers and mentors believed that students would most likely succeed in online courses when parents/guardians (1) advised students on their course enrollments, (2) monitored student performance and progress, (3) motivated students to more fully engage in learning activities, (4) organized and managed student learning at home, and (5) assisted students as they worked on assignments.

Online teachers and on-site mentors also found that parents/guardians tended to be under-engaged in fulfilling their important responsibilities due to several misconceptions and obstacles. Teachers and mentors described strategies that they used to help parents/guardians overcome these obstacles to high parental engagement. Following the provided strategies and research examining parental engagement in face-to-face courses, we believe that online programs would likely see an increase in parental engagement if they (1) involved parents/guardians in the online course enrollment decision, (2) educated parents/guardians regarding the challenges of learning online and ways that parents/guardians can support their students, (3) maintained regular contact with parents/guardians by sending them specific invitations to be involved, and (4) assisted parents/guardians in their monitoring activities by regularly emailing them progress reports and providing them with an online parent portal with displays that allow them to easily track student engagement and performance. We also recognize that these efforts would still not remove many of the obstacles that parents/guardians face such as low socioeconomic status and demands that take them away from the home as a result. While online programs, teachers, and mentors should strive for high parental engagement, for many students it is unlikely to materialize. Because online learning can actually increase the need for parental engagement, many under-privileged students may be at an even greater disadvantage; thus, schools should look for ways to increase the support that they provide those students at their brick-and-mortar school. It is important to note that of the 12 highly-successful mentors we sampled from this research, 11 required their students to attend a daily lab. This type of support structure reduces the demands on parents/guardians and is a more equitable approach to supporting online students who may lack support at home.

Introduction

Public schools in the United States have a well-documented dropout problem with an 83% on-time graduation rate (also known as the adjusted cohort graduation rate) in 2014-15 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Although policies aimed at increasing graduation rates can be divisive and politically charged, it is almost universally agreed upon that parental engagement will be a critical element in the solution. A large body of research has also confirmed that parental engagement has a positive impact on students' academic achievement (Castro, Expósito-Casas, López-Martin, Lizasoain, Navarro-Asencio, & Gaviria, 2015).

Unfortunately, the failure rates in online courses are actually higher than those found in traditional courses (Freidhoff, 2016, 2017; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Taylor et al., 2016). This is an especially concerning trend because the educational landscape is rapidly evolving to include more and more online enrollments, and online learning is more mainstream than ever before (Evergreen Educational Group, 2017). In fact, some states now require that all high school students successfully complete an online learning experience or course prior to graduation (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2014). Despite online courses' high attrition rates, online enrollments are likely to continue to grow because they have proven to be highly popular with students and parents/guardians who are seeking a more flexible alternative to traditional courses. For instance, rural students commonly enroll in online courses as a way to access courses not offered locally. Students may also enroll in online courses in order to add flexibility in their learning schedule so they can pursue other interests. Online courses are also seen as a means for students to recover course credit previously failed so that they can meet high school graduation requirements and deadlines (Archambault & Kennedy, 2017; Borup & Kennedy, 2017).

Although online learning is a potential solution to many challenges faced by students, in reality online learning's high attrition rates may only exacerbate the obstacles that many students face; therefore, the educational community should seek ways to lower online course attrition rates. Just as they have for face-to-face courses, parents/guardians can play a critical role in improving online learning outcomes. However, unlike in face-to-face settings, little research has examined parental engagement in the online setting. Although some types of parental engagement in online courses would be similar to those in face-to-face courses, researchers have claimed that the nature of online learning requires parents/guardians to be involved at different levels and in different ways as compared to their involvement in face-to-face courses (Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014). If parents'/guardians' responsibilities are different in online courses, it also stands to reason that parents/guardians will face different obstacles as they attempt to engage in their students' online learning. By identifying critical parental engagement responsibilities and the potential obstacles that parents/guardians face when attempting to fulfill those responsibilities, we hope to provide insight to those wishing to improve and increase parental engagement in online courses.

Student Support Systems

It is important to understand how parents/guardians are integrated into the support systems that are provided by the online program (see Borup et al., 2014; Harms, Niederhauser, Davis, Roblyer, & Gilbert, 2006). In addition to parents/guardians, students interact directly with the online teacher.

As the content expert, the online teacher is responsible for providing students with content-related support, assessing their level of mastery, and providing them with feedback. Depending on the instructional model used, the online teacher can also be required to facilitate learner-learner interactions and collaborations. While research has found that teachers can provide students with a high level of support and can even develop strong, caring relationships with students, their physical separation can make it difficult to provide each student with the level of support they require (Drysdale, Graham, & Borup, 2016; Valasquez, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013). As a result, some supplemental online programs require students' local brick-and-mortar school to provide an onsite mentor (also called a facilitator) (see Figure 1). The onsite mentor is not required to be a content expert and is typically not equipped to provide content-specific support. Instead, the mentor focuses on non-content specific support such as developing caring relationships with students, closely monitoring and motivating student activity and progress, communicating with parents/guardians, and facilitating students' interactions with the online teacher and other students when necessary (Borup & Stimson, 2017; Freidhoff, Borup, Stimson, & DeBruler, 2015). Mentors can also organize and manage students' learning by providing or requiring a lab where students can learn in their presence. Research has found that students who learned in a facilitated lab were almost twice as likely to pass their online courses as students who were not required to attend a lab (Roblyer et al., 2008).

The level of parental engagement that students need is, in part, determined by the level of mentoring support provided at the students' local brick-and-mortar school. For instance, if students are not provided the time and space to learn at school, they will be required to learn at home, shifting many of the organizing and managing responsibilities to the parent (Hasler-Waters, Menchaca, & Borup, 2014). Furthermore, in full-time programs, students do not attend a brick-and-mortar school and are not able to receive on-site mentoring. In some cases, the full-time program provides an online mentor, but typically the parents/guardians are asked to serve as the mentor or learning coach (Drysdale et al., 2016; GWUOHS, 2016) (see Figure 2).

Limited research has sought to identify parental roles and responsibilities in online courses. The existing research has shown that parents can support their online students by advising them on the decision to enroll in an online course/program, monitor student progress and performance, motivate students to fully engage in learning activities, provide an organized learning environment at home, and assist students as they work to complete course activities by reading directions with students, proofreading assignments, and answering content-related questions when able (Borup, 2016; Borup, Stevens, & Hasler-Waters, 2015). It is important to note that parents'/guardians' responsibilities overlap considerably with on-site mentors' responsibilities but the nature of parent-student relationships allows them to fulfill their responsibilities in different ways and times than on-site mentors can. As a result, the level of on-site mentor engagement may reduce the level of engagement required from parents/guardians, but it will not eliminate it completely.

Research Methods

To provide some clarity and insight into effective parental engagement and the potential obstacles that parents/guardians encounter, we interviewed 12 on-site mentors and 12 online teachers who worked with students enrolled in *Michigan Virtual School®* (now known as *Michigan Virtual™*). In

2013, Michigan passed legislation that allowed all students in grades five through 12 to enroll in up to two online courses during each academic term. They also required that each student be assigned an on-site mentor employed by the student's home district who "monitors the pupil's progress, ensures the pupil has access to needed technology, is available for assistance, and ensures access to the teacher of record."

Using online student pass rate data from the previous academic period (Fall of 2015), we identified highly successful schools (online course pass rates ranged from 80-97%) from a variety of geographical locations. For schools with multiple mentors, we sampled the mentor with one of the highest student loads. We then surveyed the sampled mentors to obtain general demographic information. Of the sampled mentors, seven were full-time mentors, and five completed their mentoring responsibilities in addition to their other responsibilities at the school (two mentors were classroom teachers, one was an assistant principal, one was a counselor, and one was a librarian). Mentors' student loads ranged from 15 to 300 with an average of 95 (SD=79.6), and their years of mentoring experience ranged from two to 10 years (m=4.4, SD=2.1). Interestingly, 11 of the 12 mentors required the large majority of their students to attend a daily lab. The exception to this rule was an assistant principal who required his students to attend only a weekly lab session. However, due to the flexibility inherent in his position, he was able to pull students "in at lunch or ... out of class."

Each of the sampled mentors provided the names of three online teachers they felt were especially good at working with their students. In total, mentors recommended 22 teachers. Based on their recommendations, 12 teachers were sampled and interviewed. Of the 12 sampled teachers, eight taught online fulltime. Of the four part-time online teachers, three also taught face-to-face fulltime. Five teachers had five or fewer years of online teaching experience and four had 10 or more years of online teaching experience.

Findings

Importance of Parental Engagement

Online teachers and on-site mentors highly valued parental engagement and saw parents/guardians as an integral part of the student support system. One mentor believed that the teacher, mentor, and parent/guardian formed a "three-headed spear" that worked to ensure students progressed in their course work. Another mentor also explained that teacher, mentor, and parent/guardian efforts were most effective when they worked together "to get a relationship between all three parties."

While some mentors and teachers acknowledged that it was possible for parents/guardians to be too involved, a much bigger issue was that they were not engaged enough, if at all. One teacher explained, "I think that the more the parent can be involved, generally the more positive that is." Another added:

> I don't think I've ever seen or known about a downfall of a parent being involved. Even parents who are like helicopter parents, I still think that it's a positive thing for them to be involved in their students' courses.

The level of parental engagement that students needed appeared to depend on two factors: (1) student characteristics and (2) on-site mentor engagement. First, mentors and teachers agreed that some students needed little support from their parents/guardians because they were already self-motivated. However, they also agreed that the large majority of students required consistent parental support and, in some cases, students needed a very high level of support from parents/guardians. One mentor shared the following:

> It's a case by case ... Some kids have been raised in such a way already; they're just self-motivated, self-determined. We don't really even bring the parent into it too much. Then there's the other kids who just do need the extra push. In those cases, the parents are incredibly helpful.

Second, mentors believed that while parents/guardians should always be involved, they would have to be much more involved if on-site mentors were not consistently supporting and monitoring students' online learning efforts. In fact, mentors commonly stated that if the online students were attending a daily lab with an active mentor, parents' responsibilities in online courses were similar to parents' responsibilities in face-to-face courses.

Parent/Guardian Responsibilities

In this section, we will share the types of parental engagement that teachers and mentors identified and valued. We also share representative quotes from online teachers and on-site mentors.

Advising Students on Their Course Enrollments

Teachers and mentors believed that parents/guardians should be involved in the decision to enroll their students in online courses. However, in practice, teachers commonly found that parents/guardians were unaware that their student was even enrolled in an online course. The interviewed mentors described a higher level of parent/guardian advising because of the invitations that counselors extended to them. However, interviewed mentors still believed that parents/guardians should be more involved in advising students.

> I think that parents should be aware and approve before a student is placed into an online course. Based on the idea that most of our parents, a good portion of our parents, don't even know their student is taking an online class. (Online teacher)

> I have a form [the students] have to take home and talk about with their parents. Their parents have to sign the form saying that it's okay that they take a certain class. (On-site mentor)

> Parents need to be so much more involved in all of the kids' course selections than they are. I think that is so important. (On-site mentor)

Monitoring Student Performance and Progress

Once students were enrolled in their online courses, teachers and mentors agreed that parents/guardians should closely monitor their students' performance and progress. Teachers

recorded students' grades in the courses' online grade book, and parents/guardians were provided with their students' login information so that they could check students' progress. Teachers and mentors also provided parents/guardians with course pacing guides so they could check student progress against the recommended learning pace. Teachers and mentors found that monitoring responsibilities varied greatly across parents/guardians.

> I think parents should be logging into their student's online class and monitoring their student's progress. Just like, "Hey," when the student comes home, "Let me see the grades you got today. Did you have a test? Did you bring home any papers? Let me see the grades." We all know that there are parents that do that all the time and there are parents that never do that. (Online teacher)

> [In] an online class, everything that's uploaded is right there, time stamped. If I was a parent, I would be saying, "Hey, the pacing guide said you're supposed to be on module five right now. How come you're only on two?" They should be doing that … It's all there for the parents to see if they take the time to look. (Online teacher)

> They need to check their grades. … The parents need to look at [grades] every week. … And they need to say, "Show me what you're doing in your class." I think that there's a whole lot of none of that going on. They just need to be more proactive in looking at what their kids are actually doing. (On-site mentor)

> The nice thing about an online class that makes it easier than a face-to-face class is that all the grades are in the grade book right up front. In a face-to-face [course] … a parent doesn't know what we're doing until we put it in the grade book. Online [the course provider] puts up all the assignments you need to do, and you can see where you're at and where you should be. So I think that's way easier for a parent to track a kid's progress in the online class than it is in a face-to-face class. (On-site mentor)

Motivating Students' Engagement

Teachers and mentors appreciated it when parents/guardians set high expectations and then motivated their students to meet them. Teachers and mentors identified three ways that parents/guardians motivated students: (1) verbally encouraging students and praising their positive engagement activities, (2) providing students with rewards following student success, and (3) punishing students when they failed to maintain adequate progress. The majority of teacher and mentor comments focused on punishing students, perhaps indicating that punishments had an especially high motivational effect on students.

> It's extremely helpful when we have parents who are on board and are motivating and encouraging their students to be successful. (Online teacher)

> I think celebratory actions are so much better than punishable actions … It's more about a celebratory atmosphere for successful students. (Online teacher)

> I know parents who give kids a certain amount of money ... for an A, so much for a B. That kind of thing. Or, 'You can go to this concert that you want to, if you get all B's on your report card. Then I'll let you go to this thing.' I do hear parents doing things like that. (On-site mentor)

> I don't know about rewards, but I've heard things like they had their phone taken away, or they're grounded for the weekend, or things like that. It usually doesn't happen early on in the semester, but more the mid to the end of the semester when that crunch time is kind of coming down. (On-site mentor)

Organizing and Managing Student Learning at Home

Teachers and mentors explained that when students work from home, parents/guardians should provide them with an organized learning space and access to a computer with an internet connection. However, simply providing students with the space and technology was not sufficient, and parents/guardians also needed to manage students' learning time so that they stayed on task. Students' need to learn at home depended largely on the time and space that was afforded to them to learn at school. However, mentors explained that even when students attended a daily lab, they still needed to learn from home. Unfortunately, it was found that some parents/guardians were unable to provide students with a stable learning environment or the resources they required to complete learning activities.

> If the students don't have the opportunity to work in the school, then I think more expectations are put on the parents to play more of a role in monitoring the progress of the student: making sure they're understanding the material, contacting me if the student is struggling and needs after-hours help with some of the work, setting up time [for additional support]. (Online teacher)

> I think that depends again on how the course is set up for the student. I know some schools, the student's only in the computer lab one hour a week, which is not enough time to get everything on the pacing guide done, in just one hour in the computer lab. Those kids do need to have time and a place at home to work on the online class. (Online teacher)

> I think [a stable learning environment] is huge. For 90% of our successful kids, virtual or not, it's because there's stability at home, and so the kids get to focus on what they need to focus on instead of having to worry about other things. (On-site mentor)

Assisting Students with Assignments

Teachers and mentors found that generally parents/guardians lacked the knowledge to answer students' content related questions. When parents/guardians did not know the course content, they could still assist students in general ways such as reading the directions with students and proofreading essays prior to submission. Parents/guardians could also help students to develop study skills.

Inevitably, a student is going to be working on their computer at night and have a question, and not understand, and they might ask their parent. Sometimes the parent can answer the question, and sometimes they can't. I think what's nice is that they could immediately shoot me an email, and they might have an answer by the next morning. I'm perfectly willing to take that from a parent, or from a student; however, it works best for the student. (Online teacher)

Most parents … can look at a piece of writing and say, 'Okay. Yeah, your ideas sound good. I think that this sentence sounds kind of funky.' Most parents have read enough to be able to say, 'The syntax is a little bit off. We need to switch some of these ideas or use more precise language for the sentence.' If a parent doesn't know anything, then I don't think that they'll even feel comfortable giving feedback in the first place. If the student feels that their parent has knowledge enough to be able to give them feedback, to help them with their writing, then yeah, by all means. (Online teacher)

The kids a lot of times will take an accounting class, and their parent might be an accountant. That might help. Or if they're really good at math, and [their student has] some math problems. I don't think it's their responsibility; but if it's something that they have expertise in, then it's good for the kid if they have a parent at home to help them. (On-site mentor)

It would be nice if all parents taught their kids to be self-disciplined and organized and motivated, that kind of thing. That would be great. (On-site mentor)

Misconceptions and Obstacles to Parental Engagement

Online teachers and on-site mentors had a vision for what parental engagement should entail but found that parents/guardians typically fell short of the ideal. This appeared to be the result of several misconceptions that parents/guardians had regarding online learning. One mentor believed that parents' misconceptions were to be expected because "most of them never had any interaction with an online [course]; they have no idea what it's about." Another mentor added, "I think that most parents and most students, the first time they take an online class, don't realize how different it is, and so it's just a learning curve." A teacher explained, "It's so new and I'm guessing a lot of them don't even know how it works." A mentor summarized, "I wish that a parent would be more involved … It's not through any fault of their own. There's just some aspect of it that they don't understand."

The following describes some of the most predominate misconceptions and obstacles that parents/guardians faced.

Lack of Awareness That Their Student Was Enrolled in an Online Course

Perhaps the most surprising recurring theme in our analysis was that parents/guardians were unaware that their students were even enrolled in an online course. A basic awareness that their student is enrolled in an online course is an obvious prerequisite to parents/guardians actually supporting their students in their courses. Ensuring that parents/guardians were aware that their

students were enrolled in an online course should be the responsibility of the person enrolling the student in the course — typically the local school counselor. When the enroller failed in this responsibility, it frustrated teachers, mentors, and parents/guardians.

> They find out through the school that their son or daughter is failing in the class, and then we'll get a call or an email from a parent [that says], 'I didn't even know my son or daughter was taking an online course, and I'm concerned about their progress.' That can be a frustrating situation for us as instructors and the parents if the parent does not even know that their son or daughter is taking a class [online]. (Online teacher)

> The worst is when they contact the parent and [the parent] says, 'Oh they're in an online course. I didn't know that.' (Online teacher)

> There was some headache involved with parents who don't know, didn't read any of the information I sent home, or just didn't look, and then all of a sudden, they see or they hear that their kid is failing, and they kind of panic as to what is going on. (On-site mentor)

Perception That Online Courses Were Not "Real"

In their conversations with parents/guardians, teachers and mentors found that parents/guardians misunderstood that students' grades in their online courses actually "counted." Some parents/guardians believed that students would only earn a "pass" or "fail" grade that would not be reflected on students' GPA the same way as grades earned in face-to-face courses. This resulted in some placing a lower sense of urgency and priority on performing well in online course work.

> They don't feel like the course online is as important to the student's learning as the face-to-face class. (Online teacher)

> I just want to make sure parents understand that this class counts just as much as any other class, at least toward graduation and their school requirement. (Online teacher)

> It's really hard to get the parents to understand that this kid has an actual class that in the near future is going on your report card. Grades count. Grades matter. (On-site mentor)

> Their impression is that virtual classes aren't real classes. They don't count. So they'll be like, 'Okay, just get to passing, and then you don't have to worry about it anymore.' (On-site mentor)

Perception That Online Courses Are Easier Than Face-to-Face Courses

Teachers and mentors found that many parents/guardians believed that online courses were easier to complete than face-to-face courses. As a result, many parents/guardians were unprepared to offer students the level of support they needed.

> I don't think it's [only] a parental misconception. I think it's an overall misconception. A lot of people think that online learning is just easier than face-to-face. It's like, 'Oh yeah, that's

easy. I'll do that.' Then they're like, 'Holy cripes, they actually want me to do work in here!' (Online teacher)

There are parents who think that their child will get an automatic A, because it should be an easy class. (On-site mentor)

Sometimes parents and students alike are surprised at how difficult the work may be and how much time a student will have to spend trying to learn it. (On-site mentor)

Misunderstanding the Roles of the Online Teacher and the On-site Mentor
Teachers and mentors found that some parents/guardians believed the online courses were teacher-less, which prevented them from reaching out to teachers for clarification and support. Others failed to understand the unique roles of the online teacher and on-site mentor, which caused confusion and frustration when reaching out for support from the wrong person.

A lot of parents think that it is a student reading something, taking a quiz, it's automatically graded, they move on, there's no adult behind the course. (Online teacher)

Some parents aren't even aware that there are instructors in our courses … so the parent is not really aware of what our role is. (Online teacher)

I've had parents who were upset with me when they thought I was the actual teacher. Once they figure out what my role is and that I can't fix that grade because it's not me, usually they understand. (On-site mentor)

[Parents] think that there's no one to talk to about this class because it's online. I don't think they all understand that I'm here. (On-site mentor)

Not Knowing Where and How to Check Students' Grades
Teachers and mentors agreed parents/guardians should closely monitor their students' online grades and progress. Teachers regularly entered students' grades and feedback into an online grade book. However, parents/guardians could only access the online grade book using their students' username and password. When they logged in, they would see what the student saw in the course and had to know how to navigate to the grade book. Furthermore, teachers in the local brick-and-mortar schools maintained their own password-protected online grade books that parents/guardians were accustomed to monitoring. Thus, in order to check their students' online grades, parents/guardians had to: (1) remember to visit the online course portal that was separate from the portal that was used by the brick-and-mortar school, (2) access and remember their student's log in information, and (3) know how to navigate the learning management system to actually access the grade book. The result appeared to be a large portion of parents/guardians not monitoring grades online.

Parents can go to the online grading system [for the face-to-face] courses but they cannot look at the fifth [the online course] unless they either have their students log in in front of them at home and show them their progress or they hear from me. (On-site mentor)

> I will have only a handful of parents that ever really, truly sit down with their kids at home and look at what their kids are doing online. (On-site mentor)

> Our parents have logins for our school but not for their online class. (On-site mentor)

> Our [online grade book] is really nice in our traditional classes. They can log in, look at the grade, click that grade, and then that opens up the teacher's grade book. Then they can see what assignments their kids are missing. Obviously, [parents] can't really do that with the online [course]. They have a lot more information [for the traditional courses]. (On-site mentor)

Online Teachers' Inability to Contact Parents/Guardians

Teachers only had access to parents'/guardians' contact information if that information was entered into the system at the time of registration — something that was commonly overlooked by local school counselors. This limited teachers' ability to push information out to parents/guardians or to reach out to them individually when problems arose. As a result, online teachers had to rely heavily on mentors to communicate with parents/guardians on their behalf. While some mentors also lacked accurate contact information for some parents/guardians, they had more mechanisms for obtaining accurate contact information than did online teachers. Furthermore, it was not always intuitive to parents/guardians where to find teachers' contact information in the course.

> [It should be] mandatory that we have actual parent emails and actual student emails so we know when the progress reports go out; or if I'm sending a supplemental something or other to the students, then everybody gets it. (Online teacher)

> When the school enrolls the student in the course, oftentimes they do not provide us with the parent contact information. Sometimes we do, as instructors, collect data from the students and ask them for that information. Again, [the school] doesn't have to provide it to us. That's always a challenge because we can't really do anything about it. Sometimes I have concerns when we don't have the parent's contact information. (Online teacher)

> I think that [parents] don't have access to the teacher's email easily — the actual teacher's email — so I am the 'go to' person, and I will often provide the teacher's email. (On-site mentor)

> Students will give me an incorrect email or an incorrect phone number, so I'll have to do some detective work, but I can always track them down. (On-site mentor)

Implications for Improving Parental Engagement

In this research we found that online teachers and on-site mentors had similar visions for how parents/guardians can engage in students' learning. They also believed that their students would have benefited if parents/guardians were more engaged. Teachers and mentors also empathized with them and understood that they faced several significant obstacles when they attempted to engage in their students' learning. Because we sampled highly successful mentors and teachers,

their efforts to assist parents/guardians provide insight into strategies that may help parents/guardians to more fully engage in students' learning. Based on teacher and mentor experiences and perceptions, we make the following four recommendations to online programs seeking to improve parental engagement.

Provide Students with a Mentor and Regular Lab

While a high level of parental engagement is a good aspiration for online programs, for many students it is unlikely to materialize. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), who developed one of the leading parental engagement frameworks, explained that while schools can act in ways to increase parental engagement, there are some factors that are beyond the influence of schools that limit parents'/guardians' ability to fully participate in their students' learning. They explained that "family-status variables and related factors (e.g., time, energy, community contracts) are significantly related to parent-involvement decisions" (p. 318). For instance, in households with low socioeconomic status (SES) both parents may work long hours and have little time to work directly with their students. Research has also identified an inverse relationship between levels of parental engagement and SES (Jeynes, 2007; Alghazo & Alghazo, 2015). Jeynes (2007) added that the relationship between SES and parental involvement is more complex than demands on parents' time because "some of the same attributes that help make a parent supportive are also likely to produce high SES parents" (p. 102). For instance, high SES parents tend to place a high value on education and view education as a means for living a successful adult life and may view their responsibilities differently than other groups of parents.

Because online learning can actually increase the need for parental engagement, many underprivileged children may be at an even greater disadvantage. Parents'/guardians' values and other demands on parents'/guardians' time and resources are persistent obstacles that are not easily overcome, and schools should look for ways to increase the support that they provide those students at school. It is important to note that of the 12 highly successful mentors who we sampled from this research, 11 required their students to attend a daily lab. Because of their regular contact with students, mentors believed that the level of parents'/guardians' engagement required for student success was actually similar to that in a face-to-face class. One mentor explained, "If [students] are not attending a lab, that parent piece would be far more important than just a general ed. or face-to-face [class] when they're sitting in a classroom." As a result, if schools already recognize low parental engagement at their school, perhaps the most effective intervention school administrators can implement is to provide their online students with a set time and place to learn in the presence of an active mentor. This is not to say that school administrators should hold a fatalistic view of parental engagement; there are several things that teachers, mentors, and administrators can do to increase parental engagement as described in the following sections.

Educate Parents/Guardians about the Challenges of Online Learning and Ways They Can Support Their Students

Because K-12 online learning is a relatively new innovation that is only now seeing widespread adoption, it is likely that many parents/guardians have never taken an online course. Online learning is also rapidly evolving, so it is likely that any online course that parents/guardians would

have taken is very different from the online courses that their students are tasked with completing. As a result, it is not surprising that parents/guardians will have several misconceptions that will make it difficult for them to fully engage in their students' learning.

Even before a student registers for an online course, school counselors and/or on-site mentors should be working to educate parents/guardians regarding the challenges that students face in online learning and the ways that they can help their students overcome those challenges. While teachers found that many of their students' parents/guardians were not informed of online course enrollments, the mentors who we sampled and interviewed explained either they or their school counselor would send material home prior to enrolling students in an online course. One mentor explained, "We have a form that [parents] have to fill out. It goes home and the parents have to sign it. They say exactly what course it is, how it's going to count, and some of the kinds of [parent] responsibilities that go along with [being in an online course]." Some counselors also provided parents/guardians with online learning readiness questionnaires for them to complete with their student. In some cases, mentors found that school counselors would also call parents/guardians to discuss enrollments.

Once students are enrolled in the course, the online teacher and on-site mentor should continue to work with parents/guardians to ensure that they understand the course and recognize ways that they can support their online student. In this research, the online teachers provided the mentor with an orientation document that mentors would then supplement with additional information before sending it home for parents/guardians to read. This resulted in a "really long letter" that made mentors wonder "how many parents read them." Some mentors asked parents/guardians to sign a document as an indication that they read and understood the materials. While helpful, these efforts were not sufficient and mentors found that many parents/guardians remained confused about the nature of online courses and ways that they could support their students. As a result, one mentor commonly made phone calls throughout the semester whenever she got "a feeling that the student isn't being backed up at home" so that she could talk with parents/guardians "on a personal level." Similarly, another mentor explained that he would "sit down or talk with a parent and say, 'This is what your son/daughter is doing, and this what you can do.'"

Meeting with parents/guardians on a personal level appeared to be the best approach for some families, but many mentors likely do not have the time to have a personal meeting with every parent/guardian; therefore, schools should create opportunities for mentors to speak with parents/guardians in groups. Mentors made themselves available at their brick-and-mortar school's parent-teacher night and appreciated the opportunity to "get into the class and show them" how it works, but they found that the conferences were too late into the semester and that "the parents you need to see just don't come in." As a result, one mentor recommended that schools hold more mandatory orientation meetings for parents/guardians whose students are taking an online course for the first time. "Just bring them in to say, 'Hey, this is how an online class works, and here's what you can do, and here's what your child has to do.' Just to help educate them that way." Face-to-face or even online orientation meetings have the potential to efficiently communicate with parents/guardians on a more "personal level."

Maintain Sustained Communication

Online teachers and on-site mentors should have open lines of communication with parents/guardians that they use throughout the semester. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) explained that a major motivator for parents to engage in their students' learning is parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others "because they suggest to the parent that participation in the child's learning is welcome, valuable, and expected by the school and its members" (p. 110). They added that specific and actionable invitations are particularly important when parents underestimate the level of involvement that is required, as was the case in this research. As a result, regular invitations from the online teacher and on-site mentor throughout the semester would likely help parents/guardians to maintain a more consistent level of engagement. Surprisingly, the online teachers we interviewed commonly lacked any contact information for parents/guardians because those who registered the student failed to enter the information into the system. As a result, teachers relied heavily on mentors to communicate with parents/guardians on their behalf. Unfortunately, teachers experienced a wide variance in mentors' involvement and responsiveness. One teacher shared:

> To be honest with you, it's kind of all over the board. We get some mentors who are awesome … On the other side of the table, I get several mentors who I'll contact, send progress reports to, send emails, and I never hear back from them at all.

Because some mentors appeared to be absent from students' learning, we recommend that online programs require that parent/guardian contact information be provided to the online teacher.

Teachers and mentors may also find success using a variety of communication methods. For instance, Pakter and Chen (2013) have explored using text messaging as a way to increase the immediacy of their communication with parents. Burns (2015) explained that text messages can provide new teachers with just-in-time professional development. Similarly, text messaging recommendations for engagement throughout the semester could provide them information that parents could immediately act on in the moment.

Provide Progress Reports and Parent Portal

Online programs, teachers, and on-site mentors should work to make parents'/guardians' monitoring of student progress as easy as possible. For reasons explained in the section "Misconceptions and Obstacles to Parental Engagement," there were important obstacles that deterred many parents/guardians from independently monitoring student progress online. As a result, the interviewed mentors commonly emailed progress reports to parents/guardians. However, one mentor found:

> [The] system for emailing parents is horrible … There's no way for me to put a parent email in so I have to create my own database of emails for each student … Emailing parents with 60 some-odd kids takes me almost a full day.

Because emailing parents/guardians progress reports could prove to be time consuming, mentors tended to focus on emailing progress reports only when students were under-performing. A more

user-friendly system would allow mentors to more regularly email progress reports to all parents/guardians.

Parents/guardians would also likely monitor their student's grades online if they were provided their own portal with an intuitive dashboard. One mentor believed, "if parents were able to access [students' grades] that way and have their own code to check to see where their kids were, then I think the percentage of kids that struggle, that fail, would decrease because parents would be able to actually get involved more." Another mentor added the following:

> Maybe the online providers need to provide a parent portal so when they send me the student's credentials, instead of having a server account like what I have, they have a parent account or information where parents can sign in and see their son or daughter only. That would be fantastic. Actually, that would save me, in many cases. Who knows if every parent is going to check it, but I have a feeling that a vast majority of my parents would be looking at that right away.

Conclusion

Parents and guardians play an important role in students' education — regardless of the context. Parents/guardians have also been viewed as a critical element in potential solutions for increasing students' success and decreasing student dropout rates. Research has largely confirmed that most types of parental engagement are positively correlated with student success in a face-to-face context. However, little research has explored parental engagement in online courses. An important first step is to identify the types of parental engagement that are valued by online teachers and on-site mentors. It is also important to identify the potential obstacles that parents/guardians will face as they work to fulfill their responsibilities. In this research, we addressed this need by interviewing 12 successful on-site mentors and 12 online teachers. Through our analysis of interview transcripts, we found that teachers and mentors largely agreed with the types of parental engagement that they believed would improve student learning. We also found that parents/guardians were under-engaged in their students' learning due to several misconceptions and obstacles. Following this research and research conducted in face-to-face environments, we believe that online programs would likely see an increase in parental engagement if they (1) involved parents/guardians in the online course enrollment decision, (2) educated parents/guardians regarding the challenges of learning online and ways that they can support their students, (3) maintained regular contact with parents/guardians by sending them specific invitations to be involved, and (4) assisted parents/guardians in their monitoring activities by regularly emailing them progress reports and providing them with an online parent portal with displays that allow them to easily track student engagement and performance.

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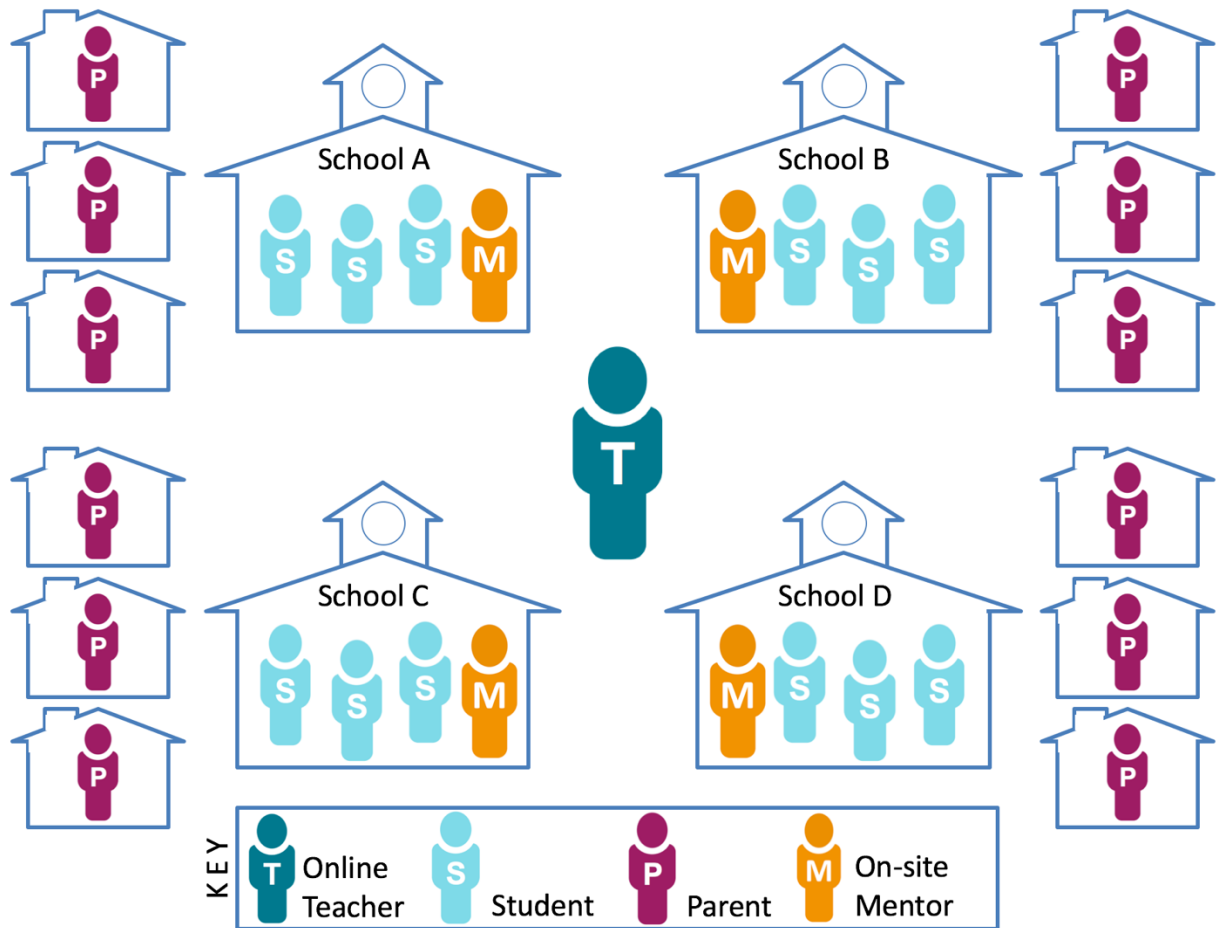
Figure 1: Supplemental online learning model where students interact with their teacher at a distance and interact face-to-face with an on-site mentor at school and their parent at home. Depending on the program, students may work primarily in a school lab with their mentor or at home with their parent.
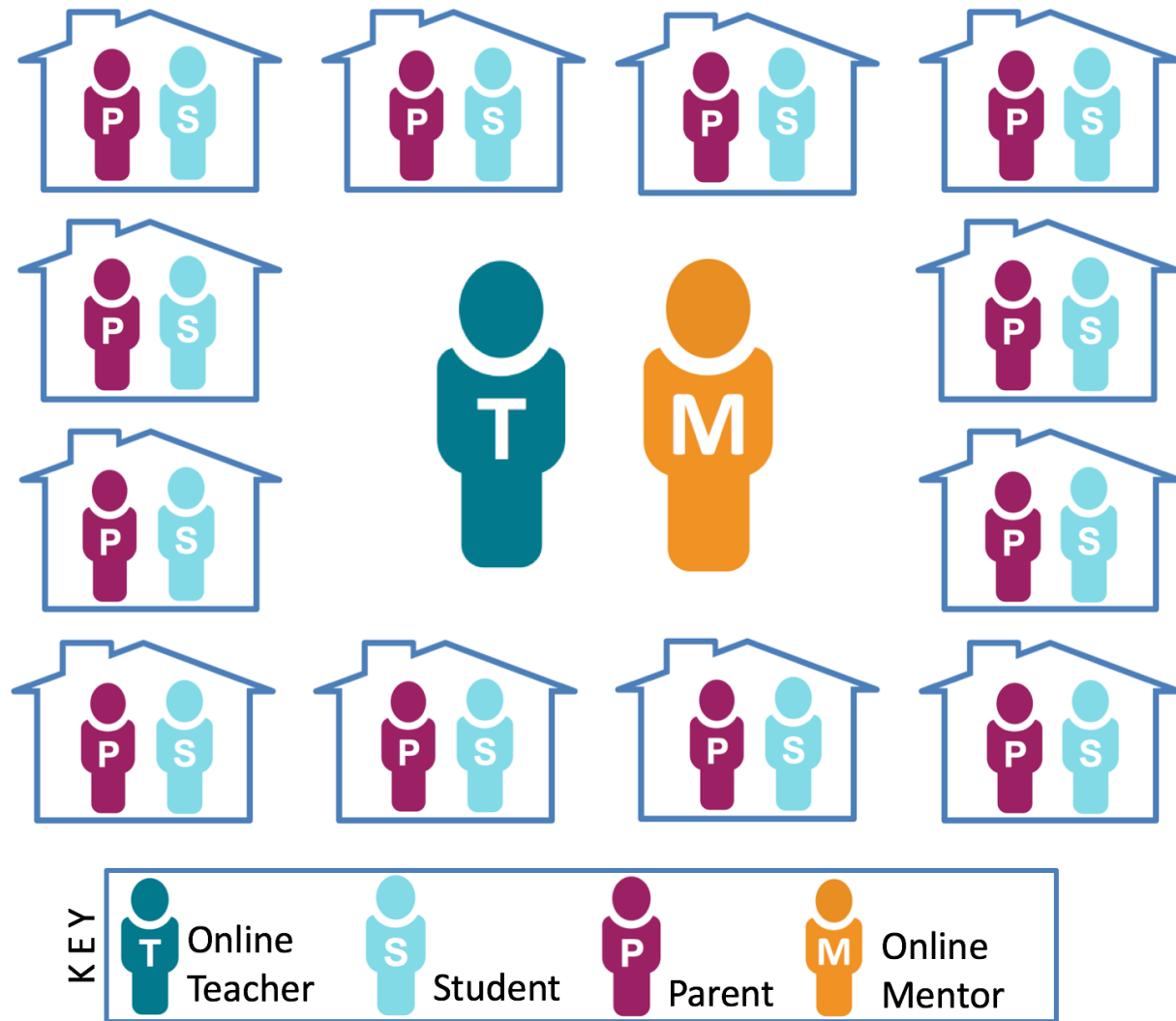
Figure 2: Full-time online learning model where students are only co-present with their parent(s) and interact with their teacher and mentor at a distance. In this model, parental engagement responsibilities are especially high because students are working primarily at home.