In my role as a special education advocate working primarily in Miami-Dade - the fourth largest public school district in the country - I’ve participated in hundreds of school meetings. Naturally as an advocate, I meet lots of dissatisfied parents, but I also see very unhappy teachers and administrators who are equally frustrated with a special education system laden with laws and red tape that often doesn’t result in even adequate educational achievement. One bright light in Miami is an emphasis on high quality online education options for struggling learners which they can access at home and in school. Virtual ed - especially hybrid models where kids get the benefit of socialization by spending part of their time in brick and mortar schools - represents the future for millions of learners, including those with special needs.

According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 48 states had established a significant form of online learning initiative as of 2012. Ambient Insight, an international market research firm, says that 1.68 million K-12 students participated in a formal online learning program in 2011. And K12, Inc., the nation’s largest provider of full-time virtual elementary and secondary education, recognizes that disabled and “academically at-risk” students represent two of their most - if not their most - rapidly growing constituencies.

In my advocacy work I also find that more and more parents whose kids don’t fit the cookie cutter mold of their neighborhood school are increasingly interested in the option of high-quality education online - even if it means missing teacher-led instruction.

Let's take the case of Carlos, an upper elementary student with high-functioning Autism who has fallen years behind in reading despite a solid IQ. Carlos loves computers. Like many children with ADHD or Autism, Carlos is drawn-in by the immediate feedback and dynamic interface offered on the computer. He is able to learn more independently via computer-based instruction than he is in his typical classroom where it's essentially impossible for a single teacher to meet the individual needs of many struggling children. Remember, Carlos' teachers must also simultaneously present an increasingly quick-paced curriculum and by no fault of their own have almost no time to provide remedial instruction to Carlos - even in the resource room in which he spends most of his day. But Carlos has a chance to catch-up by accessing daily an online reading intervention, such as iReady or Imagine Learning. And his teachers and parents can get a print-out of exactly how he's progressing on each reading skill - not information easily available in traditional classroom teaching.

The more customization a student requires, as is often the case with kids with special needs who need adaptations in pacing, methodology, presentation and curriculum, the more attractive virtual ed can be. No doubt, there have been major problems with school choice for special needs kids that have been widely written about. And I believe nearly every negative story - well, other than the purely politically driven articles - about how some special needs kids are excluded from schools of choice. That must change . . . and it will. It will change not because the feds will continue investigating discrimination against these children, as they found recently in a virtual Ohio charter, but because the smarter charter and virtual operators will find that they can succeed with special needs kids when others have failed.

Some “first adopter” parents already are setting a path by piecing together readily available online options which meet their kids needs. Just do a quick search to find list-serves, message boards and blogs for examples of how parents, particularly in California where many trends are born, are educating their children virtually.

Why are the parents of special needs and struggling kids choosing virtual schooling at increasing rates? The answer may not be immediately obvious depending on the picture you have in your mind of a disabled kid, but the truth is that the vast majority of kids in the United States labeled as disabled have learning or speech and language problems - which are not usually as pervasively debilitating as Carlos’ disability of Autism. Learning and speech and language disabilities generally can be completely remediated over several months with intensive, individualized research-based remediation on a daily basis. For example, K12 has recently launched a proprietary online reading remediation product available to all its students called MARK12. Just like a master teacher or tutor would do, if your child were lucky enough to have one, MARK12 gives each student an alternate explanation, additional practice or remediation when they miss a crucial skill or concept. In other words, the instruction adapts in real-time to each kids particular profile.

Don't get me wrong, virtual ed is not a good choice for all special needs students. It would probably not be the first choice for child who has severe behavior problems or who is profoundly intellectually impaired. But let's not let the perfect be the enemy of the good as Voltaire said. For some children who are severely bullied, have difficulty navigating large or crowded environments or have attention problems, virtual ed can be a godsend. And with the onset of the rigorous Common Core curriculum, the benefit of instruction that adapts at key points to student needs will be greater.
By now, if you know anything about special ed you're probably asking "How on earth are all the therapeutic needs of kids with disabilities going to be met in an online environment?" That's a good question which has rapidly developing answers. Many kids will need to spend some of their day or their week getting face-to-face therapies, such as speech and language therapy and counseling, in a brick and mortar school, such as in the blended learning model at Denver's Rocky Mountain Prep. Rocky Mountain Prep is a public charter school with a mission to serve a high needs population. In this relatively new and small school there is a special education teacher, psychologist and therapists made available through collaboration with the public school district. And classrooms use a rotation model in which some students at a given time will be learning on specialized computer programs, receiving small group instruction, or therapies. Other students learning at home or in rural areas may access speech and language and occupational therapy online.

Rocky Mountain Prep promises on its website that their students will "...grow at the same academic rate as their peers regardless of their socio-economic status, English language attainment and/or learning or physical disabilities..." A tall order which remains to be proven. But it wouldn't shock me if one day we discover that blended learning models like Rocky Mountain Prep are able to deliver special needs services more effectively and efficiently than traditional schools - and with less morale-killing red tape.

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