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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Empowering Diverse Learners and Their Families: The Potential of Online Schooling for  
Students with Disabilities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Anna Johnson

The committee in charge:

California State University, San Marcos

Professor Sinem Siyahhan, Chair

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University of California San Diego

Professor Shana Cohen

2024

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The dissertation of Anna Johnson is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego  
California State University, San Marcos

2024

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## **Abstract of the Dissertation**

Empowering Diverse Learners and Their Families: The Potential of Online Schooling for Students with Disabilities

by

Anna Johnson

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2024

California State University, San Marcos, 2024

Professor Sinem Siyahhan, Chair

Over the past few decades, online schools have witnessed exponential growth. Nevertheless, the body of research on their effectiveness and viability as educational options for students with disabilities, as well as their offerings for diverse learners, remains surprisingly sparse. This deficiency in evidence is noteworthy, especially as the demand for flexible

education options continues to rise. In response to this gap, the present study conducts a literature review, which underscores the scarcity of empirical data detailing the specific attributes and benefits that online schools can provide. Despite the limited existing literature, our review identifies some distinctive factors, particularly related to the integration of the "5 Cs" *learner control, flexible and rigorous curriculum, safe climate, caring community, and connection to students as individuals and their future goals*. The focus of this study is to answer the following question: What are the unique experiences, perspectives, and challenges of SWD and their parents in an online charter school compared to their previous experiences in traditional brick-and-mortar public schools (TBMPS), encompassing aspects such as choice of online schooling, collaboration and communication, inclusivity, flexibility, parental involvement, and teacher support?

This study is designed as a qualitative research endeavor, employing in-depth interviews with up to 25 families and their students with disabilities. The objective of this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of SWD within the online school environment. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze these experiences through the framework of the "5C" design, shedding light on the key components of successful online education. By doing so, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the potential of online schooling, particularly for SWD, and provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve and adapt online educational programs to better serve diverse learners. Ultimately, this investigation addresses the pressing need to explore the untapped potential of online schools, with an emphasis on fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment

*“Online education is like a rising tide, it’s going to lift all boats.” – Anant Agarwal*

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Students with disability (SWD) are students who experience developmental delays in one or more of the following areas: physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive development (Knoblauch & Sorenson, 1998). An increasing number of SWD attend public schools in the United States. In the 2020–2021 school year, 15% of all students or 7.2 million children were identified as SWD (NCES, 2024). The increase in the number of SWD in public schools over the years created a need to understand and support the learning needs of these students (Lipscomb & Stephen, 2009; Swain et al., 2021). The trend in California mimics the national trend with about one in eight, or nearly 13% of students in kindergarten through 12th grade being eligible for special education services (Lipscomb & Stephen, 2009).

Mandated by law, every child who is eligible for special education services in the United States has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that explains in detail the type of disability and the variety of services and accommodations the child needs in order to make adequate academic progress. An IEP is a legal document schools should implement verbatim. Special education teachers must keep IEPs up to date by collecting current data to be used in their instructional practices. Accurate data collection helps with creating appropriate IEPs which indicate placement and appropriate support so students can make adequate academic progress (Knoblauch & Sorenson, 1998; Swain et al., 2021).

Throughout the last several decades, with the advancement of new and digital technologies, online schooling has been on the rise and increasingly viewed as an alternative for the education of SWD (Gill et al., 2015). Within online schooling, virtual public charter schools stand out as they are tuition-free, have full-time instruction, and are publicly funded but privately

managed. It is estimated that around 13% of preK-12 students enrolled in virtual charter public schools have disabilities. Online charter schools, also referred to as virtual charters, operate without physical school buildings. Instead, they utilize technology to deliver education directly to students in their own homes. Due to synchronous and asynchronous opportunities in virtual schools, families can have more control over their child's learning environment because of the flexibility of time and space (Rhim & Kowal, 2008). The term "asynchronous opportunities" describes learning or activities where participants are not required to be present or engaged in real-time at the same moment. Individuals can instead access and take part in these opportunities at their own pace and convenience (Rhim & Kowal, 2008). Online schools typically provide students with necessary equipment such as computers, software, and access to network-based resources. Teachers are available to students through various communication channels, including email, telephone, web, and teleconference (Gill et al., 2015). Online schooling offers SWD a range of benefits such as individualized pacing, accessibility, and increased flexibility. Further, it has the potential to provide a more inclusive education experience for SWD who often encounter barriers in brick-and-mortar schools that hinder their educational progress and limit their opportunities for success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although there has been an increase in the number of online charter public schools, there continues to be a lack of research on the experiences of SWD and their parents in online charter public schools. Online charter schools are a viable alternative to traditional brick-and-mortar public school (TBMPS) because they provide access to education regardless of geographical location, socioeconomic background, or students' physical abilities. Online schools have the capacity to ensure accessibility, flexibility, personalized learning, expanded course offerings,

resource accessibility, and individualized support. At the same time, not all students have equal access to reliable Internet connections, adequate supervision, devices, or conducive learning environments at home. Therefore, it is important to investigate the lived experiences of both SWD and their parents to better understand the efficacy of online charter public schools in accommodating the needs of these students, and why SWD and their parents choose online charter public schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to understand the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter public school with a particular focus on why SWD and their parents choose to enroll in an online charter public school. In addition, to determine how the school creates an inclusive environment for SWD and their parents, how the experiences of SWD and their parents in the school compare to their experiences in a brick-and-mortar school, and the challenges SWD and their parents in an online charter public school.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school?
  - a. Why did SWD and their parents choose online schooling and a particular school for enrollment?
  - b. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, what is the nature of collaboration and communication between SWD, their parents, teachers, and school administration to support student academic success and well-being?
  - c. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways does the online school provide an inclusive environment to support SWDs' learning and academic success?



- d. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways does the online school provide flexibility to SWD to support their learning and engagement?
2. How are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school different or similar to their prior experience(s) with a TBMPS?
3. What are the challenges of online schooling for SWD and their parents with respect to inclusion, flexibility, parental involvement, communication, and teacher support?

### **Significance of the Study**

As the landscape of education continues to evolve, particularly in the wake of digital advancements, understanding the unique challenges and opportunities SWD and their parents face in online charter public schools is important. The knowledge gained in this study addresses a critical gap in current literature and informs educators to support SWD and their parents and create an inclusive curriculum where all students can be academically successful. By shedding light on the nuanced experiences of SWD in an online charter public school setting, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding inclusive education, equitable access, and the effective integration of technology. Ultimately, the findings of this study inform evidence-based practices and help shape policies that promote a more inclusive and empowering educational environment for all students, including those with disabilities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was fundamentally grounded in the theoretical principles of the 5C framework, which identifies the dimensions of successful online learning experiences for SWD (Cavanaugh et al., 2013). In this study, The 5Cs framework was used to conceptualize the different dimensions of the experiences of SWD and their parents with an online charter public school and informed the development of interview questions and data analysis to capture the

experiences of SWD and their parents across the dimensions of *learner control, flexible and rigorous curriculum, safe climate, caring community, and connection to students as individuals and their future goals* as discussed in details below.

The 5Cs encompass the following five dimensions. The first dimension, *Learner Control*, emphasizes giving students a degree of autonomy in their learning process. It acknowledges that students have unique learning styles and paces, and thus, allowing them to have some control over their learning path to enhance student engagement and comprehension. The second dimension, *Flexible and Rigorous Curriculum*, emphasizes that a successful educational institution must offer a curriculum that strikes a balance between flexibility and rigor. Flexibility allows for adaptation to individual student needs, while rigor ensures that the academic standards remain high, providing students with a challenging and rewarding learning experience. The third dimension, *Safe Climate*, highlights the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment for students to thrive. This not only includes students feeling safe not only physically but also emotionally and psychologically. When students feel secure and supported, they are more likely to engage in the learning process and take intellectual risks. The fourth dimension, *Caring Community*, suggests that a caring community builds fostering a sense of belonging and interconnectedness among students and educators. When students feel valued and connected to their peers and teachers, they are more likely to actively participate in the educational process and seek help when needed. The fifth dimension, *Connection to Students as Individuals and Their Future Goals*, takes into account the unique needs and aspirations of each student. Recognizing students as individuals and aligning the educational experience with their future goals ensures that learning is relevant and motivating.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative interview study research method was used to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of SWD and their parents in an online charter public school that the researcher worked as an education specialist. A total of seventeen SWD (grades 11th through 12th) and parent pairs (15 mothers, 2 fathers) participated in this study with the additional five parents who participated in the study but did not give consent for their child to participate. This study consisted of 38 participants (17 SWD, 22 parents). To be eligible to participate in the study, the SWD must have (a) had at least one year experience in a brick-and-mortar school prior to enrolling at the online charter public school, (b) had an IEP, (c) enrolled as a student in grades 10th through 12th, and (d) identified as having mild to moderate disability.

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with SWD and parents separately. Interviews allowed the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences, and perceptions of SWD and their parents about the differences between brick-and-mortar school and online charter school as well as opportunities and challenges of online charter school for SWD and their parents. Parents signed a consent form for their and their child's participation in the research study. The researcher obtained child assent from the student participants. Each interview took 30 to 60 minutes. The research questions and the theoretical framework informed the interview questions. The qualitative interview study data analysis approach was employed to identify and explore recurring themes, patterns, and meanings derived from the SWD and their parents' narratives. Open coding and thematic analysis were used to organize and interpret the data, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this qualitative research study involve its focus on the experiences of SWD and their parents or guardians in one school, where the researcher is an education specialist and the use of convenient sampling. The SWDs must have had at least one year of experience in a brick-and-mortar school prior to enrolling at the online charter public school, an individualized education program (IEP), been enrolled as a student in grades 10 through 12, and have a mild to moderate disability.

As such, the findings cannot be generalized to the experiences of SWD and their parents across all ages, grades, disability levels, and online charter schools. Furthermore, there is no comparison group, and the uniqueness of the selected school's structures and guiding principles may restrict the conclusions' transferability. However, because the study utilizes the theoretical principles of the 5C framework, which identifies the dimensions of successful online learning experiences for SWD (Cavanaugh et al., 2013), the findings highlight how close the school is aligned with the best practices for supporting the success of SWD in online environments.

As the researcher works as an education specialist at the school where the research took place, she examined her biases, assumptions, and values to see how they might affect the study's design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The researcher minimized bias using multiple data sources to ensure accurate qualitative analysis, remained aware of her positionality while conducting the study and worked for objectivity and impartiality. The researcher ensured that she supported her interpretations with thorough research and data to lessen subjectivity and utilized intercoder reliability to minimize preconceptions and improve validity. She was mindful of the power dynamics between herself and the voluntary participants, attempted to create

collaborative and respectful relationships, valued their participants' perspectives and experiences, and incorporated their voices into the research process.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the purpose of the study, the problem the research study aims to add, the methodological approach to be used to address the research questions. It also discussed the significance and the limitations of the study. Chapter 2, provided an in-depth review of the literature related to the research study and theoretical framework. Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the participants, procedures, data collection, and analysis. The interview questions are included in Appendix A. Findings were shared in Chapter 4, and a discussion of the findings and implications were included in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides a background on the individuals with disabilities in the education system in the United States with a focus on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the obligations schools have to ensure the needs of students with disability (SWD) are met. From there, the chapter discusses how despite the federal policies and mandates, SWD continue to lag academically behind their peers without disabilities. Having various learning options could benefit some students, particularly for SWD, for whom traditional brick-and-mortar public schools (TBMPS) may not always work. As such, this chapter reviews the history of distance education and the emergence of online charter schools as an alternative schooling for SWD. Especially with the increased demand for online charter schools due to the pandemic, there is a need to understand how online charter schools meet the needs of SWD. The chapter reviews the characteristics of online schools and how these characteristics are mapped onto the principles that guide creating a learning environment that supports the learning experiences and inclusion of SWD. Finally, the chapter concludes with the gaps identified in the literature on online schools and SWD that this research study aims to fill and the theoretical framework that informs the study along with the research questions.

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

The enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by Congress in 1975 was prompted by the widely held belief in the enduring benefits of educating children with disabilities. This legislative action was further driven by mounting concerns about the insufficient provision of public education by states for these children, compounded by a series of legal challenges. Simultaneously, states sought federal aid to support educational services for children with disabilities. IDEA serves as the foundational framework for federal funding

directed to states for two primary objectives: Early Intervention services targeting infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays, and specialized education along with associated services for school-aged children with disabilities. This framework establishes core principles to guide the delivery of these vital services (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). With IDEA states and local districts receive dedicated funds from the US Department of Education and are required by law to (1) provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) to children with disabilities ages 3 and 21, (2) identify, locate, and assess all children with disabilities, irrespective of disability severity, to ascertain eligibility and the requirement for special education and related services, (3) each child eligible for special education services with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that outlines their unique educational needs and supports, (4) provide the optimal educational setting for SWD is one where they are educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent feasible, in an environment with minimal restrictions (referred to as the Least Restrictive Environment principle), (5) put in place comprehensive procedural safeguards to ensure that children and families have avenues for resolution, encompassing mediation, complaint investigation, due process hearings, and the option to appeal to a federal district court, and (6) ensure the collaborative involvement of schools, parents, and SWD in formulating of IEP objectives, related-service needs, and placement determinations. Together, these mandates by the IDEA ensures that SWD receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that is tailored to their unique needs. Below, it was expanded on the IEP and LRE principle as these two principles underscore the necessity of personalizing curriculum to students' needs, parent engagement, and inclusion of SWD with the school community (Zirkel, 2015).

## **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

All schools, whether they are a brick-and-mortar or online school, must have a personalized and legally mandated plan that outlines the educational support and services provided to students with disabilities called IEP. An IEP is a comprehensive document designed to address the unique learning needs of students with disabilities, ensuring that they have equitable access to education and opportunities for academic success. IEP has many chapters which have specific format and terminology that varies based on local educational policies and regulations. The most common chapters in an IEP document include (1) present levels of performance, (2) annual goals and objectives, (3) accommodations and modifications, (4) special education and related services, (5) participation in general education, (6) transition planning (for high school students), (7) behavior intervention plan (BIP), (8) assessment and progress monitoring, (9) parent and student participation, (10) placement and least restrictive environment (LRE), and (11) signatures and date (Marx et al., 2014).

The IEP meeting is required by law to be attended by a specific team of people, including the general education teacher, special education teacher, related service providers, administrator, legal guardian, and other relevant people who all contribute to making sure the student's education is individualized and appropriate. The IEP is the main topic of discussion, and decisions on it must be reached by agreement of all team members and personalized to the needs of the student (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000). The IEP tailors education for students with disabilities, encompassing personalized goals, accommodations, and services. Involving parents, given their insights into the child's needs and learning style, enriches the process. Collaboration merges professional expertise with parental insights, ensuring a holistic and effective IEP. Active parental engagement cultivates commitment, benefiting progress and consistency. Parental input



empowers shared decision-making, enhancing support and advocacy, fostering ownership, responsibility, and positive learning experiences. Continuous parental involvement sustains relevance, reflecting a student-centered ethos. Ultimately, combining educators' expertise with parents' insights creates a potent IEP that guides disabled students toward personalized growth and progress (Marx et al., 2014).

### **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in Special Education refers to the principle that students with disabilities should be educated in settings that provide the maximum opportunity for their participation in the general education curriculum and the school community, while receiving appropriate special education services and supports. The law requires that SWD should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers in regular classrooms and school activities (Francisco et al., 2020; Love & Horn, 2021). The determination of the LRE for each student is made through the IEP team, which includes parents, educators, and other specialists. The team considers the unique needs of the student and strives to place them in a setting that is as close to a typical classroom environment as possible while still meeting their individualized learning needs. This could involve various placement options, such as full inclusion in general education classrooms, partial inclusion with specific support services, or occasional participation in general education activities while primarily receiving specialized instruction in separate settings (Hornby & Hornby, 2015).

The goal of the LRE principle is to promote social interaction, foster academic progress, and provide opportunities for students with disabilities to develop skills necessary for inclusive living and successful transitions to post-school activities. It emphasizes the value of creating an inclusive and accepting school environment that recognizes and celebrates diversity, supporting

the educational and social growth of all students, regardless of their abilities (Hornby & Hornby, 2015).

Many districts consider inclusion to be satisfied when a SWD is placed into the LRE. Moreover, the general purpose of inclusion is to help close the achievement gap for all students and this LRE placement may provide equitable access to learning opportunities thereby closing that gap (Francisco et al., 2020; Love & Horn, 2021; Hornby & Hornby, 2015). However, it is important to note that LRE does not have a fixed, universal definition. Instead, each school and IEP team evaluates LRE based on specific circumstances. Furthermore, merely providing access to general education does not guarantee student success. The success of students is contingent upon the support they receive to engage with the general education curriculum. LRE encompasses both access to general education and interaction with typical peers, as well as the support provided to students to facilitate their curriculum participation. Consequently, the achievement gap between SWD and their typical peers continues to expand.

### **Achievement Gap of Students with Disability**

Throughout the last decade, the number of students with disability (SWD) in schools across all grade levels significantly increased (Gilmour et al., 2019). Although federal policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) support the access of SWD to classrooms, academically SWD continue to lag behind their peers without disabilities, thereby noting evidence of an achievement gap (Gilmour et al., 2019). In California public schools, SWD drop out 32% higher rate than students without disabilities (Gutman, 2017). Although the achievement gap is often documented at grade levels, research suggests that it may even begin before kindergarten when SWD can be as much as two or three years behind in learning and school preparation (Gutman, 2017). This is particularly the case for children from lower-income

homes who have not yet been identified as SWD before kindergarten (Gilmour et al., 2019). As such, a gap that starts in kindergarten between SWD and their peers without disability widens over time during their time in the K-12 system and limits the options for SWD to pursue academic goals in school, higher education, and later in life, employment opportunities (Gilmour et al., 2019). Therefore, it is paramount that SWD are supported before and through their K-12 experience to better participate in academic, social, and civic life.

Many educators believe the achievement between SWD and their peers without a disability is caused by not having access to highly qualified teachers, a culturally relevant curriculum, and adequate funding (Gilmour et al., 2019). However, parents, academics, policymakers, and others disagree over what constitutes *educational access*. The concept of access was first defined as a *place*, such as a neighborhood school or general education classroom. Currently, it is considered students having equal opportunities not only with access to a curriculum but also in making adequate academic progress through the curriculum, thereby improving student learning outcomes. Providing a curriculum is not enough; it is also important to offer a variety of educational support and experiences to help students progress and achieve academic growth utilizing that curriculum (Gilmour et al., 2019).

SWD may require alternative modes of instruction based on their unique needs in order to show adequate educational progress. Instruction is a key component of the education system and needs to meet the learning needs of each student. However, there is no perfect educational environment for all students. Therefore, having a variety of learning options could be beneficial for some students, particularly for SWD, for whom Traditional Brick-and-Mortar Public Schools (TBMPS) instruction may not always work. As such, online schools can offer an alternative to brick-and-mortar schools for SWD as they can provide flexibility with school schedule,

individualized instruction, and more agency to parents and students in shaping the learning experiences of SWD.

### **Distance Education and the Emergence of Online Charter Schools**

Distance education is a generic, all-inclusive term used to refer to the physical separation of teachers and learners (Schlosser and Simonson, 2005; Shalev-Shwartz, 2012). The proliferation of personal computers played a significant role in introducing computer-based and computer-aided instructional methods to schools. These methods, along with the integration of multimedia tools and interactive learning opportunities, laid the foundation for the emergence of virtual schools. Clark (2003) emphasized that these technological advancements helped pave the way for the online school movement.

During the 1990s, the Internet's expansion from universities to the public sphere opened new possibilities for K-12 schools to utilize this emerging medium for educational purposes (Clark, 2003; Darrow, 2010). Recognizing its potential, schools saw the opportunity to deliver education to younger learners in innovative ways. This early period of online learning was marked by the significant support of federal and state subsidies, which played a crucial role in funding K-12 online learning initiatives. These pioneering efforts paved the way for the evolution and growth of virtual education in K-12 settings, fostering innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Their early efforts demonstrated the feasibility and potential of online education, inspiring further exploration and development in K-12 virtual learning environments (Kozma et al., 2000).

Online public charter schools in the United States were first introduced more than 25 years ago as a way to reduce bureaucracy in public schools and free up teachers to innovate (Kentnor, 2015). By 1997, two significant virtual school initiatives had been established: the

state-funded Florida Virtual School and the federally funded Virtual High School (later known as VHS Inc. and currently operating as VHS Collaborative). The Virtual High School initiative involved a consortium of high schools that transcended state boundaries, eventually expanding to a national scale (Kozma et al., 2000). These progressive advancements marked significant milestones in the growth and diversification of virtual schooling opportunities in the United States.

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, K-12 online learning experienced consistent growth and expansion in the United States. Researchers began monitoring this growth and found that between 2004 and 2011, the number of states offering both full-time and supplemental online learning programs increased from 11 states to encompass all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Watson & Gemin, 2008). Accurately capturing the precise enrollment figures for K-12 online learning has posed challenges due to the absence of a centralized monitoring entity, the constantly changing environment of online learning, and the wide array of approaches to online schooling (Glass & Welner, 2011; Watson & Gemin, 2008). The figures given should, therefore be viewed as estimations since they do not fully capture the K-12 online learning engagement range. These numbers nevertheless highlight the enormous influence that K-12 online learning has had on the educational system (Queen & Lewis, 2011).

Cavanaugh et al., (2013) found that online learning initially catered to high-achieving students, but over time, these programs have expanded their scope to include a wider range of students. This shift has been driven by educators recognizing that online learning can serve as a viable alternative to Traditional Brick and Mortar Public Schools (TBMPS) and effectively engage students in the learning process. These expanded programs aim to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, including those who excel academically and those at risk of

dropping out before completing their education (Watson & Gemin, 2008). As online learning moves beyond the early adopter phase, the growth of online programs targeting at-risk students or credit recovery has redefined the application of educational technology to meet the needs of all students. These programs cater to diverse student populations, ranging from students seeking Advanced Placement or dual-credit courses to at-risk students searching for the right instructional approach that aligns with their learning styles (Watson & Gemin 2008).

Students with disability (SWD) are particularly drawn to online education due to its flexibility and comfort. The ability to customize and adapt their learning experience to their unique needs is a significant advantage. By providing a flexible and accessible platform, online schools empower SWD to actively engage in their education and overcome barriers they may encounter in TBMPs settings. Online schools have embraced the objectives of credit recovery and closing the achievement gap, and some have reported serving SWD at rates comparable to TBMPs (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007; Watson & Gemin 2008).

Despite the growing prevalence and advantages of online education, teachers continue to encounter significant challenges in adapting to this mode of teaching. One critical hurdle is the need to shift from a traditional, fixed mindset about what schooling should entail to a more flexible approach that embraces alternative educational models. This transition requires a redefinition of teaching practices and the adoption of innovative pedagogies that cater to the virtual classroom environment (Mezirow, 1997; O'Connor & McEwan, 2020).

Another challenge lies in fostering meaningful social interactions among students. Unlike the natural, spontaneous interactions that occur in physical school settings, such as conversations during lunch or informal exchanges between classes, online education often struggles to replicate these experiences effectively. Research has highlighted the importance of peer interaction in

promoting social and emotional development, which can be harder to achieve in virtual settings (Vygotsky, 1978; Garrison et al., 2000). Teachers must develop strategies to create a sense of community and collaboration in their online classrooms to address this gap (Rovai, 2002).

Additionally, teachers face the ongoing challenge of adapting to a rapidly evolving educational landscape. The technological tools and platforms available for online learning are constantly changing, requiring educators to stay updated and proficient in digital tools (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). This demand for continuous professional development can be overwhelming, especially for those less familiar with technology.

An area of debate within online education is whether isolating students from traditional school challenges, such as bullying, is beneficial or detrimental. On one hand, online education can provide a safer space for students who experience bullying, enabling them to focus on academics without fear of harassment. On the other hand, some scholars argue that facing and overcoming such difficulties in school is essential for building resilience and social coping mechanisms (Olweus, 1993; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). The answer may depend on the individual needs of students and the support systems in place.

In summary, while online education offers flexibility and accessibility, it also requires a fundamental transformation in how teachers approach instruction. Addressing social interaction, fostering community, adapting to technological advancements, and navigating the complexities of student well-being remain key areas for improvement. Continued research and teacher training are critical to overcoming these challenges and ensuring the success of online learning models.

### **The Increased Demand for Online Charter Schools with the Pandemic**

Following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and

universities, were temporarily shut down. As a result, schools had to swiftly transition to some form of distance learning to ensure the continuity of education, leading to a significant disruption in the education system. In the United States alone, the pandemic lockdown impacted at least 124,000 public and private schools, affecting at least 55.1 million students. Regardless of the promising outcomes of online learning, many traditional schools failed to fully transition to interactive, research based curriculum for online learning (Frederick et al. 2023). The abrupt shift in teaching methodology posed numerous challenges for TBMPS students, teachers, and parents alike. The sudden transformation required adjustments and adaptation, giving rise to various hurdles during this unprecedented time (Tarkar, 2020).

Due to the pandemic, virtual schooling became a reality for every student and has gotten more acceptance from parents as an alternative to TBMPS in the United States. With the emergency of COVID, districts did not have time to understand the online education model, and being unprepared for emergencies meant that many SWD did not receive their specialized services. Looking at how school districts handled virtual education during the pandemic can provide valuable information as to what works and what does not work for virtual education as well as advanced online curriculum which could help improve academic experiences for SWD (Darling-Aduana, 2021; Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Teachers had to adapt to online learning in a very short time period without a specific online curriculum and pedagogical training. The move to online education caused the loss of personal student-teacher connections and relationships, while the focus shifted to asynchronous completion of worksheets that caused subjects to be less meaningful without an emphasis on authentic, relevant materials that enhanced student connection with content. During the pandemic, many SWD did not receive the necessary support services from TBMPS, which halted their educational progress (Sonnenschein et al, 2022). One



of the key factors contributing to their struggle was the lack of appropriate curriculum and instructional resources to effectively support SWD in a remote learning environment. The sudden shift to online education presented a unique set of requirements and demands, including the need for engaging, interactive, and accessible curriculum materials that could be delivered remotely (Long et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has imparted a valuable lesson regarding online education: it necessitates meticulous planning and dedicated staff development tailored specifically for the online learning environment (Steed & Leech, 2021). Consequently, online charter schools emerged as highly successful institutions in supporting all students, including those with disabilities, during the pandemic. These schools were inherently well-equipped for remote education due to their comprehensive curriculum, incorporation of best practices in online pedagogy, interactive content, and effective assessment strategies (Butler & Nasser, 2020; Long et al., 2021). Through a steadfast commitment to careful planning, continuous staff development, and robust support systems, many online charter schools have already established a solid foundation for successful online education.

Traditional brick-and-mortar public schools (TBMPS) encountered significant challenges in adapting to remote education, while online charter schools thrived. This success prompted parents to increasingly view online charter schools as a viable schooling option for their children. Consequently, the enrollment of students in online charter schools has experienced exponential growth during and after the pandemic, signifying the rising prominence of this educational approach.

## **Online Schools as an Alternative to TBMS for SWD**

Parents of SWD opt for online schools for many compelling reasons: flexibility, parent involvement, teacher support and the increased availability of teachers, allowing for valuable one-on-one time with professional educators, higher compatibility with the specific needs of SWD (DeLaina et al., 2021; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011). Below, the key characteristics of online schools that make online schools to be a viable option an alternative to TBMS for SWD are discussed.

### ***Inclusion***

Inclusion for SWD in virtual environments has been defined as a multidimensional concept that depends on technology, family relationships, teacher collaboration, and online teaching strategies to engage students in learning opportunities with typical peers and provide equal learning opportunities (Hornby & Hornby, 2015; Parmigiani et al., 2021). In addition, this concept includes personalized activities for students, preferably in small groups and individually, using asynchronous and synchronous interactive teaching strategies. It is important to discuss inclusion in the context of virtual education because online schools have the potential to implement inclusion to satisfy special education safeguards and regulations providing better access to learning for SWD. Therefore, many parents find an opportunity to provide inclusion for their children with special needs through virtual educational environments (Hornby & Hornby, 2015).

### ***Flexibility***

Online education offers a unique level of flexibility for SWD that sets it apart from traditional classroom-based education. Students have the opportunity to select from a diverse range of courses and programs offered through virtual learning. Flexibility empowers students to

take ownership of their education, adapt it to their unique circumstances, and create an inclusive and accommodating learning environment that supports diverse needs and learning styles. As technology continues to advance, the flexibility of online learning will likely continue to evolve and provide even more opportunities for learners worldwide. Online education extends to catering to the needs of diverse learners, including SWD. Students can choose the time of day that suits them best for studying, allowing for a more personalized and adaptable learning experience. Students can participate in courses virtually anywhere with an Internet connection. This is particularly advantageous for individuals who live in remote areas, have mobility constraints, or prefer to study in a comfortable environment of their choosing. Students can progress through the material at a speed that aligns with their learning style and abilities. Those who grasp concepts quickly can move ahead, while others who need more time can review materials as needed, reducing the pressure of keeping up with a fixed class pace. Students can rationalize their time based on their needs (Stone et al., 2019).

Families have increasingly chosen online education due to the flexibility it offers in terms of schedules and the freedom to learn from anywhere. This adaptability has been particularly valuable for SWD, enabling them to complete their school work at various times, including late hours, which accommodates their unique circumstances and health demands. The inherent flexibility of online learning has proven to be a valuable asset for SWD (DeLaina et al., 2021).

### ***Curriculum Delivery***

Flexible and rigorous curriculum in an online school combines adaptability with academic excellence, offering students a dynamic learning experience that accommodates their individual needs and challenges while maintaining high standards of rigor and depth in their

education. This approach supports diverse learning styles and needs, fosters a love for learning, and prepares students for future success in an ever-evolving world (Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011).

In online education, information can be presented to the students in a variety of ways that would be difficult to accomplish otherwise. For example, due to technology, students in online schools have the opportunity to study asynchronously at their own pace and time. This is beneficial for SWD because they might require more time to accomplish assigned tasks (Bruno et al., 2020). Another important factor is the way instruction is delivered in the virtual setting. For example, a student who is autonomous and is in charge of their education may be choosing to allocate additional time for certain subjects in which they do not feel as academically strong (Smith et al., 2016).

Distance learning outcomes were also noted as expanding opportunities and offering flexibility for SWD. Virtual schools allow students to take courses in the comfort of their homes and due to asynchronous courses have some flexibility to take courses at the time and place that works for them. Online education requires parent involvement and ownership because legal guardians are directly involved in the learning process and delivering instruction. Furthermore, virtual schools are flexible, cost-effective, affordable, and have unlimited potential due to advances in technology (Bruno et al., 2020). Distance learning outcomes were also noted as expanding opportunities and offering flexibility for SWD. Virtual education can satisfy the need for multisensory input, personal interactivity, external feedback, cost-effectiveness and availability, and affordable interactions. The proper use of computer-assisted tools in special education can promote students' engagement in learning activities and then enhance their confidence in learning (Cheng and Lai, 2020). Finally, curriculum in online schools provides students the autonomy and ability to choose their learning path. Students make choices, set goals,

and take ownership of their learning process that are key in supporting self-regulation among students.

### ***Parent Involvement***

An important characteristic in online learning for SWD is parental involvement and support. Most online schools ask parents to sign a master agreement where they confirm that they understand their role in online learning. The legal guardians are required to be present and provide adult supervision during school hours, and they are often referred to as learning coaches. As learning coaches, parents must provide essential supervision and guidance, ensuring that their children stay on track with their studies and complete assignments on time. They help establish a conducive learning environment at home and provide accommodations for SWD, which positively impacts a student's focus and motivation. By setting academic goals and regularly checking in on the progress of those goals, parents can help maintain accountability and foster a sense of responsibility in their child's education. They are expected to work collaboratively with educators and school administrators to ensure that their child's individual needs are met, and that appropriate accommodations are provided (Smith et al., 2016).

Overall, parents play a crucial role in their children's education, even more so in online learning. Their involvement directly impacts students' experience and achievements. Active parental participation in best practices for online learning can lead to optimal outcomes. Parents provide support, guidance, and assistance in navigating challenges like time management and technical issues. They identify learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses, customizing involvement for better outcomes. Monitoring progress, assignments, and offering advocacy ensures student accountability and needs are met promptly. Overall, parents are vital partners in

online education, fostering a supportive and enriching learning journey that equips students for growth (Borup et al., 2019).

### ***Teacher's Role***

Teachers play a pivotal role in designing and curating online learning experiences that align with curriculum objectives and foster meaningful learning outcomes. The role of teachers in the realm of online learning is multifaceted and essential. In a digital educational environment, teachers serve as both facilitators and guides, adapting their traditional instructional practices to effectively engage and support students in virtual settings. Teacher in virtual learning work closely with parents to ensure students receive appropriate instruction and support.

Teachers in virtual learning environments collaborate closely with parents to ensure that students receive tailored instruction and comprehensive support. This partnership between educators and parents becomes paramount in fostering a successful and productive online learning experience for students. Communication between teachers and parents in virtual learning extends to addressing individual student needs. Teachers solicit input from parents to gain a holistic understanding of a student's strengths, challenges, and learning preferences. This information informs instructional decisions, enabling teachers to tailor their approaches and interventions to suit each student's unique requirements (Maor, 2003).

Borup et al. (2019) found that teachers highly valued parents' engagement in various aspects of their students' online education. Parents played a crucial role in advising students on course enrollments, nurturing relationships and fostering communication among students, monitoring their progress, motivating them to participate in learning activities, managing their learning time at home, and offering guidance on study strategies and course content whenever

possible. Considering the inherent nature of online learning, educators engage in individualized one-on-one sessions with students to cater to their specific academic requirements.

Since online education requires parent/legal guardian involvement, this allows the virtual teachers to focus on structuring and facilitating learning experiences for students. Online learning necessitates self-paced learning with the utilization of available technologies. Technology serves to provide virtual schools the potential to change education to become a self-paced personalized learning opportunity with promising outcomes where teachers are no longer the only person who has all the knowledge. Hence, the roles of teacher and student change in the virtual environment due to a virtual school emphasizing independent study (Scott & Temple, 2017; Spooner et al., 1998).

### **The Gap in the Literature on Online Schools and SWD**

Online charter schools represent a distinctive educational environment where instruction is delivered predominantly through digital platforms. Given the diversity of disabilities and learning needs among SWD, it becomes crucial to explore how these students navigate this unconventional learning landscape. Research suggests that virtual learning presents a dynamic choice that particularly suits self-driven students capable of maintaining focus, adhering to tasks, and monitoring their educational goals (DeLaina et al., 2021). Online learning can present distinct challenges for SWD, such as difficulties in accessing and comprehending digital content, limited opportunities for personal interactions, and potential technological barriers. Exploring these challenges offers insights into the barriers these students might face and the interventions that could effectively address these issues (Rhim & Kowal, 2008).

One known disadvantage of virtual learning is there are no specific federal laws to address how virtual schools educate SWD. Understanding the experiences of SWD in online

charter schools is essential for promoting educational equity and inclusion. By identifying any disparities in access to resources, participation in activities, and overall learning outcomes, educators and policymakers can work towards creating a more inclusive online learning environment for all students, including those with disabilities. However, all public schools, including virtual charter schools are required to abide by all federal education laws that include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Rhim & Kowal, 2008; Ortiz et al., 2021).

Online schools are independent study environments, and as such, parents and legal guardians are required to provide direct instruction, teach and monitor their children. Many legal guardians simply are not able to be present for their children all the time or do not have training or patience to support their children (Ortiz et al., 2021). It is important to understand the experiences of parents of SWD in online schools to better serve the needs of SWD.

Ortiz et al., (2021) discovered that some online charter schools turn away students with disabilities due to inability to accommodate their specific needs and a lack of explicit state-level policy and a lack of regulation and supervision. Parents might not realize schools receiving public funds are obligated to educate any child who walks through their door. This finding supports the increased need for regulation of online charter schools. Specific areas for regulation and oversight include recruitment, selection, admission policies, procedures, and practices for SWD. Therefore, there is a need for clear policies for parents to refer to when applying for and going to virtual public schools, especially for SWD. Thus, strong policy regulations by local, state, and federal governments aim to protect SWD by providing them with equal access to education. (Hung, 2016; Ortiz et al., 2021).



## **Conceptual Framework for Online Education for Students with Disabilities**

Online learning is becoming an increasingly popular choice among students with disabilities. To enhance their engagement in education, it is essential to apply research-based interventions to online learning environments. As the number of online schools continues to increase, it is crucial to prioritize inclusive practices and provide appropriate support systems to ensure the success and educational achievement of all students. This study is firmly grounded in the theoretical principles of a conceptual framework for online learning for SWD (Cavanaugh et al., 2013). The framework outlines a structured and inclusive approach to delivering online education to students with disabilities.

Drawing from the literature on at-risk students with disabilities, Cavanaugh et al., (2013) identified five key areas, referred to as the ‘5 Cs,’ that are important for creating accessible, inclusive, equitable, and effective online learning environments that meet the needs of SWD. The five components are: (1) learner control, (2) flexible and rigorous curriculum, (3) safe learning climate, (4) caring community, and (5) connection to students as unique individuals with future goals. Each of the five component is discussed in detail below.

### ***Learner Control***

This component acknowledges the importance of providing students with disabilities a sense of autonomy over their learning experiences. Learner control involves affording students the ability to make choices related to their education within the online environment. This might include allowing students to set their own pace, select from various learning resources, or tailor assignments to their preferences. By giving students control over certain aspects of their learning, online programs can enhance motivation and engagement.

### ***Flexible and Rigorous Curriculum***

The 5Cs framework recognizes the need for curriculum flexibility to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. A flexible curriculum adapts to meet individual requirements, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity. Simultaneously, it maintains academic rigor to challenge and empower learners. In practice, this means providing accessible course materials, offering alternative assessment methods, and adhering to principles like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to make online learning content as inclusive as possible.

### ***Safe Learning Climate***

Fostering a safe and supportive learning environment is fundamental to promoting engagement among students with disabilities. A safe climate is one in which students feel welcomed, protected from discrimination or bullying, and supported in addressing their emotional and psychological needs. Online learning programs can establish this environment by implementing clear codes of conduct, offering mental health resources, and promoting digital citizenship to ensure respectful online interactions.

Creating a safe and supportive climate in an online school involves fostering an environment where students feel emotionally, socially, and physically secure as they engage in virtual learning. Just like in traditional brick-and-mortar schools, ensuring a safe climate in an online educational setting is crucial for promoting well-being, learning, and positive interactions among students and educators. Creating a safe climate in an online school involves a multi-faceted approach that encompasses digital citizenship education, cybersecurity, emotional support, respectful communication, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion. By prioritizing the well-being of students, educators, and the entire school community, online schools can

provide a secure and nurturing environment for effective virtual learning (Cavanaugh et al., 2013).

### ***Caring Community***

Establishing a caring community in an online school entails fostering an environment where students, educators, and parents collaborate to create a supportive and compassionate network that enhances the overall well-being and academic success of all individuals involved. Just as in TBMPS building a caring community in the virtual realm is essential for promoting a sense of belonging, emotional connection, and mutual support. A caring community in an online school is nurtured through meaningful relationships, empathy, inclusive practices, and shared experiences. By prioritizing emotional well-being, open communication, and collaboration, online schools can create a sense of belonging that enhances the overall educational experience and contributes to the growth and success of all members of the virtual learning community (Cavanaugh et al., 2013; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2011).

### ***Connection to Individual Students and Their Future Goals***

Establishing a connection with students as individuals and understanding their future aspirations is a vital aspect of effective online learning. It involves recognizing each student's unique qualities, interests, goals, and motivations and then tailoring the educational experience to align with their personal journey and ambitions. This approach not only enhances engagement and academic success but also fosters a sense of support, relevance, and meaningfulness in the online learning environment. It becomes a transformative journey where students feel valued, inspired, and empowered to pursue their dreams, contributing to their holistic growth and success in the digital learning landscape (Cavanaugh et al., 2013).

The 5 Cs' framework offers a comprehensive approach to enhancing the engagement of students with disabilities in online learning environments. By addressing these key components—learner control, a flexible and rigorous curriculum, a safe learning climate, a caring community, and a connection to students as unique individuals with future goals—online education programs can provide inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning experiences that cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to investigate the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online school with a particular focus on inclusion, flexibility, communication, teacher support, and parental involvement. The research questions this research study aims to answer are:

1. What are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school?
  - a. Why SWD and their parents chose online schooling and particular school for enrollment?
  - b. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, what is the nature of collaboration and communication between SWD, their parents, teachers, and school administration to support student academic success and well being?
  - c. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways, if any, the online school provides an inclusive environment to support SWD' learning and academic success?
  - d. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways, if any, the online school provides flexibility to SWD to support their learning and engagement?
2. How the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school is different or similar to their prior experience(s) with a TBMPs?

3. What are the challenges, if any, of online schooling for SWD and their parents?

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, online schooling has firmly established itself as a growing and permanent trend, offering new opportunities for educators, educational authorities, and institutions. Online charter schools, which have been in operation for nearly two decades, present avenues for innovation and transformation in public education by harnessing technological capabilities to SWD (Mayadas et al., 2009). As such, this chapter discussed how online schools can be a viable alternative for TBMPs for SWD. Parents choose online education due to flexible scheduling and the ability for students to learn at their own pace. Parents also send their SWD to virtual schools because those schools provide unique learning opportunities, flexible schedules, and parent involvement. The characteristics of successful online schools for SWD captured in the 5Cs model provide a conceptual framework for understanding the experiences of SWD and their parents. There is a need to conduct more research on the opportunities and challenges of online schooling for SWD.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Over the past decade, online public charter schools, including those catering to SWD, have gained popularity. Nevertheless, there has been limited research conducted to explore the pros and cons of online schooling and its effectiveness in supporting SWD. The primary methodology employed in this study is a qualitative interview study research design. The study's central objective was to acquire a nuanced understanding of the perspectives of students with disabilities (SWD) and their parents regarding their experiences with online schooling. A qualitative methodology involves the gathering and analysis of non-numeric data, encompassing observational, interview transcripts, audio and video recordings, as well as pertinent existing documents and records (Mertler, 2021).

The goal of the study was to gather information about both the opportunities and challenges SWD and their parents experiences in an online charter school. To accomplish this, the researcher interviewed SWD and their parents separately to identify alignment and gaps between what the school aims to provide to SWD and their parents and what SWD and their parents experience. Because the experiences of SWD and their parents are bounded within a school, this research study is a qualitative interview study. The research questions investigated in this study are:

1. What are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school?
  - a. Why SWD and their parents chose online schooling and particular school for enrollment?
  - b. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, what is the nature of collaboration and communication between SWD, their parents, teachers, and school administration to support student academic success and well being?

- c. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways, if any, the online school provides an inclusive environment to support SWD' learning and academic success?
  - d. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways, if any, the online school provides flexibility to SWD to support their learning and engagement?
2. How the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school is different or similar to their prior experience(s) with a TBMPS?
  3. What are the challenges, if any, of online schooling for SWD and their parents?

A qualitative study is a thorough, in-depth analysis of one particular event, action, or process within its contextual setting over a considerable amount of time (Stake, 2012).

Qualitative studies are useful for gaining an understanding of actual situations that incorporate crucial contextual elements unique to the case at hand (Hollweck et al., 2015). A qualitative interview study research is a useful tool for researchers who want to investigate and comprehend the complex and individualized parts of people's experiences within a particular environment, in this case, the experiences of SWD in online education. It prioritizes the voices of the participants, allowing their distinctive viewpoints to stand out and offer a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the studied subject.

A qualitative study proved to be an appropriate methodology for this research due to its reliance on rich narrative descriptions and examination within naturalistic settings (Stake, 2012). Qualitative study research is centered around gaining a deep understanding of individuals' subjective experiences within a specific context. The experiences of high school SWD and their parents in an online charter school was the center of this research study. The primary objective of a qualitative study is to understand how people perceive and assign meaning to their

surroundings by exploring their lived experiences, thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of those experiences. This research method places a strong emphasis on capturing the viewpoints of participants, typically involving small sample sizes ranging from 10 to 20 individuals who have been engaged in the subject of interest (Mertler, 2021; Maxwell, 2013). To gather data, the study employed in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews with SWD and their parents separately, with each interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Throughout these interviews, participants were encouraged to openly share their thoughts while the researcher attentively listened. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to comprehensively identify and describe the perceptions and interpretations of each participant concerning their experiences with online schooling.

### **Research Site**

The qualitative study research was conducted at a California public online charter school that is tuition-free under the pseudonym Elite. Elite is open to California residents and services students who are in grades K-12. The school has credentialed teachers and presents parent involvement opportunities. At the time of research, the Elite school accommodated a total of 8,900+ enrolled students and operated with a limited capacity. The school conducts periodic open enrollment periods throughout the year, subject to the availability of available spaces. The teacher-to-student ratio is approximately 29.69 students per teacher, and the school employs a faculty comprising 350+ teachers. The state of California has set a limit of 28 students that each special education teacher can service, ensuring no teacher exceeds this threshold. As a charter public school, it receives funding from the state to support its operations. The current student enrollment at the school comprises 49% male students and 51% female students. Additionally, there are 52% of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch services (see Table 1). Elite



offers a unique special education program and is designed to be a general education school with special education supports.

High school students have specific requirements to graduate designed by state guidelines, and each student is assigned a counselor who helps them stay on track toward meeting these goals. Each subject is taught on designated days, such as History on Monday, English on Tuesday, Math on Wednesday, and Science on Thursday. Students are encouraged to attend a one-hour synchronous general education class each day, with the rest of the time dedicated to independent work and asynchronous instruction. Students eligible for Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) receive SAI sessions Monday through Thursday from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM. SAI sessions do not overlap with general education classes. On Fridays, special education teachers focus on transition classes, offering opportunities for students to explore college and career pathways. During their general education classes, students have the chance to socialize with their typical peers. This schedule accommodates high school students who often hold part-time jobs, making it flexible and manageable. In SAI classes, students benefit from small group settings, where they can interact with other students and work on school materials in a more personalized environment. Additionally, both general education and special education teachers are available to meet with students individually for extra support if needed. The school also offers various social clubs, such as the Public Speaking Club and Cooking Club, where students can choose a club based on their interests and connect with peers to socialize and build friendships.

**Table 1.** Demographics of Elite School during the 2023-2024 academic year

Demographics	Number of students
Hispanic	44.4%
White	26.1%
Black	8.9%
Asian	3.4%

### **Participants**

There were 38 participants, comprised of students and parents. To participate in the study, SWD must have (a) had at least one year experience in a brick-and-mortar school prior to enrolling at the online charter public school, (b) had an IEP, (c) enrolled as a student in grades 9th through 12th, and (d) identifies as having mild to moderate disability. SWD that meet the criteria were invited to participate in an interview. The researcher conducted separate interviews with SWD and their parents/legal guardians to ensure all participants' voices are heard and that children's voices are not influenced by their parents' reports. Participants shared a comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of how online education can impact the academic success and experiences of SWD at Elite.

At Elite, SWD attend general education classes for at least one hour per day. This time allows them to engage with the general education curriculum and collaborate with their peers in an inclusive setting. Additionally, depending on their Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) minutes as outlined in their IEPs, these students participate in SAI classes tailored to their individual goals.

For example, if a student has SAI goals in math, they attend a math SAI class aligned with the general education curriculum. A special education teacher leads these classes, teaching

state standards while incorporating the accommodations necessary for each student's success.

When needed, the special education teacher can also provide one-on-one support before or after the SAI class to address specific needs.

If students have a writing goal, they attend a writing SAI class to work on their objective within the context of state standards. For instance, if a student's IEP goal is to write a five-paragraph informative essay using a graphic organizer and no more than three prompts, the SAI teacher integrates this goal into the writing SAI curriculum. This ensures the student builds skills while developing a writing portfolio.

The collaboration between general and special education teachers is key to this process. Together, they align instruction to grade-level standards while supporting students in achieving their IEP goals. This cohesive approach bridges general education and specialized instruction, promoting academic success and inclusivity for all students. Due to the flexibility in their schedules, some high school students can volunteer or work in various settings, such as animal shelters, horse rescues, family businesses, or traditional jobs like at UPS or a grocery store.

Participants undergo both summative and formative assessments regularly. Every student is required to take the STAR 360 Reading and Math tests and a writing benchmark assessment to determine their proficiency relative to their current grade level. These tests are administered three times per year and are designed as adaptive or "floating" tests. The adaptive nature ensures that the difficulty level adjusts based on the student's responses—becoming more challenging with correct answers and easier with incorrect ones. This system allows educators to pinpoint a student's grade-level proficiency accurately. Schools can effectively track student growth and learning progress by administering these tests multiple times a year.

In addition to these adaptive assessments, students participate in statewide standardized tests, consistent with all California students' requirements. These assessments ensure comparability and accountability across the educational system.

On a day-to-day basis, students complete quizzes and unit tests to demonstrate their understanding of the material covered. Each subject also incorporates portfolio-based projects, which allow students to apply their knowledge through hands-on, project-based learning. These assessments provide an opportunity for students to showcase their comprehension and creativity, offering an alternative to traditional testing methods.

This comprehensive approach to assessment enables educators to monitor student progress effectively, identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement, and tailor instruction to address individual student needs. By combining adaptive tests, daily assessments, and project-based learning, the program provides a well-rounded and accurate picture of student learning and growth, ensuring targeted and meaningful support.

## **Procedures**

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this study, the researcher promptly emailed case managers overseeing SWD's IEPs in grades 10 through 12. The email contained details about the study along with an interest form designed to screen potential participants. Additionally, Case Managers of SWD were asked to forward the letter to families in order to recruit participants for the study. Furthermore, the researcher had the opportunity to present her study during a high school special education staff meeting, where she encouraged case managers to share the information about the study with families.

The researcher reviewed the interest form and reached out to those who did not qualify to participate in the study, letting them know that they were not eligible to participate. The

researcher reached out to those who qualified to participate in the study, and sent them the parent consent form and the child assent form. On the parent consent form, parents had an option to give consent for their and/or their child's participation in interviews. The researcher asked the parent to share the child assent form with their children. Upon receiving a signed parent consent form, the researcher scheduled a Zoom interview with the parent and with the child (if the parent consented for their child's participation) separately. The researcher reviewed the content of the child assent form with the children at the beginning of the interview before proceeding with the interview questions. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and at a time that is convenient for the parent and the child. The Zoom meeting were audio recorded, and then transcribed. Once the transcription was completed, the audio files were deleted.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection method was individual semi-structured interviews with SWD and their parents. All SWD and parents were interviewed separately via Zoom. All interview sessions were recorded with the consent of the participants. An interview protocol guided the data collection, but follow-up questions were asked as needed. The interviews with SWD lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews with parents lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the audio recordings were deleted after transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is primarily concerned with how people make sense and meaning out of their daily lives. This concept deals largely with people's individual perspectives on their lives. The researcher is interested in learning what participants in a study are thinking and why (Mertler, 2021). The researcher used thematic analysis to develop themes from the data. The goal

of thematic analysis is to produce a comprehensive and complete narrative of the participants' insights about the SWD's educational journey in Elite which could add to the body of knowledge on online charter public schools catering to SWD. The research questions and the five attributes of the 5Cs theoretical framework (learner control, a flexible and rigorous curriculum, a safe climate, a caring community, and a connection to students as individuals and their future goals) served as the benchmark of a meaningful unit of analysis.

The data analysis process entailed reading, re-reading, organizing, coding and synthesizing data. The data, first, was coded with segments representing meaningful units of analysis being given labels or codes that are descriptive of the participants' experience. The researcher identified patterns and relationships between various codes as she read through the data.

Second, the researcher analyzed the codes and classified them into potential themes or groups after the initial coding was finished. These potential themes were broad and were of a higher level of abstraction than codes, but were not yet complete and comprehensive narratives that answered the research questions. For instance, the code *SWD has special needs* and the code *SWD needs an accommodating schedule* have different meanings in which the former referred to the SWD needing accommodations due to their disabilities and the latter referred to the SWD needing a non-fixed class schedule due to circumstances such as playing sports competitively or having a severely ill family member, but both codes have shared meaning patterns in SWD needing a class schedule that was not confined to a structure such as that offered at TMBPs. The codes were grouped under the potential theme named *need flexibility to address SWD's needs*. This potential theme was under research question 1a, an investigation of the reasons for choosing online school.

Finally, all potential themes identified were refined to ensure they reflected broad ideas and included significant facets of individuals' experiences. During this last step, themes were improved and altered to make sure they appropriately reflect the data and convey the complexities of the participants' experiences. The researcher gave a relevant account of the participant's experiences by creating a narrative based on the themes found. To illustrate and reinforce the concepts, the narrative combined quotes, examples, and background knowledge. It shed light on the experiences of the participants, gave insights into their viewpoints, and revealed deeper meanings and understandings.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

The researcher currently works at the school where the research took place as an education specialist. To minimize bias in the interpretation of data and improve validity of the research, the researcher utilized peer checking as a form of intercoder reliability, where she reviewed codes and interpretations with another researcher multiple times during the data analysis phase. The researcher shared her analysis of a small sample of interviews along with the anonymous transcripts with another researcher. In addition, the researcher was mindful of power dynamics between herself and the participants, aiming for collaborative and respectful relationships, valuing the perspectives and experiences of participants and incorporating their voice into the research process. The researcher let the participants know that participation in this study is voluntary. Throughout this study, the researcher was culturally sensitive and respectful to the diversity of participants considering cultural norms, values, and practices that may impact the research process and ensure participants' cultural perspectives are appropriately represented. Finally, the researcher engaged in ongoing self-reflection, learning, and professional development to enhance understanding of ethical considerations and positionality. She used a

journal to document her thoughts before, during, and after each interview. This commitment to growth contributed to conducting more ethical and rigorous research. By addressing these ethical issues and being mindful of positionality, the researcher conducted this study in a responsible and ethical manner, ensuring the validity, reliability and integrity of the research findings.



## CHAPTER 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students with disabilities (SWD) and their parents in an online charter public school with a particular focus on why SWD and their parents choose to enroll in an online charter public school, how the school creates inclusive environment for SWD and their parents, how the experiences of SWD and their parents in the school compared to their experiences in a brick-and-mortar school, and the challenges SWD and their parents in an online charter public school. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school?
  - a. Why did SWD and their parents choose online schooling and a particular school for enrollment?
  - b. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, what is the nature of collaboration and communication between SWD, their parents, teachers, and school administration to support student academic success and well-being?
  - c. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways does the online school provide an inclusive environment to support SWDs' learning and academic success?
  - d. From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways does the online school provide flexibility to SWD to support their learning and engagement?
2. How are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school different or similar to their prior experience(s) with a TBMPs?
3. What are the challenges of online schooling for SWD and their parents?

The findings of this study are presented in this chapter. This study involved an investigation of the experiences of 17 SWD and 22 parents of SWD in an online charter high school setting. This chapter starts with a summary of the demographics of the 17 SWD and 22 parent, followed by findings. The findings are reported in the form of themes that answered the research questions.

### **Participant Profile**

17 SWD and 22 parents participated in this study. The participants were recruited from an online charter public school Elite in the U.S. The SWD who participated in this study (a) had at least one year experience in a brick-and-mortar school prior to enrolling at Elite, (b) had an IEP, (c) enrolled as a student in grades 10th through 12th, and (d) identified as having mild to moderate disability by their parents who were the legal guardians of the SWD.

Among the 17 students, 15 were in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, while 2 were in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Nine identified as male and eight as female. The students' ethnicities included Hispanic ( $n = 10$ ), White ( $n = 6$ ), and Black ( $n = 1$ ). The students' ages ranged from 15 to 18, averaging 16.5 years. The students' demographics are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The demographics of SWD in the study

SWD ID#	Grade level	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Eligibility	Accommodations examples
ST 1	11	Female	White	16	Specific Learning Disability	Graphic organizers Bullet points for responses
ST 2	11	Female	Hispanic	16	Specific Learning Disability and Other Health Impairments	Bullet points for responses Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 3	11	Female	Hispanic	17	Specific Learning Disability	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 4	11	Female	Black	16	Autism	Bullet points for responses Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 5	11	Female	White	16	Emotional Disturbance	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 6	11	Female	Hispanic	16	Other Health Impairments	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 7	11	Male	White	16	Specific Learning Disability	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 8	11	Female	Hispanic	17	Specific Learning Disability	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 9	11	Male	Hispanic	17	Other Health Impairments	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.
ST 10	11	Female	Hispanic	18	Autism	Bullet points for responses Graphic organizers Reduced the number of items, but not the level of rigor.

Of the 22 parents, 15 were mothers, and 2 were fathers. Their children ranged from 10th to 12th grades. Five parents did not give consent to the researcher to interview their children.

Specifically, PST 18 did not consent to an interview with their 11th grader, PST 19, PST 20, PST 21 did not consent for their 10th graders, and PST 22 declined interviews for their 12th grader. The parent's ages ranged from 40 to 55 years. The parents' ethnicities were Hispanic ( $n = 11$ ), White ( $n = 8$ ), Black ( $n = 2$ ) and Asian (India) ( $n=1$ ). The parents' demographic profile is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The demographics of the Parents with SWD in the study

Parents ID#	Role	Age range	Ethnicity
PST1	Mother	40-45	Hispanic
PST 2	Mother	40-45	White
PST 3	Mother	45-50	Hispanic
PST 4	Mother	40-45	Hispanic
PST 5	Father	50-55	White
PST 6	Mother	50-55	White
PST 7	Mother	40-45	White
PST 8	Mother	50-55	Hispanic
PST 9	Mother	40-45	Hispanic
PST 10	Mother	40-45	Black
PST 11	Mother	40-45	Hispanic
PST 12	Mother	40-45	Hispanic
PST 13	Mother	50-55	White
PST 14	Mother	45-50	Hispanic
PST 15	Mother	45-50	Hispanic
PST 16	Mother	50-55	White
PST 17	Mother	50-55	Hispanic
PST 18	Mother	40-45	Hispanic
PST 19	Mother	40-45	Black
PST 20	Mother	45-50	White
PST 21	Mother	40-45	White
PST 22	Father	45-50	Asian (India)

## **Study Findings**

Eight categories emerged from the analysis. The categories were: (a) SWD need a flexible learning setting; (b) SWD and parents are involved in identifying problems and solutions; (c) communication is easy and personalized at Elite; (d) SWD get opportunities to succeed at Elite; (e) SWD are comfortable at Elite; (f) Elite supports SWD's learning styles; (g) students have a better learning experience at Elite compared to TBMPS; and (h) SWD and parents experienced no major challenges at Elite. These categories were further condensed to the final six themes identified in the research findings presented below.

### ***Reasons for Choosing Elite***

The participants identified one primary reason, which was the SWD's need for flexibility in learning. SWD and their parents described the students having unique needs that hindered their learning in a TBMPS. The reasons most commonly reported by the participants was physical, mental, and developmental issues. Two parents and four SWD cited anxiety as a need that was better addressed at online school at Elite than at a TBMPS.

**Anxiety Issues.** Specifically, the participant expressed that SWD who were bullied or felt overwhelmed around people experienced anxiety at TBMPS and preferred online schooling. ST2 shared, "Because it's easier for me to learn because I get distracted by being around a lot of people are like, it's usually like anxiety or being caught on in front of a bunch of people." ST6 stated, "I was having a lot of, trouble going to in-person school. It was giving me like a lot of anxiety." ST6's mother, PST6, described the observable change in ST6's anxiety level and student engagement upon transferring to Elite:

Because my child started having very high anxiety around others in public schools, and she wasn't being successful in public school. So we decided that. We wanted to try something different. And the pandemic, she's been doing home school, and we have noticed that she's more engaged in school.

**Physical Health Issues.** Three parents and two SWD reported physical health issues as a reason for needing a flexible learning set-up. ST11 stated, “I would say [I need flexibility because of] medical issues.” ST10 shared her perceptions of probably dropping out of school because of health issues if not for the flexibility offered by online schooling: “If not flexibility, I would have to drop out of school because of my health issues.” ST10’s mother, PST10, perceived that ST10’s health issues were linked with her anxiety and that she intentionally searched for a program that offered a flexible schedule to accommodate ST10’s needs. PST10 stated, “My daughter has anxiety and some health issues. So, flexibility is something we were looking for.” Parents PST14 and PST16 shared that their children could not attend a traditional brick-and-mortar school because of their health issues, and if not for online schooling, their children would have stopped going to school. PST16 shared, “We didn’t have any other option. His health was a significant issue, as was staying in an in-person school.” PST16 added that she chose Elite because of its accreditation, reputation, and fit for her child’s needs: “This school was accredited and was much more beneficial for my child... Elite was established a little longer [than another online school].”

Three parents described their children’s developmental and other issues that resulted in their struggles at TBMPS and need for a flexible learning setting. PST10 and PST15 explained their children’s different learning needs that were not addressed at TBMPS. PST10 shared, “Because ST10 learns differently, and she needs more one-on-one offered at Elite.” PST15 articulated that her three boys have a genetic mutation, which manifestations included learning disabilities among two boys and physical limitations in one boy. PST15’s three sons all went to TBMPS, which transitioned to online learning for a few months during the COVID-19 lockdown. PST15 saw “a huge difference, a 180 turnaround” in her children’s academic

performance and engagement during online learning, which prompted her to enroll her children at Elite. PST13 described how her child's condition, Tourette's syndrome with tics, affected his TBMPS experience and led to their decision to enroll him at Elite. PST13 explained:

The primary reason that we chose online schooling is my son has an IEP, and he also has Tourette's tics as well. Tourette's tics really interfere with schooling, especially in regard to social interactions with kids and then bullying him. The school could not help us take care of the symptoms, and it caused a lot of issues in the classroom. Make him feel uncomfortable, and it was never about learning.

**Family Life Events & Lifestyle Needs.** The participants additionally described that their family's lifestyle affected their need for SWD to have a flexible learning setting. One lifestyle was the children's involvement in competitive sports. PST2 noted, "My oldest daughter was recruited for Team U.S.A. to compete internationally, and I needed to find a school and a program they should be able to do online because she will have to train out of school." ST13 shared that he played competitive golf ...and wanted to have a flexible learning setting to accommodate his training schedule. ST14 conveyed that their family typically did not settle in one place and the flexibility of online schooling made moving around easier for them. ST10 disclosed having problems with sleeping and was more productive when working later during the day which added to their reason for enrolling at Elite. ST5 and ST3 revealed that their mothers were diagnosed with brain cancer and in order for the family to take care of the ill, they needed to have a flexible schedule. ST5's father explained how ST5 was struggling academically and socially at a TBMPS and ST5's mother's diagnosis finalized their decision of enrolling at an online school:

A lot of it came down to her mother's diagnosis of the brain tumor. But we actually kind of switched over a little after the brain tumor was diagnosed. But that allowed for more time for ST5 to spend with her mother. She was already experiencing frustration with some of the students and teachers at the public school and the administrative staff.

Data showed that SWD and their parents appreciated flexibility that online schooling have to offer because they accommodate their SWD unique needs. These unique needs are often not provided in a TBMPS. The flexibility provided in online education also allows families to manage mental health needs of their children. In addition, the flexibility helps with health issues, anxiety, and playing sports. These findings answer the first research question of why families choose online schooling and Elite for SWD's education. The findings suggest that families choose online education due to the flexibility it offers to accommodate individual student's emotional and physical needs as well as the needs of the family as a whole.

### ***Collaboration and Communication at Elite***

The findings reported in this section answers the research question on the nature of collaboration and communication between SWD, parents, teachers, and school administrators. The participants highlighted how Elite's system is built on proactive, personalized, and flexible communication that actively involves both students and their parents in the educational process. The main means of communication and collaboration reported by SWD and their parents was proactive check-ins and follow-ups by the teacher(s) and through IEP meetings.

**Proactive Check-ins.** The regular, proactive check-ins by teachers, especially homeroom teachers, who closely monitor students' progress play an important role in making SWD and their parents feel connected to Elite. These check-ins were not just academic; they also extended to personal support, creating a strong sense of collaboration between students, parents, and teachers. For example, ST6 shared, "My teacher calls me for weekly check-ins and if I fall behind, she will call me to support me and encourage me to work." ST13 further elaborated, "My homeroom teacher calls me at least one time per week. If I fall behind, she will find me. She will



not stop calling until she talks to me and inspires me to work. We mostly talk about my academic progress, but I sometimes share my life events.”

Parents also expressed appreciation for this consistent communication, noting how it kept them well-informed and involved in their children's education. For instance, PST9 remarked on the positive impact of teachers reaching out first, stating, “They constantly check on us to make sure we have everything we need.” PST7 emphasized the collaborative nature of this communication, describing how her child’s homeroom teacher communicated 2 to 3 times per week, adding, “I feel like I am well-informed, and she will let me know if he needs support. We truly work like a team.”

**Just-in-Time Support and Multiple Modes of Check-Ins.** The personalized nature of communication at Elite is further enhanced by the convenience of multiple channels—emails, phone calls, text messages, and Zoom meetings—which allow parents and students to reach teachers easily. ST15 appreciated the responsiveness of the teachers, stating, “Never experienced any challenges with communication. Teachers always respond.” ST12 also noted, “There is no communication breakdown. I don’t have to wait two weeks to meet with my teacher. I ask her a question and then I can continue working, and I know I am on the right track.”

This personalized communication is particularly beneficial for students with social anxiety, who find it easier to engage with teachers in a non-face-to-face setting. For instance, ST17 shared how his anxiety was alleviated by the positive tone of teacher interactions at Elite, “I am used to being afraid of the teachers, but when she calls, she focuses on something good. I do not want to disappoint her.” ST9’s mother, PST9, added that her son, who had difficulty asking for help at traditional brick-and-mortar schools (TBMPS), found comfort in the various

communication options at Elite, such as emails, text messages, and Zoom without having to show his face.

**Parental Access to Tools and Reminders.** Moreover, Elite’s communication strategy extends beyond regular updates, providing parents with access to an online parent portal where they can view their children’s schedules and grades. Parents also valued the reminders and personalized messages they received, which kept them informed about deadlines, exams, and even seminars on important topics like mental health. PST1 expanded on this, stating, “I get emails from teachers, and emails from the schedule. For homework, I also get reminders for seminars or webinars on suicide prevention and mental health awareness. I think that’s just great, especially for her age.” As PST6 articulated, “If the teachers give me a phone call, you know, or they email me or text me, I make sure that I pass that information to my child. And I make sure that the child follows through. So we were instructing them. And helping them so they can accomplish the goal that we have set up of the team.”

Overall, the combination of collaborative efforts and personalized, multi-modal communication at Elite creates a supportive environment that is essential for student success. By involving parents and offering multiple avenues for communication, Elite ensures that both students and parents are empowered and well-supported throughout the educational journey. These findings answer the second part of the first research question of the nature of collaboration and communication among SWD, their parents, teachers, and school administrators at Elite. The findings suggest that collaboration and communication are established through frequent, personalized, and multi-model outreach to SWD and their parents. The teachers are accessible for questions from SWD and their parents while they monitor student work and proactively reach out to SWD and their parents about SWD’s academic progress.

### ***Different Ways Elite Creates an Inclusive Environment***

Elite fosters an inclusive environment that supports SWD in their academic and personal success by offering meaningful opportunities and ensuring they feel valued and included. SWD and their parents report that Elite’s approach to education—focused on meeting IEP goals, achieving academic success, flexible schedule/curriculum, and preparing for higher education—helps SWD and their parents feel genuinely included.

**Collaborative Decision-Making during IEP Meetings.** Parents reported that they feel they are actively included in decision-making processes, which they found crucial in supporting their children's education. PST6 noted, “During IEP meetings, they involve me in every decision-making for my child. I know what is going on, and I am not guessing.” This inclusion empowers parents to support their children’s academic progress and success at Elite.

This is a great example for educational leaders such as school principals as a way to engage with parents in a meaningful way. The educational leaders need to recognize what families are bringing to the table to improve the services and overall outcome of their child and our student.

**Implementing IEP Effectively.** Parents reported not only the IEP meetings involved collaborative decision-making, but also Elite implemented the IEP effectively to meet the needs of the student. PST8 mentioned that “All her accommodations are being implemented. It is very authentic and proper for her needs.”

**Pivoting with the Plan When Needed.** Parents at Elite feel that their voices are heard in the creation of their children’s educational experiences. As PST20 shared, “I feel like they do listen to the parents. Our case manager is listening to us very much.” Teachers at Elite were reported to be responsive to students' needs, creating a flexible environment where students feel

cared for and heard. ST1 highlighted this by stating, “I feel like the teachers care for me as both a student and a person... I can speak with my teacher, and we will change [things]. They listen to me.”

**Adopting a Caring Approach.** This inclusive atmosphere is further reinforced by teachers who are patient, supportive, and committed to student success. ST7 emphasized, “Honestly, I just needed a school that would work for my needs. Elite provided the flexibility that I needed, and I am also happier here.” PST11 appreciated the positive reinforcement from teachers, stating, “He is not afraid to ask for help and enjoys it when a teacher calls him because it is very positive. They build on his strengths. Nobody has ever treated my son this way.” Participants noted that SWD were able to easily adapt to Elite due to its caring, flexible, and supportive approach. ST7 explained, “They are easy to get the hang of [assignments]. I can do them, and they are appropriate for me.” PST15 added, “Maybe it’s the same education. But the way it’s presented is friendly, and it’s caring. They make that transition easy, even though they’re online.”

**SWD are not Singled Out for SE needs.** Moreover, SWD are fully integrated into general education classes without being singled out for their special needs. ST8 shared, “In traditional school, you are being picked up from a classroom, and everybody knows that there is something wrong with you. Here, nobody knows that you have an IEP.” ST6 elaborated on the inclusivity, saying, “I go to all general education classes. I am not pulled out of my classes. I can go to special classes where I get support to help me keep up with my assignments.” ST15 described, “I can reach out to my teachers, and they are very welcoming. I don’t feel like I bother them. It feels like they want to hear from me. I am always happy to hear from them.”

In summary, the answer to the third part of the third research question of how Elite creates inclusive environment is that Elite engages in collaborative decision making during IEP meetings, implements what is decided during IEP meetings effectively, makes changes to the plans when needed and is responsive to the SWD and their parents' expressed needs, adopts a caring approach in communication and support of SWD, and does not singling out SWD to meet their special needs. This supportive atmosphere allows SWD to thrive academically and personally, as they feel both included and empowered in their educational journey.

### ***Different Ways Elite Provides Flexibility to SWD and their Parents***

The phenomenon of flexibility is broad and weaved across different aspects of SWD and their parents' experiences with online schooling and particularly with Elite.

**Flexibility with Schedule.** As mentioned earlier, the participants revealed that they enrolled at an online school, particularly Elite, due to their need for flexibility for a variety of reasons (e.g. anxiety issues, physical health challenges, and family life events and style needs). The flexibility of SWD and parents managing their schedules support students' academic success as noted by PST2: "The flexible schedule helped us fit his appointment without him falling behind."

**Flexibility with Teacher Communication and Support.** Another experience that relates to flexibility is teachers' responsiveness and prompt support. 22 participants mentioned the one-on-one support from teachers is just-in-time and as needed basis. ST7 explained that one-on-one support was a form of flexibility because of being an "individualized attention." Furthermore, other SWD and parents stated that one-on-one support can be requested any time they experienced difficulties. Parent PST10 noted that one-on-one support allowed ST10 to work at

her own pace without disturbing other students. ST8 stated, “I have more one-on-one support here than in Traditional [school]. Teachers are more available and happier at Elite.” ST14 shared:

“But I can request one-on-one with any teacher, and I will see a teacher within a day. It is very quick. My questions are being answered. In a traditional school, you can’t have one-on-one because there are a ton of kids around you.”

PST15 articulated that her children learned differently from other children, and that Elite provided different pedagogies to help her children learn in their own way. ST12 shared, “Online...it is very flexible as long as you complete the work. In traditional, teachers talk all day, and often, I would lose what they talk about. We are all different, but they teach us that we are one body.” ST9 stated that having an unstructured, flexible learning setting was not a challenge but a factor that helped him succeed at Elite. Several SWD expressed that they liked the flexibility in having accommodations and options to complete the required work. ST12 shared, “I get teacher support with alternative portfolios which are a huge help.”

**Flexibility fosters Self-Directed Student Learning.** Being 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, the participants perceived that SWD were capable of being organized and responsible for working independently to complete their school requirements, and that working independently was beneficial for the SWD. Parent PST1 described ST1 as: “She is very good at organizing her day, and she knows exactly what she needs to work on. This school works great for her learning style.” ST7 elaborated,

Well, when I start working on school work, I have a schedule, and also I have a to-do list... I have control over what I study and know what I need to do to improve. I am able to complete assignments, and I get feedback from my teachers.

Five parents stated that the children were not pressured by time at Elite. PST4 stated, “In online school, and at home, I think you know that the times are flexible; we have a little more time to do our work, therefore they can really improve their knowledge.”

In summary, the answer to the fourth part of the first research question is that Elite provided flexibility in multiple ways to support SWD's learning and academic engagement. Participants emphasized that the one-on-one support from teachers and teacher being available whenever needed provided flexibility in that it allowed students to work at their own pace without time pressure to succeed academically. This individualized attention helped SWD focus better, learn in ways that suited their unique needs, and take responsibility for their own learning. Additionally, the unstructured, flexible learning environment was seen as beneficial rather than challenging, enabling students to organize their time effectively and complete assignments independently.

### ***Differences between Elite and TBMPS Experience***

This section answered the second research question related to the differences or similarities between SWD and their parents' experiences at Elite and TBMPS. Overall, 36 participants stated that Elite offered a better learning experience than TBMPS. The improved experiences were categorized into four dimensions that the participants compared their Elite experience with the TBMPS: learning environment, learning method, learning outcomes, and learning attitude. Each of these elements is described in details below.

**A Better Learning Environment.** A better learning environment was attributed to having more safety and less distractions when taking online classes at Elite while at home than in-campus at TBMPS. The participants perceived that the SWD were safer at home than in a TBMPS because of issues such as bullying, illegal drugs, active shooters, and COVID-19. PST4 stated, "I just wanted something safer... We're still nervous about going to school because of COVID and the school shootings and stuff like that." PST7 was worried about other students who might bring illegal drugs to school, and perceived that being at home and learning online

was safer than being exposed to bad influences at TBMPS. The parents perceived that when SWD were worried over their fears of being physically in-campus, they were distracted from learning. For instance, PST19 stated, “Students bully students and it takes away their focus.” Five students did confirm that they experienced bullying at TBMPS and caused their lack of focus at school. The participants also stated that at Elite, SWD were not distracted by other students and could do school work without being bothered or bullied. PST2 shared, “It’s a great fit. She can focus better, she can get things done on her own terms.”

**A Better Learning Method.** According to the participants, a better learning method at Elite than at TBMPS meant that SWD learned the same curriculum but with better quality and more appropriate pedagogy. PST12 stated, “Honestly, he would never go back to brick-and-mortar. The quality of education is not comparable.” ST2 explained, “I learned a lot because it challenged me to focus on something. I have to do a lot of research and think critically and analyze. Yeah, we do a lot of research.” ST1 and ST15 shared that at Elite, they had more freedom in how they can interpret the content to help them understand the lessons better than in TBMPS. ST1 stated:

“I perceive that the lessons in online school are somewhat more straightforward, allowing for a bit more freedom in interpreting and understanding the material compared to traditional schooling. In traditional schools, the main emphasis tends to be on understanding the teacher’s perspective and following their instructions closely.”

Better learning method also included easier way to contact teachers for questions and clarifications. PST5 stated, “My daughter can reach out to teachers and would always get support in an online school. In traditional schools, we struggle to ask for support from teachers and administrators.” The participants additionally expressed that parents’ involvement in their children’s education increased at Elite than at TBMPS. Online school was more convenient for



parents to assist and guide their children than at TBMPS. PST20 shared, “I know what he's doing, and the assignments he has.” Parents also got to bond with their children. PST6 described, “I think one of the biggest advantages for me is having my daughter around. We really enjoy that. Like I get to do more stuff with her.”

**Improvement in Learning Outcomes.** For learning outcomes, the participants disclosed observing the results of SWD’s work at Elite. Results included getting good grades, improved behavior, and better outputs. ST7 stated, “I get good grades; it is better than I've ever been.” PST10 noted, “I think she's learning a lot more online. I'm also seeing an improvement and her behavior and her attitude.” For outputs, ST4 shared, “I can write an essay. I never knew what it meant. I never knew I could put something on paper.” ST10 got good feedback from teachers and shared his knowledge to his mother. Four other SWD reported improved understanding of the content they learned at Elite than at TBMPS. ST14 stated, “I understand lessons online better.” Two parents and one SWD perceived that SWD gained improved critical thinking at Elite. PST3 stated, “I don't think ST3 was getting as much knowledge as he is now because he's able to think critically.” ST1 explained,

I do feel like I have to sometimes think outside the box a lot more often in online school rather than in a traditional school where I have, where I was able to think inside a box or stay relatively in my comfort zone, which I used to, but in an online school, I have to step out a little bit more towards to what I need and what I want.

**Improvement in Attitude towards Learning.** A better learning attitude entailed SWD having a renewed interest in school and learning. PST4 stated, “She is happy to do her work and go to school. It never happened before.” PST22 observed his child to be more enthusiastic about mathematics at Elite than at TBMPS and the child took initiative to explore various topics in mathematics such as algebra and geometry. PST21 shared that her child did not exert effort in

their education while they were at a TBMPS, but was more involved and engaged at Elite. PST4 described, “I liked the flexibility of online school. My daughter thrived. I saw the difference in her attitude and enjoyment of school.” Students also had a better sense of responsibility and purpose at Elite than at TBMPS. PST9 stated, “So now there's definitely that awareness there for him that he's like exactly so you need to get it done.” ST8 described his new sense of purpose in finding how the content he was learning was applicable to real-life scenarios:

I have to work every day to keep up. I know what I am learning, and I am keeping up. To keep up, I have to work daily. This year, I am taking consumer math, and I am glad that I am learning math that I will use in everyday life.

In summary, the comparison between experiences at TBMPS and Elite revealed that 36 participants perceived Elite as offering a superior learning experience across four key dimensions: learning environment, learning method, learning outcomes, and learning attitude. Participants highlighted that the safer, less distracting environment at home was a significant improvement over the challenges faced at TBMPS, such as bullying and exposure to negative influences. The learning methods at Elite were also seen as more effective, offering better quality education, greater freedom in interpreting content, and easier access to teacher support. Parents were more involved in their children's education, finding it more convenient to guide and bond with their children. In terms of learning outcomes, students reported better grades, improved behavior, and enhanced critical thinking skills. Lastly, the learning attitude at Elite was significantly better, with students showing renewed interest, enthusiasm, and a stronger sense of responsibility and purpose in their studies.

### ***Challenges of Online Schooling***

This section answered the third research question on the challenges SWD and their parents experienced with online schooling, and particularly with Elite. Many participants

expressed no issue, however, there were challenges mentioned by others. The findings revealed that the participants experienced one-time issues or obstacles that were easily resolved while at Elite. ST3 expressed, “I don’t really think there are very many disadvantages. I don’t think there are any at all.” ST11 stated, “There are not many challenges. The workload is heavier than normal, but you have the time and flexibility to compensate for the difficulty. You really learn.” ST7 shared that he did not have major challenges at Elite because his needs were addressed:

I don’t really have any. It is easier for me to do work because I am by myself. I don’t like portfolios for some classes, but I get support for them. In portfolios, I have to do a lot of writing. My teacher teaches me to put all my ideas on paper, and then we read aloud and edit. It always turns out nice.

**Lack on Socialization.** One perceived minor challenge expressed by 16 of the parents interviewed was their concern for their children’s lack of socialization with their peers. PST10 shared, “It is a challenge not having the same level of social interaction, and you know, things that teenagers look forward to.” SWD ST4, ST8, and ST15 were the only students who expressed that they missed having lunch with their friends at school, but the challenge did not heavily affect them because they still saw their friends during weekends. ST4 shared, “I kind of miss that...I still get to see my friends on weekends and after school.”

**Lack of Motivation.** Motivation was a challenge for some SWD as stated by three parents and two SWD, but apart from PST11, the other participants were able to easily resolve the issue by having teachers who monitored and worked with the students. PST11 had problems with ST11’s motivation because of depression: “Motivation is very hard for us, but it is attributed to depression struggle.” PST8 attributed students’ lack of motivation because of being in front of the computer for a long time without variety. PST8 took her child and their portable computer to different places as a way to address the issue.

Many participants reported minimal challenges with online schooling at Elite, with most issues being minor and easily resolved from the perspectives of SWD and their parents. Several students found the flexibility and support provided by teachers to be beneficial to mitigate the challenges, particularly in managing heavier workloads or assignments they initially found difficult. However, some challenges were noted, including concerns about the lack of socialization, which 16 parents highlighted as a minor issue. A few students missed daily interactions with friends, but this was mitigated by seeing them on weekends. Motivation was another challenge, especially for students dealing with depression or the monotony of extended screen time. While most participants were able to overcome these challenges with teacher support and creative solutions like changing study environments, motivation remained a significant concern for a few, particularly when linked to mental health struggles.

### **Summary**

This chapter contained the presentation of the study findings which aimed to understand the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter public school with a particular focus on why SWD and their parents choose to enroll in an online charter public school, how the school creates inclusive environment for SWD and their parents, how the experiences of SWD and their parents in the school compare to their experiences in a brick-and-mortar school, and the challenges SWD and their parents in an online charter public school. This study involved an individual interview of 17 SWD enrolled at an online charter public school in the U.S. and 22 parents with SWD enrolled at an online charter public school in the U.S. Analysis of the data revealed eight themes. Table 4 provides a summary of the findings along with the research questions.

**Table 4.** List of RQs and Summary of Findings

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Summary of Findings</b>
<i>RQ1a</i> Why did SWD and their parents choose online schooling and a particular school for enrollment?	SWD and their parents perceive SWD need to learn in an environment that offered accommodations to their specific needs. Anxiety issues, physical challenges, and family life and lifestyle needs (e.g. playing competitive sports or taking care of a sick family member) resulted in SWD and their parents needing more flexibility for schooling.
<i>RQ1b</i> From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, what is the nature of collaboration and communication between SWD, their parents, teachers, and school administration to support student academic success and well-being?	Collaboration and communication at Elite takes place through proactive check-ins by teachers. Teachers also use multiple modes to checkin on students and parents. They provide just-in-time support. Further, parents access to online tools where they can check on their children’s progress and receive reminders and information frequently from teachers and the school.
<i>RQ1c</i> From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways does the online school provide an inclusive environment to support SWDs’ learning and academic success?	Elite creates an inclusive environment by engaging in collaborative decision making during IEP meetings with SWD and their parents. The school also implements IEP effectively as agreed during the meetings. However, the school is also flexible and adapts when SWD and their parents suggest changes. The teachers has adapted a caring approach in communicating with students and their parents. Finally, SWD can continue to receive their specialized instructions and activities without being signaled out during their general education coursework.
<i>RQ1d</i> From the perspectives of SWD and their parents, in what ways does the online school provide flexibility to SWD to support their learning and engagement?	Flexibility weaved across the experiences of SWD and their parents. The school provides flexibility with schedule for schooling. Teachers are also flexible with their communication and support they provide adapting to individual student needs. Flexibility with course work encourages self-directed learning among SWD.
<i>RQ2</i> How are the experiences of SWD and their parents in an online charter school different or similar to their prior experience(s) with a TBMPS?	SWD and their parents perceived the experiences with online schooling, and particularly with Elite better than their experiences with TBMPS on four dimensions: learning environment, learning method, learning outcomes, and attitude towards learning.
<i>RQ3</i> What are the challenges of online schooling for SWD and their parents?	Majority of the participants reported no challenges, however, a few mentioned (a) a lack of socialization, and (b) a lack of motivation to complete course work.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

Students with disability (SWD) experience developmental delays in one or more of the following areas: physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive development (Knoblauch & Sorenson, 1998). They represent kindergarten through 12th grade eligible for special education services (Lipscomb & Stephen, 2009). Although there has been an increase in the number of online charter public schools, there is a lack of research on the experiences of SWD and their parents in online charter public schools, a viable alternative to brick-and-mortar facilities because they provide access to education regardless of geographical location, socioeconomic background, or students' physical abilities. Online schools enable accessibility, flexibility, personalized learning, expanded course offerings, and individualized support. At the same time, not all students have equal access to reliable Internet connections, adequate supervision, devices, or conducive learning environments at home. Therefore, it was essential to investigate the lived experiences of both SWD and their parents to understand better the efficacy of online charter public schools in accommodating the needs of these students.

This study aimed to understand the experiences of SWD who attended an online public school and their parents. This qualitative study involved interviews with 17 SWD enrolled at an online charter public school referred to as Elite in the U.S. and 22 parents. The research focused on why SWD and their parents chose enrollment in the online charter public school, whether the school created an inclusive environment for SWD and their parents, how the experiences of SWD in the school and their parents compared to their experiences in brick-and-mortar facilities,

and the challenges SWD and their parents experienced in the school.

The objective was, therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of SWD within the online school environment. Furthermore, the study sought to analyze these experiences through the framework of the “5C” design (learner control, flexible and rigorous curriculum, safe climate, a caring community, and a connection to individual students and their future goals) to shed light on the critical components of successful online education. Data analysis revealed eight themes: (a) SWD need a flexible learning setting, (b) SWD and parents are involved in identifying problems and solutions, (c) Communication is easy and personalized at Elite, (d) SWD get opportunities to succeed at Elite, (e) SWD are comfortable at Elite, (f) Elite supports SWD’s learning styles, (g) Students have a better learning experience at Elite compared to TBMPS, and (h) SWD and parents experienced no significant challenges at Elite.

This study may contribute to a nuanced understanding of the potential of online schooling, particularly for SWD. It can provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve and adapt online educational programs to better serve diverse learners. Ultimately, this investigation aimed to address the pressing need to explore the untapped potential of online schools, with an emphasis on fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Scholars wish to understand how online charter schools meet the needs of SWDs. This study was grounded in the theoretical principles of the 5C framework, which identifies the dimensions of successful online learning experiences for SWDs (Cavanaugh et al., 2013). The researcher used the 5Cs framework to conceptualize the different dimensions of the experiences of parents and SWDs in an online charter public school and inform the development of interview

questions and data analysis to capture their observations and impressions across relevant aspects.

Table 5 provides a summary of the findings along with the 5C Attributes.



**Table 5** Attributes of Online Schooling for Students with Disabilities: Research Questions, Findings, and 5Cs Attributes

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Summary of Findings</i>	<i>5Cs Attribute</i>
Reasons for Choosing Online Schooling (RQ1a)	SWD and their parents perceive SWD need to learn in an environment that offered accommodations to their specific needs. Anxiety issues, physical challenges, and family life and lifestyle needs (e.g. playing competitive sports or taking care of a sick family member) resulted in SWD and their parents needing more flexibility for schooling.	<i>Flexible and Rigorous Curriculum</i> <i>Safe Learning Climate</i>
The Nature of Collaboration and Communication (RQ1b)	Collaboration and communication at Elite takes place through proactive check-ins by teachers. Teachers also use multiple modes to check in on students and parents. They provide just-in-time support. Further, parents access to online tools where they can check on their children’s progress and receive reminders and information frequently from teachers and the school.	<i>Caring Community</i> <i>Connection to Individual Students and Their Future Goals</i>
Creating and Inclusive Environment (RQ1c)	Elite creates an inclusive environment by engaging in collaborative decision making during IEP meetings with SWD and their parents. The school also implements IEP effectively as agreed during the meetings. However, the school is also flexible and adapts when SWD and their parents suggest changes. The teachers has adapted a caring approach in communicating with students and their parents. Finally, SWD can continue to receive their specialized instructions and activities without being signaled out during their general education coursework.	<i>Flexible and Rigorous Curriculum</i> <i>Safe Learning Climate</i> <i>Caring Community</i>
Providing Flexibility (RQ1d)	Flexibility weaved across the experiences of SWD and their parents. The school provides flexibility with schedule for schooling. Teachers are also flexible with their communication and support they provide adapting to individual student needs. Flexibility with course work encourages self-directed learning among SWD.	<i>Learner Control</i> <i>Flexible and Rigorous Curriculum</i> <i>Caring Community</i> <i>Connection to Individual Students and Their Future Goals</i>
Differences between Elite and TBMPS RQ2	SWD and their parents perceived the experiences with online schooling, and particularly with Elite better than their experiences with TBMPS on four dimensions: learning environment, learning method, learning outcomes, and attitude towards learning.	<i>Learner Control</i> <i>Flexible and Rigorous Curriculum</i> <i>Safe Learning Climate</i> <i>Caring Community</i> <i>Connection to Individual Students and Their Future Goals</i>

## **Learner Control**

Learner control emphasizes providing students with autonomy in their learning process, acknowledging that each student has different needs and works on their own pace. In this study, participants reported choosing online schooling, particularly Elite, because of the flexibility it provided to accommodate student and family schedules and needs. The flexibility of online education was instrumental in empowering SWDs, giving them control over how they approached their studies, the pace at which they learned, and the environment in which they studied. This autonomy helped students overcome barriers such as mobility constraints and social anxiety, increasing their ownership of the learning process and engagement with their education.

In addition to the flexibility with schedule, learner control principle is supported with the flexibility in teacher communication and support. SWD and their parents reported that SWD received immediate and personalized assistance from teachers when they needed. Teachers also communicated and provided support using multiple modes of communication, e.g. email, phone, video conferencing, etc. Although teachers engaged in proactive check-ins with students before students had a question or help, SWDs at Elite were comfortable reaching out the teachers as well.

Flexibility with schoolwork schedule and with receiving support from teachers in a just-in-time fashion gives more autonomy and control to learners because SWD choose what to work on, when to work on, and decide when to seek help to succeed academically. Overall, this study supports previous research suggesting that the flexibility of online schooling support learner control in ways that are different than TBMPS. The autonomy and flexibility offered through

virtual learning empower students to take ownership of their education, adapt to their individual needs, and work in partnership with teachers and parents to achieve academic success.

### **Flexible, Rigorous Curriculum**

A successful OPCS must offer a flexible yet rigorous curriculum that balances adaptability with high academic standards. Flexibility allows the curriculum to meet individual student needs, while rigor ensures that students are challenged and engaged in meaningful learning experiences. This balance is especially important in online learning environments, as highlighted by the participants in this study—SWD and their parents—who emphasized the benefits of flexibility in OPCSs. They valued the ability to choose when and how to engage in their studies, the option to work independently or with others, and the opportunity to receive personalized, one-on-one support from teachers. This flexibility catered to their unique needs, facilitating greater academic achievement and more rapid progress for SWDs.

The flexibility offered by OPCSs has redefined educational technology's application, particularly for at-risk students and those seeking credit recovery. These programs cater to a broad range of students, from those looking for advanced placement and dual-credit courses to students with physical, mental, or developmental challenges who require an alternative approach to traditional brick-and-mortar public schools (TBMPS). For many SWDs and their families, the rigid structure of TBMPSs hindered their learning, with physical health issues, anxiety, developmental disabilities, and social challenges being cited as key factors that necessitated a more flexible schooling environment. Parents and students reported that the online model better addressed issues such as bullying, overwhelming social interactions, and medical conditions like Tourette's Syndrome. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this further, as several parents

observed significant improvements in their children's academic performance during lockdowns, prompting them to pursue online education long-term.

Research by Stone et al. (2019) supports these findings, showing that online learning creates an inclusive and accommodating environment that can meet the diverse needs of students. As technology continues to advance, the flexibility of online education is expected to expand, offering even more opportunities for learners, especially those who live in remote areas or face mobility challenges. DeLaina et al. (2021) further emphasize that online education's adaptability has been particularly valuable for SWDs, enabling them to complete schoolwork at their own pace, even during late hours, to accommodate their health demands and personal circumstances.

In conclusion, the flexibility of OPCSs offers a distinct advantage for SWDs, providing an accessible and supportive platform that allows students to tailor their learning experiences to their unique needs. As online education continues to evolve, it will play an increasingly vital role in supporting diverse learners and ensuring that all students, particularly those with disabilities, have the opportunity to succeed academically.

### **Safe Climate & Caring Community**

The study reveals that SWDs and their families felt that Elite fostered a secure and inclusive climate, contributing to students' opportunities to succeed. Success was measured in various ways, including achieving IEP goals, excelling academically, making friends, graduating from high school, enrolling in college, and pursuing careers.

Parents appreciated the inclusive approach at Elite, noting that their input and their children's needs were heard and addressed. This inclusive approach made parents feel valued and involved in their children's educational journey. Participants observed that Elite's dedication

to student success was evident in how teachers adapted their support to meet individual needs. Six parents highlighted the patience of Elite teachers and reported that teachers proactively sought opportunities for SWDs to succeed by reaching out and encouraging them.

Historically, online learning platforms were initially designed for high-achieving students but have evolved to accommodate a broader range of learners, including those at risk of dropping out or requiring additional support (Cavanaugh et al., 2013; Watson & Gemin, 2008). This evolution demonstrates the potential of online education to engage diverse student populations effectively. Online platforms offer flexible learning options, allowing students to study asynchronously and at their own pace—beneficial for SWDs who may need additional time to complete tasks (Bruno et al., 2020).

The virtual setting of Elite provides diverse instructional methods tailored to SWDs' unique needs. For instance, students who prefer autonomous learning can schedule additional study hours when needed. Feedback from SWDs indicates that extended time is crucial for their academic success (Smith et al., 2016). Furthermore, the flexibility of virtual schools supports various learning styles by allowing students to take courses from home and choose study times that best fit their personal schedules.

Virtual schools offer significant advantages in terms of flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and the capacity to leverage technological advancements (Bruno et al., 2020). Schools like Elite, cater to all students and address the need for multisensory input through personal interactivity, external feedback, and affordable interactions. Effective use of technology in special education can enhance student engagement and confidence (Cheng & Lai, 2020). Online education also promotes student autonomy, as students can set goals and manage their learning processes, which supports self-regulation.

This study found that the inclusive and safe climate at Elite contributed to SWDs feeling comfortable and supported. Participants reported that students adapted well when transitioning from traditional schools to Elite. Teachers' familiarity with IEP goals, their support, and the creation of a caring environment at Elite facilitated this transition. Unlike TBMPS, where SWDs might be pulled out of general education classes and marked as different, Elite ensured that SWDs were included in all classes and activities, with the freedom to choose their level of participation.

Participants highlighted that the support and accommodation at Elite allowed SWDs to express themselves comfortably, whether through their words or appearance. One student shared, “I can reach out to my teachers, and they are very welcoming. I don’t feel like I bother them. It feels like they want to hear from me. I am always happy to hear from them.” Additionally, three students appreciated the option to work alone, without the presence of other students, which allowed them to manage their learning schedules around personal needs such as medications and doctor’s appointments.

Inclusion is integral to a safe and supportive learning environment. Online schools like Elite can effectively implement inclusive practices by leveraging technology, fostering family relationships, and employing collaborative teaching strategies that ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students (Hornby & Hornby, 2015). This multidimensional approach to inclusion involves providing personalized, interactive instruction both asynchronously and synchronously (Hornby & Hornby, 2015; Parmigiani et al., 2021).

The study findings suggest that the safe climate created by administrators and online teachers, as perceived by the participants and discussed above, indicates that the SWDs experienced being part of a caring community rather than worrying about being overwhelmed,

anxious or bullied. Students who experience being valued and looked after can develop a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with fellow students, guardians and educators. They tend to actively participate in the educational process and seek help when needed if they feel appreciated, respected and interrelated with their peers and teachers. Cavanaugh et al. (2013) stated that creating a safe climate in an online school involves a multi-faceted approach that encompasses digital citizenship education, cybersecurity, emotional support, respectful communication, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion. By prioritizing the well-being of students, educators, and the entire school community, online schools can provide a secure and nurturing environment for effective virtual learning (Cavanaugh et al., 2013).

### **Connection to Individual Students and Their Goals**

A connection to individual students and their future goals is crucial in creating an educational environment that is both relevant and motivating. Recognizing each student's unique needs and aligning their educational experience with their aspirations ensures that learning remains engaging and impactful. Online schools, such as Elite, exemplify how characteristics of virtual education can support the inclusion and success of SWDs. This perspective aligns with Maor's (2003) assertion that the role of teachers in online education is multifaceted and essential. Teachers are pivotal in designing and curating online learning experiences that align with curriculum objectives and foster meaningful outcomes for each student. Additionally, it is vital for parents to collaborate with online teachers, provide guidance, ensure timely completion of assignments, and maintain an effective learning environment at home (Smith et al., 2016). Effective communication between teachers and parents allows for a comprehensive understanding of students' strengths, challenges, and preferences, informing instructional decisions and tailored interventions (Maor, 2003).

Rose and Blomeyer (2007) and Watson and Gemin (2008) noted that online schools have embraced efforts to close the achievement gap for SWDs, providing opportunities for graduation, college attendance, and career development. Participants highlighted that they chose Elite for its flexibility, and this flexibility significantly benefited SWDs. The most notable aspect of flexibility reported by 22 participants was the individualized attention from teachers. SWDs and parents appreciated the ability to request one-on-one support from any teacher when needed, and this support was delivered promptly. As one parent noted, “I have more one-on-one support here than with traditional teachers. Teachers are more available and happier at Elite.”

Participants also observed that the online environment minimized distractions and prevented bullying, allowing SWDs to focus better on their work. One parent remarked that Elite provided various pedagogies to accommodate different learning styles, saying, “My children learned differently from other children, and Elite provided various pedagogies to help them.” A student shared, “Online...it is very flexible, as long as you complete the work. In traditional, teachers talk all day, and often, I would lose what they were talking about. We are all different, but they teach us that we are one body.” Another student appreciated the unstructured, flexible learning environment, stating that it was not a challenge but rather a factor that contributed to their success at Elite.

For 11th and 12th-grade students, the flexibility of working independently was viewed as beneficial. Students could create to-do lists, organize their day, and manage their studies according to their needs. Five parents mentioned that their children were not pressured by strict timelines at Elite. SWDs valued the flexibility, accommodations, and options provided.

The IEP addresses students’ unique learning needs by setting personalized goals, accommodations, and services. Parental involvement enriches this process, merging professional



expertise with parental insights to create a comprehensive and effective IEP. Active parental engagement enhances commitment, support, and advocacy, fostering positive learning experiences. Continuous parental involvement ensures the relevance and effectiveness of the IEP, reflecting a student-centered approach. Combining educators' expertise with parents' insights results in a robust IEP that guides SWDs toward their highest potential (Marx et al., 2014).

This study support Liu and Cavanaugh (2011) in that individualized IEPs and flexible curricula in online schools provide a dynamic learning experience that accommodates students' needs while maintaining high academic standards. Such an approach supports diverse learning styles, nurtures a love for learning, and prepares students for future success in an evolving world. Participants in this study found this viewpoint to be highly accurate, underscoring the critical value of flexibility and individualized support in online education. They emphasized that such tailored approaches not only accommodate their unique learning needs but also significantly enhance their ability to achieve their future educational and career aspirations. The ability to customize their learning experiences and receive individualized support was viewed as instrumental in paving the way for their long-term success and fulfilling their goals. Moreover, the collaboration between teachers and parents in virtual learning environments has been pivotal in supporting SWDs. Teachers regularly checked in with students to identify and address potential challenges, while parents were closely involved in their child's learning process. Parents played an active role in monitoring progress, setting academic goals, and creating conducive learning environments at home, which aligned with their child's unique needs. This partnership between educators and parents allowed for timely intervention and support, ensuring students stayed on track and successfully navigated the online learning environment.

Research supports the idea that active parental involvement in online education, when combined with the flexibility and autonomy provided by learner control, leads to improved outcomes for students. Studies by Borup et al. (2019) and Maor (2003) highlight the importance of this collaboration, demonstrating that when students, parents, and teachers work together in an online setting, students are better equipped to succeed academically. By giving students the power to control their learning journey and involving parents in the process, online education fosters a learning environment that is both adaptable and empowering, enabling students to thrive.

### **Students Have a Better Learning Experience at Elite Compared to TBMPS**

36 participants reported having a better experience at Elite than TBMPS. The improved experiences were categorized into four: learning attitude, learning environment, learning method, and learning outcomes. A better learning attitude entailed SWDs' renewed interest in school and learning. A parent stated, "He is happy to do his work and go to school. It never happened before." Another observed that his child was more enthusiastic about mathematics at Elite than at TBMPS and took the initiative to explore various topics such as algebra and geometry. Another shared that her child did not try while at a TBMPS but was more involved and engaged at Elite. STP10 described, "I liked the flexibility of online school. My daughter thrived. I saw the difference in her attitude and enjoyment of school." Students also had a stronger sense of responsibility and purpose at Elite. A student described his new sense of purpose in working daily to keep up and that he realized that the content he was learning applied to real-life scenarios. Parents saw a change in their children's learning attitude. One noted, "I think she's learning a lot more online. I'm also seeing an improvement in her behavior and her attitude."

A better learning environment was attributed to having more safety and fewer distractions when taking online classes at home than on-campus classes at TBMPS. The participants perceived that the SWD was safer at home than in a TBMPS because of issues such as bullying, illegal drugs, active shooters, and COVID-19. Parents perceived that SWDs were distracted from learning when they felt worried on campus. Five students confirmed that they experienced bullying at TBMPS, which resulted in a lack of focus at school. According to the participants, Elite's better learning method meant that SWDs learned the same curriculum but with better instruction and more appropriate pedagogy. A parent stated, "Honestly, he would never go back to brick-and-mortar. The quality of education is not comparable." A student explained that they were challenged and learned a lot because they had to focus, research, think critically, and analyze. Two students shared that they had more content interpretation freedom at Elite, which helped them understand the lessons better as they were more straightforward than in TBMPS, where students were required to understand the teacher's perspective. A better learning method included making contact with teachers easier for questions and clarifications. The participants additionally expressed that parents' involvement in their children's education increased at Elite. Online school was more convenient for parents when assisting and guiding their children as they were informed regarding what their children had to do and could spend time together.

Concerning learning outcomes, the participants appreciated having access to SWDs results at Elite, which included good grades, improved behavior, and better outputs. Students believed their grades were better than before. A student discovered how to write an essay, another shared teacher feedback with their parent, and one student had acquired a better understanding of the educational content and gained improved critical thinking skills.

The 5Cs framework recognizes the need for curriculum flexibility to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. A flexible curriculum adapts to meet individual requirements, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity. It simultaneously maintains academic rigor to challenge and empower learners. Cavanaugh et al. (2013) asserted that establishing a connection with students as individuals and understanding their future aspirations is a vital aspect of effective online learning. It involves recognizing students' unique qualities, interests, goals, and motivations and tailoring the educational experience to align with their journey and ambitions. This approach enhances engagement and academic success and fosters a sense of support, relevance, and meaningfulness in the online learning environment. It becomes a transformative journey where students feel valued, inspired, and empowered to pursue their dreams, contributing to their holistic growth and success in digital learning (Cavanaugh et al., 2013).

The '5 Cs' framework offers a comprehensive approach to enhancing the engagement of students with disabilities in online learning environments. By addressing these vital components - learner control, a flexible and rigorous curriculum, a safe learning climate, a caring community, and a connection to students as unique individuals with future goals - online education programs can provide inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning experiences that cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities. In practice, flexibility and academic rigor mean providing accessible course materials, offering alternative assessment methods, and abiding by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to make online learning content as inclusive as possible. The UDL framework has three principles. First, to provide multiple means of representation by presenting information and content in alternative ways. Second, to supply various means of action and expression by differentiating how students can express what they

know. Third, affording several engagement methods by stimulating interest in and motivation for learning (CAST, 2024). Based on parents' and students' responses to questions, this researcher concluded that the participants in the study affirmed the value of the 5C and UDL frameworks and their application by the Elite administration and teachers.

### **Lack of Motivation and Socialization is a Challenge at Elite**

The participants shared that they did not have significant challenges. The findings revealed that they experienced one-time issues or quickly resolved obstacles. A participant said, "I don't really think there are very many disadvantages. I don't think there are any at all." Another stated, "There are not many challenges. The workload is heavier than normal, but you have the time and flexibility to compensate for the difficulty. You really learn." A student shared that he did not have significant challenges at Elite because his needs were addressed. One minor perceived challenge expressed by 16 parents was their concern for their children's lack of socialization and interaction with peers. Three students said they missed having lunch with their friends at school, but the challenge did not heavily affect them because they still saw their friends over weekends.

Three parents and two students regarded motivation as a challenge, but most participants could resolve the issue because they had teachers who monitored and worked with them. One parent had problems with their child's motivation because of depression, and another attributed the lack of motivation to working on a computer for lengthy periods without variety. She took her child and their portable computer to different environments to address the issue.

During the pandemic, many SWDs did not receive the necessary support services from TBMPS, which halted their educational progress (Sonnenschein et al., 2022). One of the key factors contributing to their struggle was the lack of an appropriate curriculum and instructional

resources to support students in a remote learning environment effectively. The sudden shift to online education presented a unique set of requirements and demands, including the need for engaging, interactive, and accessible curriculum materials that could be delivered remotely (Long et al., 2021).

Educators learned valuable lessons regarding online education, including that it necessitates meticulous planning and dedicated staff development tailored to the online learning environment (Steed & Leech, 2021). Consequently, online charter schools emerged as highly successful institutions that can support all students, including those with disabilities. These schools were inherently well-equipped for remote education due to their comprehensive curriculum, incorporation of best practices in online pedagogy, interactive content, and effective assessment strategies (Butler & Nasser, 2020; Long et al., 2021). Many online charter schools have established a solid foundation for successful online education through a steadfast commitment to careful planning and robust support systems.

This study's participant responses emphasized the value of virtual charter schools for students with special needs. The perceptions of parents and students were that learners did not experience significant challenges and that issues that did come up could be handled without difficulty. Participant opinions highlighted the benefits afforded by online charter schools for SWDs and their parents. Their responses have convinced this researcher that online charter schools are a viable alternative to brick-and-mortar schools for SWDs. Students' and parents' experiences of the flexibility afforded, parental involvement, learning opportunities provided, SWD comfort levels, adaptable learning styles, improved learning experiences and outcomes, and the lack of challenges have been confident and affirmative.

## **Recommendations**

Online charter schools represent a distinctive educational environment where instruction is delivered predominantly through digital platforms. Given the diversity of disabilities and learning needs among SWDs, it was crucial to explore how these students navigate this unconventional learning landscape. Research suggested that virtual learning presents a dynamic choice that suits self-driven students capable of maintaining focus, adhering to tasks, and monitoring their educational goals (DeLaina et al., 2021). According to Rhim and Kowal (2008), however, online learning can present distinct challenges, such as difficulties in accessing and comprehending digital content, limited opportunities for personal interactions, and potential technological barriers. This study explored parents' and students' experiences and offers insights into potential barriers, if any. Participant responses indicated that students and parents found accessing and comprehending digital content at Elite straightforward, could interact with teachers whenever necessary, and that students handled not being with their friends during school hours reasonably well. Most students could rely on their parents' or guardians' assistance regarding potential technological barriers and other concerns when needed. The current study offers insights into the predominantly positive perceptions of the participants involved with Elite, the online charter school in question.

Online schools are independent study environments, so parents and legal guardians must provide direct instruction, teach, and monitor their children. Many legal guardians simply cannot be present for their children all the time or do not have the training or patience to support them (Ortiz et al., 2021). There is a need to understand the experiences of parents of students with disabilities attending online schools to serve their needs better. Educators and scholars could

research how to assist parents with the required training and advice to enhance the support their children must have.

A known disadvantage of virtual learning is that no specific federal laws address how virtual schools educate SWDs. Understanding the experiences of SWDs in online charter schools is essential for promoting educational equity and inclusion. Researchers may wish to identify any disparities in access to resources, participation in activities, and overall learning outcomes so educators and policymakers can work towards creating a more inclusive online learning environment for all students, including those with disabilities. However, all public schools, including virtual charter schools, must abide by all federal education laws. These include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Rhim & Kowal, 2008; Ortiz et al., 2021). Research on the effect the California Assembly Bill 1955 (AB-1955 Support Academic Futures and Educators for Today's Youth Act, 2023–2024) may have on teachers, parents and students in online charter schools if the federal court allows it to go forward may be advisable.

Ortiz et al. (2021) discovered that some online charter schools turn away students with disabilities due to their inability to accommodate specific needs and a lack of explicit state-level policies, regulations and supervision. Parents might not realize that schools receiving public funds must educate all children. This finding supports the increased need for online charter school regulation. Specific areas for regulation and oversight include recruitment, selection, admission policies, procedures, and practices. There is a need for clear policies parents can refer to when applying to virtual public schools, especially for SWDs. Therefore, strong policy regulations by local, state, and federal governments must protect SWDs by providing them with



equal access to education (Hung, 2016; Ortiz et al., 2021), and additional research could make a difference regarding SWDs' opportunities to access the education they deserve.

### **Implications for Educational Leaders**

This study serves as a powerful testament to the critical role that building strong connections between parents, schools, and students plays in fostering an environment where students can reach their full potential. By working in unison, these key stakeholders create a support system that is vital to student success. The increasing choice of online education by parents highlights an important point: many families are opting for this mode of learning because it provides them with a greater opportunity to be actively involved in their children's education. This is just one example that underscores the need for educational leaders to prioritize family engagement, regardless of the educational setting—whether it's in-person, online, or a hybrid model.

As educational leaders, we must shift our focus toward fostering active partnerships with families. These connections are crucial for student growth and development. One of the key ways to do this is by facilitating meaningful conversations between schools and families. Educational leaders should model cultural proficiency, demonstrating an understanding and appreciation for the diverse backgrounds, languages, and traditions that families bring to the learning environment. Building this level of cultural understanding helps to cultivate a community of mutual respect and trust, which is essential for productive collaboration.

Too often in education, the narrative shifts toward blaming parents when students are not succeeding. This approach overlooks the shared responsibility that schools have in shaping the learning environment. Schools are not just a part of the learning ecosystem—they are at the heart of it. A thriving educational system requires that schools recognize their role in empowering

families and creating opportunities for them to engage meaningfully. When parents and schools collaborate effectively, students benefit from a more holistic support system, one that is geared toward their academic, social, and emotional well-being.

The responsibility of student success lies in a united front. Educational leaders need to take proactive steps to engage with families and create spaces for their voices to be heard. This will require not only open communication but also an ongoing commitment to building relationships that are founded on respect, inclusivity, and shared goals for the well-being of every student.

### **Implications for Parents and SWD**

As the landscape of education continues to evolve, particularly in the wake of digital advancements, it has become essential to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by students with disabilities and their parents in TBMPS and online charter public schools. The knowledge gained in this study addressed a critical gap in current literature, as it informs SWD educators and parents about the importance of creating an inclusive curriculum to help all students succeed academically. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding inclusive education, equitable access, and the effective integration of technology by shedding light on the nuanced experiences of students with disabilities in an online charter public school setting. Ultimately, the findings of this study inform evidence-based practices and can help shape policies that promote an even more inclusive and empowering educational environment for all students, including those with disabilities, their parents and educators.

TBMPS may consider altering certain policies based on this study's findings and online schools' operating methods to improve SWDs and their parents' experiences by, for instance, making it easier for SWDs to get the assistance they require from educators, assistant teachers or

administrators and revisiting exclusion policies regarding general education classes, activities and opportunities. According to Boston Consulting Group, an estimated 12 million school-aged children in the US did not have internet access at home in 2022. The SWDs included in that group could do with a healthier environment at their TBMPS that excludes being bullied and distracted in big classes, from which some feel excluded. While some SWDs cannot deal with these concerns because of depression or anxiety, most find it challenging to reach their full academic potential under those circumstances. Positive social change regarding SWD education and inclusion can be enhanced if TBMPS and online charter schools followed Elite's operating methods. Doing so could enable the best circumstances within which SWDs can thrive, such as comfort, flexibility, parental involvement, student/parent/teacher communication, room to adapt to diverse learning styles, and advanced learning experiences, to create beneficial opportunities to succeed.

### **Implications for Social Justice, Equity, and Diversity**

Historically, SWDs have been a marginalized population, often overlooked and subjected to barriers in accessing appropriate education. This research addresses the social justice implications by shedding light on the experiences of SWDs in OPCSs, an educational option that has not been widely available to them in the past. By investigating these experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the quality and inclusivity of education in this virtual environment, which is crucial for fostering equity. The findings serve as a foundation for educational leaders to develop and implement policies and practices that promote the equitable treatment and success of SWDs in online settings. Educational leadership can leverage this research to create more inclusive environments, ensuring that the flexibility and personalized support of OPCS are fully harnessed to meet the diverse needs of SWDs. Moreover, the study

underscores the responsibility of leaders to advocate for system-wide changes that remove barriers, enhance accessibility, and improve educational outcomes for SWDs, advancing both social justice and educational equity in the digital age.

### **Recommendations for TBMPS**

To improve the experiences of SWD in TBMPS based on this study, schools need to take actionable steps to enhance inclusivity, flexibility, and support systems, as informed by the research findings. TBMPS must prioritize full compliance with IEPs by ensuring teachers are well-trained in both general and special education strategies, including differentiated instruction. Schools should focus on fostering collaboration between general and special education teachers, creating opportunities for co-teaching models where both can work together to provide grade-level instruction while accommodating the needs of SWD.

Flexibility in scheduling and classroom environments is essential. TBMPS should implement more adaptive schedules that allow SWD to access support services without missing core instructional time in general education classes. For instance, offering dedicated times for pull-out services or integrated SAI sessions within the general classroom can help SWD meet their IEP goals without feeling isolated from their peers. Schools should also ensure that classrooms are equipped with assistive technologies and provide training for teachers to use these tools effectively.

Additionally, fostering a safe and inclusive climate is critical. TBMPS must implement anti-bullying programs and create opportunities for peer interaction that encourage SWD to participate in social and academic activities alongside their typical peers. This can include peer mentorship programs or small group collaborations designed to build social skills and a sense of belonging. Schools should also actively involve parents in the educational process by

maintaining consistent communication about their child's progress and providing resources or workshops to help them support learning at home.

Finally, TBMPS must focus on bridging the achievement gap for SWD by incorporating regular formative and summative assessments to monitor progress, followed by timely interventions. Expanding access to specialized staff, such as behavior specialists, counselors, and transition coordinators, can further support SWD in both academic and social-emotional growth. By addressing these key areas, TBMPS can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that better supports the needs of SWD.

## **Conclusion**

The study aimed to understand the experiences of SWDs and their parents in an online charter public school with a particular focus on why SWDs and their parents chose to enroll, how the school created an inclusive environment, how the experiences of SWDs and their parents compared to their encounters in brick-and-mortar schools, and the challenges students and their parents faced in an online charter public school. Analysis of the data revealed 6 themes: (1) Reasons for Choosing Elite, (2) Collaboration and Communication, (3) Different Ways Elite Creates an Inclusive Environment, (4) Different Ways Elite Provides Flexibility, (5) Difference Between Elite and TBMPS Experience, (6) Challenges of Online Schooling

The participants shared that their preference for an online school over a TBMPS was due to SWDs' need for a flexible learning setting. SWDs require flexibility in learning because of factors such as physical, mental, and developmental issues, as well as lifestyles and responsibilities such as playing competitive sports or taking care of a sick family member. Parents searched for a program they thought was applicable to their children's needs and decided on Elite.

The participants perceived that Elite provided collaboration, communication, inclusion, and flexibility. Parents and SWDs received frequent and individualized teacher check-ins regarding students' problem areas and progress. Parents and students were included in meetings on how to resolve challenges. The SWDs' IEP goals were incorporated into the solutions, and parents' input was considered. They described communication as easy and personalized as teachers communicated with parents and students via different channels such as emails, text messages, phone calls, Zoom meetings, and online portals.

Teachers monitored students and could be contacted if they missed assignments. Likewise, SWDs could privately message their teachers for assistance and if they had questions. Teachers also contacted parents individually to update them on their children's progress. Regarding inclusion, the participants shared that SWDs could attend regular general education and directed studies classes. SWDs expressed their appreciation for not being pulled out of general education classes and not having their IEP disclosed to their peers. They stated that being excluded resulted in bullying at TBMPS. They were also invited to all activities at Elite, but they had a choice concerning the extent of their participation if they chose to participate. They were not pressured to socialize.

Most SWDs interviewed in this study did not find the lack of time physically spent with teachers and peers challenging. On the contrary, the participants felt relief in not dealing with bullies, drama, and distractions while learning online. Thus, SWDs were generally comfortable at Elite. Students felt cared for and received opportunities to succeed, while parents felt heard. The participants perceived that Elite tailored their methods to fit the needs of individual students, and learners received one-on-one support when they requested it. SWDs also had more freedom to interpret educational content, which resulted in a better understanding of the lessons. They

could also decide how and when they wanted to study and did not experience time pressure while learning. Participants regarded the overall experience at Elite as better than at TBMPS. These results indicate that there are ways to constructively accommodate SWDs so they can achieve their full potential.

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## Appendix A. Interview Protocol

### Parent Interview Questions:

#### A) Reasons for Choosing Online School

1. How did you learn about online schools?
2. Why did you choose online schooling for your child's education?
3. How did you learn about Elite?
4. Why did you choose to enroll your child to Elite? What are some of the things you considered in the process of making a decision to enroll your child to Elite?
5. What background work, if any, have you done before you enrolled your child to Elite?  
(e.g. reviewing the curriculum, talking to parents whose child is already enrolled, checking school reviews online, etc.)

#### B) Participants' Experiences at Elite

##### I. Learner Control

1. From your perspective, to what extent, your child has the ability to allocate more or less time to specific subjects based on their needs?
2. From your perspective, in what ways does the school support your child in taking control of his/her/their learning?
3. What tools and resources are available to your child to exercise control over their learning process? What tools and resources are available to you to help your child exercise control over their learning process?
4. In what ways, do you think the teacher(s) support your child's control over their learning while maintaining academic standards?

##### II. Flexible Rigorous Curriculum

1. Do you consider your child being academically challenged at Elite? If so, in what ways your child is academically challenged?
  - a. Possible Follow-up: In what ways your child is academically challenged? Please provide examples.
2. Do you consider your child's academic needs having been met by his/her/their teacher, and the school more broadly?
  - a. Possible Follow-up: In what ways the teacher and the school meets your child's academic needs? Please provide examples.
3. Do you consider your child receives the necessary accommodations from his/her/their teacher, and the school more broadly to succeed academically?
  - a. Possible Follow-up: In what ways the teacher and the school accomodates your child's needs to help him/her/they succeed academically?

### III. Safe Learning Climate

1. In your experience, in what ways, does the school and the teacher create a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves?
2. In your experiences, how does Elite address issues of bullying, discrimination, or harassment to maintain a safe learning climate?
3. What resources or support systems are available to students who may be experiencing challenges related to safety or mental well-being?

### IV. Caring Community

1. From your perspective, in what ways Elite creates and foster a sense of community and connection within the school?

2. How does Elite involve parents and guardians in creating a caring and supportive environment for students?
3. Are there any practices, programs, or initiatives at school that you consider promoting the values of a caring community?

#### V. Establishing Connection and Collaboration

1. How would you describe your and your child's relationship with his/her/their teacher(s) and connection to the school?
2. In what ways, do you think the school, teachers, parents, and students collaborate?
3. How does the teacher(s) and the school more broadly encourage and create opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds or grade levels to collaborate and interact?
4. How does Elite engages parents and guardians in building connections and collaborations within the school community?

#### C) Experiences with Online vs. Brick and Mortar Schools

1. Can you discuss your experiences with online schooling and brick and mortal schooling? What are the differences and similarities?
2. What are the key differences between online and brick-and-mortar schools in terms of the learning environment and educational experience?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online education compared to traditional brick-and-mortar schooling?
4. How do online and brick-and-mortar schools differ in terms of curriculum delivery and teaching methods?
5. Can you explain the role of teacher-student interaction in both online and brick-and-mortar settings and how it impacts the learning process?



6. From your perspective, what types of students might thrive in an online learning environment, and conversely, who may benefit more from a brick-and-mortar school?
7. Are there notable differences in the level of individualized attention and support that students receive in online versus brick-and-mortar schools?
8. What challenges do parents and guardians face when choosing between online and brick-and-mortar schooling for their children, and how can they make informed decisions?
9. In what ways do online and brick-and-mortar schools adapt to accommodate special education and diverse learning needs?

#### D) Challenges with Online School

1. What are some of the challenges of online schooling for your child and for you?

##### *Learner Control related follow-up question:*

2. What are some of the challenges or obstacles that learners may face when trying to exercise control over their own education?

##### *Flexible Rigorous Curriculum related follow-up question:*

3. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in assessing and evaluating your child's academic performance?

##### *Safe Learning Climate related follow-up questions:*

4. What are some of the challenges that come with increased screen time when doing online schooling?
5. Are there challenges with cyberbullying, online harassment, or inappropriate behavior, which can impact the safety of the learning climate?
6. Are there challenges with maintaining your child's mental health and accessing mental health resources?

*Caring Community related follow-up questions:*

7. In traditional brick-and-mortar schools, students often have face-to-face interactions with teachers and peers. What are some challenges with the lack of physical presence in online schools? How does lack of physical presence affect the development of a caring and supportive community?

8. Building a caring community often involves mentorship and guidance. How do online schools facilitate or hinder the establishment of mentorship relationships between students and educators?

9. Communication is a key factor in creating a caring community. What are some challenges you've faced in effectively communicating with teachers and fellow students in the online school setting?

*Establishing Connection and Collaboration related follow-up questions:*

10. Communication is key to building connections. What are some challenges you've faced in effectively communicating with teachers, other parents, staff, and the school more broadly in the online school setting?

11. What are some challenges with online schools supporting extracurricular activities and clubs to help students connect outside of regular academic coursework?

Child Interview Questions:

A) Reasons for Choosing Online School

1. Why did you chose online school?
2. What were you looking for in on-line school?

B) Participants' Experiences at Elite

I. Learner Control

1. In your view, how much control do you possess in adjusting the time dedicated to specific subjects according to your needs?
2. In your opinion, in what ways does the school support you in taking control of your learning?
3. In what ways, do you think the teacher(s) support your control over your learning while maintaining academic standards?

## II. Flexible Rigorous Curriculum

1. Are you being academically challenged at Elite? How are you being academically challenged? Can you provide examples?
2. Are your academic needs being met at Elite?
3. Do you think you receive the necessary accommodations at Elite to support you with your academic goals?

## III. Safe Learning Climate

1. In your experience, in what ways, does the school and the teacher create a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves?
2. In your experiences, how does Elite address issues of bullying, discrimination, or harassment to maintain a safe learning climate?
3. What resources or support systems are available to students who may be experiencing challenges related to safety or mental well-being?

## IV. Caring Community

1. From your perspective, in what ways Elite creates and fosters a sense of community and connection within the school?

2. How does Elite involve you and your family in creating a caring and supportive environment for students?
3. Are there any practices, programs, or initiatives at school that promote caring community?

#### V. Establishing Connection and Collaboration

1. How would you describe your relationship with your teacher(s) and school staff?
2. How do you connect with your teachers? How often do you collaborate with them? What is the purpose of these collaborations?
3. How does Elite engages you in building connections and collaborations within the school community?

#### C) Experiences with Online vs. Brick and Mortar Schools

1. Can you discuss your experiences with online schooling and brick and mortar schooling? What are the differences and similarities?
2. What are the key differences between online and brick-and-mortar schools in terms of the learning environment and educational experience?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online education compared to traditional brick-and-mortar schooling?
4. How do online and brick-and-mortar schools differ in terms of curriculum delivery and teaching methods?
5. Can you explain the role of teacher-student interaction in both online and brick-and-mortar settings and how it impacts the learning process?
6. In your opinion, what types of students might thrive in an online learning environment, and who may benefit more from a brick-and-mortar school?

7. Are there notable differences in the level of individualized attention and support that students receive in online versus brick-and-mortar schools?
8. In what ways do online and brick-and-mortar schools adapt to accommodate special education and diverse learning needs?

#### D) Challenges with Online School

1. What are some of the challenges of online schooling for you?

##### *Learner Control related follow-up question:*

1. What difficulties, if any, do you encounter when attempting to take charge of your own educational journey?

##### *Flexible Rigorous Curriculum related follow-up question:*

1. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in assessing and evaluating your academic performance?

##### *Safe Learning Climate related follow-up questions:*

1. What are some of the challenges that come with increased screen time when doing online schooling?
2. Are there challenges with cyberbullying, online harassment, or inappropriate behavior, which can impact the safety of the learning climate?

##### *Caring Community related follow-up questions:*

1. In traditional brick-and-mortar schools, students often have face-to-face interactions with teachers and peers. What are some challenges with the lack of physical presence in online schools? How does lack of physical presence affect the development of a caring and supportive community?

2. Building a caring community often involves mentorship and guidance. How do online schools facilitate or hinder the establishment of mentorship relationships between students and educators?
3. Communication is a key factor in creating a caring community. What are some challenges you've faced in effectively communicating with teachers and fellow students in the online school setting?

*Establishing Connection and Collaboration related follow-up questions:*

1. Communication is key to building connections. What are some challenges you've faced in effectively communicating with teachers, staff, and the school more broadly in the online school setting?
2. What are some challenges with online schools supporting extracurricular activities and clubs to help students connect outside of regular academic coursework?

## Appendix B: Codes, Potential Themes, Themes

Code	Potential theme	Final theme
SWD has special needs	Need flexibility to address SWD's needs	SWD need a flexible learning setting
SWD needs an accommodating schedule		
For parents to monitor education	Parents saw potential benefits of flexible education	
Parents' decision		
Parents have access to a parent portal	Ease of private communication with Elite	Communication is easy and personalized at Elite
Student with social anxiety can contact teachers online		
Teachers respond to questions as soon as possible		
Personal announcements and reminders for parents and students		
Parents are included in child's IEP meetings	Involved in resolving problems	SWD and parents are involved in identifying problems and solutions
Parents are involved in child's education		
Frequent check ins with parents and students	Updated with concerns and progress	

Parents get updates about students

Comfortable to navigate education

Comfortable to be oneself

SWD are comfortable at Elite

Comfortable to speak up

Comfortable working alone

Comfortable reaching out for support

Comfortable to express oneself with teachers

Comfortable with homeroom teacher

Easy to adapt

Full participation in gen ed classes

Students can work around the schedule of their medication

Gained opportunity to go to college

Having opportunities for success

SWD get opportunities to succeed at Elite

Parents' inputs are heard

Student felt cared for

Students are assessed for needs

Students are set for success

Students' IEP goals are met

Has no distractions

Supports different learning styles

Elite supports SWD's learning styles

Student is more focused and can



do things their  
own way

Student is not  
pressured by time

Student is  
organized and can  
work  
independently

Students are given  
options to be  
successful

Students get one-  
on-one time with  
teachers

Enjoys learning

Better attitude  
towards school and  
learning

Students have a better  
learning experience  
at Elite compared to  
TBMPs

Has purpose

Improved interest  
in learning

Improved sense of  
responsibility

Better social  
interaction with  
peers

Better learning  
environment

Easier access to  
learning materials

Exposed to more  
diversity

Felt safer to be at  
home

Improved focus on  
learning

Smaller class size

Struggled at tbmps

Child can work at their own pace in online school vs tbmps	Better learning method	
Child was offered therapy		
Easier to contact teachers		
Improved parental involvement		
Learn the same curriculum in different ways		
Better understanding of the content	Better learning outcomes	
Can see results of hard work		
Improved critical thinking		
Heavy workload for parents	Can be overwhelming	SWD and Parents experienced no major challenges at Elite
Chose not to go to activities	Some lack of socialization with peers	
Student felt disconnected		
Connectivity sometimes	Minor and infrequent challenges	
No structured schedule		
One particular activity in a course		
Parents' experience of lack of sympathy from school		

Student can forget  
work sometimes

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## Appendix C: Recruitment Email

### Email to be sent to Parents:

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research on Online Schooling for Students with Disabilities Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Anna Johnson, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University and the University of California San Diego. I also work at California Online Public School as an education specialist and teacher coordinator. I am conducting a research study to understand the experiences of students with disabilities and their parents/guardians with online schooling. As part of the study, I hope to conduct 60-minute interviews with parents/guardians and students separately. Interviews will be scheduled at a convenient time for you and will be conducted online via Zoom. If you and/or your child are interested in participating in my study, please contact me at 619-550-8115 or email me at [annakorjohnson@gmail.com](mailto:annakorjohnson@gmail.com)

Your child must meet the following criteria to be able to participate in the study: (1) currently enrolled as a student in grades 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>, (2) has at least one year experience in a brick-and-mortar school prior to enrolling at your current online charter public school, (3) have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and (4) identify as having mild to moderate disability.

Your willingness to participate in this research is crucial for improving and advancing online schooling for students with disabilities.

Thank you for considering this invitation, and I look forward to your valuable contribution to this research.

Best regards,

Anna Johnson