



Alternative learning center helps Ala. kids learn online without being stuck at home

School districts that struggle to find an appropriate placement in the least restrictive environment for a student who has trouble entering a large school campus can take a cue from Mountain Brook Schools, located outside of Birmingham, Ala. That district has an answer for students with school phobia, anxiety, OCD, or other challenges that make it difficult to learn in a traditional school setting -- or even to enter the building, in some cases.

Mountain Brook Schools utilizes an alternative learning center, housed in its own small building on a high school campus. The center includes a virtual classroom. Students with disabilities and their typical peers who attend the center can engage in online learning but still have access to in-person services, elective courses, and lunch with their peers.

Dr. Melissa Brooks, the district's director of instruction and special education, said the center is a good option for students with social anxiety, or OCD, who can't walk into a regular school building. She added it's also an alternative for those with depression who need a smaller setting to learn. For many of these students, it's "better than going into a big school," Brooks said.

The center serves students in grades 7 to 12, said Brooks. It includes a large classroom and smaller rooms for small group learning or for individuals. Brooks explained that most of the 50 students who attend the ALC enroll in the virtual classroom and have no requirement to attend every day. They can learn from home, depending on their needs and circumstances. "The remaining students are there for therapeutic placement where they can receive specially designed instruction and individualized instruction. They are also on the virtual format, if possible," Brooks said.

Least restrictive environment

One of the benefits of the center is that it provides a setting that's generally less restrictive than learning from home, said Brooks. She said that the center, on the LRE continuum, is considered 80-100 percent with nondisabled peers.

"At any given time, the ALC is full of general education students, and the virtual class is filled with gen ed students," said Brooks.

Some virtual students learn from home, depending on their needs, Brooks said. But, they may still spend part of their day at the ALC to receive extra support or clarification on assignments.

Another plus is that students who attend the center may eat lunch in the school cafeteria and sometimes attend classes on campus such as band, art, music theory, choir, or even an AP class that is not available through the virtual program. Students may also bring their lunch and eat in any of the rooms or on the patio at the back of the building, Brooks said.

Placement

For students with a disability, it's the IEP team that decides whether and to what extent the student will learn on campus at the center or remotely from home, at least part-time. Not all students must attend the center in person, explained Brooks.

"If a general education student is not turning in assignments or seems to be falling behind, they will be required to attend some portion of the week," Brooks said.

IEP, BIP implementation

Another benefit of the alternative learning center program is that it includes support to help ensure IEPs and behavioral intervention plans are implemented with fidelity. First, while students may be learning independently, teachers and the administrator at the center can see how students progress and tell how much they are working, Brooks said. Teachers can see what's on students' screens while they are in the building.

Second, the building is well-staffed. An administrator, a special education teacher, a general ed teacher, and a part-time tutor are present in the building, Brooks said. There are also two instructional paraprofessionals, she added. Additionally, the district's school psychologists, mental health coordinator, job coach, transition coordinator, and Board Certified Behavioral Analyst have shared offices there, said Brooks

Brooks also noted that if a student has behavioral interventions as part of his IEP, there is a staff member present to help implement them. A BCBA trains all staff at the center on those interventions, and the special education teacher keeps track of that data.

September 7, 2022

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