

Speaker A: You're listening to the WBS podcast. In today's episode, we learn more about how students with accommodation are supported in the virtual classroom. Welcome once again to the WBS, uh, podcast. This is Jason Schmidt, your host. Executive director of Wisconsin Virtual School. And then I also have two very special guests with me today. Uh, so Larissa, uh, you're returning to the podcast. Thanks for joining us again. Uh, just a brief introduction for everybody who may be moved.

Speaker B: Yes. My name is Larissa Sanpolis and I am with Wisconsin Virtual School. I am the Special Populations Associate Director.

Speaker A: Thanks Larissa. And one of our friends from Indiana.

Speaker C: Um, my name is Alyssa Gossip. I am a program specialist at Indiana Online, supporting students who have accommodations.

Speaker A: Well, thank you both for joining us. Uh, I ah, just really appreciate the expertise and the level of collaboration that you bring to the organization. So thank you very much for coming on the podcast today. So, uh, our conversation today is really about special populations and students who need some additional support, possibly in, uh, order to be successful in school in general, but then also maybe in an online environment. So really focusing in on that online piece. Uh, so what are some of the ways that you and the organizations that you serve, uh, help students to be successful in an online learning environment?

Speaker B: Really, it starts with the partnerships with our districts. So with being the program that we are, we work directly with districts all across the state of Wisconsin, and the students that come from those districts or programs, we really work with them to understand what that student needs for success in a virtual environment because that district knows that student best. So, uh, we really want to create those relationships and, um, connections with those districts so that we can best support that student. It really depends on what that learner needs. But we also keep in mind that we are a virtual environment, and some of those accommodations that a student may receive in person is going to look much different than what they receive in a virtual environment.

Speaker C: So one of the things that looks different virtually versus in a brick and mortar is having text read aloud. In a brick and mortar setting, you have a person most often reading that content to a student. And in a virtual environment, we most often have a computer doing it. Sometimes it is built into your learning management system, or sometimes it's something like, uh, Google Translate or Speak It or something like that, where the student copies and pastes that text. But it gives them more autonomy and independence in a virtual setting than they might have in a brick and mortar because they can have it read to them at midnight if they want. So that's one that looks different. I know for, uh, us, extended time is an accommodation that we get pretty regularly and that looks different for us because we don't have any time assessments, uh, especially in our Asynchronous courses. The only hard deadline is the end of the semester, so they have the extended time. What's critical is making

sure that we understand the reason why the student has that extended time. Is it because they need additional processing time? Is it because, um, they're an elite athlete and they have practice, and that's why they've chosen an online environment. So making sure that the teacher understands the reason why that extended time accommodation is in there, and, um, that they're not ignoring that student thinking, oh, they're just using their extended time. Maybe they're stuck and they're not asking for help or just procrastinating.

Speaker A: Don't know anybody who does that. So, uh, you mentioned the text to speech and extended time as two common accommodations. What are some of the other things that you have seen or that, uh, we work to set up to help these students be successful?

Speaker B: We've had a lot of different situations, but some of the most common ones that we use are reducing multiple choice options and assessments, uh, of something we can do very easily and apply to all courses, which is great for the students. That's consistent across the board. Other things that we can do, we can also remove time limits on assessments, like Alyssa already mentioned. And really, some of the other great things that I feel, ah, that are important to learners that we're able to do is we're able to help students that may have a visual, uh, impairment or a hearing impairment and really work with that specific learner in that district on how that's going to look. And really just making sure that the environment that is, um, virtual, uh, for them is their least restrictive environment, and that it's the best fit for them.

Speaker C: And back to what you were saying about the partnership with our districts, when there are things that in our setting we aren't able to do, necessarily going back to our partners at the district level, and they are able to provide some of those accommodations. And so we're all just working together to support the students, to give them everything that they need to be successful.

Speaker A: So that relationship piece, right, and we talk about that, uh, in every single setting of online, whether we're talking about special populations or students who need accommodations or are elite athletes or high achievers, it doesn't matter where they fall on that spectrum of achievement, uh, that relationship piece is really super important. And I think that's, uh, been something that's just a huge area of emphasis for any quality online program is going to focus on relationships. What are some of the things that you two have seen, uh, that teachers do or that districts do to help maintain some of those, uh, close relationship with students? Whether it's communication or opportunities to come in or connection to that local school? What are some of the really good things that you've seen in that.

Speaker C: Sorry, go ahead. Our teachers do, uh, a first call at the beginning of a session and actually pick up the phone and call the student and start having a conversation. And that is often how we find out that students have accommodations because that's one of our questions. And they're the ones advocating for themselves and say, oh yes, I have an IEP, or oh yes, I have a 504. So that is really good. They also are just asking some getting to know you type of questions, just like you would those first couple of days in brick and mortar. It

just looks different. Our, um, district partners are often zooming or Google meet or teams, whatever it is that they use. They are using, uh, that type of platform to meet with their students. And it looks very different. Some check in once a month, some are checking in weekly, some check in every single day. It just depends on what that, ah, student needs and um, they're still able to build those relationships. Even though it's through a camera, you can still do it.

Speaker B: I'm always impressed by what our teachers do without even being asked or told, they know their learners and know what they need. Um, and looped into conversations or emails where our teachers will be like, well, I noticed this. Can we reach out to the district and see if this is something else they need? Because I think it will help them be successful. And that could be any learner, which is something that I think is so important because truly, we're thinking about all learners and how we can support all of them as well. But, um, again, with those phone calls at the beginning, um, welcome emails and then we do. Wisconsin Virtual School has connect time to their Asynchronous students once a week and really encouraging those students to get on board with those optional meetings. And then our synchronous students have daily sessions, um, that they meet with their teachers and just really ensuring that they're getting what they need. And that feedback, um, too on assignments. So getting that feedback and making sure it meets that learner's needs. So if that learner needs voice, um, feedback, they're providing that instead of written feedback. And really knowing those learners and what's going to help them succeed.

Speaker C: Something that you mentioned made me think of something that we have in place, we have when, what I need. And it's for our students who are with us full time taking synchronous courses. And right now, the focus for that time. Teachers invite students to join if they are missing some of those prerequisite skills. And so it's a time for them to focus on those, um, lagging skills outside of the daily sessions with their peers and the current content to help them get caught up and get that more individual support that they need.

Speaker A: I'm loving everything you guys are saying. And it's just making me think about how maybe our perceptions need to change about, uh, accommodations. And really like, these are things that would be helpful for any kid and would help anybody be successful, uh, in an online class, or in a brick and mortar, or wherever they are. Um. I'm just throwing this out there. Uh. And you guys can feel free to bunch or just let it pass by on the curveball. But is there any such a thing as like a universal accommodation or. Um. Something that we don't just do this for particular students who request it. But this is just a default practice that we do because we know it helps kids be successful? Is there any such thing?

Speaker B: I would say TextToSpeech. That is one thing that I share with our teachers and staff all the time. Text to Speech is built into almost, uh, every single one of our courses. Um, and it's something that's totally underused. And it's not for just students that have an IET or 504 and haven't written into their course. It's for students that are auditory learners that learn better that way. Or maybe they just need to hear it from a different person or perspective. Um, but I'm also a big believer that we can have those pieces built into our content and built in by our vendors. But if we're not teaching those learners how to use it,

then it's absolutely useless. So, I think what's really important is that we're providing those tutorials that training to our teachers, to our students, to our districts on how to use it, so it does get used, and so that is beneficial for all learners.

Speaker C: The other thing about Text to Speech that I love so much is ours, and I think a lot of others translate into multiple languages. So you're getting the students who are auditory learners, you're getting the students who maybe English is not their first language, but then something that a lot of people don't think about is it gives students an opportunity who might be wanting to learn another language and be using it outside of, uh, say, their Spanish course. They might be in their science course. And let me just translate this into Spanish so that I can have my science content in Spanish for today. Um, most people don't think to use it in that way, but it's a nice little perk.

Speaker A: I hadn't really thought about using text to speech to translate into another language. Obviously, it's something that can happen, like the technology would support it, but, uh, I hadn't thought about that application of it. That's really interesting. Um, as, ah, people who deal with a lot of these special plans that come in, what are some things, um, that are in those plans that just don't apply very commonly, or are very difficult or not possible to implement in our settings?

Speaker B: I would say some simple things that I see often is like preferential seating, multiple breaks throughout the day, um, just or listening to music while they were simple things like that that are very beneficial to right into an individualized plan within, uh, brick and mortar. But in a virtual setting, especially if they are full time with us and they're at home, or in a certain setting where they're able to have those options, those things won't apply, because they're truly allowed to do any of those things. They can pace their date, they can take breaks, they can choose their CD, and they can do all of those things and really customize their learning environment for themselves. I think what's important to remember about that, though, is even though they're in that virtual environment, we have to teach those learners that, uh, you can do that if sitting in an, uh, office chair isn't working for you, what's going to work better? And talking them through those things and helping them learn to advocate for what is better, best for the environment?

Speaker C: Absolutely. Uh, one of the things that has been so wonderful to see is a lot of students who might have had some pretty involved behavior intervention plans when they were in brick and mortar moved to a 100% virtual environment. And those behavior intervention plans are not needed at all because they don't have the triggers, the stimuli, any of those things that were causing the behaviors to occur have now been removed, and they are excelling. I would agree.

Speaker B: Some of the best, uh, success stories that I hear from districts is that, uh, the IP 504 that is written for this review doesn't apply in the virtual environment because all of the barriers have been removed and the student is successful and is in an environment that fits for them. Um, and it's just so amazing to see that happen. And at times, people don't even

think that this is an environment that would make them successful, but they surprised us all, and it's some of the best success stories to hear about.

Speaker C: I have one in particular that just makes my heart so happy. It's a student who really, really struggles and has switched to 100% virtual is thriving. And his family never dreamed in a million years that he would be able to go to college. But because we now have 100% virtual postsecondary education opportunities and we have 100% virtual employment opportunities, his life view is completely different than it would have been just a few years ago. And I think the more that we can embrace having these options for students for whom it is completely appropriate, the more successful we are going to be as, uh, an entire society.

Speaker A: Yeah, that whole idea of options, right? It's not the best environment for all, but it is the best environment for a lot. And to have those quality options available and people in place who can help support students through that really, uh, can make a huge difference. I love hearing about those success, uh, stories, uh, for kids who are not successful in a brick and mortar environment are just thriving. To have this kind of an environment and are just doing so well. Um I'm so glad. That's why we do what we do, right? Absolutely. Subscribe our channel.