The Role of the Advocate in Cyber Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Existing research on facilitators in K-12 schools has focused on supplemental online programs where on-site personnel work with online students in a local brick-and-mortar school. While some insightful research exists focused on online facilitators at full-time cyber schools, additional research is needed to examine facilitators using synchronous support. The purpose of this study was to determine whether and how the role of a facilitator in a full-time cyber school could help to address students’ cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted qualitative interviews with two administrators and four advocates during Spring 2020, using the Academic Communities of Engagement Framework as a lens to understand the advocates’ role. Findings confirmed the need for a facilitator role to support online student engagement. This type of research will provide insights to full-time cyber schools and will be insightful to those seeking to engage students during emergency remote learning.

Keywords Cyber school · Virtual school · COVID-19 pandemic · ACE framework · Behavioral engagement · Affective engagement · Cognitive engagement

Johnson (2008) explained that there are two sides of teaching--the human and the academic--and argued that the former was actually the more difficult. While online students are physically separated from their teacher and peers, “many learners want the convenience offered by a distributed environment yet do not want to sacrifice the social interactions and human touch” (Graham, 2006, p. 9). Roblyer et al. (2007) added that a “human touch and support” is particularly important because success in online courses requires “motivation, self-direction, or the ability to take responsibility for individual learning” (p. 11), skills that many primary and secondary students lack. As a result, learning online can be more challenging than in-person learning because those new to online courses need to simultaneously learn a subject online while also learning how to learn online (Lowes & Lin, 2015).

The need for learner support was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when primary and secondary schools around the world had to close their buildings and move instruction online. During the pandemic, teachers’ and students’ personal lives were disrupted while they were also tasked with rapidly learning how to learn and teach online. Barbour et al. (2020) described the initial phase of the pandemic as an “all hands on deck movement to remote delivery...with massive changes” in just weeks (p. 3). As expected, teachers themselves were overwhelmed with learning the basics of teaching their course material online and struggled to provide students all of the support required to consistently engage in learning activities (Francom et al., 2021). Standing out against effective online education (Branch & Dousay, 2015) – learning experiences that have been developed, planned, and designed to be online – instruction during COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as emergency remote teaching (ERT), which is a short term change of instruction due to a crisis-related event. In ERT, teachers employ fully remote teaching solutions for curricula that has been designed for in person, blended, or hybrid courses with the full knowledge that their instruction will return to an in-person format when the crisis-related event subsides (Hodges et al., 2020).

The struggle to engage online students in learning activities is not new to emergency remote learning. Prior to the
pandemic, experienced online teachers found it difficult to engage all of their students in learning activities, resulting in attrition rates higher than that found in in-person courses (Freidhoff, 2021). In order to better support student needs, some online programs have provided their students with support from a facilitator in addition to that provided by the online teacher.

The majority of the existing research on facilitators has focused on supplemental online programs where on-site facilitators work with online students in a local brick-and-mortar school (Borup, 2018). However, K-12 students are increasingly learning entirely online, never stepping foot into a brick-and-mortar school. While some insightful research exists focused on online facilitators at full-time cyber schools, additional research is needed to examine other models and strategies, especially those using synchronous communication and support. Not only will this type of research provide insights to full-time cyber schools, it will also prove particularly insightful to those seeking to better engage students during emergency remote learning. Using interviews, in this article we examined facilitators’ strategies and challenges at a full-time online program where facilitators regularly met with students synchronously. Our research question asked about the perceptions of administrators and advocates regarding the role of the advocate and how a person in that role helps support students’ cognitive, behavioral, and engagement needs.

**Theoretical Framework**

The Adolescent Community of Engagement (ACE) framework guided this research (Borup et al., 2020). The ACE framework focuses on ways that others can support a student’s academic engagement. Specifically, in the ACE framework Borup et al. (2020) identified the following three dimensions of academic engagement:

- **Affective engagement**: “The emotional energy associated with involvement in course learning activities” (p. 813).
- **Behavioral engagement**: “The physical behaviors (energy) associated with completing course learning activity requirements” (p. 813).
- **Cognitive engagement**: “The mental energy exerted towards productive involvement with course learning activities” (p. 813).

Within the K-12 educational community, these dimensions of engagement are commonly referred to as engaging students’ head (cognitive), hands (behavioral), and hearts (affective) (Inan & Inan, 2015). Building on Halverson and Graham’s (2019) work, the ACE framework contended that students’ ability to independently engage in online learning activities varies depending on the learner’s characteristics and background, the learning environment, and the personal environment (see Fig. 1).

Building on Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), the ACE framework argued that a student’s ability to independently engage affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively in learning activities is limited, frequently leaving a gap between a student’s independent engagement and the level of engagement necessary for academic success (see Fig. 2). When this gap exists, the student requires support from others to increase personal engagement. Specifically, the authors of the ACE framework aligned various support elements with each type of engagement, claiming that cognitive engagement would likely increase with instructing and collaborating supports; behavioral engagement would likely increase by troubleshooting and orienting, organizing and managing, and monitoring and encouraging progress supports; and affective engagement would likely increase by facilitating communication, developing relationships, and instilling excitement for learning.

The ACE framework grouped support actors within the following two communities: the student’s personal community and the course community (see Fig. 3). Actors within a student’s personal community have formed relationships with the student that extend beyond the boundaries of the course and began before the course, sometimes at birth. In contrast, actors within the course community are officially part of the course, and their relationships with students are formed as a result of the course and will largely end following the course. The actors within each community tend to have different knowledge and abilities. Actors within a student’s personal community tend to know the student well, including educational background and learning preferences, and understand the student’s learning and life goals. Actors within a student’s course community tend to have a good understanding of the course material and/or procedures.

Just as parents tend to be the primary actors within a K-12 student’s personal community, the online teacher tends to...
be the primary actor within a student’s course community. As a result, most of the existing research that has examined online student support has focused on that offered by online teachers and parents (see Hasler-Waters et al., 2018). However, only examining the course community support offered by the online teacher provides a narrow view of the support students actually receive from their course community, and more research is needed to examine support offered by other actors, such as facilitators.

The roles facilitators fulfill vary across programs, but research has identified some common themes. Harms et al. (2006) were some of the first to research facilitators in K-12
online learning, and to highlight the following roles, largely confirmed by subsequent research (see Borup, 2018):

- Getting to know individual students to better understand and address their needs.
- Coaching students to help ensure their readiness for online learning, including the development of organizational and other study skills.
- Mediating communication between parents, teachers, and others who are supporting students’ learning.
- Facilitating student-student communication and building a sense of community.
- Helping students to focus their attention and efforts on completing academic tasks.
- Monitoring and promoting student progress.
- Serving as a problem-solver and mentor.

Importantly, the outlined roles are independent of the online course topic, and facilitators can successfully fulfill their responsibilities without content specific knowledge or skills. However, in practice students commonly turn to their facilitators for tutoring support, especially when the facilitator is a certified teacher (Barbour & Hill, 2011; Barbour & Mulcahy, 2004; Borup et al., 2019). In general, facilitators support students in their efforts to learn how to learn online, while online teachers support students in their efforts to learn the subject online. Hannum et al. (2008) summarized that facilitators’ primary responsibility is ensuring “everything is working smoothly and order is maintained” (p. 213). To summarize, facilitators see their role as taking care of behavioral and affective needs so teachers can provide cognitive support.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine whether and how the role of the advocate could help to address students’ cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement needs that may not be well addressed by the online teacher alone during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we addressed the following research question: How do administrators and advocates perceive the role of the advocate, and how does that advocate support students’ cognitive, behavioral, and engagement needs?

Participants

The research site for this study was Valor Global, a private, online, grades 2–12 school with approximately 180 students that serves students across the world. Its vision is to provide a purposeful, global, connected learning experience that prepares students for living in an increasingly complex world. In addition to employing teachers and administrative personnel, the school also staffs what is called an advocate role, which fosters and grows connections with both students and parents, understands the benefits of meaningful assessments, and responds promptly and reliably to requests and concerns from students, parents, and teachers. The advocate hosts daily homerooms, during which they talk to students about their previous day and what they have planned for the week, assess social and emotional needs of the students, and discuss any family or emotional situations students may be going through. Advocates also hold focus groups, which are daily synchronous meetings that are optional for students with a grade of C or above, but required for students with a D or an F. Advocates utilize the focus group time by acting as a liaison between struggling students and their teachers, helping both to understand the specific learning problem and to facilitate a solution. Students who have satisfactory academic progress can also attend the focus group as an open study time where teachers and advocates are present to answer any questions. In contrast to most online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to note that Valor Global has adopted the “effective online education” model mentioned above (Branch & Dousay, 2015; Hodges et al., 2020).

We selected this school as our research site because of its adoption of the advocate role. One of the researchers had a child enrolled in Valor Global and thus was familiar with the role of the advocate. As a result, the parent contacted an administrator at the school and asked if the staff there were interested in being involved in the research study. The school agreed, and after IRB approval, we sent three rounds of invitation emails to all administrators and advocates employed by the school. In total, both school administrators and four of the five advocates agreed to participate in the study. All of the advocates held a bachelor’s degree, one year of experience as an online advocate, and some previous kind of teaching experience, although that varied between traditional, public, private, and homeschooling. We considered these participants to be key informants as defined by Patton (1990) since the school’s use of the advocate role was unique among online schools. All of the interviewees were female. Both administrators also had significant experience as a brick-and-mortar school administrator. All of the advocates were in their first year in this position (Table 1).

Data Collection and Analysis

Each advocate and administrator consented to participate in a one-and-a-half hour, semi-structured interview during Spring 2020. The protocol was developed based on the ACE framework. The interview protocol was shared with participants beforehand. Interviews were conducted via videoconferencing and transcribed using a transcription...
Researchers then listened to each interview several times while reading the transcript, making corrections and taking notes to ensure the transcript was accurate.

Coding was done using the constant comparative method as detailed by Lincoln and Guba (1986). For this study, an initial coding phase was used to develop a robust codebook. For this phase of coding, each transcript was coded by using open coding. We worked toward categorical saturation, searching for the “emergence of regularities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 350). The researchers collaborated iteratively on the final coding scheme until a consensus was reached, making an effort to ensure that codes used words and phrases that the advocates actually spoke in the interviews. The researchers also met to discuss the coding process and codes, and some corrections to the codes were made to ensure that they all used actual words spoken by the advocates and that they accurately represented the context of what had been said in the interviews. The next coding phase occurred during which the codes were grouped into categories and provided a label that best represented the codes. The researchers then met to discuss the categories and make any needed corrections, providing confirmation to the data analysis process. Finally, the categories were grouped by similarity into three themes. This was guided by—but not limited to—the support elements identified by the ACE framework.

**Limitations**

The current research is limited in that the population consisted only of private online advocates and administrators at a small, private online school. The population is not inclusive of all private school or online programs (public, private, and charter) in the United States. Our study is also limited by what may be perceived as a relatively small sample. We attempted to interview as many advocates and administrators at the school that were willing, and successfully interviewed four out of a possible five advocates and both administrators. Nevertheless, the data began to reach a high level of saturation through the six interviews.

**Findings**

The interview analysis resulted in findings that were categorized by the behavioral, affective, and cognitive components of the ACE framework but also allowed researchers to hear about the practices of the advocate. The themes and codes focused on an overall concept of the Advocate and was best summarized by Advocate 1 as, “bridge(ing) the gap” between the support offered by online teachers and students’ actual support needs.

### Behavioral Component

Advocates supported students’ behavioral engagement by managing learning, monitoring student progress, and orienting students to the learning environment and technology (see Table 1). Administrator 1 explained that one way that advocates were tasked with managing students’ learning was teaching time management skills and “productivity coaching” such as “not context switching and multitasking” by “time blocking” so students could maintain focus. Advocates also helped students structure their learning time by holding a daily synchronous study hour, called “focus group,” where students could log in to receive assignment help, collaborate with peers, or just have a quiet place to work. Additionally, advocates used the focus group time to facilitate tutoring for specific classes by asking specific teachers to attend focus groups to tutor students or review lessons. Advocate 1 summarized:

All the advocates offer a focus group time where we allow a quiet space for students to come in and be accountable and have access to us. And, in my case, I usually have one of the math teachers with me where students, if they’re having difficulty in math, they’re able to break out into one of the breakout rooms and work individually, one on one with the math teacher. So behaviorally we offer this focus group time where students are able to come into a classroom environment.

Having daily synchronous sessions appeared to add structure to students’ learning schedules and helped them focus on completing tasks.

Advocates also managed student learning by scaffolding students in their development of organization and technology skills. Advocates helped students who were behind in their assignments to develop an organized plan to get caught up. As Administrator 1 shared, “They’ll usually reach out to the student with either a, you know, ‘Hey, I’ve noticed you haven’t submitted these assignments yet,’ or ‘You’re getting behind. Is there something I can help with?’”

### Table 1 Advocate demographic information

| Name         | # of students they advocated for | Highest academic degree |
|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Advocate 1   | 21                              | Masters                 |
| Advocate 2   | 50                              | Bachelors               |
| Advocate 3   | 48                              | Bachelors               |
| Advocate 4   | 31                              | Masters                 |
Advocates also supported students’ behavioral engagement by closely monitoring student progress. Advocate 2 shared the following description:

The advocates will run a progress report every two weeks and look to see, are there kids that I need to check in on that are failing, you know, with Ds or Fs? They’ll highlight those kids and they’ll look for kids who have changed their grades. So if someone’s normally an A, B student and now they’re seeing some C work, they might go check that out too.

Administrator 1 added that this monitoring also involved one-on-one meetings between the advocate and student where they try to “figure out, is it [the problem] IT technology, is it feeling overwhelmed, do you not understand? They’ll figure out what next step makes sense for the student and then help the student take that next step.” Once advocates identified the issue, they could coordinate support. As Administrator 1 explained, the “starting point for pretty much every conversation in our school is an advocate.”

Advocates also supported students’ behavioral engagement by orienting them to their courses and setting expectations. Specifically, advocates were responsible for orienting every student to technological, academic, and social expectations. Advocates ran the student orientation during the first week of classes. Advocate 4 shared the following orientation activities:

And we walked through, “Okay, on your first day here’s what you will do, you’re going to open this, it’s going to take you here, these are tips for you. You know, please check grades every Thursday afternoon for all your classes with your students to make sure they can fix things by Friday.” You know, just giving them the different tips and tricks and also setting that expectation.

Advocates also set expectations for online homeroom participation, as Administrator 1 explained:

Here’s our homeroom expectations, so you know: I’m going to be on time. I’m going to do specific things every day. We all have our camera on. We all share. If you don’t want to share, you can tell me in the chat and then [I will] share [what you shared with the group anonymously].

While setting expectations began the first week of school, to a degree they continued throughout the semester (Table 2).

**Affective Component**

Advocates supported students’ affective engagement by establishing their online presence and developing a supportive learning community (see Table 2). Advocates established their presence by coming alongside their students online and attending classes and other school-related meetings, which helped bolster student engagement. Administrator 1 observed, “The students were more engaged [in class] when the advocate was present, and you know not leaving [the class] but speaking in the chat to them.”

Advocates also communicated with students on both academic and personal topics. Administrator 2 shared the following:

Their [advocates] whole job is to look at these students emotionally doing well, we understand that whole idea of Maslow before Bloom you know and are making sure that we’re taking care of their well being. The advocates are really on that Maslow piece, and then we look to our teachers to really focus, fine tune the Bloom.

The idea of “Maslow before Bloom” expressed in this quote permeated the interviews, pointing to a central focus of the advocate—monitoring students’ emotional well being. Advocates also used parent communication to better understand students’ situations and support needs. Advocate 4 shared,

It's kind of been interesting to see from the child’s perspective everyone’s goals and pain points and figuring out a way to have a plan that satisfies everybody. All my seniors have had life changing stuff in this year—I mean hospitalization, mental health hospitalizations, suicide, divorce. That's the stuff that I feel like I've been able to help navigate with them and still be a responsible student while that's happening.

Advocates also worked to facilitate parent-teacher communication because “a parent, obviously, is going to have one perspective, a teacher and educator is going to have another.” Similarly, advocates saw themselves as “a bridge” between students and parents. While students and parents shared the same physical space, advocates found that their communication regarding coursework was lacking. As one advocate noted, “they communicate like a teenager which then doesn’t work for the parent.” As a result, advocates had to help students “find their voice” and “normalize some of their feelings.” In this way the advocates acted as a bridge between the students and their parents.

Advocates also supported affective engagement among students through building connections with students and developing a sense of community. They did this through sustained communication with the teachers and students that built relationships while they were also fulfilling their other responsibilities. Advocates also communicated with students to help them learn how to interact with other students and their teachers. Administrator 1 shared,
| Theme                                | Codes                              | Definition                                                                 | Example quotes                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Managing Learning and Monitoring Progress | Teaching time management           | Teaching and modeling skills in how to regulate the time that students have available for learning. | “Monday we look at their planning for the week... What do you have this week? If you have a lot of things due on Friday. Help with which things we can move up so you get done Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, so you're not swamped on Friday. So we teach them that kind of time management.” (Advocate 4) |
| Organizing and offering synchronous sessions | Organizing small groups of students that meet daily and are facilitated by the advocate. These groups are spaces where students can find help with specific academic related content questions. |                                                                                       | “So it's a time that the advocate leads that students can pop in and out stay the whole time if they want and they recommend that new students go to it a few times that first week for special or extra help.” (Administrator 1) |
| Monitoring and encouraging student progress | Checking student grades, monitoring assignment progress, and encouraging students |                                                                                       | “When I check in with students I monitor their grades. When they're looking at their grades with me we can go in and look at each class and see which assignments they either need to redo or they haven't submitted. That gives them very good direction on what they need to be working on right now to get their grade up.” (Advocate 2) |
| Organizing                           | Advocates help students who are behind in their assignments organize their time, plan to get caught up. |                                                                                       | “And then they'll usually reach out to the student with either a you know hey if I've noticed you haven't submitted these assignments yet or you're getting behind. Is there something I can help with?” (Administrator 1) |
| Orienting and Setting Expectations   | Orienting students to learning environments and expectations | Running the student orientation during the first week of classes. | “We designed a school wide orientation for our new students. The advocates did it in their home rooms, so they shared a little bit about who they were, and then they shared a little bit about the school.” (Administrator 1) |
| Establishing class participation     | Helping students to understand how to interact with other students and teachers and how to be successful in classes. |                                                                                       | “The advocate shares expectations through that first week of school. We had set aside times that they would be able to share those expectations and instructions, so the advocates were part of that first week of school, the orientation on how to submit assignments, and how to find your classes and what to do if you think there's a mistake somewhere.” (Administrator 1) |
| Setting up and troubleshooting technology | Helping students to understand how to setup and use the technology. |                                                                                       | “I'm answering the same questions all year long... Like how would you submit a video? How to send a Google link from a video in a folder to a teacher?” (Advocate 3) |
The advocate was able to say, “Hey can you stay on after with me? You know, let’s stay on after homeroom and we’ll find a time for your group to meet.” So they were able to try to bring in the student who is not participating in the group work.

Advocates also focused on developing a trusting relationship with their students, as Advocate 4 shared:

> We can help you with all of these things, and we are still in a guidance role for you, but we’re here as your partner to help you succeed, so I think it brings a whole other avenue for them to access a different type of relationship.

The school system is also tailored to the role of the advocate. For example, Administrator 2 shared that advocates used surveys and thematic days of the week such as “Wellness Wednesday” to organize homerooms, collect data, and monitor students: “They [advocates] meet with the students every morning. They start their day with a wellness check in and just giving the students a safe place to talk and relate in, saying here are the barriers.”

Advocates worked to build personal relationships with students that focus on personal growth. Administrator 2 said,

> The advocates meet in small groups [with students] every morning of the week, but they also have regular personal calls with the students, making sure that they’re getting some one-to-one time. Then the students also have opportunities to show up in a focus group later in the day, with their advocates, so there are multiple points in the day.

Facilitating communication, grouping students for social interactions, and building personal relationships with students all appeared to contribute to community and connection among students.

Advocates also taught students positive awareness of others and how to manage emotions. They also provided encouragement as to the student’s place in life and helped bolster their self-esteem. Advocates recognized that students experienced “up and downs” and needed them “to take that into consideration and work with them where they’re at.”

This allowed advocates to be “a positive influence” in students’ and their parents’ lives, especially “with some students who have some type of learning disability or challenge.” Advocates believed that this social and emotional support helped students work through life circumstances and continue to succeed academically.

Advocates were able to try to bring in the student who is not participating in the group work. The result, according to the advocates and administrators, was that students’ emotional energy was at a high level (Table 3).

### Cognitive Component

Advocates worked to directly support students’ cognitive engagement as well as facilitate support from others (see Table 3). Advocates directly supported students’ cognitive engagement by co-learning with the students, tutoring them when they already knew the content, and ensuring that the learning activities were appropriate for students with disability service plans. First, advocates co-learned lessons side-by-side with students. Administrator 1 explained one way that advocates would offer support was to “walk a student through an existing lesson.” This required advocates to actually go through the assignments with students as if they were students themselves. This was especially time consuming when the assignment was a project that required “multiple steps and multiple planning.” Advocate 3 explained, “That’s a lot, I mean it takes me probably half the time just understanding the assignment before I can truly help them understand what’s next.” Students’ need for co-learning support varied greatly and was especially high for “students who have IEPs and the younger kids.”

Although administrators did not view tutoring as a specific responsibility of an advocate, advocates still reported spending considerable time directly tutoring students. For instance, Advocate 3 shared that she tutored students “every day for an hour.” Advocate 2 shared,

> When a student comes to me, and they need help with something they don’t understand that they’re learning, or a lesson, I will do my best to look at that lesson and help them to the best of my ability.

Advocates found some subjects more difficult to provide tutoring support in than others. It appeared particularly difficult to tutor students in math because not only does math require specific knowledge, there are multiple approaches to doing math, and their approach may not align with the teacher’s. Advocate 2 explained,

> Math is one of those things where I try to be careful about how I help them unless I see the exact instruction, because I know that there’s different ways to teach math and they’re learning how to solve a problem in different ways.

As a result, advocates tended to only provide tutoring if they were knowledgeable in the topic and the teacher’s approach to teaching it. Advocate 2 summarized, “If it’s something I know exactly what’s expected of them, I know what they’re doing, then I will help teach them during those sessions or semi tutor them.” If advocates were unsure of either the topic or the teacher’s approach, they would help the student...
| Theme                      | Codes                      | Definition                                                                 | Example Quote                                                                 |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Establishing Presence     | Coming alongside           | Advocates may sit in classes or attend school functions to encourage student engagement | “...last year we had the advocate sit in a few classes and when the advocate was present the students were more engaged.” Administrator 1 |
|                           | Communicating with students | Advocates talk with students as much as needed to encourage them to complete their work or help in dealing with a personal or family situation. | “In homeroom we are watching for things that indicate that a student may be off that day emotionally. We are looking for students who don’t seem to be connecting as well with other people.” |
|                           | Communicating with parents  | Advocates communicate with parents regarding academic and family issues.  | “Having conversations with their parents, how are they doing, what are you seeing, do they feel lonely, do they feel sad?” Advocate 4 |
| Building a Supportive Community and Connections | Facilitating student-teacher communication | Advocates communicate to teachers regarding students' needs and help students interact with their teachers. | “So I kind of feel like I’m a communication coach between them, teaching them how to advocate for themselves in an appropriate way and understand the other side.” Advocate 3 |
|                           | Facilitating Student communication | Advocates communicate with students to help them interact with other students and their teachers. | “A student that is kind of falling through the cracks a little bit and say ‘Hey can you get this person with this person for a group project, because we think that would really help draw them out.’” (Advocate 2) |
|                           | Encouraging student-student relationships | Advocates informally group students together for targeted social interactions | “We kind of intervene a little bit here and there, like hey this person doesn’t seem to be connecting and so we’ll encourage the kids to reach out, you know one or two kids to reach out to this other student.” Advocate 4 |
|                           | Forming relationships with students | Advocates focus on building personal relationships with students that focus on personal growth. | “I want all of my students to be seen and heard, and I will talk to them individually, as well as in a group, but I feel like that time when we have our check ins that one-on-one time is really when we’re able to develop a little bit stronger of a relationship.” Advocate 2 |
|                           | Teaching social and emotional skills | Advocates teach students positive awareness of others and how to manage emotions. They also provide encouragement as to the student’s place in life and bolster their self esteem | “Helps them believe in themselves so there’s that emotional side that feeds out eventually into engagement.” Advocate 4 |
contact the teacher for support or contact the teacher on their behalf. Similar to their co-learning activities, some advocates actually attended classes or reviewed lesson videos to better understand a concept so they would be able to better tutor students in the future.

Another thing that advocates did was to collaborate with teachers, administrators, and parents to adjust the amount and type of work students completed. For instance, Advocate 4 shared the following example of a time when a student was dealing with a “family situation” and “just failed to show up”:

The teacher contacted me and said, “This student failed, and this is an elective, what should we do?” Since it was an elementary student, we had a little more flexibility on how to handle that so I was able to coordinate with the student and the parents, and also with our [school] leadership and allow him to drop the class.

Advocates also helped to ensure assignments were an appropriate fit for students. At times advocates received feedback from teachers or parents, leading them to request more or fewer modifications or additional work for students. For instance, Advocate 4 shared the following example of a successful student on a disability service plan:

One of the teachers got in touch with me and said, “Hey this student is excelling in this class and I think she would easily succeed in a more challenging section.” And so, in my role I reached out to the student and talked to her and said, “Hey you know great news, your teacher thinks you’re doing amazing, she would like to challenge you more, how do you feel about that, do you want that kind of a challenge?” She was honored and flattered and wanted that challenge, so then I talked to Mom. And then we went ahead and changed her class.

Advocate 4 also recalled “parents who sometimes communicate that they have advanced students and they’re going through their work too quickly” which helped her and the teacher to make modifications to better challenge students and “extend their learning.” Administrator 2 agreed that advocates were an important resource when making modifications for students on a disability service plan and actually worked to hire advocates who “have education in their background” so they “have useful training and background in modifications.”

Advocates also supported cognitive engagement by facilitating collaboration between others. One way they did this was to use a daily “focus group” time to invite teachers to tutor students who needed help, and then facilitated academic collaboration between students. Administrator 2 shared, “If you have a couple of students in a focus group that are working on the same assignment, that can be a collaborative assignment.” This method proved to be effective among students, providing informal peer tutoring for those who needed it. Additionally, sometimes students who were assigned to group projects had a member who was not performing a fair share of the work. In those cases, advocates would step in and help the group collaborate to ensure participation from all group members. Administrator 1 shared the following:

You know, as happens in any group, there are some students who are happy to not be a part of the group work. And the advocate was able to say, “Hey can you stay on after homeroom and we’ll find a time for your group to meet.” So they were able to bring in the student who was not participating in the group work without necessarily calling them out or saying that anyone had tattled on them.

This non-confrontational approach involved the non-participating student in the group project without any embarrassment and ensured a better academic outcome for all members of the group (Table 4).

Discussion

Findings from this research confirmed the importance of a separate facilitator role to support online student engagement. Although some programs have provided online students with a facilitator in addition to an online teacher (see Borup, 2018), there has been little research regarding how facilitators support students. The two most researched models have been on-site facilitators who work with students at the local brick-and-mortar school and online facilitators within full-time online programs where they support students primarily through asynchronous communication. This research focuses on an additional model within full-time online programs where facilitators primarily work with students through synchronous communication using webinar tools such as Zoom.

The time advocates spent meeting synchronously with students, either individually or in groups, appeared especially helpful when fulfilling their responsibilities. Traditionally, K-12 online courses in the United States have been delivered mostly asynchronously to provide students with the flexibility they require, especially in supplemental online programs (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Woodworth et al., 2015). However, synchronous webinar tools were widely used in emergency remote teaching (Lowenthal et al., 2020) and may become more commonplace in K-12 online programs, especially full-time programs where students all follow the same school calendar. Barbour and Reeves (2009) also highlighted several benefits of synchronous learning.
| Theme                        | Codes                                      | Definition                                                                                                                                  | Example quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Facilitating Support from Others | Facilitating support from teachers          | Advocates use daily focus group time to invite teachers to tutor students and facilitate academic collaboration between students               | “If during one of the focus groups one of the advocates notice that kids are always asking about math class, then we have that math teacher come into the focus group once a week.”  
ADMINISTRATOR 1                                                                                                       |
|                              | Facilitating learner-learner collaboration  | Advocates facilitate collaboration between students involved in group projects                                                              | “If you have a couple of students in a focus group that are working on the same assignment that can be [turned into] a collaborative assignment.”  
ADMINISTRATOR 2                                                                                                           |
| Providing Support Themselves | Co-learning                                 | Advocates will go over lessons with students to enhance their comprehension and facilitate collaboration between students on group assignments | “I think there are areas of interest that the advocate’s an expert in and the advocate will often have the student open up the assignment and start working through the assignment with them.”  
ADMINISTRATOR 2                                                                                                           |
|                              |                                           |                                                                                                                                            | They have a group project that they need to be working on [for class]. So group projects are a little bit tough, especially with the younger kids because they have to figure out how they’re going to meet together ... I feel like I also have to guide them a little bit more, and as they get closer if I noticed that certain groups aren’t meeting or I or the teacher tells me this group hasn’t met together, and can you check in on them, I will send an email to that entire group, including parents on there so that way everybody’s on the same page.  
ADVOCATE 2                                                                                                                  |
| Tutoring                     |                                           | Advocates will answer academic questions they know how to answer, learn lessons with students, and tutor during focus groups so they can help the students understand their lessons and assignments better | “I do try to watch the teacher’s lessons [on video]. So we have one teacher who does math and science and she has a lesson that the students can walk through and watch for the week. So if a student is struggling with something I will typically go through that with them. We watch the lesson together and we will both learn together doing that.”  
ADVOCATE 2                                                                                                                  |
| Aligning and modifying assignments to student ability levels |                                           | Make sure students’ disability service plan modifications are being applied by teachers and helping to adjust assignments based on student ability (Advocate) | “You have kids coming in with like a lot of work, just to get to the resources they need. Like, how can we help them, how can we truly like honor that piece, and so we have a special needs advocate dedicated to balancing out the load.”  
ADVOCATE 3                                                                                                                  |
including the opportunity to create a strong sense of community. As a result, this research may provide insights into strategies for supporting students during emergency remote learning as well as K-12 online programs seeking to strategically integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning, recently termed *bichronous online learning* (Martin et al., 2012).

Overall, this research indicates that school administrators and advocates felt they supported students’ affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, but focused primarily on behavioral and affective engagement tasks not normally within the sphere of the traditional online teacher. Findings related to affective engagement aligned with past research that had shown the benefits of facilitators who focused on developing relationships with students (Borup et al., 2019). Advocates built personal relationships with students that targeted personal growth and mentoring, and provided social and emotional support to students by teaching positive awareness of others and how to manage emotions. These relationships appeared not only to help students adjust to the new learning environment, but also to deal with their life circumstances. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to support students emotionally and to respond to both their academic and personal situations. Darling-Hammond and Hyler (2020) explained that “it is increasingly clear that students’ social and emotional experiences influence their learning—and that teachers must learn how to integrate these areas of development to be effective” (p. 457). This also confirms Harms et al. (2006) call for facilitators to serve as “problem-solver, mentor, and friend” (para. 36).

Advocates also supported students’ affective engagement by facilitating communication between students and their online teachers. This built community and peer connections as advocates helped students interact with their teachers and parents, and even were able to group students for targeted social interactions, helping them establish social relationships with other students. These support elements were highlighted in the ACE framework. However, this research did not find that advocates instilled an excitement for learning as outlined by the ACE framework. This may be a limitation of our research, and we may have identified that type of support if we had interviewed students.

Advocates in our study supported students’ behavioral engagement through accountability practices. They used time management strategies, helped students learn how to set expectations, and utilized collaboration, organization, and technology skills. This type of support is especially important because the need for students to develop organization and time management skills is especially high in online learning, abilities too often lacking in K-12 students (Paudel, 2021). Additional research is needed to identify best practice for helping students develop these skills as they “learn how to learn online” (Lowes & Lin, 2015, p. 18).

While not their primary responsibility, advocates spent considerable time and effort supporting students’ cognitive engagement. Advocates commonly facilitated tutoring support from teachers but also frequently engaged in co-learning activities with students when they knew the material and understood the teacher’s instructional approach. In fact, some advocates even attended class so they would have a better grasp of the course material and how it was taught. Furthermore, advocates recommended accommodations for students, including those on disability service plans. Previous research has reported similar activities (Barbour & Hill, 2011; Barbour & Mulcahy, 2004; Borup et al., 2019) but it appeared to be at a higher level at this particular school. Advocates in this research may have been more comfortable supporting students’ cognitive engagement for several reasons. Since the school was small, advocates and teachers had a level of familiarity that may not be possible in larger schools. This research also examined a school with students in grades 2–12, whereas previous research has largely examined middle and high school students. Administrators also specifically hired advocates with some educational experience who were already able to support cognitive engagement; whereas in other settings facilitators may be hired with just a high school diploma or associate’s degree (Borup & Stimson, 2019; Staker, 2011).

Lastly, this research highlights how complex the role of a facilitator is, noting that even those with an education background would likely benefit from professional learning opportunities. Roblyer (2006) explained that “facilitators are made, not born” (p. 34), and research has supported that those facilitators who received professional development were more successful than were those who had not (Hannum et al., 2008; Staker, 2011).

**Conclusions**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the difficulty teachers have in consistently engaging students in learning activities online (Francom et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to determine whether and how the role of advocate could help address students’ cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement needs that are often not well addressed in the learning coach model currently used in many K-12 cyber schools. We explored this through interviews of administrators and advocates at a small, private, fully-online K-12 school located in the United States. The ACE framework proved helpful in better understanding students’ needs in fully online K-12 schools. Although these findings of our qualitative study cannot be generalized to other cyber schools, they point to a need for larger scale research on the role of the advocate in larger cyber schools. Future research should also explore how the separation of the grading
function of the teacher and the advocate may help to promote personal relationships and community building in K-12 cyber schools.

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Declarations

Conflicts of Interests/Competing Interests The authors declare they have no financial interests. Author Dennis Beck currently serves as president of the school board for Arkansas Connections Academy, a full-time cyber school. He receives no compensation as member of the school board. Author Dennis Beck currently has two of his children enrolled in the school that was a participant in this research study. This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Arkansas (February 15, 2021/No. 2011296374). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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