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K-12 Online Teaching Endorsements: Are They Needed?

by Patricia Deubel, Ph.D.

According to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2007), "Research shows that the single most important school-related factor in raising student achievement is the quality of the teacher in the classroom. Today, in the era of high standards and increased accountability, boosting teacher quality is more crucial than ever before" (p. 4). The nature of the 21st-century classroom is rapidly changing. Online education in K-12, also called virtual schooling, is growing at about 30 percent annually (North American Council for Online Learning [NACOL], 2007). With this rise comes an increase in demand for experienced teachers to teach online, which adds another dimension to this issue of teacher quality.

States require that teachers have a valid teaching license and ultimately professional certification. While "the majority of online teachers are certified public school teachers, with experience teaching in public schools" (Davis, Rose, & NACOL Research Committee and Working Group, 2007, p. 8), is any regular classroom teacher already qualified to teach online? Some might believe this. However, it is a myth. Skill sets acquired for teaching in face to face settings are not adequate preparation for online teaching or online course development. Should K-12 teachers desiring to teach online ultimately be state or nationally endorsed in e-learning and teaching online? Let's explore these questions.

Certification, Licensure, and Quality

Teacher certification is associated with passing some kind of competency examination. Content might relate to general education, subject matter expertise, and professional teaching knowledge. Certification involves "a process by which teachers become recognized by the state as expert teachers, implying that a teacher has mastered the complex art of teaching. This is different from a 'licensed' teacher, one who teaches but is not considered an expert."

Teacher licensure is "the process by which teachers receive permission from the state to teach. States have minimum requirements, such as the completion of certain coursework and experience as a student teacher. Some states, faced with shortages of teachers in particular areas, grant teachers emergency licenses and allow them to take required courses while they are full-time teachers" (The Eye on Education Glossary: http://edreform.eyeoneducation.tv/glossary/t). Thus, licenses do not necessarily guarantee that teachers are prepared for the challenges that lie ahead, nor do they guarantee that teachers have all the competencies required to teach. This is particularly true for the uninitiated into the online environment.

Some readers might view quality as more important than extra endorsement on a teaching

certificate. How is quality measured? Consider that it's only been during the last five years that online education has become more widely accepted. There is still a lack of standards and policies for virtual schools and many differing views about the education that teachers need for the online environment (Davis et al., 2007, pp. 4-5). NACOL (2007) adopted the Southern Regional Education Board Standards for Quality Online Courses as a source for its standards and added a standard to include 21st Century Skills. The National Education Association (NEA) recognized in its policy statement on distance education that "licensure in a subject matter being taught is a necessary condition for any teacher, [but] it is not a sufficient condition for a teacher involved in distance education. Teachers who provide distance education should in addition be skilled in learning theories, technologies, and teaching pedagogies appropriate for the online environment" (NEA Policy 13, sec: Student Learning, 7a).

We have a long way to go in ensuring consistent teacher quality in K-12 online programs. In their 2006-2007 national survey of online K-12 teachers, administrators and professional development trainers, Rice and Dawley (2007) noted that "most state-led programs have developed extensive professional development (PD) for their own teachers, but that the amount of time in PD varies greatly by program, from none to 270 hours per year" (p. 5). They found that 90 percent of online teachers had professional development of some kind, or it was made available to them; the highest teacher-reported period when PD occurred was during the first year (61 percent). Unfortunately 62 percent of teachers reported having no training prior to teaching online.

Essential Competencies
A teacher can be rated as great in a face to face setting, yet be ineffective in an online setting. Online educators might teach students residing in multiple states and internationally. The diversity of students in terms of culture, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and abilities is potentially far greater than for teaching in a single rural, urban, or suburban face to face setting. While every teacher needs competencies within their subject area, a national or state endorsement in online teaching would indicate that the teacher understands the unique needs of online learners and challenges they face and has developed online learning facilitation skills that include conducting effective online discussions, managing and monitoring the progress of each learner, guiding collaborative activities, and administering online assessments and evaluations.

An endorsement in teaching online would indicate completion of initial training in theoretical, technical, and pedagogical foundations. Competencies would be gained via online learning to ensure teachers have some personal experiences with issues faced by online learners. Teachers would have facilitated at least one online course, hopefully mentored, thus gaining an understanding of the expanded time commitment of online educators to ensure learner success.

Teachers would also know the legal and ethical issues relating to online courses (e.g., copyright, plagiarism, intellectual property, privacy, accessibility) and have developed skills in curriculum and basic media design for online learning. They would have gained an understanding and working knowledge of asynchronous and/or synchronous features offered within a variety of online course management systems, Web 2.0, and emerging technologies such as virtual worlds

for learning.

More Pros and Concerns

As with National Board Certification, an online teaching endorsement would signify "professional excellence and demonstrate that a practitioner has met standards through intensive study, self-assessment, and evaluation by others. Certification assures the public that a specialist has the requisite knowledge, experience, and skills for high-quality practice" (NBPTS, 2007, p. 6). Upon employment by a virtual school, an endorsement in online teaching might cut down on the initial PD for core knowledge and skills that virtual schools might now provide. The teacher would only need additional training for the specifics of the job at hand, such as school policies and procedures, features unique to the online delivery system in use, and familiarity with the specific course materials that will be used.

Further, successful completion of an endorsement program meeting nationally accepted criteria would enable teachers to teach more easily across state lines once the endorsement was added to a state certificate. This, however, assumes that the current barrier to teaching across state lines would be resolved, perhaps in consideration of NEA policy 13 on distance education.

The largest barrier to an endorsement in online teaching on one's state certificate is national acceptance of it. I agree with Carnevale (2003) that it would not necessarily lead to employment or job security. Because present certification programs in teaching online vary greatly, the certificate earned has no official weight unless the program is tied to a specific degree. As per the results of recent studies on National Board Certification (e.g., Harris & Sass, 2007; McColskey, Stronge et al., 2005), I suspect that an endorsement would not necessarily mean that the online teacher who has one will be more effective in ensuring student achievement than one who does not have an endorsement.

Ultimately, there is the practical reality: The additional time involved for rigorous training to teach online is more than some educators might be willing to expend, particularly if it extends into a time period affecting the economic stability of the potential employee. Even individuals who have undergone training at one institution might not be willing to repeat that training to teach in another online program, if much of that training includes repeat core content.

A Matter of Time

Four states now have specific endorsements for online teachers. Georgia's endorsement became effective in 2006 (Davis et al., 2007, p. 8). I suspect that it is only a matter of time before other states follow. We need to have some national consensus as to minimal PD for teaching in the online environment. The question remains as to whether or not K-12 online teaching endorsements are actually needed or if they will be considered "a plus, but not required" for employment, as Carnevale (2003) suggests. It's too early to make a definitive statement, as the research base linking endorsements to K-12 online programs is yet to come. Perhaps in the long run, subject matter expertise will take priority as in post-secondary education and states will agree that it will "be acceptable if a teacher who provides distance education to elementary/secondary

school students is licensed in any state in the subject matter being taught" (NEA Policy 13, sec: Student Learning, 7a). States do need, however, to examine their licensure/certification policies in recognition of the growth of K-12 online education. In any case, I've provided food for thought.

Resources

World Wide Learn: Certificate and degree programs and training courses in online learning and teaching online

Georgia's 505-3-.85 Online Teaching Endorsement Program

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