

Online Teachers: What Can SREB States Do to Ensure Competence and Quality?

Introduction

Increasing numbers of middle grades and high school students in SREB states are taking online courses each year. The SREB *Report on State Virtual Schools* shows that enrollment in state virtual schools in the SREB region has increased sevenfold since 2005. Why is online learning escalating? The simple answer is access: More quality online teachers and courses are now available to give students the academic courses they need, regardless of where they live in a state. But this growth means many more online teachers are needed.

Where can SREB states find more competent, high-quality online teachers? What considerations are important in identifying and hiring these candidates? This report looks at several factors that affect — or should affect — requirements for online teaching.

Certification is an issue

Currently, almost every SREB state virtual school requires its online teachers to be certified in that state. While this may seem necessary to ensure that online teachers are as qualified as their counterparts in traditional schools, it may not be appropriate for instructors who teach in classrooms without borders.

In fact, state teacher certification requirements are thwarting the hiring of quality online teachers, who need unique instructional, communication and technical skills not necessarily required of teachers in a face-to-face setting.

In addition, all SREB state virtual schools supplement teacher licensure by requiring traditional teachers to participate successfully in professional development programs prior to employment in online teaching. It is important to note that not all traditional teachers who apply to teach online are accepted, even though many are considered highly qualified to teach in a traditional classroom and possess the appropriate academic credentials. Not all certified teachers, even with training, are able to adapt to the teacher-facilitator role of the online teacher.

Some requirements reduce access to quality online teachers

By requiring that online teachers obtain the same state licensure as traditional teachers, SREB states have erected unintended barriers that are shrinking the pool of potential online teachers. These include:

- eliminating highly qualified candidates and prospective teachers who have recognized academic credentials but do not reside in the state.
- discouraging college or university faculty or other adults who may possess extraordinary academic credentials but who would likely be unwilling to obtain state teacher licensure.

Revised requirements are needed

SREB states should remove, modify or adapt their out-of-state teacher requirements to attract high-quality teachers regardless of where they reside. It should make little difference if a teacher lives in another state if that teacher is highly qualified and meets the state's academic and instructional requirements.

Instead of focusing on certification and residency, each state's online teacher accountability requirements should be aligned with the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching*. These are specific standards for high-quality online teachers that SREB developed in tandem with several SREB states a few years ago. Alignment is extremely important to ensure that online teachers meet these standards and are competent to teach in a Web-based environment.

By focusing on this alignment, states can increase access to all qualified instructors who can help meet the growing need for online teachers.

New ways of thinking

Alignment requires new ways of thinking and programs that go **beyond** traditional teacher certification and residency requirements and link the teacher to student academic success. Traditional state teacher certification programs are not adequate to serve as a screening for online teachers or to license online teachers for several reasons:

1. They are designed to reflect what a teacher in a traditional school needs to know and do to be successful. Current teacher certification programs do not attempt to define the skills that online teachers, who never see their students in person, need to be effective: mastery of a variety of technologies, high-quality written communication skills and strong time-management skills.
2. Current certification programs are designed primarily for individuals residing in a state who wish to become a teacher in that state. A few SREB states have reciprocity agreement with other states — the ability to transfer certification from state to state. The certifications these agreements provide are, at best, difficult and time-consuming to obtain, often because they are based on the completion of an accredited teacher education program in the originating state and require additional course(s). They never anticipate a teacher operating in more than one state simultaneously.
3. They impose time and requirement barriers for potential online teachers, including postsecondary faculty or professionals outside the field of education who possess unique and often high-quality skills or knowledge. Some SREB states have implemented alternative certification programs, but none of these addresses online learning. They are often too costly or time-consuming to pursue.

In short, certification today is based on credentials that overlook some specific requirements and skills of online teachers. To become certified, an individual must take certain courses and pass certain tests. To correct this gap, **initial certification or licensure of online teachers should be based on each candidate's relevant experience, plus completion of training specifically designed for**

online teachers. SREB states also should ensure that those who are selected and hired have mentors available to monitor and assist them during their first year on the job.

To ensure both the largest **pool** of prospective online teachers and the **quality** of those teachers, it is time for state leaders to seriously consider measuring success based on performance rather than certificates held.

In fact, there is a growing movement in the field of education toward this *performance-based* approach, which focuses on student learning — not only for the online environment but for traditional teachers as well.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) published a policy inventory to help states examine policies that affect teaching quality. The inventory asked a series of questions, two of which are relevant to this report. They are:

- What is the relationship between student performance and teacher quality?
- Have high standards for teachers, based on national standards and related to the standards for student learning and performance, been developed and adopted?

While these questions were raised to help states ensure a quality teacher in *every* traditional classroom, they provide a good framework for states to consider when addressing online teacher quality in SREB state virtual schools. All SREB state virtual schools have to measure their success based on successful student achievement, not on what is referred to in traditional schools as “seat-time.” One state virtual school, Florida Virtual School, retains its online teachers based on the level of student academic success, directly linking teacher performance to student achievement. All SREB states should strive for this approach, both in their online courses and their traditional courses.

Using the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching*, each SREB state should develop competency and quality programs for persons who want to teach online in their state.

In 2006, SREB states worked together to develop the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching*. These standards define what a teacher needs to know and be able to do to successfully teach students through Web-based courses. They acknowledge that to be high quality, all teachers — both online and in traditional classrooms — must have academic degrees and related, discipline-specific credentials in the field in which they are teaching.

Yet, as a state legislator who reviewed the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* said, “These [additional] standards hold teachers to a much higher level of performance than teachers in schools.” In addition to requiring academic credentials, the standards identify a clear set of skills that are essential to effective online teaching. They include:

- *The teacher has the prerequisite technology skills to teach online.*
- *The teacher plans, designs and incorporates strategies to encourage active learning, interaction, participation and collaboration in the online environment.*

- *The teacher provides online leadership in a manner that promotes student success through regular feedback, prompt response and clear expectations.*
- *The teacher models, guides and encourages legal, ethical, safe and healthy behavior related to technology use.*
- *The teacher has experienced online learning from the perspective of a student.*
- *The teacher understands and is responsive to students with special needs in the online classroom.*

Suggested next steps

SREB states need to take the following actions:

1. Formally adopt the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* as the benchmark for all online teaching in the state. These standards provide the state with expectations and benchmarks for state requirements for online teachers.
2. Provide an efficient way for out-of-state teachers to obtain online teaching approval. This approval may be limited to teaching online if providing more general approval would result in unnecessary obstacles.
3. Develop and implement a program that allows for alternative paths to teaching online in the state. This approach would assure the state of the academic competence of the prospective online teacher.
4. Revise state reciprocity and alternative certification programs to provide an efficient means for online teachers from other states to obtain appropriate credentials. A forthcoming SREB report, *Guidelines for Professional Development of Online Teachers*, should be of significant help in addressing these issues.
5. Integrate the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* into the state's *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* definition of a "highly qualified" teacher. Given the federal *NCLB* requirements, this could remove a barrier for states in hiring quality online teachers.
6. Using the SREB *Guidelines for Professional Development for Online Teachers*, develop and provide a quality online professional development program for beginning and experienced online teachers.
7. Establish a quality monitoring program of newly employed online teachers for the first year (or first several years) to provide support and ensure student and teacher success.
8. Monitor the online teacher certification process to ensure that it does not create unnecessary barriers to the state virtual school's access to quality teachers.
9. Work with colleges of education to develop and provide courses and programs based on the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching*.

SREB states need to exercise care as quality professional development programs are planned and implemented to avoid putting obstacles in the path of new and experienced online teachers. State virtual schools often need access to a pool of potential online teachers in response to student or school emergency needs or unanticipated demand. Regulations or policies should not be so rigid that online courses that would otherwise be available cannot be offered because of policy or regulatory requirements.

SREB states can take the lead

Every reliable indicator of the future of teaching — especially at the middle grades and high school levels — shows that many academic courses will be taught fully or partially online. If these indicators are accurate, SREB states should establish carefully considered policies for teacher quality and competence that will ensure that teaching using the Web will result in improved student academic success. This will not be an easy task, given the history and evolution of teacher certification, where merely adding more courses or testing requirements often has been the solution. But it is the only way to match online teacher certification requirements with online students' needs.

To meet state academic goals and prepare for future online growth, SREB states should not place more barriers between student academic needs and quality online teachers. And they do not have to. The SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* give each state a strong and specific foundation upon which to build.

Just as the SREB region led the nation in creating state virtual schools, SREB states that align with these standards can take the lead in defining for the nation what it takes to be a successful online teacher — and giving online students access to more and better online teachers than ever before.

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