Chapter 45
The Extent of K–12 Online Teacher Development:
A Disconnect Between Preparation and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter, updated for the second edition of this volume, reviews the current research specific to the characteristics and preparation of those involved in K–12 online teaching. While few teacher education programs integrate any aspect of online teaching into their coursework or field experiences, existing programs are discussed. Limited, but notable progress is being made with respect to K–12 online teacher preparation. However, there continues to be gaps in the literature examining the extent to which teachers are being educated, trained, and otherwise prepared to function in online settings. Over the past decade, the need for teacher education programs and current K–12 online schools to work together to prepare teachers has become increasingly clear. Effective online teaching techniques must be defined, empirically proven, and then efficiently implemented by both future and current K–12 online teachers to ensure quality online educational experiences and outcomes for students.

INTRODUCTION

K–12 online education has seen steady growth during the past decade and continues to expand as a viable addition or even alternative to traditional, face-to-face schooling (Miller & Ribble, 2010). The need for highly-qualified, classroom teachers has always been critical, but now such teachers must also be prepared to meet the challenges of educating students who are separated from the teacher in space and time (Pulham, Graham, & Short, 2018). Competencies for online teachers include many skill sets

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in areas such as designing and developing course content in a technology-based environment as well as facilitating content and communicating with students, parents, and mentors both synchronously and asynchronously using technology tools (International Association for K–12 Online Learning [iNACOL], 2011). Unfortunately, there is a significant disconnect between the growing expectations for online education and the preparation of teachers. While some form of online learning has been available in every state (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011), only a small minority of current K–12 online teachers have actually received formal training on how to teach online during their teacher education programs (Archambault, 2011; Archambault & Larson, 2015; Dawley, Rice, & Hinck, 2010). The current status of online K–12 education must be viewed against a background of teacher preparation that includes little, if any, relevant instruction pertaining to teaching in an online environment.

This chapter will present and discuss the following topics:

1. An introduction to online teacher quality and preparation;
2. The characteristics of K–12 online teachers based on current research;
3. Programmatic online teacher preparation efforts, both at the pre-service and in-service levels; and,
4. Implications and recommendations for teacher education programs.

BACKGROUND

Current Status of K–12 Online and Blended Learning

During the past decade, online education in its many forms has continued to grow in popularity. During the 2012–2013 school year, 31 states had at least one fully-online, statewide school (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012), and this number increased to 33 states by the following year (Miron & Gulosino, 2016). Enrollment in K–12 courses offered by online schools has increased dramatically in recent years, driven by students taking supplemental courses online along with their regular course load at a traditional school, in addition to a growing number of schools that are combining face-to-face instruction with online instruction to create blended or hybrid models (Gemin and Pape, 2017).

There are many reasons for the increasing number of K–12 students who attend school online, including, for example, the ability to work at one's own pace and to take courses that are otherwise unavailable. For example, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses in common subjects were offered in fewer than 34% of public school districts (Lee, Edwards, Menson, & Rawls, 2011). Advanced courses as well as credit recovery are two of the most common reasons that school districts have made online offerings available to students (Lee et al., 2011).

Online programs have evolved over the past two decades through the independent efforts of geographically and politically separated administrative entities. Different formats have been experimentally implemented in the presentation of different subjects, using different technologies at different grade levels. This lack of common or centralized development has led to the adoption and use of different terms for the same or closely similar concepts in online learning. Only recently has there been a trend toward more unified and shared terminology and identification of the basic formats by which K–12 content is delivered, in whole or part, through the internet.

According to Watson et al. (2012), one of the fastest growing educational formats is "blended learning," a combination of face-to-face learning with online learning. During the 2014–2015 school year,