

Graduate-level professional development opportunities for in-service teachers: helping to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates

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Abstract

Teachers living in sparsely populated rural areas have difficulties in complying with continuing education mandates. Using state funding support, partnerships between K-12 and post-secondary institutions have been developed in Wisconsin and serve as models for professional development. These could be mirrored in other settings to enable meeting the No Child Left Behind mandates.

Introduction

An in-service school teacher in the United States may never disregard his or her own continuing education. Although requirements vary from state to state, in most states a set number of approved continuing education credits must be earned each time the practising teacher applies for renewal of an existing teaching licence. In the state of Wisconsin in the U.S.A., for example, practising K-12 teachers must accrue six academic credits each five years. Called "professional growth requirement," all teachers seeking a five-year renewal licence must earn credits that are, "directly and substantively related to one or more of the licences held by the applicant or to the applicant's professional competency." (www.dpi.state.wi.us)

Credits may be earned from any accredited baccalaureate or graduate degree-granting college or university recognized by the Department of Education. Original transcripts, documenting the appropriate work, must be submitted with the application at the time of license renewal. Coursework may include independent study, correspondence, or internet courses and at the present time may be in any academic discipline.

Obstacles for teachers

Teachers living in rural areas understandably have a relatively difficult time complying with continuing education mandates. Wisconsin, with a population of approximately 5.5 million, has a very low overall number of persons per square mile, at 98.8. Comparing this to the state of California, which has a population of 35.5 million and 217 persons per square mile, one can see that Wisconsin is a much less densely populated state with far fewer people per square mile. Another spatial comparison may be made with the state of New York, which has a population of 19 million people and a density of 401 persons per square mile. (www.census.gov/qfd.states)

This brief comparison of three states in the United States is intended to demonstrate that Wisconsin has a very low overall number of persons per square mile and therefore, as expected, contains large areas that are rural and geographically isolated. This spatial aspect creates many obstacles for in-service teachers in their quest to meet their professional growth requirement in order to renew their teaching licences. In addition, teachers have reported that they often take the easiest route, both in terms of

course delivery and academic discipline of earned credit. Simply completing the required credits becomes the goal, rather than a great deal of thought being put in to how it will better qualify them in the classroom.

While it is true that Internet and other correspondence-based courses will satisfy the basic requirements to renew a licence, are they necessarily the best courses and methods of delivery to meet the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements in place in the United States today? According to the Department of Education homepage, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools. President George W. Bush describes this law as the "cornerstone of my administration." Clearly, our children are our future, and, as President Bush has expressed,

"Too many of our neediest children are being left behind. With the passage of No Child Left Behind, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) - the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. In amending ESEA, the new law represents a sweeping overhaul of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States. It is built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility."

The website goes on to explain that,

"Of course, this Act is intended to ensure a quality education to all students in the United States, but in this new era of education, children will no longer be trapped in the dead end of low-performing schools. Under No Child Left Behind, such schools must use their federal funds to make needed improvements. In the event of a school's continued poor performance, parents have options to ensure that their children receive the high-quality education to which they are entitled. That might mean that children can transfer to higher-performing schools in the area or receive supplemental educational services in the community, such as tutoring, after-school programs or remedial classes."

School, teacher, and student performance is measured by quantified test scores although the validity of such testing has been met with criticism. According to the National Education Association (NEA) Homepage, this accountability serves to "punish" schools who cannot meet the standards. They go on to say that, "The National Education Association has consistently sought to guarantee every child an equal opportunity to succeed in our nation's public schools. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted in 1965 to provide guidance and funds to K-12 schools. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (the latest revision of ESEA) presents real obstacles to helping students and strengthening public schools because it focuses on:

*Simply completing
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Teachers involved in the University of Wisconsin workshops

- punishments rather than assistance
- mandates rather than support for effective programs
- privatization rather than teacher-led, family-oriented solutions.

As one commentator notes:

“States are working hard to place certified teachers in as many classrooms as possible in accord with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. But according to a new report, not enough of these efforts have benefited schools with high concentrations of impoverished students. Many states now have programs that offer signing bonuses, retention bonuses, scholarships, loans, and tuition assistance to attract new teachers. But few of these programs are targeted at high-poverty or low-achieving schools, the survey says. A noticeable gap in teacher quality continues to exist between high-poverty and more affluent schools. One measure is the percentage of students who take at least one class from a teacher who did not major or minor in the subject. For secondary schools overall, it’s about 22 percent, but in high-poverty secondary schools, it rises to 32 percent. Students in high-poverty high schools are also twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools to have a teacher who is not certified in the subject he or she teaches.” (Coeyman 2004)

The Bayfield School District is one such example of a rural, isolated school district in Wisconsin where practising teachers have a difficult time meeting their professional development obligations. Wisconsin Information Network for Successful Schools (WINSS) teacher quality data indicate that while 100% of the Bayfield School District Middle and Secondary teachers are fully licensed (as compared to 95% statewide) the teachers in this District fall far behind state averages for advanced degrees in their field. While 43% of teachers statewide hold a Master’s Degree, only 8% of Bayfield teachers have received an advanced degree. This data support teachers’ claims that they have a very difficult time, because of geographic isolation, completing even

their continuing education requirements for licensure, and often turn to correspondence course that are not even in their academic discipline. From *Education Week* (September 8, 2004) Teachers of Ambition, states that “Broadening the instructor’s own intellectual horizons does much to improve the quality of teaching,” thus supporting the importance of pertinent continuing education for quality teaching.

Opportunities available

Most states offer funding support designed to assist in-service K-12 teachers in meeting their professional development requirements. Utilization of this funding often requires a partnership and commitment between the K-12 and post-secondary institutions. Two such partnerships have been developed in Wisconsin, and serve as models for professional development, that can be mirrored in other settings.

The University of Wisconsin System currently supports financially a partnership agreement, initiated by the University of Wisconsin in Superior. This smallest of the University of Wisconsin System schools is located in the most northerly portion of Wisconsin, right on the westernmost tip of Lake Superior – a largely rural and isolated part of the state with the city of Superior having a population of less than 30,000 persons. The University has partnered with two nearby K-12 schools with the goal to provide professional development in the areas of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and Image Processing (IP). Teachers attend an intensive one-week technology training workshop, followed by curriculum support designed to enable teachers to integrate the technology into existing curriculum. The teachers are then required to develop lessons and share those lessons with a colleague, thus disseminating the newfound knowledge to additional practising teachers. Information on this program can be found at the homepage maintained for the project at: <http://www2.uwsuper.edu/personal/facstaff/rgabr>



Teachers involved in the University of Wisconsin workshops

Twelve teachers participated in this three-year, three-tier project. Each earns two graduate credits per year and receives a \$500 stipend to pay for the credits. Participation in this professional development project, therefore, earned teachers the necessary credits required to renew his/her teaching licence. Each teacher's school was also provided with all of the necessary software and financial support to implement the lessons in the classroom. Survey assessment data strongly supported the theory that this workshop-based, hands-on professional development met the needs of the practising teachers much better than the other limited options for professional development teachers often have at their disposal.

Because of the success of this project - entitled Superior Technology for Awesome Teachers (STAT) - another grant request is pending with the University of Wisconsin System to partner once again with the local Superior School District, to introduce this technology to additional teachers as well as include pre-service teachers in the process. The new project, mirrored after the pilot STAT, is titled Technology Connections (TC). After both in-service teachers from Superior and Bayfield and pre-service teachers from the University of Wisconsin in Superior learn the technology, pre-service teachers will have the opportunity to visit the in-service classroom to observe and assist the in-service teachers. The very isolated school, Bayfield, which is 160 miles roundtrip from the city of Superior, and located on the south shore of Lake Superior, will also be included in this new project.

Most classroom or workshop based professional development opportunities for in-service teachers most often requires that the teachers travel to the site of instruction. In order to ease the barriers for these isolated teachers in Bayfield, the workshop instructors will also travel to Bayfield. Early indications show that this attempt to assist teachers with graduate degree level work will be very popular - although funding is not yet secured, many more teachers than can be accommodated have applied to be part of the project.

Conclusion

Although the projects used as examples do not lead directly to a Master's Degree in Geography, the courses are at the graduate-level and could be transferred into an accredited geography program. Unfortunately, in the spatial region of northern Wisconsin, virtually no opportunities exist for in-service teachers

to earn an advanced degree in geography or a related field at a distance or in a non-traditional setting. Although Master's degree programs are emerging online, such as the Master's Degree in Geography Education at the University of Texas, San Marcos, this program does still require time be spent in Texas, something that is beyond the financial means of many practising teachers in geographically distanced states.

Still, the changes that are needed to address the NCLB mandates are also evident in the non-traditional degree that may be earned from Western Governor's University in the United States. Carnivale (2003) reports that the U.S. Secretary of Education, Roderick R. Paige, has said that the new Teachers College would help school districts meet a requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandates that elementary and secondary schools have instructors with teaching credentials in all classrooms by 2006. The Education Department helped finance the Teachers College with a \$10-million grant that was awarded in September 2001.

The college will offer Associate, Bachelor's, and Master's degrees in education; some of the degree programs will focus on using technology in the classroom. Western Governor's is a virtual university that does not offer any courses itself. It awards degrees based on evaluations of students' competencies in various subjects. Students can gain that competence through experience or by taking online courses through institutions that have formed partnerships with WGU.

Although northern Wisconsin has not presented opportunities such as this for in-service teachers to earn an advanced degree in geography, Wisconsin University System funding has enabled many teachers to be exposed to GIS, GPS and Image Processing, and to earn much needed graduate credits in geography that serve two purposes, (1) to renew teaching licences by earning genuinely useful credits, and (2) earn credits toward a possible graduate degree in geography. Because these technologies can be applied to many disciplines, including physical and human sciences and mathematics, they serve to assist teachers in creating more innovative and interesting lessons that meet the NCLB mandates and serve as a model to assist schools and teachers in the United States.

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