In August 2010, Education Week Marketing began surveying our readers regarding their districts’ preparedness to pursue online learning strategies. To date, nearly 2,000 district personnel respondents have provided perspectives in the following areas:

- Student needs
- Dropout rates & credit recovery challenges
- Teacher professional development needs
- Impact of ed tech on student engagement and achievement
- Technology availability (in district, classrooms, and homes)
- Parental involvement

In conjunction with the special report in this issue on E-Learning, we thought we would share some preliminary findings from the survey.

**OVERWHELMING CONSENSUS ON NEEDS AND POTENTIAL ...**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>% AGREEING</th>
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<tr>
<td>95%</td>
<td>“Students need personalized pacing to address achievement gaps or take advantage of accelerated learning abilities.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>78%</td>
<td>“Students need additional or alternative credit recovery opportunities to what is currently offered.”</td>
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<td>89%</td>
<td>“Students are positively engaged by the use of technology in learning environments.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>96%</td>
<td>“Students demonstrate improved learning, performance and/or achievement when technology is integrated into their curriculum.”</td>
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...but only 1 in 2 districts are meeting their students’ demand for online learning.

<table>
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<th>50% Agree</th>
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<td>“Your district meets the online learning demands of all students.”</td>
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n=1,585 District personnel

To take the next step in assessing your district’s preparedness for online learning:

#1 Sign up to get our survey whitepaper at www.edweek.org/go/eprepared

#2 Take the Planning for Online Learning self-assessment from our survey underwriter, Blackboard K-12, at www.Blackboard.com/K12/AssessmentTool
ONLINE

LIVE WEBINAR
Evaluating E-Educators’ Evolving Skills
Thursday, Sept. 23, 2 p.m. Eastern Time
Register for this webinar to learn more about the special set of skills online teachers need and how it differs from the skill set of their face-to-face counterparts. Also learn about the guidelines some virtual schools and states are adopting that require online teachers to receive regular training on how to use new technologies and that set standards for the quality and frequency of communication between e-educators and students.
Featured Guests: Pam Birtolo, chief learning officer, Florida Virtual School, and Bryan H. Setzer, chief executive officer, North Carolina Virtual Public School
www.edweek.org/go/webinars/e-educators

ONLINE CHAT
Teaching in Two Worlds: Virtual And Face-to-Face
Thursday, Sept. 30, 2 p.m. Eastern Time
Sign up to participate in an online chat about how teachers are balancing workloads from both virtual schools and brick-and-mortar classrooms. Moving back and forth between teaching virtual and face-to-face courses can present a challenge for educators juggling different teaching methods. But many who do both say they are able to successfully incorporate strategies they’ve learned from teaching online into their face-to-face interactions.
Featured Guest: Douglas J. Horne, a design and technology education instructor at Essex High School in Essex Junction, Vt., and an online teacher for the Maynard, Mass.-based Virtual High School Global Consortium.
www.edweek.org/go/chats/e-educators

THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL WORLD HAS BEEN BUZZING with activity in recent months.
Massachusetts announced it was opening its first state-sponsored K-12 online school, Pennsylvania’s popular cyber schools are under greater scrutiny for largely failing to meet state standards, and a recent analysis of federal Race to the Top finalists shows that most of the 10 round-two winners submitted strong online-learning proposals.
The Chicago public school system recently announced a pilot program to add learning time at 15 elementary schools by replacing licensed teachers with online courses, adding to a roster of other virtual-learning opportunities offered by the district. Meanwhile, the Oregon legislature tackled one of the more controversial e-learning issues, regarding who decides whether a student can attend a virtual school.
All this activity in the virtual world raises important questions about e-educators that are just beginning to be addressed. For instance, what quality standards exist for online teachers? How should they be compensated and evaluated? And what is being done to prepare new educators for virtual teaching jobs or help experienced educators make the transition from face-to-face to online-only instruction?
This special report, the second in a three-part series on e-learning, aims to answer those and other questions related to the growing role of e-educators in K-12 education. It provides perspectives and advice from state policymakers and virtual school providers navigating through the new and often murky policy waters of online-only education, and features insights from e-educators in the trenches of virtual schooling.
As the opening story in this report points out, the reality is that many states and national education groups still have not addressed the issue of teacher quality for the online classroom. Many states do require a virtual instructor to be a state-certified teacher, but a majority of states have no endorsement to label an instructor competent in the skills necessary to work in a fully virtual environment. Those that do, or are considering such endorsements, often bill them as a desirable portfolio-builder rather than a required credential.
Sorting through these issues will not be easy. But the K-12 community is finally beginning to address them. And that is a step in the right direction.
—KEVIN BUSHEWELLER, Executive Project Editor

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In Idaho, the state is moving toward a mandate that online teachers have additional training to teach in a solely virtual environment. Most online teachers in Georgia must pass a professional-development course in virtual instruction. And many virtual schools in other parts of the country require that their cyber educators complete professional development aimed specifically at teaching in an online environment.

Yet many states and education groups still have not addressed the issue of teacher quality for the online classroom. And dissenters say added requirements for cyber educators could exacerbate existing teacher shortages, and even be detrimental to teacher quality.

Those supporting additional certification see it differently. They say the goal is to make sure students aren’t getting shortchanged.

“We can put any warm body on the other end of the computer, but are those kids going to learn?” said Christina Linder, the director of certification and professional standards at the Idaho Department of Education. “Based on what we know, no.”

“It’s another hoop to jump through,” she said of additional certification, “but it’s the right hoop.”

Idaho is in the process of adopting recommended state standards for online teachers, with the intent of eventually making them mandatory, Ms. Linder said.

Many states require a virtual instructor to be a state-certified teacher, but a majority of states have no endorsement to label an instructor competent in the skills necessary to work in a fully virtual environment. Those that do, or are considering the step, often bill the endorsements as a desirable portfolio builder rather than a required credential.

“The fact that [schools] can hire people that have these kinds of endorsements can definitely give [teachers] more marketability,” said Christina Clayton, the director of virtual learning at the Georgia Virtual School, or GVS, a state-run school that instructs about 30,000 students a year. “I think it’s going to become the norm rather than a requirement.”

While most states don’t require a separate credential for online teachers, virtual schools often make professional development focusing on online teaching mandatory.

Experts say many states and national education groups are behind the curve in addressing the issue of teacher quality for the online classroom.
Incoming teachers at VSès must now take and pass a yearlong course in online instruction that includes completion of a virtual field experience. Other virtual schools have similar programs, but with VSès being run by the state department of education, its certificate doubles as a state-issued endorsement. There are plans for future work with universities in the Georgia system to offer the online-teacher training and certification in graduate programs.

Texas has a similar program. Any courses being used in the Texas Virtual School Network, created in January 2006, must be taught by teachers who are Texas-certified and have completed an online professional development program that has been accepted by the network, said Barbara B. Smith, the network’s project director.

The Richardson, Texas-based network acts as a clearinghouse to vet online courses. As of August, 345 schools districts had registered to allow their students to take courses approved by the network.

Idaho is in the process of final work on a two-tiered certification: one for instructors who teach “blended” face-to-face and online classes that every Idaho preservice teacher would earn, and one for fully online instructors, to be earned by in-service teachers.

While the certification for new virtual teachers would initially be recommended, the intent is to make it a requirement. Idaho officials estimate it would take until 2015 to fully implement the endorsements.

Already-working online instructors would continue to teach, thanks to a grandfather clause, and not be forced back to school. “We’re kind of in the limbo phase of transitioning,” said Lisa Dawley, the chair of Boise State University’s department of educational technology and one of the people leading the creation of the Idaho virtual-teaching-certification standards. “People are saying) ‘let’s build some basic competencies.’ And that makes sense right now. We still have 90 percent of teachers teaching in traditional brick-and-mortar schools.”

Louisiana also offers an online-teaching endorsement, which permits instructors to use previously online-teaching experience to meet its requirements. Utah offers a distance-learning endorsement, but it would have to be adapted to include online-only instruction. In its current form, it refers mainly to synchronous distance-learning formats, such as videoconferencing, with non-Web-based technology.

With many teachers already instructing in online environments, policies are lagging behind, said Cathy Cavanaugh, an associate professor of educational technology at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. “We are playing catch-up,” she said. “Practice is moving beyond policy rapidly.”

## Ed. Groups Outline Guidelines For Virtual-Teacher Quality

BY MICHELLE R. DAVIS

M any states and virtual schools developing criteria for characteristics of a high-quality online teacher are looking to a few key references for help.

Both the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, and the Southern Regional Education Board, or SREB, in Atlanta, have published compatible guides for national standards and professional development of online teachers. Those guidelines are often cited when policymakers and experts talk about how to establish such principles.

“We use iNACOL’s standards to review [online teachers] professional development and make sure it reinforces a high level of online teaching,” said Barbara B. Smith, the project director of the Texas Virtual School Network, which vets online courses used in the state. “We’re finding many of the state virtual schools are standardizing around them.”

The “National Standards for Quality Online Teaching” from iNACOL were first released in 2008 and were updated this year. They embraced the “Standards for Quality Online Teaching” published by the SREB and also reviewed other online-teaching guides such as the National Education Association’s “Guide to Teaching Online Courses” and the Ohio Department of Education’s “Ohio Standards for the Teaching Profession.”

The iNACOL standards recommend that online teachers meet the state standards required where their courses are taught, and that the teachers demonstrate technology skills, including the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools such as discussion boards, chat tools, and electronic whiteboards. The ability to promote interaction between teachers and students, and among students, is also critical, the standards say. Teachers should be able to demonstrate strategies to encourage active learning, interaction, and participation and collaboration in the online environment.

Online communication is also critical, according to the iNACOL standards, and a teacher must provide regular feedback, prompt responses, and clear expectations.

Ed. Groups Outline Guidelines For Virtual-Teacher Quality

## Many state-sponsored online schools are setting standards around guidelines from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning and the Southern Regional Education Board

The standards provide a checklist for the skills online teachers should have.

### NECESSARY SKILLS

Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of iNACOL, said that the appeal of her organization’s standards continues to grow, and that states, schools of education, accrediting agencies, and virtual schools are requesting permission to use them.

“The use of technology is critical, but the interaction and communication in an online classroom is critical as well,” she said.

The standards also point to an ability to do performance-based assessments as a necessary skill. Teachers must be able to implement and deliver online assessments that are both valid and reliable, but also complex enough to test student knowledge beyond a multiple-choice exam, for example.

In addition, the iNACOL standards recommend that virtual teachers experience “online learning from the perspective of a student,” meaning that they’ve taken online courses themselves.

Often those courses come in the form of professional development. The SREB guidelines, already in use in the organization’s 16 member states, say professional development for teachers operating in a virtual world should include formal and informal activities, online courses, role-playing activities, hands-on training with learning-management systems and other technology tools, and partnering with mentor teachers.

The SREB guidelines, which were released in 2009, provide advice to virtual school teachers on what they need to do to boost their skills, and to state virtual schools on what those organizations need to do to support and provide such professional development.

“Because you’re going to have online programs which don’t have frequent face-to-face contact, you are going to need additional skills and standards,” said Myk Garn, the SREB’s director of educational technology. “To ensure teachers have that, you’re going to need professional development.”

Links to the iNACOL and SREB standards are provided at edweek.org/links.
of funding. Many of them are at the capacity of their funding, so they also have the teachers they need right now.”

Instead, schools like the state-run Virtual Virginia high school must screen instructors themselves, through a process that involves both extensive interviews and hands-on training.

Lan Neugent, Virginia’s assistant superintendent for technology, said the creation of state certification for online learning in Virginia is not only unlikely, but undesirable.

Because Virginia offers alternative-certification pathways to teachers who did not get a bachelor’s degree in education, Mr. Neugent said, the concern is that those certification recipients could then acquire an online endorsement and enter virtual instruction without enough of a pedagogical foundation.

To avoid that scenario, Virtual Virginia hires only teachers with previous brick-and-mortar classroom experience, according to its website. But Mr. Neugent admits the process isn’t foolproof.

“We have great concern about people who just interview well and seem to understand what to do and the rest of it, but don’t have any formalized training” in virtual instruction, Mr. Neugent said.

Ann Flynn, the director of education technology for the Alexandria, Va.-based National School Boards Association, said she supports a recommendation for additional professional development and skills for virtual teachers. But she also stressed that the idea of making that mandatory raises red flags.

“Some states are already challenged to get high-quality teachers and get a good, solid teaching force,” she said. “You don’t want to see criteria set up that present unnecessary obstacles.”

Others say research shows that the true test of how well teachers will do in an online environment is still largely their effectiveness in a traditional classroom. Requiring new certifications for online teachers could discourage talented face-to-face teachers from entering that realm.

“There might be some exceptional teachers now that have been practicing before these certifications have been established,” said Barbara Treacy, a managing project director for the Center for Online Professional Education at the Newton, Mass.-based Education Development Center. “We don’t want to use [certification] as a weapon against teachers who are practicing and maybe are even leaders in the field.”

Some states are already challenged to get high-quality teachers and get a good, solid teaching force. You don’t want to see criteria set up [for virtual teachers] that present unnecessary obstacles.”

ANN FLYNN, Director of Education Technology
National School Boards Association
Making the Move To the Virtual World

BY KATIE ASH

When Jim Kinsella began teaching online, little was known about the best way to support students, train teachers, or build an online classroom. It was 2001, and he was asked to be a pilot teacher at the Illinois Virtual High School, now known as the Illinois Virtual School.

The social studies and government teacher had long incorporated digital elements into his face-to-face classes at University High School, one of Illinois State University’s lab schools, and was curious how teaching online would affect teaching and learning.

“I wanted to see what the new technology would do, and how much you could bring to the students and how well they would do with it,” Mr. Kinsella said.

But making the move from regular-classroom teaching to a virtual setting is about more than just the technology, he and other experts on e-learning say. Individualizing instruction, creating an engaging and supportive online classroom, and learning how to communicate with students who aren’t physically present are among the most challenging aspects of online instruction for new virtual teachers.

Today, Mr. Kinsella teaches online courses for the Illinois Virtual School, Northwestern University, and Sevenstar Academy, a private Christian school in Cincinnati.

Intellectual curiosity initially attracted Mr. Kinsella to online learning, but the relationships he soon found he could build with online students hooked him.

“Online teaching is much more hands-on than face-to-face teaching,” he said. “The interactions that I have are one-on-one, so I get to know my students much better and in a much different way.”

Communicating with students and building relationships with them are among the hardest, and most important, parts of becoming an online teacher, Mr. Kinsella said.

“One of the big pitfalls of online learning is that high school kids have a tendency to disappear,” he said, especially right before tests or term papers are due.

To help combat that inclination, Mr. Kinsella requires his students to initiate contact with him by phone or through Skype, a free online videoconferencing service, at least once a week.

SOLVING TECHNOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Mr. Kinsella was successful in his transition from the face-to-face to the online classroom, but it might not be the right move for every teacher, said Evan Abbey, the project manager for online learning for the Iowa Area Education Agency.

“Understanding the power of digital tools helps, but just because you can effectively integrate technology in a face-to-face classroom doesn’t mean you’re ready to teach in an online classroom,” he said. “It’s more than just being a tech-infused teacher.”

Of course, some comfort with technology is essential for online teachers, said Barbara Treacy, a managing project director in the Newton, Mass.-based Education Development Center’s Center for Online Professional Education.

Experienced e-educators say leaving a regular classroom to teach in an online-only environment takes more than just expertise with technology.
"It takes most teachers at least a year to a year and a half to get comfortable in an online classroom. It doesn’t happen overnight."

JEFF MURPHY
Director of Instructional Support
Florida Virtual School

“An online facilitator or teacher needs to be prepared for technological problems,” she said. “They have to be willing to be a calming front line of defense with technical issues.”

Becoming more comfortable with technology and learning-management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, was one of the reasons Matt Lozano began teaching online, he said.

After 10 years of face-to-face teaching, Mr. Lozano taught his first online course through the Maynard, Mass.-based Virtual High School Global Consortium, or vhs, last year.

“I really wanted to learn how to use [Blackboard] because in the future, my face-to-face courses will be using something like Blackboard,” he said. “We’ll have to interact with students online eventually anyway, and I wanted to be ahead of the game.”

GUIDING THE STUDENTS

What Mr. Lozano didn’t expect was how well he would get to know his students. “At first, my perception was that it was going to be awkward and difficult to get to know them because they’re so far away, but the way the course is structured, I realized that they’re actually being required to express themselves more than a lot of my kids in the face-to-face classroom would,” he explained.

For Mr. Lozano, the easiest part about the transition to an online classroom was getting used to allowing students to direct their own learning. “I would say that in my face-to-face classroom, I am used to being the star. I’m used to presenting the material, and in an online environment you can’t do that,” he said. “I wanted to jump into a discussion and take it over, but I learned pretty quickly that that’s not necessarily helpful for those kids.”

Allowing conversations to go off on a tangent and land on topics that the students themselves found interesting was both challenging and rewarding, he said. “It took some maturity on my part,” Mr. Lozano said, “to be able to trust them and give them little guiding remarks rather than jumping in with the answer.”

Liz R. Pape, the president of vhs, a network of over 660 member districts, said that many new online teachers reported a greater emphasis on higher-order thinking skills in online discussions than they saw in face-to-face discussions.

“In an online classroom, the teacher is helping and fostering community, communication, and collaboration,” she said. “Problem-solving skills, creativity, innovation, and real-world applications of content knowledge—those are all higher-order thinking skills that you want to foster.”

Asking open-ended questions that can’t be answered by just one student is especially important in an online environment, said Ms. Pape, since the teacher is not there to facilitate the discussion in real time. And those teachers who go through training to teach online often note that those skills helped improve their teaching in a face-to-face classroom as well, she said.

In her first year, Kim Solomon, a 2nd grade teacher at the Chicago Virtual Charter School, a blended learning environment in which students learn mostly online but have some in-person lessons with teachers, noticed that the online classroom required teachers to develop a tailored set of time-management skills, such as setting a daily schedule and sticking to it, keeping track of emails and phone calls, and planning each lesson well in advance.

“The administrators are not micromanaging us,” she said.

Learning how to evaluate students who are not physically present can be challenging for new online teachers, said Steven Guttentag, the executive vice president and chief education officer of the Baltimore-based Connections Academy, which operates online schools in 21 states. “[Teachers] in a brick-and-mortar school are used to talking to kids and watching them to see if they’re OK,” said Mr. Guttentag. In an online environment, teachers have to depend on data and online feedback to evaluate whether their students comprehend the curriculum.

WORKING WITH PARENTS

Online teachers also need to be prepared to work more closely with parents, Mr. Guttentag said. In many online-learning programs, students’ parents become their learning coaches, and therefore frequent and open communication between teachers and parents is essential, he said.

The teacher must establish “good customer relations” to foster productive discussions about student progress without allowing parents to overstep their boundaries, he said. “It’s a fine line,” Mr. Guttentag said. “You have to be able to maintain your professionalism and authority as a teacher.”

Online teaching is not for teachers who are looking for an easier alternative to a regular classroom, said Jeff Murphy, the director of instructional support for the Florida Virtual School.

“You have to really care about students and want to go out of your way to help them be successful. And that does mean working long hours and staying on the phone for an hour to work with a student to get them to understand an important concept,” he said. “In this environment, the bell’s not going to ring.”

And just as in a face-to-face classroom, it takes time for online teachers to feel at ease in their environment.

“It takes most teachers at least a year to a year and a half to get comfortable in an online classroom,” said Mr. Murphy. “It doesn’t happen overnight.”
Professional Development Seen to Lack Consistency

BY KATIE ASH

While the teacher training for online educators lacks consistency and structure at the state and national levels, long-running virtual school programs have learned much about what online teachers need to know to succeed.

Providing ongoing training in both formal and informal ways, pairing first-year teachers with mentors, and putting rookie virtual teachers in the student’s seat are key elements of comprehensive professional development for online teachers, experts say. Although some schools of education have begun to include training for online teaching, most do not, said Lisa Dawley, an educational technology professor and researcher at Boise State.

Boise State has an online-teaching-certificate program, which can be taken on its own or as part of a master’s degree. The project-based program is taught online. In addition, 885 partners with schools, districts, and virtual education providers to offer training for online teachers.

As it is, most teachers do not learn how to teach online in their initial preparation. Rather, some receive their training through alternative certification, while most are trained by the virtual schools themselves, Ms. Dawley said. While some virtual schools have well-rounded professional-development programs that give teachers the support they need, she said, many—especially smaller virtual schools and online-learning programs—do not have the resources to provide teachers with adequate initial and ongoing training.

MENTORS NEEDED

“Everybody’s looking for training, and they don’t really know where to go to get it,” Ms. Dawley said. “The solutions aren’t quite scaling up fast enough to meet the demand.”

A report released in 2008, for which Ms. Dawley was one of the researchers, said that 17 percent of online teachers received 10 hours or less of professional development before they began teaching online. Among new virtual teachers, training in the use of communication technologies was ranked most important, followed by appropriate uses of learning-management systems, time-management strategies, and student Internet safety, according to the report, which was based on a national survey of 885 K-12 online teachers. One area where more professional development is needed, said Michael K. Barbour, an assistant professor of instructional technology at Wayne State University in Detroit, is how to teach effectively in an asynchronous environment, meaning interactions with students can occur at any time, not just in the confines of a scheduled time period.

In asynchronous online learning, he said, “you’re trying to facilitate a discussion that isn’t happening in real time.” Most teachers from a traditional classroom background are more comfortable teaching synchronously or during scheduled time periods, he said.

In an asynchronous environment, teachers do not receive the same immediate feedback from students that they get in a face-to-face classroom, Mr. Barbour said, which can be challenging.

Online teachers in an asynchronous environment need to be more

Blended’ Learning Seeks the Right Mix

Schools combine virtual and face-to-face teachers to meet student needs

BY KATIE ASH

In blended-learning environments, where students learn partly online and partly in a face-to-face classroom, how do teachers work together to best support their learning? That’s a question educators at the Chicago Virtual Charter School have spent five years answering.

“We’ve really been pioneering this path of hybrid education,” said Leah Rodgers, the academic administrator for the 600-student school. “And we’ve figured a lot of this out as we’ve gone.”

At CVCS, which is operated in partnership with K12 Inc., a Herndon, Va.-based e-learning company, each student spends two hours and 15 minutes in a classroom one day a week and spends the rest of the school week working virtually from home. The school works with students in grades K-12.

For two years, the school operated under a model in which students met with one teacher during their face-to-face sessions and different ones in their online classes. But over time, the school found that “when students had two different teachers, it was difficult for those two teachers to be on the same page,” said Ms. Rodgers. “[Teachers] weren’t able to really identify what the student knew and didn’t know.”

Students, as well as parents, became confused about which teacher should be approached for which questions, and parents felt that their relationships with the teachers weren’t as strong as they could be, she said.

As a result, the school moved to a new model, in which the virtual and face-to-face instructor for each student is one and the same. High school students have different teachers for each subject.

“We’ve been able to streamline the communication and create much stronger relationships between teachers and students,” Ms. Rodgers said.

WHAT ‘BLENDED’ MEANS

Blended, or hybrid, learning has caught the eye of many looking into the potential of online learning, especially after the release of a meta-analysis and review of online-learning research by the U.S. Department of Education in May 2009. The authors found that “instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage” than either purely online or entirely face-to-face instruction.

Understanding what blended learning really means, however, and how it best can be used to support students, is still largely up in the air, experts say.

“Everybody’s talking about blended, but you talk to ten different people, and there are ten definitions of what it is,” said Steven Gutten-tag, the executive vice president and chief education officer of the Baltimore-based Connections Academy, which operates online schools in 21 states.

As shown by CVCS experience, even knowing who is responsible for teaching the students is up for debate.

At the Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, for instance, there are several models of blended learning, said Julie Young, the executive director of the 97,000-student school, which operates as its own district within the state.

In one model, FLVS students convene in a classroom or computer lab to take their online courses from an off-site instructor. They are joined by a site facilitator, who is on hand to help with any technical issues and answer basic questions, Ms. Young said.

“The facilitator is being [the online instructor’s] eyes and ears,” she said. Facilitators are trained to make sure students are engaged in their courses, and the sites where they work are equipped with phones that online instructors can use to call and check if a student is having trouble.

In another model, a site facilitator works with students who are all taking the same online class to set up experiments, for instance, or help with collaborative, in-person activities.

In yet another approach, online instructors can team up with face-to-face teachers to co-teach a course, said Ms. Young.

Although that model is more expensive for schools, “it’s a really awesome opportunity for the in-person teacher simultaneously to receive training in how to teach the course. That model is exactly what the Louisiana Virtual School turned to, opened by a lack of certified Algebra 1 teachers.

The Louisiana Algebra 1 Online Program pairs up an uncertified, face-to-face math teacher with an online-certified Al-gebra 1 instructor.

“It gives students the advantage of high-quality instruction delivered by a certified teacher, and the advantage of having a teacher in the classroom to provide immediate assistance if it is requested,” said Dianne Gauthier, an educational technology consultant for the 7,000-student Louisi-siana Virtual School, or LVIS, based in Baton Rouge. “The classroom teacher is provided with pedagogy training and mentoring that helps to build capacity for high-quality instruction.”

The two teachers meet in a two-day, face-to-face workshop during the summer that lets them “start the bonding process and determine roles and responsibilities,” Ms. Gau-thier said. “They also decide upon the best
Coaching Virtual Students

Iowa’s state-led high school distance-learning program, Iowa Learning Online, requires each student enrolled in an online course to be assigned a coach who will help him or her stay on track, said Gwen Nagel, the director of the program.

The coach must be a school district employee and is usually a teacher, she said, and so far, the presence of a good mentor for each student is the greatest predictor of student success in the program. Since the online courses taken through Iowa Learning Online are supplemental, often a student will be the only one in the school taking the course, said Ms. Nagel, and it helps to have an involved adult to encourage the student and keep him or her focused.

The coach communicates frequently with the online instructor through the program’s learning-management system to track the student’s progress, she said. In addition, the coach is expected to e-mail a weekly progress report to the parents and inform the online instructor of any personal events in the student’s life that may be affecting academic performance.

“The coach is the person who really is the ‘mom,’” Ms. Nagel said. “They’re the person there checking in so that the student doesn’t drift.”

Collaborative Learning

At the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School, or FVS, teachers go through similar initial teacher training, said Jeff Murphy, the school’s director of instructional support.

They complete three stages of training, involving several full days of instruction at the beginning and part way through their first year, he said. The training is provided both face to face and through the learning-management system.

During that process, teachers connect with dozens of other teachers they can reach out to at any point—an essential part of the induction process, said Mr. Murphy. Teachers keep in touch mainly through instant-messaging programs, as well as through phone calls, he said.

And, again, each teacher is paired with an instructional leader he or she can reach out to for additional support.

In addition, at any point, FVS teachers can access quick recorded webinar-like sessions that address specific issues about online instruction, such as tips on discussion-based assessment or motivating students, Mr. Murphy said.

The support system created that first year of teaching extends throughout a teacher’s career at the Florida Virtual School, he said.

“The professional development doesn’t stop with your new teachers,” Mr. Murphy said. “Using veterans to help other veterans is a great way of building professional learning communities.”
The E-Teacher’s Toolbox

Online instructors have more options in their arsenal than ever to help deliver and explain academic content to students—blogs and wiki pages, social networks, and videoconferencing software, to name a few. But even the most experienced online instructors can struggle with which tool to use, when, and how.

The days of online classes delivered exclusively through discussion forums and e-mail are long gone, experts point out, and the formats of online learning environments themselves are more diverse. In “virtual classrooms,” teachers have to facilitate collaborative learning online, while in “virtual courses,” much of the student learning is self-paced and independent.

So just which technology tools are best for which situations?

E-MAIL

In the pioneering days of online learning, e-mail was the main means for delivering online courses. Now that e-mail has worked its way into almost all teaching, online students are dismissing its use as a relic of the past.

“Our students today think e-mail is pretty archaic,” said Pam Birtolo, the chief learning officer of the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School, or FLVS. Teachers should still correspond by e-mail in many cases, but Ms. Birtolo recommends that e-mail correspondence with students now be used largely as one-way communication, similar to a regular school’s morning announcements or hallway bulletin boards.

Teresa Scavulli, the senior director of Herndon, Va.-based K12 Inc.’s teacher-effectiveness division, said the for-profit online education company instructs teachers that “dependency on e-mail as an intervention or a way to engage a student who is disengaged is not the appropriate use of it.”

BLOGS AND WIKIS

Collaborative websites like blogs and open-source wiki documents can enhance collaborative learning in the “virtual classroom” model. But, while often grouped together, the two aren’t the same, and both are often more about student communication than teacher communication.

Wikis are sometimes more research-oriented than blogs, according to research stemming from observations of 30 teachers across the nation, published in June by the Education Development Center’s Center for Children and Technology, based in New York City.

Blog entries are published chronologically and thus may be more aligned with teacher-led instruction, while wikis that can be edited by anyone at any time could be better suited for collaborative projects. And wikis that record who is adding what content help online teachers know which students are engaged.

“In a wiki environment, if [students] don’t join in, it’s as plain as the nose on your face,” said Victoria Davis, a middle school teacher at the 400-student private, pre-K-12 Westwood Schools in Camilla, Ga., and a co-founder of the Flat Classroom Project.

Flat Classroom Project students, who take part in the collaborative initiative from around the world, are asked to outsource different jobs in a project to different people using wikis for online communication. To create a video, one student might do the storyboarding, one the scriptwriting, and one the directing, all without ever maintaining live communication. The process is the most advanced form of online collaboration, Ms. Davis said, and helps students prepare for life in the 21st-century global economy.

On the other hand, the Center for Children and Technology’s research found blogs were used mostly to foster discussion and elicit prior knowledge, with a teacher posting questions or prompting discussions for students to learn comments about. They were also occasionally used for writing submissions.

Daniel Light, a senior research scientist for the center, cautions that any use of blogs or wikis must begin early during a virtual or blended class, and it must be consistent. He points to one English teacher in the study who created a writing blog in the middle of the term. Previously, students had submitted assignments in private.

“It silenced [students’] voice,” Mr. Light said. The teacher “worked so hard to create an environment where students trusted her with their work. She realized the blog was not going to work…You have to develop the norms to support it.”

—IAN QUILLEN

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Facebook, Ning, Twitter, and other social-networking websites provide platforms for some of the same kinds of collaborations that blogs or wikis do. But for online instructors, their biggest value may be in communicating beyond the course material.

While recent measures in some districts have restricted teachers’ social-networking interaction with students on public sites such as Facebook and Twitter, Ms. Scavulli insists good virtual instructors should pursue such relationships. Such an instructor, she said, is someone “who can create a video and show the students that he or she...is very real.”

“It’s about making sure you are connecting” to the students, she said.

Teachers can also reach out to parents on social networks to provide a portal to class activities and discussions. Ms. Smokorowski’s class, for example, often tweets short messages about class visitors or other activities.

“Parents are busy, too,” Ms. Smokorowski said. “They want it short and sweet. ‘Tell me what’s up, and let’s move on.’”

CELLPHONES

The ability to call or text a student via cellphone may be the single most important communication tool in online instruction, experts in the field say. Because the demands of online learning are often very different from those in a traditional classroom, students can struggle to gain a connection to an instructor and lose interest. And the easiest way to rectify that isn’t online.

“Nine times out of ten,” Ms. Scavulli said, “a situation can be quickly remedied if the teacher just picks up the phone.”

Teachers can also send group text messages to inform students that a question has been posted online, or to individuals who are more comfortable with receiving advice that allows them to respond at their own pace.

Calling and texting can stirbrick-and-mortar teachers, who often think of phone calls as a last resort and virtual learning as something that only happens online. But to be successful in an online environment, it’s something teachers should get used to, experts say.

“The phone is all about delivering the message that I care about you [the student], and let’s learn together, and let me facilitate learning your way,” said Ms. Birtolo of the FLVS. “The phone is getting to know you.”
As the youngest faculty member in the school of education technology at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, Leanna Archambault was quickly tapped as the most “qualified” to teach one of its first online courses.

Not that she was.

“I was like, ‘How do I do this?’ ” recalled Ms. Archambault, a nontenured instructor at the university at the time. “It was really like building the plane while I was flying it.”

As she soon found out, teaching online courses presented very different challenges from merely integrating technology into the classroom. And after earning a doctorate from UNLV, Ms. Archambault in 2008 headed to Arizona State University in Tempe to create a curriculum to help K-12 teachers learn how to teach online. But while she had intended to focus on preservice teachers, she found certification and course-hour requirements too encumbering, and instead created a graduate certification program that began this fall, a choice that was the obvious one in retrospect.

“With undergraduates, they just made the decision to be a teacher, and many of them are not even aware that online teaching is a possibility,” Ms. Archambault said. “There needs to be some kind of will on the part of the teacher, because it’s a huge commitment. And it’s vastly different from the traditional classroom.”

While experts on virtual education largely agree that preservice teacher education needs to catch up to the times, they also often concede that graduate programs make more sense, at least for now.

Schools like Iowa State University, in Ames, offer coursework to prepare preservice teachers for virtual teaching, and others like the University of South Florida, in Tampa, and the University of Central Florida, in Orlando, offer virtual-teaching internships. But they are largely the exceptions.

So, while online education advocates groan that a recent survey by the technology company Blackboard Inc. found that only 4 percent of responding teachers had been taught how to deliver online courses during preservice education, changing that percentage may not be a top priority. Until demand grows to the point of creating an employment gap, the reality will be that most beginning online teachers are high on brick-and-mortar experi-
New Educators Look Back at Virtual-Teacher Preparation

WHEN MARTIN SZCZUCZYNSKI FINISHED HIS FIRST TEACHING INTERNSHIP as a junior at Orlando’s University of Central Florida, his main knowledge of K-12 virtual education came from what college friends told him about taking online classes in high school.

And while his teenage and 20-something friends didn’t exactly dive into deep discussions about pedagogy and curriculum, they went far enough that he checked a box on his post-internship evaluation expressing interest in doing his second teaching internship online.

“I was very curious,” said Mr. Szczyuczynski, who a year later is also known as Mr. S, by his physical science students in his first year as a full-time instructor with the Florida Virtual School. “I had ideas in my head, and I wanted to see if they were true.”

It turns out they weren’t—which is exactly the point of Central Florida’s collaborative internship program with Florida Virtual, or FLVS. Born out of what university and the virtual school officials saw as a mutual need to increase staffing at FLVS and prepare preservice teachers for the virtual environment, the program helped dispel the notion that K-12 virtual education mirrored online college courses, in which professors typically push content and students work independently, Mr. Szczyuczynski said.

“REALY REINFORCING”

Instead, when he partnered with an FLVS advising teacher, he fought the same challenges many virtual instructors battle during their first real year on the job, such as getting full-time students to do assignments and tests on time.

But after learning the tools of the trade during his internship—including using experience and low on virtual training.

“If you’ve got teachers who have all been teaching for seven out of eight years and give them another set of skills, that’s probably a good equation for giving students better outcomes,” said Susan D. Patrick, the president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or INALKO, based in Vienna, Va.

HIRING RECENT GRADUATES

Even so, Niki Davis helped Iowa State become one of the schools to challenge the idea that only graduate-level programs should tackle the training of online teachers.

After emigrating from the United Kingdom to direct Iowa State’s Center for Technology in Learning and Teaching, Ms. Davis wrote a successful federal grant proposal to fund the school’s Teaching Education Goes Into Virtual Schooling program, or TEGIVS, which started in 2005. And it’s only been in the years since, she said, that the nation’s virtual schools have entertained the concept of hiring teachers straight out of college.

“When we started our TEGIVS project, the virtual schools said they preferred teachers to have the experience of brick-and-mortar schools first,” Ms. Davis, now a professor of e-learning at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, and Graceland University, in Lamoni, Iowa—includes a lab and lecture for elementary and secondary teacher education students, several hours of field experience, a unit during an instructional-design course, and themes within a methods course and a distance education course. The hours of field experience can vary by school, partly because of how much time a state requires preservice teachers to spend in traditional classroom internships.

“It is difficult” to fit in the hours, conceded Ms. Davis. “At FLVS, we substituted 10 hours among the total required. A bigger problem was persuading teacher-educators of the relevance and importance of this.”

It’s an even harder sell when the student-teaching isn’t really in a traditional K-12 environment.

Currently, said Ann Thompson, the founder of Iowa State’s Center for Technology in Learning and Teaching, students rotate through instructional roles during a distance-learning course they take with their peers. “Ideally, we’d have students teaching [actual K-12 courses] at a distance,” Ms. Thompson said, “but we haven’t figured out how to do that.”

FLORIDA MODELS

The project—which has partners in the University of Florida, in Gainesville, the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, and Graceland University, in Lamoni, Iowa—includes a lab and lecture for elementary and secondary teacher education students, several hours of field experience, a unit during an instructional-design course, and themes within a methods course and a distance education course. The hours of field experience can vary by school, partly because of how much time a state requires preservice teachers to spend in traditional classroom internships.

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FLORIDA MODELS

With very few virtual school offerings available to Iowa’s high schoolers, Iowa State can’t offer an internship arrangement similar to what the University of Central Florida and South Florida have with the Florida Virtual School, which served 97,000 students last school year.

At the University of Central Florida, teacher education students can enter a hybrid version of the school’s Internship 1 course, where they spend half a semester in a virtual environment and half in a brick-and-mortar class, before choosing which environment to progress to during Internship 2. And because the Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, is considered its own school district within the state, the virtual-internship hours are viewed the same as those earned in a regular school.

The program, which began last year as a response to an enrollment spike that drove the Florida Virtual School to nearly double the size of its teaching staff, will have about 20 students in its two levels this fall, said Michael Hynes, the co-director of the University of Central Florida’s school of teaching, learning, and leadership.

Logistical challenges prevent the program from growing much larger. Teachers who advise interns must go through the university’s clinical-supervision course. And while the Florida Virtual School hires teachers from across the country, Mr. Hynes said his university will only partner students with teachers for whom regular face-to-face consulting is possible.

“We’re not choosing people who live in Wisconsin and teach in the Florida Virtual School,” said Mr. Hynes, who hasn’t had to turn interested students away yet, but fears he may soon. “With 20 students this fall, we are stretching. We’re right at the limit at this point.”

Meanwhile, the University of South Florida’s physical education department last fall began a similar program, in which nine students spent a seven-week period helping FLVS teachers provide high school gym courses. University officials said it was a natural extension of what was already happening in the department, which has emphasized research on active gaming—video games that involve vigorous body movement, such as Nintendo’s Wii game system or Konami’s “Dance Dance Revolution” games—as potential tools for physical education.

“What we want to do is to provide options for our students,” said Colleen S. Kennedy, the dean of the University of South Florida’s education school. “And what the Florida Virtual School sees is offering this kind of preparation to our teachers will make them more marketable.”

Of course, the marketability of a preservice teacher who is versed in online instruction depends on how much online education grows, and could vary depending on a state’s technology-competency standards for licensed teachers and its enrollment allowances for virtual schools.

If FLVS enrollment were to continue to increase as rapidly as it has over the past five years, Mr. Hynes said, it would become much more affordable to hire adequately prepared teachers than to train experienced teachers who have no virtual-teaching background.

But Myk Garn, the Southern
emoticons “like no other”—he said he entered his full-time position this past summer well ahead of his first-year colleagues.

“I’ve found that I have a great reputation with people I’ve never even seen face to face,” Mr. Szczuczynski said.

Fellow former intern Laura Scott-Kappler, now a first-year global studies teacher for the Florida Virtual School, also said she began her teaching career with an advantage over her fellow rookies.

“Within the last couple weeks” of the internship, said Traci Archambault, a first-year global studies teacher for the Florida Virtual School’s state endorsement program—which has to invest its own resources to train people I’ve never even seen face to face,” Mr. Garn said, referring to teachers who instruct both face-to-face and online-only classes, “but I don’t think blended is going to require the same kind of training” as fully online instruction.

Meanwhile, the smattering of online-teaching state endorsements that have been or are soon to be developed include mandates for coursework and field experience beyond the preservice level.

In Idaho, draft standards for online learning will require preservice teachers to be proficient in leading blended learning, but those in fully online environments to do graduate study. In Arizona, which has had only preliminary discussions about creating an online-teaching endorsement, Ms. Archambault’s program at Arizona State is a 15-credit certificate that can be earned independently or as part of an educational technology master’s degree.

And in Georgia, the Georgia Virtual School’s state endorsement for online teaching—previously offered only by the school—is included in some of Kennesaw State University’s graduate programs for the first time this fall. "That’s an issue that needs to be to be addressed,” said Traci Redish, an associate professor at Kennesaw State, who chairs the Georgia Instructional Technology Task Force. “We truly believe that online learning is going to explode. We’re just in the beginning phases of it—the infancy of it.”

Regional Education Board’s director of educational technology said enrollment caps in many of the Atlanta-based state’s 16 member states artificially restrict demand for online instructors. That doesn’t mean preservice teachers won’t need to learn how to lead online learning; it’s just that they’ll need to know it as a supplemental skill, he added.

“We’re going to see a dramatic increase in blended learning,” Mr. Garn said, referring to teachers who teach both live and online courses. “We’re just in the beginning phases of it.”

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Some teachers might apply to work for virtual schools in search of extra cash to supplement their brick-and-mortar day jobs; others may want to experience the flexibility of an online environment, the chance to reach students beyond their traditional district boundaries, or the opportunity to more fully utilize technology.

What they shouldn’t expect is a more lucrative source of primary income.

Compensation for virtual instructors more or less mirrors what instructors in regular schools earn, though the pay structure for them can vary greatly, say online education experts. And given the distinctive demands and connectivity of online teaching—many novice online teachers struggle with time management and find themselves in constant teacher-student communication—it is possible that some virtual educators earn less per hour than their colleagues in brick-and-mortar schools.

But employment practices for virtual educators differ so widely that establishing or improving any norms is a major challenge. “The biggest concerns ... are the lack of consistency from one agency and/or virtual school to the next,” Ken Bradford, Louisiana’s director of education technology, which runs the Louisiana Virtual School, said in an e-mail. “Some schools pay flat fees, some pay per student ratio, and some pay per student that passes a course. There are no standards for online teacher pay across the nation.”

**STATE OF PAY**

With state education departments, for-profit education companies, regular school districts, and independent online-only districts all managing virtual schools, it can be hard to establish fair and structured compensation practices. State education departments struggle with how to pay virtual teachers when their pay scales are designed to establish fair compensation for all state employees, while state and national teacher groups struggle to grasp even how many of their members are virtual instructors. In all virtual schools, there is debate over how much brick-and-mortar experience should affect pay for online instructors.

State-run virtual schools often use an intermediary financial agent to handle teacher compensation, sometimes to avoid the negative publicity of hiring more state employees during a difficult economic period, say virtual school officials. At the 5,800-student Louisiana Virtual School, for example, teachers are officially paid by the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts, a state-supported residential high school in Natchitoches, through what Mr. Bradford termed an interagency-agreement contract. The virtual school’s 16 full-time instructors are paid on a pay scale that mirrors a traditional district’s, Mr. Bradford said, while its roughly 100 adjunct teachers are paid per student enrolled, with a cap on enrollment at 25 students per course.

In Georgia, the 32 full-time instructors and 80 to 120 adjuncts at the 30,000-student Georgia Virtual School, or GVS, are paid directly by Kennesaw State University, the intermediary financial agent. Full-time teachers’ salaries are determined by a combination of the state board of education’s guidelines, which stipulate the base salaries for teachers of different experience levels, and an average of the supplemental pay across the state’s districts, said Christina Clayton, the school’s director of virtual learning. The state lists base pay for starting teachers at $33,424 annually, though what beginning teachers actually make depends on their level of certification. District supplements typically range from $3,000 to $8,000.

Full-time GVS teachers also receive employee benefits from the university, situated 20 miles north of Atlanta, including the opportunity to take up to nine graduate-level or continuing education credits per semester after nine months of teaching service.

Like their Louisiana counterparts, the Georgia Virtual School’s part-time instructors are paid according to the number of students enrolled in their courses; they can receive up to $310 per student for a course carrying one Carnegie unit of credit. All new teachers are required to complete a yearlong training course in delivering online instruction, Ms. Clayton said, but that course is paid for by the Georgia Virtual School.

**FLEXIBILITY ON INCENTIVES**

While state-run virtual schools grapple with how to compensate their instructors, state and national teachers’ organizations are largely inactive on the issue. Officials from the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers’ union, say only that they represent very few full-time virtual instructors. The number of part-time or “blended” instructors they represent is impossible to determine, they say, because of the fluidity of teachers’ incorporating online elements into learning. Some online education experts argue that the relative absence of unions helps the online-teaching process, easing the sometimes tense relationships between traditional teachers and administrators, and allowing alternative pay structures for organizations with more flexibility to offer teacher incentives.

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**E-EDUCATOR PAY MODELS**

Compensation for teachers in virtual schools can vary widely based on who is managing the school.

**FLORIDA VIRTUAL SCHOOL**

**FULL-TIME:** All full-time instructors are paid the same starting salary regardless of their brick-and-mortar teaching experience. They can increase their salaries by meeting teaching-performance standards set by FVS. A key to the school’s ability to provide such incentives is that FVS acts as its own public school district within the state.

**PART-TIME:** While the Florida Virtual School generally shies away from hiring part-time faculty members, it does hire some. Adjuncts are paid based on the number of students who complete their courses successfully.

**GEORGIA VIRTUAL SCHOOL**

**FULL-TIME:** For teachers in Georgia’s brick-and-mortar schools, the state board of education approves the base-salary structure, with many districts opting to pay a supplement that exceeds the state standard. Since the Georgia Virtual School is open to students from all districts, it pays teachers based on a formula that adds the state-determined base-salary to an average of the district supplement amounts. Brick-and-mortar teaching experience is factored into full-time salaries.

**PART-TIME:** Adjunct instructors are a majority of the school’s teaching force and are paid on a per-student-enrolled basis. There is no cap on how many students an instructor may teach per course.

**K12 INC. SCHOOLS**

**FULL-TIME:** The for-profit K12 Inc., based in Vienna, Va., runs some virtual schools itself and offers services—including teachers—to others. Most of its hired instructors are considered full-time and are paid on the basis of performance incentives, although some districts the company works with require a specific pay structure.

**PART-TIME:** Like their full-time counterparts, adjuncts working for K-12 can see their pay vary based on external factors such as school district and state requirements.

**LOUISIANA VIRTUAL SCHOOL**

**FULL-TIME:** Instructors are paid according to a structure similar to those of most traditional school districts, but the school’s fiscal agent—the name on teachers’ pay stubs—is a state-supported residential school, the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts. Brick-and-mortar experience is factored into full-time salaries.

**PART-TIME:** Adjunct faculty members constitute a majority of the school’s teaching force. They are paid per active enrollment and are assigned no more than 25 students per class.

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**SOURCE:** Education Week
This gives teachers greater freedom to openly discuss any questions, concerns, and issues they might have in regards to any part of their employment and relationship,” said Jeff Kwitowski, a spokesman for the for-profit online education company K12 Inc., based in Herndon, Va., which manages online schools and offers services to others. “It also enables high-achieving teachers to be rewarded for their individual success.”

THE EXPERIENCE FACTOR

Determining how experience should factor into a virtual instructor’s compensation can also be more difficult than in a brick-and-mortar school.

In “Going Virtual,” an October 2008 study from researchers at Boise State University in Idaho, only one in 13 new online teachers did not have previous traditional teaching experience. That’s fine with many experts, who say experience leads to better traditional teaching, which leads to better online teaching.

“The literature is very clear that being a good teacher in general is most related to being successful in online environments,” said Priscilla Norton, an instructional technology professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. “Companies that create online courses and market them to K-12, they hire people who have classroom experience—people who understand curriculum, who understand teaching and learning—to then work in an online environment.”

But while some schools reward brick-and-mortar experience with pay, the Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, which operates as its own school district within the state, starts all new virtual teachers at the same base pay. If their experience in regular schools makes them better online teachers, they will quickly earn more money through performance incentives, said Pam Birtolo, the school’s chief learning officer. Those incentives, she said, are more popular among virtual schools’ teachers than recently passed performance-pay plans for Florida’s traditional teachers, which hinge primarily on student performance.

Ms. Birtolo said an FLVS teacher is evaluated on whether parents and students perceive the teacher to be caring, whether the teacher can bring students of all ability levels through completion of a course, how many students he or she can bring to course completion during a school year, and how responsive the teacher is to individual student issues.

The performance incentives “are not based on some state mandate. They’ve been designed and developed and tweaked by our teachers,” Ms. Birtolo said. “In order to require the hard work our teachers do, we also have to be fiscally accountable to them.”

Ms. Birtolo would not assign dollar amounts to how FLVS teachers are paid, but said the amount FLVS pays it teachers puts it in the upper third of Florida school districts. According to the National Education Association, full-time Florida teachers earned an average annual salary of $47,000 in 2008.

Yet, in many cases, the inconsistency in virtual-instructor pay simply reflects the inconsistency in traditional teacher pay. For example, Teresa Scavulli, the director of K12’s teacher-effectiveness division, said virtual instructors in highly sought-after fields like Mandarin Chinese, math, and science are sometimes more heavily compensated.

Also, virtual teachers are generally still subject to the salary policies of states and districts. And with some teachers losing brick-and-mortar jobs in a sour economy, the supply of potential online teachers is exceeding demand, giving online schools less incentive to boost pay, said Susan D. Patrick, the president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or INACOL, based in Vienna, Va.

“Teachers in virtual programs are compensated at a similar rate to [traditional] teachers,” Ms. Patrick said. “It’s just that it’s all over the map.”

The biggest concerns [regarding compensation] are the lack of consistency from one agency and/or virtual school to the next. There are no standards for online-teacher pay across the nation.”

KEN BRADFORD
Director of Education Technology
Louisiana Department of Education

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BY MICHELLE R. DAVIS

T

though Douglas J. Horne stands in front of a class full of students every day as a design and technology teacher at a Vermont high school, at different times he also sits before a computer to teach engineering principles to online students.

In his classroom at Essex High School in Essex Junction, Vt., an administrator might spend three or four times a year collecting data on the actions of a student. An administrator “sits in” a virtual world, or looks at what his virtual classroom is doing, he reports. It is a virtual classroom, and in motivation him or her to improve, in an online learning environment, for instance, it can be difficult to assess if you’re teaching principles it’s important to look at the quality of those interactions, said Bryan H. Setser, the chief executive officer of the Idaho Digital Learning Academy.

“Time is money,” he said. “It’s 12 hours for returning phone calls. The entire process can happen within the span of a few semesters because the school’s 345 teachers might have. In a regular public school setting, collecting the proper documentation to get rid of an unsuccessful teacher can take years, not semesters, Mr. Setser said. If that doesn’t happen, the teacher is let go.”

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