Chapter 4
Distance Education in the K–12 Setting: How Are Virtual School Teachers Evaluated?

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ABSTRACT
The evolution of technology over the last century has in many ways changed how teachers teach today. From kindergarten through twelfth grade, students are now able to complete 100% of their schooling online. If novel teaching practices have been established as a result of technology advancements, tools which align with those teaching practices must be produced in order to ensure continued student success. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold; to review teacher practices in K-12 distance education today and to discuss the field of education’s need for research in measuring K-12 virtual school teacher effectiveness. The chapter begins with an overview of the history of distance education, followed by an examination of virtual school teacher pedagogy, a brief review of measuring K-12 teacher performance in the traditional and virtual school settings, and a synopsis of current tools for evaluating K-12 virtual school teacher effectiveness. The chapter closes with solutions and recommendation for future research.

INTRODUCTION
Today students as young as five years old are beginning their formal education online. This means that young students are not in the same physical space as their teacher-something that would not be possible in today’s world without technology advancements. With increased blended and online learning opportunities for all students, it is more important than ever to recognize effective teaching practices in the online environment. Moreover, virtual and blended schools continue to grow exponentially which results in an increased need of trained, and highly qualified virtual school educators. The eldest and most prevalent state-funded online school in the nation, experienced a 45% increase from the 2011-2012 school year to the 2012-2013 school year and the 5-year growth forecast from 2009-2013 was 1,197% (Watson, DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2838-8.ch004)
Distance Education in the K-12 Setting

Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2013). The speed in which virtual schools continue to grow supports that teacher education programs and local schools must be proactive in determining how to evaluate virtual school teacher effectiveness to ensure that the influx of students receive high quality instruction. Today, “hundreds of thousands of students are attending full-time online schools that provide their entire education” (Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, & Watson, 2015, p. 12). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss current virtual school teacher practices within the full time K-12 setting as well as current methods of evaluating virtual school teacher effectiveness. This chapter presents possible solutions for transforming evaluation techniques to ensure that they align with virtual school teacher practices.

The chapter begins by reviewing the history of distance education and virtual school teacher pedagogy. It continues to explain the role of a virtual school teacher then gives an overview of best practices in the virtual setting according to research in the K-12 online arena. Finally, an overview of tools available to aid in evaluating virtual school teacher effectiveness and the work that needs to continue in the field of evaluating virtual school teacher effectiveness is explored.

BACKGROUND

Accurately measuring successful teacher practices is essential to ensuring student success. Teacher effectiveness influences student learning at a higher level than any other school variable, including class size, school size, after-school program quality, or the school itself (Darling-Hammond, 2006; MET Project, 2010). Using daily practice, identified characteristics, and student performance measures, as means of teacher assessment, a complete view of effective virtual school teachers can be accurately reflected (Rice, 2012). According to Ferdig (2010), virtual school teachers are a driving factor in student success in the online setting. Therefore, research has established the importance of effective teachers in both in person and distance settings.

The 1970’s marked the beginning of states working to “regulate learning and teaching by requiring outcomes and attaching incentives to their attainment” (Fuhrman, Cohen, & Mosher, 2007, p. 65). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that African American and Hispanic students achieved higher tests scores after tying incentives to outcomes (Cohen, Moffitt, and Goldin (2007). Subsequently, policy was implemented to influence classroom practices and standards-based reform was born in the mid-1980’s, which, according to Fuhrman et al. (2007) resulted in higher levels of accountability efforts for schools and teachers. Ultimately, policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and Goals 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 1993) were enacted. School Choice, where public funds are used to fund privately run schools, became a way to replace failing schools. In 2010, Race to the Top (The White House, 2010) was implemented to entice states through funding to further implement teacher accountability practices including linking student test scores to teacher evaluations (Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, & Watson, 2015). As an increasing education option and with today’s reform efforts focused on using student data to rate teacher effectiveness, the quality of full time virtual schools and their impact student learning, must be investigated.

Concerns in regards to instructional quality in distance education can be traced back to correspondence education. Through such alternate methods of instruction, students received instruction without attending a class in a physical building (Russell, 2004). Critics of online learning often point out limitations of delivery technologies and often wish to duplicate the practices of a traditional classroom teacher (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Currently, measuring virtual school teacher effectiveness can