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Addressing Shortages of Educators in an Uncertain COVID-19 Landscape: Viewing Teacher Candidates as Assets

Districts trying to address budgets and service delivery uncertainties posed by the COVID-19 crisis may minimize priority on collaborations with local educator preparation programs (EPPs). In fact, school districts may shy away from welcoming preservice teacher candidates, avoiding what they perceive as an added burden on overtaxed teachers and overwhelmed administrators. However, collaborations between school districts and EPPs on teachers' initial preparation and ongoing professional development can leverage resources and expertise to achieve outcomes that would not be realized without productive cooperation (Rosenberg et al., 2009).

Teacher candidates should be considered an asset in school buildings, and may help to alleviate potential and ongoing teacher shortages in many content areas. With adequate EPP supervision, teacher candidates can augment veteran teachers' efforts while successfully honing their own professional practices. Moreover, they may help to address teacher shortages that may occur due to efforts to reduce classroom and school building density. Instead of delaying partnerships, districts, in concert with EPPs, have an opportunity to reimagine and innovate how field experiences are best organized and delivered to address student needs and improve teacher preparation during a time of disruption and challenge.

Similarly, EPPs and state departments of education must be prepared to make accommodations for teacher candidates who face their own health-related challenges in light of COVID-19 and may not be able to complete school-based fieldwork. Changes to common practices and policies may be necessary to allow maximum flexibility for teacher candidates to demonstrate skills, either in person or virtually, to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to continue to make progress toward graduation and licensure.

Below we offer examples of ways that teacher candidates can serve as assets in their field placements, both in person and virtually, and what EPPs must do to ready candidates for these expanded responsibilities.



Getting Started: Foundational Skills

At this stage, teacher candidates have just begun to reflect on the multiple roles of classroom teachers. In coursework, they typically begin to learn about curriculum, have opportunities to experience planning for instruction, and discuss typical and atypical child and adolescent development. Although they are perhaps not ready yet to provide instruction, their eagerness to help and willingness to apply newfound skills can be useful in

many ways. In school configurations where at least part of instruction is provided online, new teacher candidates can assist in multiple ways:

POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES TO ASSIST DURING REMOTE AND IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION:

- Develop short, content-focused videos on essential topics for review and to fill gaps during times spent in online instruction;
- Assist with locating and vetting online instructional materials (e.g., videos, worksheets, and other materials);
- Create support materials, such as scaffolded notes and graphic organizers;
- Contribute to making materials more accessible by helping with closed captioning, narrating slide presentations, and reading text aloud;
- Monitor small groups, either in person or in breakout rooms; and
- Post materials to online sites, such as Schoology, Google Classrooms, Blackboard, or other learning management system (LMS) apps.

These efforts can help mitigate the challenges of teachers trying to monitor two classrooms simultaneously: one in person and one via remote learning. To make sure candidates are prepared for this challenge, EPPs may want to move quickly to provide candidates with these opportunities:

- To prepare for assisting with planning and preparing materials, both in person and online:
 - Reviewing modules on instructional accessibility, available for free from the [National Center for Accessible Educational Materials](#);
 - Learning where to find district resources and reputable online curricula and materials;
 - Experiencing ways to evaluate instructional materials for curricular alignment, appropriateness, and accuracy;
 - Filling in any gaps identified in their technology expertise; and
 - Gaining exposure to Google Classrooms, Schoology, Blackboard, and other LMS apps, in the role of both teacher and learner.
- To prepare to protect the safety and security of students, as well as manage disclosures and set boundaries, both in person and online:
 - Learning about privacy and confidentiality of student records, both in the classroom and online;
 - Completing mandated reporting requirements early on, as well as fingerprinting and other assurances; and
 - Completing online safety modules for teachers and for age-appropriate groups, such as those offered by [Common Sense Media](#) or from the [Office of Justice Programs](#).



Gaining Experience: Intermediate Practice

By now, teacher candidates have had some experience in the classroom and have begun to learn the instructional methods and teaching practices that benefit a variety of learners. Eager to try out these new skills, teacher candidates at this stage may be ready to teach small groups of learners, especially those who may be at greater risk for learning loss and falling behind. Schools should leverage the skills of teacher candidates at this stage to help fill learning gaps and provide additional assistance to those who need it most.

POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES TO ASSIST DURING REMOTE AND IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION:

- Teach small group lessons designed to assess prior learning;
- Create review materials and extension activities;
- Provide small group instruction to reteach or fill in gaps;
- Spend time with an assigned “target” student or a small group for tutoring or remedial learning;
- Work with individual students to provide feedback on work submitted virtually, such as short answer responses and “leveling up” on sites such as [Zearn](#) or [Reading A to Z](#);
- Assist with screening and benchmarking activities, including reflecting on collected data to identify learning gaps and targeted plans for intervention; and
- Continue assisting with making materials accessible, posting materials to an LMS, and finding extension activities (for both in person and remote learning).

Teacher candidates may need explicit training to meet these needs that may not typically be part of their preparation at this stage. However, as districts will be working hard to meet the considerable needs of learners and families with limited personnel and resources, EPPs may want to consider:

- Allowing field-based assignments to be completed through both in-person and remote activities (with monitoring provided by a cooperating teacher);
- Assigning teacher candidates to grade-level teams or school buildings rather than to a single teacher, allowing their time to be used flexibly to assist target students;
- Providing opportunities for teacher candidates to oversee activities on remote learning days, assuming a considerable number of students will spend time both in school and in remote learning;
- Working collaboratively with districts to identify veteran teachers who may be struggling with remote learning and placing capable teacher candidates with them for additional assistance and to ease stress; and
- Asking supervisors and clinical professors to support remote learning and to evaluate candidate performance in remote learning or through virtual platforms (rather than in person).



Transitioning from Teacher Candidate to Novice Teacher: Advanced Preparation

Teacher candidates entering the student teaching phase need opportunities both to learn from experienced veterans and to demonstrate their independence. At the same time, concerns regarding the health of veteran teachers who may be unable or unwilling to return to classrooms may leave school districts scrambling to fill positions or to identify creative solutions. In fact, this may lead to new opportunities for student teachers to collaborate, as capable teacher candidates can assume the role of in-school instruction provider, taking advantage of technology to get assistance from mentor teachers. The mentor teacher may still be considered the teacher of record, but responsibilities could focus on planning, providing instruction in remote settings, and providing virtual mentorship. School districts may want to consider this and other novel ways to reconsider the roles of teacher candidates at this stage of preparation.

POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES TO ASSIST DURING REMOTE AND IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION:

- Assuming students will spend time both in school and in remote learning each week, allowing teacher candidates to take on full responsibility for the remote learning for one or more groups of students;
- Asking EPPs to allow capable student teachers to be assigned to cooperating teachers with health concerns, potentially allowing the teacher candidate to serve as a long-term substitute teacher if necessary, therefore providing an opportunity to maintain continuity in classroom instruction or service delivery;
- Encouraging opportunities to implement team teaching and co-teaching approaches, thereby enabling the teacher candidate to have responsibility for overseeing responsibilities for planning and evaluating a group; and
- Working with EPPs, pairing a teacher candidate with a mentor teacher who may provide effective in-person instruction but who could use assistance with remote learning.

To promote any of these opportunities, teacher educators may need to make allowances to typical policies. For instance, longstanding decisions to not allow teacher candidates to substitute teach may need to be reconsidered to allow consistency in instruction. New and emerging technologies may need to be adopted. With these ideas in mind, some other things EPPs may want to consider are:

- Discussing with candidates what contact with families may look like during in-person and remote learning, as well as the harmful impact of implicit bias;
- Promoting mentoring through virtual platforms, including real-time “Zooming” into a classroom or using services like Sibme or TeachForward to upload video for feedback;
- Evaluating the utility of existing teacher evaluation rubrics, recognizing that some rating systems may not be flexible enough or include opportunities to provide feedback on the new roles;
- Working closely with local districts to target the placement of student teachers to schools in most need of assistance; and
- Allowing student teachers to demonstrate skills in unconventional ways, such as through collaborating with multiple teachers across multiple classrooms to assist students in most need.



Moving Forward

The impacts of COVID-19 on education are undeniable. Looking back, we may come to realize the positive impacts the crisis has had on instruction, including gathering resources that allow teachers to extend student content knowledge, providing new ways for students to demonstrate their understanding, and offering exciting opportunities for peers to collaborate. Focusing on teacher candidates as assets may help school districts recognize these possibilities.

References

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