

Forbes article posted by ASCD Smartbrief: [Why more colleges should offer online teacher training](#)
E-learning may be a top solution to narrowing teacher shortages, writes Hui-Yin Hsu, head of New York Institute of Technology's Teacher Education Program. The approach could help bring individuals with noneducation-industry expertise into the classroom, she notes in this commentary.

E-Learning: An Essential Tool For Improving The Public Teacher Corps

Forbes.com By Hui-Yin Hsu, August 22, 2016

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As classes start, public school systems across the country are staring down crisis-level teacher shortages.

Rapid City, South Dakota schools have 50 unfilled teaching positions. Georgia's Houston County has 90. San Francisco has more than a 100. Florida's Orange County: a whopping 300.

There's a desperate need for new blood in America's teacher corps. Older educators continue to retire at a steady pace, and there is not enough new talent joining the profession. Worse still, too many young teachers aren't equipped with the knowledge required to educate effectively. And the teacher corps remains remarkably homogenous, failing to reflect the diversity of the nation.



In February 2016, a teacher gives a lesson recorded for the 'Digischool' e-learning website in Lyon. The French startup raised necessary funds to become the European leader in e-learning. (JEAN-PHILIPPE KSIAZEK/AFP/Getty Images)

There is a silver-bullet solution to all these challenges: online teacher certification. E-learning portals empower people from less traditional career tracks to join the teaching profession, bringing their unique perspective, skills and backgrounds into the classroom. [More universities should offer online teacher training.](#) And public school systems should value these degrees and recruit heavily from these new pools.

The vast talent pool

E-learning represents the best way to grow and improve the American teaching corps.

Consider Arlene Steenkolk, a former computer engineer in Beaverton, Oregon. She made plenty of money in her old career, retired early, and wanted to help foster the next generation of computer scientists. So she took up teaching, taking a position as a technology assistant at a local elementary school. “This is my passion,” she explained. “I want to encourage (the students) to look ahead for their future.”

There are countless Arlenes across the country, motivated professionals in their 30s, 40s and 50s with impressive skills and an ambition to give back through teaching.

This vast talent pool, though, has gone mostly untapped. The biggest reason? Many professionals face a prohibitively high transition cost: They can’t afford to quit their jobs and spend several years in a full-time teaching program. Many have kids to support, mortgages to pay and retirements to plan for. They can’t forgo several years of wages.



The ideal model

That’s where e-learning comes in. Online teacher training programs allow working professionals to get certified at their own pace. They don’t have to leave their jobs to start switching careers. And the degrees are just as specialized—and good—as those offered by traditional, brick-and-mortar schools.

The University of Massachusetts, for instance, offers online courses leading to more than 20 teaching degrees.

The ideal model couples flexible online instruction with regular, in-person training sessions in which candidates visit K-12 classrooms and interact with real students. At my university, New York Institute of Technology, our education school offers online graduate programs and a blended program that incorporates classes and instruction on campus.

This kind of hybrid model has proven exceptionally effective elsewhere, too. One recent study spearheaded by the former president of Princeton University examined over 600 college students and found that those who completed both online and in-class courses performed better than traditional students.

Bridging knowledge and diversity deficits

Empowering more mid-career professionals to join the teaching corps would also address another major problem plaguing public school educators: a serious knowledge deficit. Recent research shows that many middle and high school instructors lack the necessary knowledge about math to effectively teach their students the subject. These educators “are not prepared to teach the demanding curriculum needed for U.S. students to compete internationally,” says William Schmidt, the Michigan State University professor that directed the study.

When mid-career professionals migrate into education, they bring their knowledge and professional skills, honed over decades, with them. Students can learn, say, about computer science directly from a Google engineer or about writing from a Fortune 500 advertising executive. Young minds deserve access to such elite knowledge.

Teachers from non-traditional paths are also more likely to come from diverse demographic backgrounds. Boosting their ranks will make the teaching corps more reflective of the student body.

Indeed, there’s currently a serious lack of diversity among educators. While over 40% of U.S. public school students are students of color, more than 80% of their teachers are white. Empowering more mid-career professionals to make the switch can help close this gap.

A desperate need

Our nation can’t afford to let the problems with the teaching corps continue unaddressed. The scarcity of qualified, diverse instructors is leading to lower quality instruction and contributing to poor outcomes. Today, the United States isn’t even among the top 20 performing countries in international student achievement assessments.

Leveraging online learning technologies to empower adult professionals to become teachers will provide an injection of fresh talent into a school system that desperately needs it.