Teacher preparation goes virtual in the wild west: The impact of fully-online teacher preparation in Texas

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Boom in Online Teacher Preparation

In Texas, becoming a teacher has many paths, and lately, online teacher preparation programs are becoming really popular. Nearly all of these programs are run by for-profit companies that have expanded rapidly because Texas has a teacher shortage. However, there is growing concern among researchers and stakeholder groups that these online programs may not adequately prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom. With minimal state oversight, the quality of these programs can vary significantly, prompting questions about their overall effectiveness.

Why Our Study Matters

The teacher shortage remains a pressing issue in the state, and there is a temptation to look at online preparation programs as a quick fix. However, our study reveals important cautionary notes about this approach. While convenient, teachers prepared via fully-online programs do not perform as well in their first years, affecting students' reading and math scores. Moreover, these teachers leave the profession at a rate 2.5 times higher than their counterparts. This high turnover creates a cycle of shortages and rehiring, burdening school districts financially and academically.

Key Findings

1. **Widespread Impact:** 1 in 4 students in Texas are now being taught by teachers prepared via fully-online teacher preparation programs, highlighting the scale and potential consequences.

2. **Lower Student Performance:** Students taught by teachers prepared via fully-online EPPs perform worse in math and reading compared to their counterparts. The size of the effect on achievement is equivalent to the gap in achievement between White-Latinx students and economically disadvantaged students and their peers.
3. **Delayed Effectiveness**: For those who remain in the teaching profession, it takes three years for teachers from fully-online programs to show similar effectiveness to first-year teachers from college/university prepared pathways.

4. **No Systematic Bias**: We found that teachers prepared via fully-online programs are not systematically assigned to lower-achieving students. The lower achievement levels are attributed to the teacher’s preparation pathway.

5. **High Turnover Rates**: Teachers trained in fully-online programs leave the teaching profession at a rate 2.5 times higher than teachers who completed other programs.

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**Policy Implications**

- **Better Alternatives Exist**: As the state contemplates solutions to teacher shortages and aims for educational excellence for all Texas students, we should prioritize quality and long-term effectiveness over convenience and expediency. Texas is home to many effective alternative pathways to teaching.

- **Reconsider Funding**: The high turnover rate among online-program teachers has financial implications for school districts, exacerbating the teacher shortages.

**Recommendations**

1. **Strengthen Oversight**: Texas's educational authorities should increase oversight of fully-online programs to ensure they meet quality standards.

2. **Performance Monitoring**: Continuously monitor and assess the effectiveness of teachers from online programs as well as other preparation pathways.

3. **Transparency**: Programs should be required to publicly disclose performance outcomes for their graduates, including student achievement scores, to better inform potential students and employers. Current audit reports contain missing information needed to assess effectiveness of programs.
Methodology

We examined the effectiveness of teachers in their first four years of teaching who were prepared via fully-online teacher preparation programs on student achievement in Texas. To identify which programs were fully-online, we individually verified the status of every teacher preparation program in the state. We also confirmed that the participating teachers completed their training online using information provided by the State Board of Educator Certification.

We use data from the University of Houston’s Education Research Center (ERC), which contains information on all students attending Texas public schools and their teachers. We categorize teacher preparation pathways into six groups: University/College, Education Service Center/Local Education Agency, Online, Other Alternative, and Uncertified. Our analysis spanned six years, from 2013 to 2019, and included 3,055,425 student-by-year observations in grades 4-7. The study focused on student performance on STAAR reading and math assessments. To ensure a robust analysis, we accounted for student demographic and school characteristics. We also incorporated prior student achievement levels, using previous STAAR scores, to control for initial disparities in student performance. This approach allows us to attribute differences in achievement to the preparation pathway of their teachers.

Research Team Bio

J. Jacob Kirksey, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the College of Education and associate director of the Center for Research in Leadership at Texas Tech University. His research is broadly focused on issues at the nexus of education and other areas of public policy, which includes student absenteeism and truancy, inclusion and special education, immigration and education, and the teacher workforce.

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