

Stated Briefly

Professional experiences of online teachers in Wisconsin: Results from a survey about training and challenges



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Wisconsin Virtual School, a state online learning program that offers supplemental online courses to partner districts in Wisconsin, administered a survey to its teachers in fall 2014 to learn more about their training experiences and challenges. More Wisconsin Virtual School teachers reported participating in training or professional development related to online instruction while teaching online than before teaching online or during preservice education. The most frequently reported professional challenges concerned student engagement with and perseverance in online courses. Wisconsin Virtual School teachers indicated that they preferred unstructured professional development to structured professional development for addressing challenges related to students' perseverance and engagement.

This brief summarizes the findings of Zweig, J., Stafford, E., Clements, M., & Pazzaglia, A. M. (2015). *Professional experiences of online teachers in Wisconsin: Results from a survey about training and challenges* (REL 2016–110). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest. That report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=1463>.



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Why this study?

The use of online courses by elementary and secondary schools has grown rapidly in many parts of the United States for more than a decade (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2014; see box 1 for definitions related to online learning). Research demonstrates that high-quality teaching plays an important role in student outcomes (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014; Rockoff, 2004). However, only four states and the District of Columbia require online teachers to participate in training or professional development related to online instruction (Watson et al., 2014), and there is little guidance about what kinds of training and professional development online teachers should receive. Members of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest Virtual Education Research Alliance identified a need for more information about online teacher training and professional development experiences.

To address this need, Wisconsin Virtual School, a state online learning program that offers supplemental online courses to partner districts in Wisconsin, administered a survey to its 54 teachers in fall 2014. Among the questions addressed by the study were the following:

- What percentage of online teachers at Wisconsin Virtual School participated in training or professional development related to K–12 online instruction? When did this training occur?
- What challenges did Wisconsin Virtual School online teachers face when teaching in online environments?
- What type of training or professional development, if any, did Wisconsin Virtual School online teachers indicate would help them overcome their challenges?

The REL Midwest study team, in collaboration with the Virtual Education Research Alliance, developed and validated the survey based on items from the Going Virtual! survey (Dawley, Rice, & Hinck, 2010; Rice & Dawley, 2007; Rice, Dawley, Gasell, & Florez, 2008), among others. The survey response rate for Wisconsin Virtual School teachers was 91 percent.¹ This Stated Briefly report, a companion to the full report, contains the key findings from the survey responses of 48 teachers who taught an online course during the 2013/14 or 2014/15 school year. The full report contains more information about the duration, format, and content of teachers' training and provides information about when respondents thought that training or professional development should be delivered. The survey instrument and details about the study methodology can also be found in the full report (Zweig, Stafford, Clements, & Pazzaglia, 2015).

What the study found

Wisconsin Virtual School offers ongoing, multifaceted professional development for all of its online teachers, including a summer workshop and professional learning communities. Thus, all Wisconsin Virtual School teachers reported participating in training related to online instruction either before or while teaching online. The remainder of this section describes the timing of the training in which Wisconsin Virtual School teachers participated, the challenges teachers reported, and the types of professional development and training teachers thought would help them address those challenges.

Nearly three times as many teachers reported participating in training related to online instruction while teaching online than during preservice education

Asked at what points in their careers teachers participated in training related to online instruction, 88 percent reported participating in professional development while teaching online, 69 percent reported participating in training before teaching online but after their preservice education, and 31 percent reported that online instruction was covered during their preservice education (figure 1). Seventeen percent of teachers reported participating in training during all three periods.

Box 1. Key terms

Online learning program. An organized offering of courses delivered primarily over the Internet (International Association of K–12 Online Learning, 2011).

Online teacher. The person who is responsible for instruction in an online course (International Association of K–12 Online Learning, 2011).

Professional development and training. Defined in this study as activities aimed at increasing teachers' capabilities in K–12 online instruction.

Professional learning communities. A group of teachers that meets several times a year to share knowledge and expertise, with the goal of improving teaching practice and student performance.

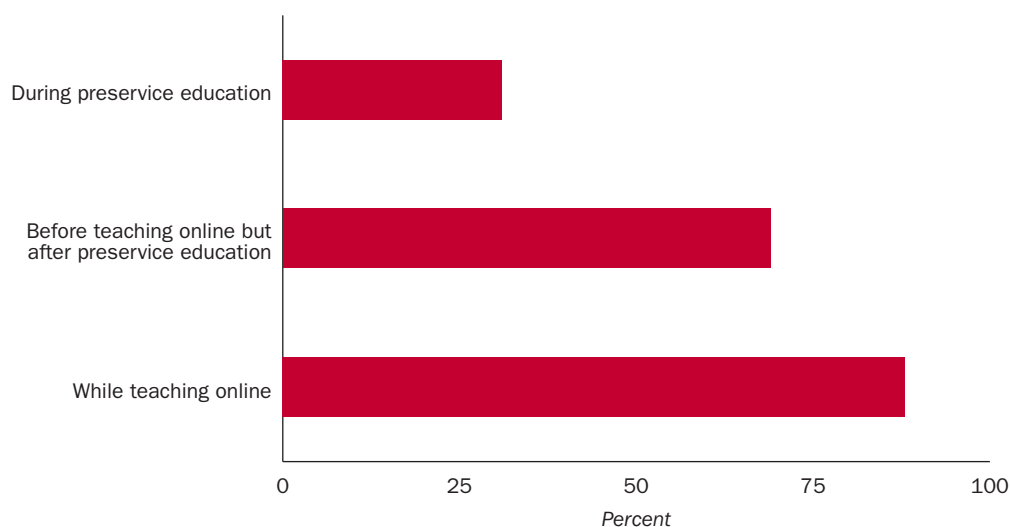
State online learning program. An online learning program created by legislation or by a state agency, administered by a state education agency, or funded by a state appropriation or grant for the purpose of providing online learning opportunities across the state (International Association of K–12 Online Learning, 2011).

Structured professional development. Professional learning aimed at increasing teachers' capabilities in K–12 online instruction; occurs in a structured format, such as a workshop or graduate course.

Unstructured professional development. Professional learning that occurs outside a structured format, such as mentoring, online forums, and Internet searches.

Wisconsin Virtual School. A state online learning program that offers supplemental online courses to students enrolled in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. It was created through a partnership between the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Cooperative Educational Service Agency 9. It has been in operation since 2000 and serves as Wisconsin's Web Academy, as called for by 2007 Wisconsin Act 222 (Watson et al., 2014). It partners with school districts throughout the state to offer online courses to middle and high school students.

Figure 1. Most Wisconsin Virtual School teachers who taught an online course in 2013/14 or 2014/15 reported participating in professional development while teaching online



Note: Respondents include 48 online teachers who taught at Wisconsin Virtual School during the 2013/14 or 2014/15 school year.

Source: Authors' analysis based on the 2014 Wisconsin Virtual School survey data.

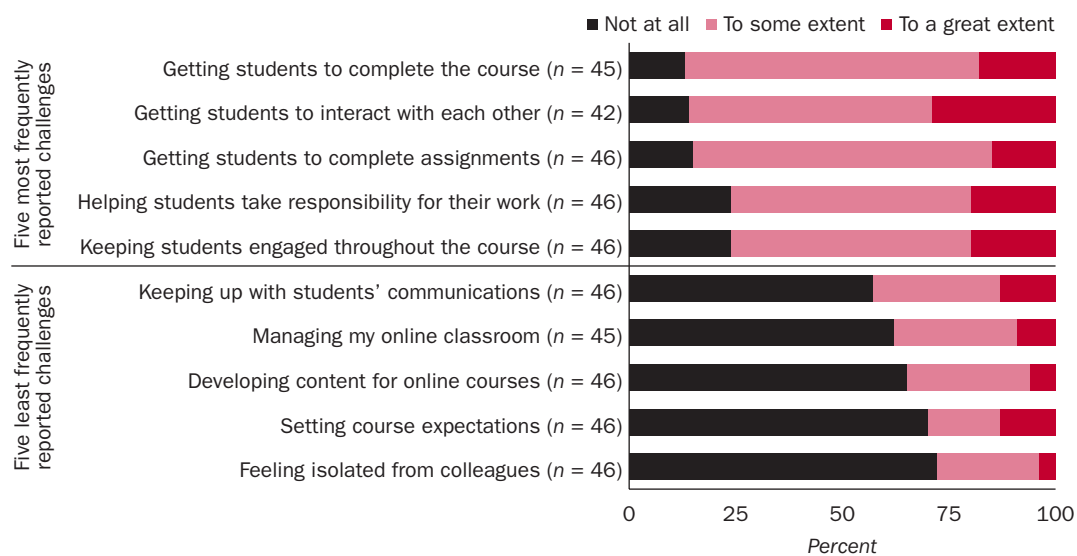
Wisconsin Virtual School teachers' most frequently reported challenges related to students' perseverance and engagement

The challenges teachers reported most frequently include getting students to complete the course (87 percent indicated at least some challenge), interact with each other (86 percent), and complete assignments (85 percent; figure 2). More than three-quarters of teachers reported that two other challenges included helping students take responsibility for their work (76 percent) and keeping students engaged throughout the course (76 percent). Teachers reported fewer challenges related to working conditions, such as feeling isolated from colleagues (28 percent), and professional practices, such as setting course expectations (30 percent), developing content for online courses (35 percent), managing their online classrooms (38 percent), and keeping up with students' communications (43 percent).

Wisconsin Virtual School teachers indicated that they preferred unstructured professional development to structured professional development for addressing challenges related to students' perseverance and engagement

Approximately 80 percent of teachers indicated that they would like some form of professional development to address the top five challenges. More teachers preferred unstructured professional development, such as mentoring and online forums, to structured professional development, such as graduate courses and workshops, to address the top five challenges (figure 3). For example, 51 percent of teachers reported believing that unstructured professional development would help them develop strategies to support students completing an online course, as opposed to 28 percent who thought structured professional development would help address that challenge.

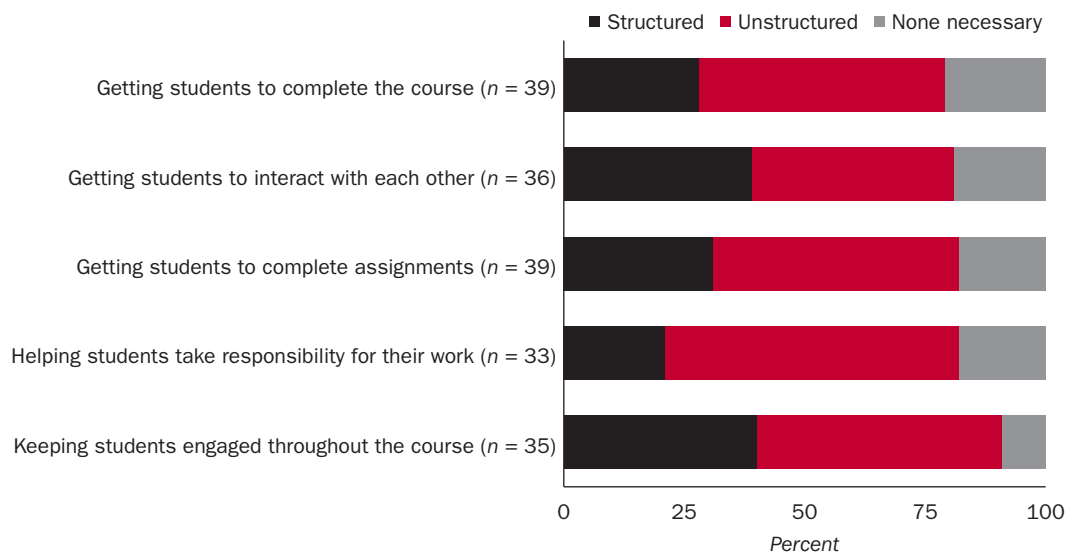
Figure 2. The five most and least frequently reported challenges among Wisconsin Virtual School teachers who taught an online course in 2013/14 or 2014/15



Note: Respondents include 42–46 of the 54 online teachers who taught at Wisconsin Virtual School during the 2013/14 or 2014/15 school year. Excludes teachers who selected not applicable.

Source: Authors' analysis based on the 2014 Wisconsin Virtual School survey data.

Figure 3. Wisconsin Virtual School teachers who taught an online course in 2013/14 or 2014/15 indicated that they prefer unstructured professional development to help address their greatest challenges



Note: Data summarize responses to the question “What type of professional development or training do you think would best help you address the challenges that you face in online instruction?” Respondents included online teachers who taught at Wisconsin Virtual School during the 2013/14 or 2014/15 school year and indicated that these were challenges they faced “to some extent” or “to a great extent.” The number of respondents ranged from 33 to 39.

Source: Authors’ analysis based on the 2014 Wisconsin Virtual School survey data.

Implications of the study findings

Although online teaching presents unique challenges that are unlike those of traditional face-to-face teaching (Dawson & Dana, 2014; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012), little is known about the ways in which online teachers would benefit from additional training. Knowledge in this area is limited to the results of a previous survey (Dawley et al., 2010) and recommendations of professional organizations (Davis & Rose, 2007; National Education Association, n.d.; Southern Regional Education Board, 2009). This brief provides additional information by focusing on the training received by one group of teachers affiliated with a state online learning program in the Midwest. In addition, this brief highlights that the main challenges these teachers experience are related to student perseverance and engagement and that the teachers believe additional professional development would help them address those challenges. Wisconsin Virtual School is already using the findings from this study to modify and expand its professional development offerings. Other state online learning programs, state departments of education, and employers of online teachers also can use these findings to consider the training and professional development provided to online teachers in their jurisdictions. These entities also may want to administer the survey, which is available in the full report (Zweig et al., 2015), to their teachers and to consider the following:

- When are teachers receiving training to teach online, if at all?
- How should preservice programs integrate online teacher training into preservice education?
- What structures and policies may be necessary for online teacher professional development?
- What training or professional development is available to online teachers about supporting students’ perseverance and engagement?
- Do the existing training and professional development opportunities meet their teachers’ needs?
- Are different types of training opportunities available to meet the varied needs of online teachers? (Do online teachers have access to both unstructured and structured professional development?)

The results of this study, combined with findings from previous studies reporting high levels of student attrition in online courses (Carr, 2000; Roblyer, 2006; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Simpson, 2004), suggest a particular need for research investigating strategies to improve student engagement with and perseverance in online courses.

Note

1. Forty-nine of the 54 teachers responded to the survey (91 percent), but one respondent did not teach an online course during the 2013/14 or 2014/15 school year. Thus, the report is based on the responses of the 48 teachers who responded to the survey and taught an online course during the 2013/14 or 2014/15 school year.

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