

How to Successfully Support Online Teachers



Twenty years ago, finding Adventist teachers with online teaching experience was very difficult. The online school administrator had to grapple with the balance of hiring an experienced teacher with little technology experience, or a recent graduate who was a digital native¹ but had limited teaching experience. Fortunately, since that time, many Adventist educators have realized that technology and online education are a valuable support to our educational system. They have become involved in the instruction or facilitating of online education for individuals or entire classrooms. Online classes provide Adventist education with the ability to truly reach all students.

Adventist correspondence education began as early as 1909 through The Fireside Correspondence School, which eventually grew into Home Study International, and most recently, Griggs University/Griggs International Academy.² In the 1990s, K-12 Adventist online learning began with AE21 (using synchronous learning) and Griggs International Academy (using asynchronous learning). A number of our universities now offer online courses and degrees. After almost 25 years of experience in online learning within Adventist education, it is becoming more common to find teachers with online teaching experience. Yet, even qualified candidates continue to need training, profes-

sional development, and additional support as new technology tools and approaches to online instruction are developed.

Online education requires administrators who will provide support and mentoring to teachers—who are the school's direct, daily connection with students.³ Administrators can accomplish this by building into the structure of the program opportunities for support, which can be offered by experienced instructors or program supervisors. Because teachers of online courses often live in rural areas lacking fast Internet connections, they may need help using innovative teaching strategies to connect effectively with students online. Communicating with online teachers, wherever they are located, must be a top priority for the administrator, to ensure that they do not feel isolated and that they understand and embrace the goals of the school. This article shares seven practical guidelines that will help online school administrators choose and support their online teachers.

1. Hire Qualified Teachers

Once a job is posted and the résumés start filling the inbox, the program administrator must carefully evaluate which candidates will make good online teachers.⁴ At the K-12 level, limiting the selection to certified teachers is the first

BY L A R O N D A F O R S E Y

Box 1. Applications Specific to K-12 Online Education.

step in sorting the résumés (see Box 1). At all levels, administrators should ascertain that teachers are qualified in their specific content area, verify their academic qualifications, and request references.

Because only a few applicants will have online teaching experience, the administrator can arrange for a videoconference interview to assess the candidate's technological and communication skills. The online interview and references will provide valuable data to use in evaluating the candidate's aptitude for online teaching. Since many online teaching jobs are part-time contract positions, the program administrator also needs to determine whether the candidate is willing to commit enough hours to handle the responsibilities of the job. If the classes are asynchronous, the schedule will be more flexible, but the teacher will need to devote adequate time to video conference interaction and providing prompt assistance to students' questions. Before the interview, candidates should be provided with a teacher handbook so they know what will be expected of them. Policies that guide the hiring of individuals who may live outside of a state or country should already be in place. If not, then these need to be developed, and it would be appropriate to consult with the institution's legal counsel to craft policies regarding benefits, applicable tax requirements, or other contractual issues. Finally, before teachers receive an employment contract, the school must conduct a background check⁵ on each one.

2. Provide an Orientation

A vital aspect of hiring and keeping qualified teachers is ensuring that they receive significant support and training. Since Learning Management Systems (LMS) are complex and different from one another—and teaching online is quite different

The practical guidelines shared in this article are applicable to all levels. However, there are specific guidelines that are critical for the K-12 environment.

- Teachers must be certified and endorsed in the subject areas they wish to teach.
- Background checks are recommended for individuals working with minors in the United States, but each state has its own requirements. For example, some states require child abuse checks, federal criminal checks, and state criminal background checks. The same is recommended for adults working for church-affiliated institutions. The NAD works with Verified Volunteers to provide assistance with this process. In addition, Adventist Risk Management provides several resources to support church-affiliated institutions. See <https://adventistrisk.org/en-US/Safety-Resources/Solutions-Newsletter/How-to-Recognize-and-Prevent-Child-Abuse>. Since each country has its own requirements for background checks, make sure to investigate these as part of the pre-hiring process.
- Parents and chaperones accompanying prospective and new students to orientation events will need housing accommodations.
- Administrators and teachers will need to ensure that communication occurs regularly between the school and the parent.
- The North American Division (NAD) has created several resources for K-12 distance-education schools. See TDEC at <http://tdec.nadeducation.org/distance-education/> for a compilation of materials such as the philosophy and rationale supporting distance education, accrediting organizations, approved schools offering online and distance education in the NAD, and forms and checklists that are required to be used in the NAD when seeking approval to begin offering distance education. Other divisions might find these forms useful as guidelines.
- Benjamin Herold, "Online Classes for K-12 Students: 10 Research Reports You Need to Know," *Education Week: Digital Education* (June 21, 2017): http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2017/06/online_classes_k12_research_need_to_know.html.

from classroom teaching—online teachers will need training, support, and regular communication from the administrator. Administrators must make multiple commitments: to help teachers through the period of transitioning to online instruction if it is a new experience; to assist them in learning a new LMS if they previously taught in a different one; and to helping them enhance their skills. An orientation, initial technical training, and close monitoring during the first few weeks of the teacher's work set the stage for success.

Orientation for an online teacher should consist of a series of meetings and training sessions. During these sessions, the administrator, with help from the administrative team, can provide teachers with the teacher handbook; introduce the required curriculum guides and frameworks (or for higher education, the course syllabus); and introduce the LMS designated for the program.

Even though the teacher handbook might include guidelines for using the LMS, the real learning takes

place when the teacher works one-on-one with the administrative team to learn the intricacies of the LMS system such as the various options for giving feedback to students, the types of assignments that can be posted, video formats, and features that provide the required support for students. After the teacher has been issued a username and password for the LMS, the training becomes more relevant since he or she has access to the assigned courses and students. It's often helpful to have a new teacher consult with the previous teacher to review the course and talk about specific aspects of the curriculum. The best scenario is for a new teacher to obtain support from the course design team, the administrator, and another teacher. If the teacher lives some distance from headquarters, orientation can be done via video conferencing. It is important that teachers have multiple contact options to get the help they

need. Support and appreciation from the administrative team contribute to a teacher's ability to successfully provide students with quality educational support.

3. Planned Teacher Meetings

Planning teacher meetings can be a challenge in an online school or program. Since teachers are often some distance from headquarters and mostly working from home, an online program might conceivably have hired teachers who live in a variety of time zones. Also, many instructors only teach a single online class, and possibly teach in a local brick-and-mortar school during the day. Having at least four meetings a year with the entire group of online teachers is recommended. This allows for announcements, questions, and time for professional development that is specific to online teachers. Recording these meetings is a good option, in case a few teachers

cannot make the appointment. Meetings should not be limited to these four times, but administrators might have to deliver the meeting in different ways to ensure that it reaches everyone. Suggestions include making a brief video presentation with announcements and updates. A group e-mail can also ensure that information reaches everyone quickly. Some of the most productive meetings take place when a small group of teachers assembles to give input or help make decisions about specific tasks. An example of this might be if all the math teachers are asked to meet to discuss the best way to handle tutoring for a student if the assigned teacher is on vacation or becomes ill. Administrators must ensure that policies and contingency plans are in place for such emergencies, including but not limited to an online teacher quitting mid-term, being fired, or not being able to fulfill the contractual agreement for any reason. Meetings enable teachers to have input and help



ensure their “buy-in” to the mission and processes of the organization.

4. Communicate Regularly

There is rarely enough communication between administrators and teachers, even though it is the key to a successful school environment. This is true for any school, but especially for an online program. Online teachers should know the “big picture” of what is happening at the school in order to fill their roles effectively. Teachers need to receive announcements, newsletters, handbooks, etc.

Social media is also a good way to keep in touch with teachers. Creating a private Facebook page for teachers to join adds another avenue of building community with people living in all parts of the country. A school administrator or member of the program administrative team can be assigned to moderate and monitor the questions and comments posted on this page on an ongoing basis.

It is easy to assume that the teachers know what is happening in the organization and understand all the policies and procedures, but this is not always the case. The administrator can create a culture of two-way communication by making sure the teachers feel comfortable texting or calling at any time. In an online program, it is possible that an administrator and a teacher can work together for several years without ever meeting each other. This makes video conferencing invaluable to building relationships—in fact, it is really the most important form of communication used by administrators, teachers, and students in an online school or program.

The next most important communication method is texting because it is fast and efficient. Administrators should keep track of conversations and know what is most effective for individual teachers to ensure a healthy working relationship through real-time interaction.

New teachers will have very different training needs than veteran teachers, but administrators should conduct an annual orientation for all teachers to cover policy changes as well as technology updates and reminders. It is very easy for an online teacher working from home to start feeling isolated or discon-

For asynchronous online education, two aspects relate to teacher evaluation. The first is ensuring that each teacher keeps up with the work load and provides effective and timely feedback to students. In asynchronous online courses that are prepared ahead of time, feedback is the most important aspect of teaching. The administrator should regularly evaluate the teachers’ work by reviewing the LMS log.

nected from the organization. Teachers need to be contacted on a variety of occasions, not just after a parent or student has complained. Giving teachers feedback from students and parents is important, but this should not be the only time a teacher hears from administrators.

Teachers also need reminders of best practices for using technology to give student feedback and enhance the course. For example, administrators can recommend that teachers provide students with feedback using the audio or video option, not just written feedback.

5. Conduct Evaluations (Weekly and Annually)

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to students. In asynchronous online courses that are prepared ahead of time, feedback is the most important aspect of teaching. The administrator should regularly evaluate the teachers’ work by reviewing the LMS log.

Providing feedback within a reasonable time (no more than two days) enables students to learn more efficiently and keep moving in their course. Systematically monitoring the frequency and quality of the feedback given to students is one way of assessing the teacher’s effectiveness, and this should be done at least weekly. Teachers who regularly get behind in their grading and in providing feedback to students will need to be counseled and warned, and perhaps have their teaching load rearranged or reduced.

The second aspect of evaluating online teachers is assessing the actual “teacher-student interaction” that takes place. Does the teacher give helpful, personalized feedback to each student? Do the students receive help or tutoring in a timely manner? Does the teacher grade fairly and consistently? Most of this can be verified via the LMS, but “end-of-course” student surveys are also helpful in determining this information. Annual teacher evaluations should also be conducted. In many cases, the teacher completes a provided self-evaluation questionnaire, and then the administrator reviews the questionnaire in a video conference meeting with each teacher. This can be a learning experience for both the teacher and the administrator.⁶

6. Listen to Teacher Input

As a teacher works with students, he or she will recognize what works well in a course. Qualified teachers have been hired for their expertise, so it is important that administrators listen to what they have to say about a course or about how students perceive the curriculum. In an online program, the teachers have the most direct communication with students, so they are aware of issues that might not be communicated directly to administration. It is helpful to have a form for teachers to submit if they perceive the need for a change in the content or design of a course.

In other areas, such as philosophical issues and student complaints, the teacher should share these concerns with administrators as soon as possible. Performance evaluations should be a time when administrators listen to the teachers' ideas about how to make program improvements. For example, if a teacher is struggling to implement a particular activity for students, the administrator can engage the teacher in helping to find a solution. Teachers are often good problem solvers, making them built-in consultants as administrators attempt to improve the system.

7. Promote Teacher/Student Interaction

The administrator sets the tone for how teachers interact with students. In reality, the best way to create an interactive culture is for the administrator to teach at least one online course per year that gives him or her direct, daily experience with how the system works and the options for interaction. If the administrator has direct experience with the LMS and a course, he or she will find it easier to communicate ideas and innovation to the teachers and to troubleshoot problems.

All teachers need encouragement to do their best—especially in the area of teacher/student interaction. For example, an administrator who experiments with the discussion board can report his or her successful interactions and give suggestions on how to use it for other courses. Helping teachers find tools and resources that will enable them to successfully meet students' needs is a key way to support student/teacher interaction. For example, if a teacher needs to meet with online students by appointment, the administrator can help the teacher find a digital appointment book that eliminates the need for e-mailing back and forth to find a suitable time to meet. The administrator can also facilitate discussion among teachers about how to best interact with students in providing feedback, instruction, and general support.

Conclusion

Being an online program administrator has unique challenges and rewards. It is vital to understand the significance of having a good working relationship with teachers, as well as the need to provide them with the tools and support to effectively guide students through their courses. Taking a hands-on approach with teaching, and leading by example are the best ways for an administrator to build a team of great teachers. Adventist education reaches a wide group

of students, and online education can fill the gaps that might be difficult for the “brick and mortar” school. Having dedicated, well-trained Seventh-day Adventist teachers and administrators involved in online learning will help the church to serve more students with quality Christian education. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. “A digital native is someone who was raised in a digital, media-saturated world.” The term is generally applied to Millennials (individuals born between 1980 and 1999) and members of Generation Z (individuals born since 2000). See <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/millennials-digital-natives/>.
2. For more about the history of Griggs University, see <http://www.griggs.edu/article/68/about-gia/history>. A timeline is also available at http://www.griggs.edu/site/1/docs/Griggs_timeline_20120612_FINAL.pdf.
3. Scott McLeod and Jayson W. Richardson, “School Administrators and K-12 Online and Blended Learning.” In Richard E. Ferdig and Kathryn Kennedy, eds., *Handbook of Research on K-12 Online and Blended Learning* (Pittsburgh, Penna.: ETC Press, 2014), 285-301.
4. Yi Yang and Linda F. Cornelius, “Preparing Instructors for Quality Online Instruction,” *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 8:1 (Spring 2005): 1-16; Niki Davis, Ray Rose, and Rose Smith, *Professional Development for Virtual Schooling and Online Learning* (Vienna, Va.: North American Council for Online Learning, 2007).
5. For a description of what is involved in a background check, see <https://peoplefacts.com/industries/teacher-background-checks/> or <http://www.amof.info/what-is-criminal.htm>. Requirements vary across state lines and countries. For more on international background checks, see <http://www.amof.info/i-criminal.htm> or https://www.tieonline.com/view_article.cfm?ArticleID=328.
6. Jayson W. Richardson et al., “Job Attainment and Perceived Role Differences of Cyberschool Leaders,” *Journal of Educational Technology and Society* 19.1 (January 2016): 211-222.