

Closing the Gap: How Online Learning is Helping to Fill Teacher Shortages

By Holly A. Brzycki



About the Author: Holly A. Brzycki is the Supervisor of Online Learning at the Capital Area Intermediate Unit (CAIU15). For the past 14 years, she has managed the Capital Area Online Learning Association (CAOLA), a consortium of online learning programs for over 140 schools, districts and intermediate units in Pennsylvania. She has been in the education field for over 25 years as a teacher, director, principal and supervisor in traditional and cyber schools/programs.

Mrs. Brzycki is also an executive director on the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance board and represents Pennsylvania with the Distance Learning Collaborative. She recently won the national 2023 Individual Excellence in Digital Learning Award for contributing to online learning for over a decade.

Mrs. Brzycki holds a Bachelor of Arts from King's College and a Master of Arts in educational leadership from Jones International University. She is completing her Ed.D. in instructional technology from the American College of Education.

The teacher shortage has been a growing concern for schools worldwide, with many struggling to find qualified educators to fill their classrooms. However, online learning brings hope to many schools trying to provide students with a quality and equitable education. With its flexibility and accessibility, online education has become integral in helping schools manage teacher shortages. This article will explore how online learning provides teaching support to school entities and increases course options, creating student equity.

Evolution of Online Education

For over 25 years, online learning and teaching have existed in Pennsylvania (Article XVII-A charter schools, 1997). Since then, online learning has undergone many changes and innovations. Today, it is an integral part of education, helping schools manage the teacher shortage by providing educators with curriculum and instruction in subjects experiencing shortages. Today's platforms are user-friendly and offer a variety of features that make learning more engaging and effective. Schools are using online courses to give students more flexible schedules and provide additional resources for struggling learners. Online learning is flexible enough to bridge the gap for teachers who are absent short or long-term due to illness or other reasons.



A Solution to Traditional Teacher Shortages

The teacher shortage in traditional schools is a real and pressing issue in the United States. Across the nation and in Pennsylvania, schools are struggling to find enough qualified teachers to fill all their classrooms. However, despite a traditional teacher shortage, there is no shortage of online teachers. Currently, the online teaching job market is experiencing a boom. Online learning companies that hire teachers are sharing that they have multiple applicants for open positions. Representatives from Accelerate Education, Edison Learning, eDynamic Learning and Strongmind report that they have anywhere from 10 to 57 applicants for every open teaching position. This point emphasizes that schools can turn to online learning to fill their empty teaching positions temporarily or permanently with quality online teachers. These companies employ Pennsylvania-certified teachers and offer Pennsylvania Common Core aligned curricula. Online learning companies require teachers to adhere to strict grading and communication standards aligned with the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (NSQT).

Experts Providing Guidance and Support

In Pennsylvania, many intermediate units (IU) offer online learning options to their member districts. IU programs like the Capital Area Online Learning Association (CAOLA), operating out of the Capital Area Intermediate Unit 15, help districts manage online learning tailored to the schools' needs. IUs have seen an increase in schools offering online learning to students when they cannot secure a traditional teacher. The director of curriculum & instruction/educational technologies at Carbon Lehigh Intermediate Unit 21, who oversees eLearn21, a CAOLA partner, shared:

"When several schools were faced without filling teaching positions in more specialized subject areas like world language, having a viable and vetted online learning program allowed students in those schools to continue their studies and progress forward in their academics. An additional value that our intermediate unit was able to provide within this context was onboarding, orientation and logistical support for these scenarios that were previously unfamiliar to the districts. They have been immensely appreciative of a partnership in resolving these teacher shortage needs."

School districts that decide to use online learning options to fill their teacher needs appreciate the support that the local IUs can provide. Moving to online instruction involves making many logistical decisions. The IUs provide expertise to help the process move smoothly. The principal at myCyber Campus, Southern Tioga School District, an eQUIP and CAOLA member, said:

"In the fall of 2022, the Southern Tioga School District found itself short of certified teachers in a tested high school subject area. Knowing that we can provide content and teacher-of-record oversight, we engaged with eQUIP Online Learning, a CAOLA partner, to offer the two sections of this class in a hybrid format. The students would report to the classroom, be supervised by a teacher and complete the work online. Our myCyber Campus teacher provided scheduling oversight and real-time support and guidance for the students. With a few emails to sort out any confusion, we have been up and running for the year. We have worked on communication with all parties to keep the process running smoothly."

This past fall, many schools faced shortages in core subjects and turned to online learning to provide students continuity in learning. The lead teacher of ELANOnline for Secondary at Eastern Lancaster County School District explained how his district, through Lancaster Lebanon IU 13's Lancaster-Lebanon Virtual Solutions (LLVS) program, is using online learning to address the teacher shortage in his district:

"Like many school districts, we have been faced with the problem of staffing shortages and open teaching positions. This spring, we had an open teaching posi-

tion in our math department with no candidates to fill it. Almost 90 students were faced with a semester of vital algebra content without a certified teacher to lead them through it. The online curriculum provided by our existing ELANOnline virtual academy (EOL), powered by LLVS with CAOLA, was utilized in a new way to provide instruction within the building facilitated by our own local teachers. By using the vendor course from LLVS, EOL gave the school the flexibility to overcome the obstacles and provide our students with an equal opportunity at a high-quality education during these trying times."

Increased Course Options

Not only does online learning assist with the teacher shortage, but it also allows students to take courses not offered at their school. Students can explore new subjects and expand their academic horizons. One of the great benefits of online learning is that it provides students with more choices. In a traditional school, students are limited to the courses offered at that school. But with online learning, they can take over 400 K-12th-grade courses. This gives them a much more comprehensive range of options when choosing a course of study. Offering more courses creates equity by giving students more opportunities to take advanced placement and career pathway courses that may not be offered due to teacher shortages or limited financial resources.

Next Steps

The teacher shortage is a real and pressing problem in Pennsylvania. In response, many schools are turning to online learning to help manage the shortage. Online learning can allow schools to offer more courses and programs that otherwise would not be possible due to the shortage. This can help students receive the necessary courses to graduate on time and prepare for their future careers. Most intermediate units manage online learning programs for their member district. Reach out to your local Intermediate Unit to learn about online learning options for your school. Intermediate Units have managed online learning programs for over a decade and are experts in quality online curricula. Their support provides advocacy, saves you money through consortium pricing and offers best practices for implementing online learning. For further information, please contact Mrs. Brzycki at hbrzycki@caiu.org

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