

Managing Teachers You Can't See

Overseeing Instructional Staff in a Virtual School

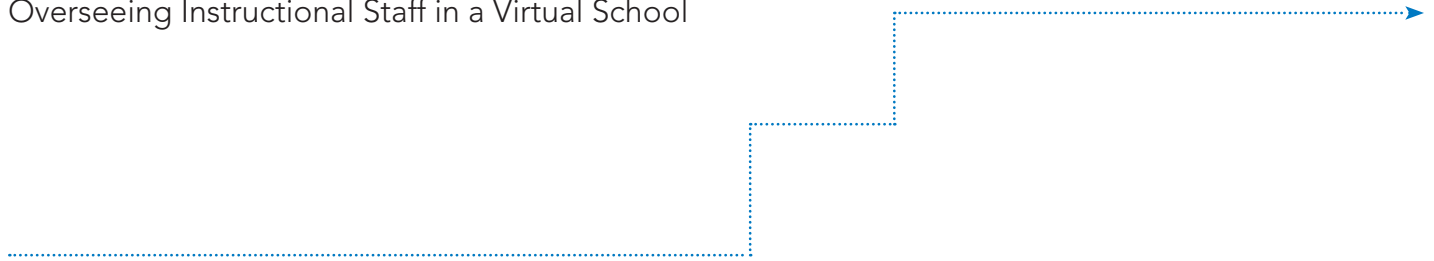


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Managing Teachers You Can't See

Overseeing Instructional Staff in a Virtual School

In a traditional school environment, one can recall the obligatory annual evaluation sessions. The process may have gone something like this: Sometime in the fall, a teacher meets with the supervising principal (perhaps weeks after it was really supposed to happen) to analyze his or her strengths and weaknesses in light of a set of written standards – a laundry list of “what great teachers do.” Together, they made a plan to target certain areas, agreed to a follow-up meeting in the future, and revisited the same process during the middle and end of the school year.

The process might have been helpful by reminding the teacher of what he or she should be doing, but did it really help the teacher a better instructor? How often has it been said that someone's teaching was transformed because of an annual evaluation?

If it is difficult to provide the kind of coaching and management that truly transforms teaching in a traditional environment, how is this challenge faced in an online world where teachers aren't even seen? The task is just as important – and maybe even more so, because added to this challenge is the equally-difficult task of overcoming skepticism regarding the academic validity of teaching and learning online. This skepticism is often the result of a bad taste left behind by poorly-managed programs of substandard quality. To build confidence in a virtual program and ensure learning, the online instructor must consider the following:

- Is student success at the center of every policy and instructional decision?
- Are teachers taking advantage of various communication modes—including the good old-fashioned telephone—in order to provide outstanding feedback and build relationships?
- Are teachers being held accountable to set communication and feedback standards?
- When teachers are found to be struggling, are support mechanisms in place to pull them “out of the mud?”
- Are partnership opportunities available whereby teachers with various strengths can team to complement one another or to mentor new online instructors?

In most virtual programs, teachers work remotely, thus creating a unique challenge for supervisors when it comes to assessment. In the same way that one has to consider supervisory issues surrounding students who work remotely, one must also consider these issues regarding staff.

At a minimum, the instructional management staff will need devices to evaluate teachers in terms of the following:

- student pace and progress
- feedback and communication strategies
- commitment to culture
- professional growth

Student Pace and Progress: Using Data to Inform Action

Checking progress reports regularly allows one to catch irregularities in student pace. For instance, if a student who started a yearlong course is almost finished after two months, it may merit a second look. While it is possible for the exceptionally-gifted student to work at that pace, it is usually an exception. Utilizing academic integrity tools can be helpful to check for authenticity of student work. Teachers at Florida Virtual School® (FLVS®) have an excellent tool at their disposal to check for plagiarized work which helps to address this concern. In addition to monitoring student work, reviewing teacher input is necessary to ensure the student wasn't just herded through the course.

It is also important that students are sticking to their agreed-upon pace, not only to ensure that they finish the course, but also to learn about time management and responsibility. It is the teacher's responsibility to monitor that pace and take appropriate action should the student fail to keep his or her end of the bargain.

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Feedback and Communication Strategies

Since the grading process tends to be dynamic and multifaceted in an online environment, it is important to consider more than the GPA when monitoring student progress. For example, one might look at Johnny's grades and see that he has an A. While this might seem fantastic, it becomes less impressive when it is discovered that Johnny has only been in the course for two weeks and has only submitted two assignments. It's always important to remember—especially in an environment with open enrollment—that the percentage of the course completed is highly relevant when assessing student performance.

Checking student assessments also provides information about the actual teaching and learning taking place. For instance, how does one know if the necessary feedback in critical lessons is happening in order for learning to occur? Instructional leaders will need to know the courses well enough to distinguish which kinds of assessments are best to validate and review teacher feedback.

How often should students receive progress reports? In a traditional school, students typically receive a grade report every nine weeks. In a virtual environment where student success is so dependent on frequent feedback, it is too risky to wait nine weeks for grade reports. Monthly reports provide a better opportunity for teacher and parent interventions before a small problem becomes a major obstacle in the way of student success.

Course design comes into play as well when considering the need for good communication. Oral components provide an opportunity for teachers to "spot check" student understanding. A discussion-based assessment provides yet another direct contact opportunity with the student, allowing the teacher to not only assess learning but also connect with that student and his or her parent again.

Making a List, Checking it Twice

These are just a few items that the mentoring staff at Florida Virtual School will cover with their teachers. Each item is either a standard or a part of the FLVS culture that mentors are seeking to instill in the teaching staff. Your “checklist” will reflect your program’s priorities and culture.

Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides course updates as needed • Provides team coverage when needed • Shares best practices and strategies
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announcement page is updated weekly with personable, timely, and useful information • Responds within 24 hours to student questions via email and voicemail • Provides graded feedback to students within 48 hours • Uses a positive and supportive tone in all student feedback • Sends weekly updates to students and parents • Uses the FLVS drop policy appropriately
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper and timely use of the Leave of Absence form • Timely submission for reimbursements • Attends staff meetings • Attends team meetings • Completes progress reports with comments on time
Organizational Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracks student progress • Uses FLVS grace period wisely • Manages all parts of job with consistency and efficiency
Customer Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides specific feedback on student assessments • Contacts and manages enrolled students in a timely fashion • Positive student and parent feedback (survey results) • Completes monthly calls to students and parents • Provides positive support to schools as needed • Makes decisions based on what is best for student learning and success

Likewise, timely turn-around in grading student work is critical. One of the beauties of online instruction is the fact that teachers have far more time to concentrate on teaching. There are no ringing bells or hallways to monitor and teachers can get on with the business of teaching. When a school provides a comprehensive online curriculum, even more time is available because lesson planning is off the “to do” list. Thus, it becomes more reasonable to expect prompt grading. There is a 48-hour turn-around grading policy at FLVS. Although this is not an easy challenge, FLVS believes that student success depends on fast and direct communication from teachers. A quick turn-around time keeps students motivated.

In the same vein, feedback must be specific. “Good job” is not sufficient. In terms of best teaching practices, it’s no secret that specific feedback is critical to student success, but it becomes even more important in an online environment when written feedback is the major means of communication. Look for written feedback that tells students specifically why the end result was great or why it needs improvement.

Hi Ernest! You did well with the first chosen quote, but the second and third are a bit off-base. Take another look at what “woo” means and also what “a man of wax” might represent! Also, I wonder how the nurse and Paris might act toward one another. Give some more detail on that, and resubmit for a top score! Thanks, Ernest! Mrs. X.

By providing “wondering” questions like these, students are given hints as to where gaps exist in their writing or thinking processes. In a traditional classroom, if one wanted to evaluate a teacher’s communication skills, he or she could simply sit in the class a few times and perhaps join a parent/teacher conference. So, what is the equivalent as an online supervisor? An essential element to check for any virtual program is the communication tools that the teachers are using—namely, phone logs, email, and teacher feedback on student papers. Another helpful tool is an online survey of parents and students where they can anonymously critique a teacher.

When deciding upon the communication tools that teachers will use, it is important to note that a supervisor must have access to instructors’ emails. If instructors are using their own phone or email systems, it is akin to allowing a teacher to lock the classroom doors to prevent administrators from ever dropping in for a visit. Open access to teacher phone logs and email on an ongoing basis is crucial. A voice over Internet provider (IP) system is one tool that addresses open access because it bills directly to a central office making phone logs accessible. For email, an internal system with full administrative access is vital.

Once communication systems are secured, one should check staff emails at least twice per month for tonality, frequency, and a caring, student-centered focus. Be aware that access to staff email initially feels more intrusive to teachers, but since email is a matter of public record regardless, it is good for teachers to understand that every word they write to students or parents could potentially turn into a headline. There is a level of accountability in this knowledge, even without feedback from administrators. By reading through a few emails from each teacher each month, a great deal can be discovered about where the teacher’s head is in regard to his or her students. It provides tremendous insight in determining whether the teacher is providing sufficient feedback for real learning to occur.

The goal, of course, is not to “catch” problems so much as to prevent them and provide coaching where needed. If a teacher is found to be lacking in the “specific feedback” department, a whole arsenal of training and coaching tools can be implemented, including mentoring, chat sessions, phone calls, and online training tools.

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The personal touch in online learning is also a major key to success. Monthly phone calls where parents, teachers, and students speak voice-to-voice are imperative in the online environment. In the online environment, the monthly call is similar to the parent-teacher conference in the brick and mortar environment. Since the onus is on the school to make extensive efforts to build bridges to the home, it simply isn’t enough to schedule a parent conference only when problems exist. The monthly chat with the parent allows relationships to develop over the period of the course and makes parents feel at ease with contacting teachers in the interim. Many FLVS parents are a little surprised by this monthly contact, as it is fairly unusual for them to speak with teachers in brick and mortar high schools more than once or twice during the school year, if at all. This kind of frequent interaction with parents is a welcome change for them, making parents eager to partner in the education of their children.

In order to enforce such a policy, however, you will need access to monthly phone logs as well as a system for logging information about each phone contact. Digital “call reports” record the essence of teacher conversations with parents and students.

For students to know that a real teacher is watching and monitoring their work, and, more importantly, for real learning to occur, it is critical that teachers return calls to students in a timely manner. FLVS policy is to return any student call within 24 hours. A direct correlation can be traced to highly-responsive teacher feedback and student achievement.

Finally, supervisors must model what is expected from teachers. Instructional supervisors should provide weekly communication through online newsletters, telephone calls, emails, and instant messages with teachers to keep them informed, respond to their needs, and support their professional growth.

It is helpful for administrators to be able to view student grades, start dates, number of weeks active in the course, percentage of the course(s) completed, and pace. Look for a data management system that provides administrators with reports that reflect teacher-student contact, feedback, and support.

It's one thing to pass along a policy manual; it's quite another to pass along a culture, or a whole way of thinking and working. FLVS is constantly looking for ways to ensure that the staff is not only receiving the training and ongoing coaching they need to keep their skill levels in check, but also that they are being motivated and excited by the challenge of keeping students at the center. FLVS wants to encourage an environment where teachers are always looking for ways to improve and asking, "How can I reach just one more student?"

To that end, it is important to integrate opportunities to encourage an enthusiasm and passion for the school's culture and vision. At a minimum, you will want to consider the following:

- Monthly content team meetings to allow subject-area expertise to be shared
- Annual staff meetings
- Monthly calls with each teacher that include both praise and coaching

Perhaps most importantly, the leadership team must be available via phone, instant messenger, and email for those ongoing coaching sessions, which will occur daily so that everyone can take ownership of the school's vision. Once again, instructional leaders must model the behaviors they want teachers to implement with students. Send postcards to teachers for encouragement or to recognize milestones or birthdays. If the desire is for teachers to keep notes about students (such as the student's extra-curricular interests, interesting family facts, etc.), then it's important that supervisors are doing the same for teachers.

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Commitment to Culture

Creating a school culture is vital to any virtual program. At Florida Virtual School, a "customer-centered" business model has been the approach, with students, parents, and traditional school personnel as "clients." This is the model that has allowed FLVS to take on the challenge of a funding model that only provides dollars upon successful course completions. Because of that challenge, it has become imperative for teachers to maintain a focus on meeting student needs and making those personal connections with families.

This “customer-centered” approach is quite a switch from the environment that most teachers have come to know in traditional middle and high schools, where there may be a gap between home and school. The funding model for FLVS requires teachers to “complete” a certain number of students successfully. This level of accountability is new for most teachers, requiring a different mindset regarding aggressively reaching out to families. The frequent phone contact and quick turn-around on grading are new challenges to teachers who, for the most part, are used to setting their own rules for their classrooms. How can staff be motivated and energized within the context of these new challenges?

FLVS surveys parents and students regularly to glean information on teacher responsiveness, attention to detail, feedback, and approachability.

Random calls to parents should also be part of the routine for supervision. This will allow insights as to where there may be gaps, not only with specific instructors, but also with the overall program. Hopefully, it will also allow bring to light what is right about what is happening in the program or with teachers. FLVS surveys parents and students regularly to glean information on teacher responsiveness, attention to detail, feedback, and approachability. Survey feedback is actually included as part of the teacher’s annual performance review and the data is a good starting point when looking for areas where the teacher may want to improve. It also provides a way to discern staff strengths so that peer coaching and mentoring can be better utilized.

Hiring

Julie Young, President and CEO of FLVS often says, “Teaching is the most important thing we do. The second most important thing we do is hiring.” The hiring process cannot be taken lightly and must be approached in such a way that the hiring team can find the right matches for the organization. It may be surprising to learn that being technologically savvy is not a top priority. Technology can be taught, but finding teachers who are more interested in students than their own teaching style or subject matter is more challenging.

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In a world where methods and approaches to virtual learning are subject to harsher criticism and the staff is required to consistently find ways to prove the validity of online education, it is vital to have teachers who are committed first and foremost to students. There’s no room for the teacher who has the mentality, “This is my teaching style, and if the students don’t get it—tough beans.” That kind of attitude simply will not bear weight under the scrutiny that virtual schools typically encounter, particularly within the context of federal requirements to close achievement gaps and provide higher levels of accountability.

Since the largest percentage of information between teachers and students will be delivered in a written format, it is important to know how the teacher comes across in his or her writing style. Requiring a mock written assessment to be completed by a candidate during the interview process can provide useful insight.

If there are gaps in the teacher's feedback, it is also important to make a determination, prior to hiring, as to whether or not those gaps are so severe that intervention and training will not bring the teacher up-to-speed.

While the interview itself should be face-to-face, it's also a good idea to plan to have a few members of the interview team call in for the interview rather than be physically present. Again, because teachers may never actually meet students face-to-face, it is critical to know what kind of impression he or she leaves when speaking on the telephone.

Craft questions to look for the following:

- Willingness to work with a team
- Willingness to rethink the hours of the work day—or to be available outside traditional hours, such as evenings or weekends
- Realistic attitude about teaching online (for example, a red flag would be someone who wants to teach online simply to make his or her life easier)
- Ability to view things from more than one angle (rather than a “my way or the highway” approach)
- Ability to individualize learning and willingness to adapt teaching style or time requirements to meet student needs

It is critical that those who are applying to teach virtually truly understand what this means and grasp the expectations and culture of the organization. Incorporating an informational session into an “interview day” may allow applicants to have a very clear understanding of the daily work and expectations; teachers, too, can decide if virtual instruction is the best fit for them before committing to the lengthy interview process. Candidates must decide that the job fits them before they commit to serving students.

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Managing Change

Considering the fact that most virtual instructors are teaching from home, administrative support must help teachers learn to balance their professional work within their personal space. As professional educators, it is very natural that teachers be passionate and dedicated to serving their students. To that end, instructors may feel obligated to be on the computer or phone at all hours of the day and night. Without good time management, organization, and empowerment to set breaks and boundaries for personal time, your staff can quickly burn out. As a virtual manager, it is important to help new hires develop a schedule in writing and learn to re-evaluate it throughout the year to ensure a good work/life balance. This expectation ensures that staff members are tweaking their schedules to maximize work time effectively. Monitoring schedules will also help staff manage change when new strategies and techniques are presented to increase efficiency.

Professional Growth

As noted at the beginning of this article, performance reviews are typically two or three brief meetings that often do not have a huge impact on a teacher's professional growth. For real growth to happen, teacher monitoring, coaching, and mentoring has to occur on a daily and dynamic as-needed basis.

Mentoring and Training

Formal training and mentoring systems are essential to introduce new hires to the Florida Virtual School culture, its systems, and to the life that instructors and staff will experience on a daily basis. The year-long mentoring program allows veteran online instructors to coach new hires through their first year, providing time for new teachers to adjust and settle into the new online teaching environment.

The FLVS formal induction and new hire training, called Transformations, consists of both face-to-face and virtual instruction over a period of eight to ten days. Content across all areas, including FLVS history, learning management systems and other commonly used systems, is structured and chunked into topic areas allowing the new hire time to absorb the information and get some practical use of the systems. In essence, it is designed and delivered to avoid overload.

For instance, the formal face-to-face training, which lasts four days for full-time instructional staff and two days for full-time support staff, includes information about the organization, its history, basic systems and computer issuance, the learning management system, and student management system that instructors will use to teach and communicate with their students. During the virtual follow-up training sessions, topics such as policies and procedures, customer service, and travel and expense are also covered. For many of our new teachers, this is their first venture into online teaching so their training does not end with the final Transformations virtual session. Rather, training continues as new teachers utilize the official mentoring program throughout their first year.

A Day in the Life

What might “a day in the life” look like for online instructional managers? While there is certainly variation from school to school, or even from one person to the next, the instructional management team at Florida Virtual School provides the following as a guideline for understanding the types of responsibilities involved in the job:

Daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call teachers to review progress and look for ways to assist them in meeting completion goals. • Monitor and review teacher call data, email, and assessments by conducting virtual classroom walk-throughs. • Call parents to ensure quality customer service. • Resolve conflicts where needed (students, parents, school staff). • Implement policies and procedures as needed. • Be accessible and approachable to teachers, parents and office staff
Weekly or bi-weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide motivational support to teaching staff – sharing ‘fun facts’ about the teachers on your team to build collegial relationships • Share celebrations and success stories of your teachers and students. • Provide subject-specific information as needed or as available. • Check progress information to ensure students are staying on pace. • Meet with Instructional Management team to share ideas, discuss trouble spots, and monitor overall progress. • Meet with other members of your support staff to monitor progress of students, progress of your overall program, and class size. For Florida Virtual School, this includes a weekly “touch base” meeting with our guidance and district outreach personnel. Also, because FLVS utilizes rolling enrollment, it is important that we keep regular tabs on the number of students in each teacher’s classroom. • Touch base weekly with your mentoring staff to provide feedback on issues or struggles teachers are facing. • Provide a weekly written update which might include information about recent research on effective instruction, especially that which translates well into the online environment. The weekly update is also a great way to focus on areas of concern or patterns (good or bad) that your management team has spotted and include celebrations.
Monthly or as-needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide time for the evaluation process which will include a time to look at past performance, chart goals for the year, check progress throughout the year, and conduct formal mid- and final evaluations. • Participate in the recruiting and interviewing process for new teachers. • Participate in new hire training sessions. • Participate in teacher training sessions. • Participate in professional development for yourself. • Arrange and participate in face-to-face casual, social events with staff. • Provide professional development opportunities for instructional staff. • Present or participate in local, state, or national conferences.

On the face-to-face training day, newly hired teachers are paired with lead teachers for several days where they provide content-specific instruction to students. This time allows the newly hired teacher to get familiar with his or her FLVS content area. After this time, the official mentor takes the lead and works with the new hire and models the kinds of behaviors that are part and parcel of the culture and expectations within the organization. Mentors guide the new teachers through their teaching experience and provide coaching in areas where needed.

Mentors also assist with conducting a classroom walkthrough with their mentees and allow their mentee to observe their classroom management. This hands-on training is very beneficial, as peers explain how they monitor progress, when they intervene with a student who is struggling, and what that intervention should look and sound like. To build a trusting relationship, it is critical that the mentor is not in a supervisory role and does not report to the manager of the newly hired teacher but is rather a supportive colleague and peer. This mentoring program is an invaluable piece of setting a solid foundation for new online teachers to succeed.

Summing it up: Focus, Data, Modeling, Support, and Accountability

The success of students, and therefore, any virtual program, lies largely in the hands of the teachers. It is critical to provide the accountability and support that is needed to ensure outstanding instruction.

First, the focus must always be kept on student success, and every policy should be measured by that standard. If students are not succeeding, are teachers prepared to make mental and practical shifts in order to better reach the students? Is the administration prepared to support them as those changes are implemented?

Are careful measures taken to hire wisely—and once the staff is on board, is training and support provided to transition teachers to the online environment? It is critical that instructional managers and the mentoring staff are prepared to model, in every outlet, the very behaviors expected from the teaching staff. Are they expected to be available, even at odd hours, to students? Then managers should also expect to be available. Are teachers expected to provide a personal touch through phone calls or emails? Then managers should provide that same level of personalization. Instructors who are hands-on by calling students and parents will lead by example and support their team and make a positive connection with the customer.

Finally, data should be used not only to keep track of student progress and overall school progress, but also to look for ways to support teachers. The data is only useful if it is used to tailor training and mentoring opportunities for the teachers. By modeling what is expected, allowing mentors to act as friends and guides, and keeping the feedback frequent, consistent, and positive, an instructional staff will soon be built that can truly exist as a model to teachers everywhere.

About Florida Virtual School

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is an established leader in developing and providing virtual Kindergarten through Grade 12 education solutions to students nationwide. A nationally recognized e-Learning model, FLVS, founded in 1997, was the country's first state-wide Internet-based public high school. In 2000, the Florida Legislature established FLVS as an independent educational entity with a gubernatorial appointed board. FLVS is the only public school with funding tied directly to student performance. Access the school at www.FLVS.net.

