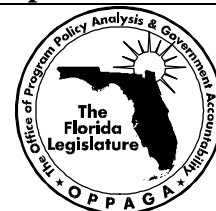




Office of Program Policy Analysis And Government Accountability



John W. Turcotte, Director

February 13, 1997

Review of the Decentralization of the Teacher Certification Renewal Process

Report Abstract

- **The early effects of decentralizing the teacher certification renewal process have generally been positive for school districts. It has eliminated duplication of work by state and district offices, increased service efficiency, and increased district funding flexibility.**
- **Decentralization reduced the Department's Bureau of Teacher Certification workforce and reduced costs at the state level by approximately \$1 million annually. However, it has slowed processing of some certification applications and has increased the workload for remaining Bureau staff.**

Purpose of Review

The Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability was directed by the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee to review the Department of Education. As part of our review, we examined the preliminary effects of decentralizing the teacher certification renewal process.

Other reports in this series examine the preliminary effects of decentralizing the educational facility construction review process and the Department of Education's use of resources.

Background

The Department's Bureau of Teacher Certification and the school districts jointly implement statutory provisions relating to teacher certification (s. 231.145, F.S.). Florida law requires each person employed as a public school supervisor, principal, teacher, library media specialist, school counselor, athletic coach, or in another instructional capacity to hold the certificate required by the State Board of Education. Teacher certification is intended to protect the educational interests of students, parents, and the public by assuring that teachers are professionally qualified, possess an adequate knowledge of teaching methods and relevant subject matter competence, and can demonstrate an acceptable level of professional performance. Certified personnel must renew their certificates every five years to promote continuing professional improvement.

In 1995, the Legislature decentralized the teacher certification renewal process. This decentralization was an effort to reduce duplication of work by state and district offices, increase service efficiency, and increase funding flexibility for districts. The Department of Education was previously responsible for issuing and renewing professional certificates. However, three major functions relating to renewing certificates of district-employed teachers were shifted from the Department to the school districts, effective January 1, 1996. These functions include updating applicants' renewal information on the Florida Teacher Certification Database; checking applicants' criminal histories and reporting cases to the Department's Professional Practices Services, as needed; and requesting the Department to print certificates for approved renewal applicants.

Districts also assumed several renewal functions previously shared with the Department for district-employed teachers. These functions include advising teachers regarding renewal requirements, collecting applications and fees, verifying completion of renewal requirements, and retaining applicants' certificate renewal records. Renewal applicants pay a \$56 fee, of which \$36 is retained by districts and \$18 is remitted to the Department for deposit into the Educational Certification and Service Trust Fund.¹

The Department continues to issue renewal certificates, maintain the Florida Teacher Certification Database, process applications for initial certificates, and process other certification actions.² See Appendix A for more information on the changed responsibilities of the Bureau of Teacher Certification and the school districts.

Certification activities must be self-supporting. Department certification activities are funded from the Educational Certification and Service Trust Fund, which is comprised primarily of teacher certification and renewal fees.³ For fiscal year 1995-96, Trust Fund receipts were \$3.4 million. The Trust Fund's ending balance has tripled over the past five years. For fiscal year 1991-92, the Trust Fund balance was \$603,000 compared to \$2.1 million for fiscal year 1995-96. The Bureau's 1995-96 expenditures were \$2.5 million.

Findings

School districts report that decentralization has had generally positive effects.

School districts report that decentralization has had generally positive effects. To identify these effects, we interviewed certification staff in 20 districts.⁴ Positive effects of decentralization include elimination of work

¹ In addition to the \$18 forwarded to the Bureau of Teacher Certification, \$2 goes to the Department's Education Practices Commission for the Recovery Network Program for Educators.

² Examples of "other" certification actions include renewing certificates for teachers not currently employed by school districts, "add-ons" of other subject areas, reissues, duplicate certificates, and general information changes.

³ Additional Trust Fund sources include fingerprint fees and interest earned on the Trust Fund balance.

⁴ We interviewed district staff in 20 districts: 7 small districts (student populations less than 10,000 unweighted FTEs), 7 medium districts (student population of 10,000 to 100,000 unweighted FTEs), and 6 large districts (student populations greater than 100,000 unweighted FTEs).

duplication, increased efficiency, and provision of funding to school districts to support renewal activities.

Decentralization has eliminated duplication of work by state and district offices. Prior to decentralization, both district and state-level personnel advised teachers regarding renewal criteria; verified completion of renewal requirements; collected application forms and fees; and retained renewal records for teachers employed by the district. These functions are now performed by the district.

Also, decentralization has increased the efficiency in which teaching certificate renewals are issued. Teachers employed by districts, thus far, are receiving their renewal certificates in a more timely manner. District staff report that the typical renewal response time is generally 1-2 weeks compared to 2-3 months prior to decentralization. The process incorporates fewer steps for renewal, and has reduced correspondence and paper flow between teachers, districts, and the state.

Finally, decentralization provided funding for districts. Prior to decentralization, district staff performed most of the renewal functions for teachers employed by the district but received no fees for their services. Districts now retain \$36 of the \$56 fee for each renewal certificate and have the flexibility to decide how to use the funds.

Districts expressed a few concerns in decentralizing the teacher certification renewal process. Disadvantages cited include: decentralization may jeopardize the integrity of the renewal process; staff are sometimes uncertain what information to look for when processing and verifying renewal applications; the process is time consuming for district staff; and the districts have more responsibilities which require additional time to perform.

It is too soon to determine the long-term impacts of decentralization. District certification staff were already performing most of the renewal functions prior to decentralization and generally supported continuing their current role in the certification renewal process. The state does not yet have a system in place to help ensure the uniform and consistent application of renewal requirements throughout the state. However, Department staff continue to provide technical assistance as needed.

Decentralization reduced the Bureau of Teacher Certification workforce and reduced costs at the state level.

Decentralizing the teacher certification renewal process reduced the Department's Bureau of Teacher Certification workforce and reduced state costs. In 1994-95, the fiscal year prior to decentralization, the Department's Bureau of Teacher Certification had 79 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. The Bureau now has 46 FTEs, as of October 1996.

Decentralization has also resulted in decreased costs. Prior to decentralization (fiscal year 1994-95), Bureau expenditures were \$3.1 million. For fiscal year 1995-96, the year in which the Bureau reduced personnel and decentralization occurred, the Bureau's expenditures decreased to \$2.5 million.⁵ As of December 31, 1996, the Bureau expended approximately \$1 million for the first six months of fiscal year 1996-97 and projects expenditures of \$2.1 million for the first full year of decentralization. Therefore, based on Department projections, decentralization could result in state-level cost savings of approximately \$1 million for fiscal year 1996-97 when compared to fiscal year 1994-95 when the certification renewal function had not been decentralized.

Decentralization has slowed processing of some certification applications and has increased the workload for remaining Bureau staff.

While decentralizing the teacher certification renewal process appears to have had generally positive effects on the renewal process, the Department is taking longer to process requests for initial certificates and other certification activities. Staff estimate that the average time to issue certificates has increased from 30 days to more than 60 days.⁶ The Bureau is generally meeting the 90-day processing time authorized by law. However, Department staff are concerned that with the time increase, they may not meet teachers' needs and expectations for timely certification actions.

⁵ A portion of this reduction in expenditures reflects the disbursements associated with staff reductions for January through June 1996, the first six months under the revised decentralization process.

⁶ The Department does not maintain average processing times; therefore, staff estimated processing time information.

Two primary factors contribute to the increased processing time. First, following decentralization, the Department reduced the Bureau staff by 42% (79 to 46) based on the expectation that half of the certification workload would transfer to the school districts, and technological enhancements within the Bureau would increase efficiency. However, the Bureau's workload did not decrease as anticipated.

Although the number of applications the Department received decreased by 45%, the Department retained responsibility for processing the most complex and labor-intensive applications such as initial certificates. For example, while a renewal application can often be processed in about 15 minutes, an initial certificate can require at least an hour and as much as an entire day to process, depending on the complexity.

Other aspects of the Bureau's responsibilities such as correspondence with applicants also did not decrease as anticipated. Although a reduction in correspondence has been noted, correspondence was expected to decrease 50% but actually declined by only 8%. Further, because of the staff reductions, many Bureau staff have assumed new duties and have needed time to increase their efficiency in performing new tasks. It is too soon to determine whether this trend in decreased efficiency will continue.

Second, the Bureau's certification database system is not designed to readily provide all necessary information that would be useful in making certain management decisions. Bureau staff report that the current process, driven by the certification data base, used to input, update, and track certification applications needs to be re-engineered before substantial increases in efficiency can be realized.

The Department plans to conduct a comprehensive workflow analysis to determine how the system can be more efficient and useful. After completing the cost analysis and reviewing the proposal for system improvements, the Department anticipates implementing the system over several years. The Department has included a request in its fiscal year 1997-98 Legislative Budget Request for an appropriation to fund initial system changes identified in the proposed workflow analysis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Decentralizing the teacher certification renewal process has been in effect since January 1, 1996. Thus, it is too soon to determine the long-term impacts. Based on Department projections, cost reductions for the Bureau may be as high as \$1 million. Although decentralization has had generally positive effects, it has slowed the Department's processing of some certification applications and has increased the workload for Bureau of Teacher Certification staff. Database improvements may improve productivity and help resolve short-term problems. These improvements could perhaps be funded, at least partially, through the Educational Certification and Service Trust Fund balance. The state does not yet have a system in place to help ensure the uniform application of renewal requirements by district staff.

To help ensure that the decentralization process continues to have positive effects for the state, districts, and teachers we recommend that:

- The Department conduct its proposed workflow analysis to determine what changes are needed to make the certification system more efficient and ensure that certification applications are processed timely;
- The Department assist the districts in establishing a process to help ensure districts uniformly and consistently review renewal applications. This could be accomplished through a local self-review with technical assistance provided as needed by the Department or through the district self-monitoring process as part of the Division of Public Schools Monitoring System; and
- The Legislature require the Department to submit, with its request to purchase an upgraded computer system to process certificates, a suggested timeframe that the Department should be held accountable for when issuing certificates. Currently, the law provides the Department with a 90-day statutory deadline to issue a certificate upon the receipt of a completed application. Since the Department's intent in purchasing new equipment is to expedite the certification process, a shorter time frame would be reasonable.

Agency Response From the Department of Education

January 30, 1997

John W. Turcotte, Director
The Florida Legislature
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street
Room 312 Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32301

Dear Mr. Turcotte:

The tentative report from the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability on the Review of the Decentralization of the Teacher Certification Renewal Process has been received by my office and reviewed by appropriate staff. We are pleased with the positive appraisal reflected in the report and share the view that decentralization has been an effective strategy that has well-served the citizens of this great state.

Regarding the specified conclusions and recommendations, the Department of Education welcomes the support of your office in conducting the proposed workflow analysis and subsequent planning for technological improvements. Americans have grown to expect timely and accurate governmental services, and the current 90-day allowance is no longer feasible. An upgraded computer system will enable the Department to respond more effectively to our customers. Additionally, quality assurance is an important element in the renewal process, and the Department will continue to develop relevant assistance programs to address this need.

Your efforts in evaluating our Certification Decentralization System are much appreciated, and we are pleased with this fine review.

Sincerely,

/s/ Frank Brogan

FTB:bc

Appendix A
Under Decentralization, Teacher Certification Renewal Responsibilities Have Changed

BEFORE DECENTRALIZATION	AFTER DECENTRALIZATION
Bureau of Teacher Certification's Primary Certificate Renewal Responsibilities for District-Employed Teachers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise teachers regarding renewal requirements. • Collect completed application form and fee. • Verify completion of renewal requirements. • Retain applicant's official renewal application and supporting documentation. <p>Check applicant's criminal history and report cases to the Department's Office of Professional Practices Services (PPS) for processing, as needed.¹</p> <p>Certify applicant and print certificate.</p> <p>Mail original certificate to applicant and copy to district.</p> <p>Maintain Florida Certification Database.</p>	<p>Print certificate.</p> <p>Mail original certificate to applicant.</p> <p>Maintain Florida Teacher Certification Database.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Produce monthly district invoice for state's portion of renewal application fees. ✓ Validate and post district payment.
Districts' Primary Certificate Renewal Responsibilities for District-Employed Teachers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise teachers regarding renewal. • Collect completed application form and renewal fee. • Complete preliminary verification of renewal requirements. • Retain copies of renewal application and supporting documentation. <p>Make copies of application and supporting documentation before forwarding originals to the Bureau.</p> <p>Send application, fee, and supporting documentation to the Bureau for official verification.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise teachers regarding renewal requirements. • Collect completed application form and renewal fee. • Verify completion of renewal requirements. • Retain applicant's official certification renewal application and supporting documentation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Check applicant's criminal history and report cases to the Department's Office of Professional Practices Services Office (PPS) for processing, as needed.² ✓ Authorize Department to print certificate. ✓ Update applicant's demographic information and add renewal application to Florida Teacher Certification Database. ✓ Validate district invoice information and pay the Department its portion of renewal application fees.

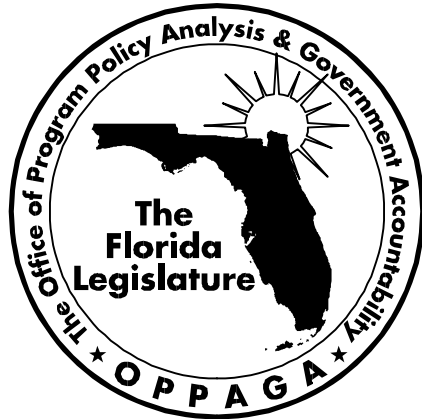
- Duplicated functions now performed only by districts
- ✓ New function

¹ The Bureau forwards renewal applications for individuals with arrest records to the Department's Office of Professional Practices Services (PPS) which processes complaints of alleged violations of the Code of Ethics/Principles of Professional Conduct by educators seeking or holding a certificate. The Office then determines the applicant's eligibility for renewal.

² The school district's criminal history check of certificate renewal applicants relies upon the applicant to self-disclose any arrest record. If the applicant discloses an arrest record, the district refers the application to the Department's Office of Professional Practices Services (PPS) which then determines the applicant's eligibility for renewal.

Source: Compiled by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability based on information provided by the Department of Education.

The Florida Legislature
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability



Mission Statement

This Office provides objective, independent, professional analyses of state policies and services to assist the Florida Legislature in decision-making, to ensure government accountability, and to recommend the best use of public resources.

This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report may be obtained by telephone (904/488-1023 or 800/531-2477), by FAX (904/487-3804), in person (Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St.), or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, P.O. Box 1735, Tallahassee, FL 32302). Web site: <http://www.state.fl.us/oppaga/>

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