



Fewer Teacher Certification Staff Needed Because of Streamlining and Technology

at a glance

The Department of Education has streamlined its teacher certification process and increased its use of technology. This has enabled it to process certification applications faster with fewer staff.

To improve accountability, the department should track the time it takes to process types of teacher certification applications and set timeliness goals for handling those that require special analysis.

The department has provided training and guidance to district certification personnel to help ensure that districts process renewal applications in a uniform and consistent manner.

Purpose

State law requires OPPAGA to inform the Legislature of actions taken in response to our reports.¹ This progress report presents our assessment of the extent to which the Department of Education addressed the findings and recommendations included in our prior report.²

¹ Section 11.45(7)(f), F.S.

² *Review of the Decentralization of the Teacher Certification Renewal Process*, OPPAGA [Report No. 96-52](#), February 13, 1997.

Background

Instructional personnel in Florida public schools are required by law to hold the teaching certificate designated by the State Board of Education. These certificates must be renewed every five years. Prior to 1996 the Department of Education issued all new and renewal teaching certificates. The 1995 Legislature decentralized the renewal process. School districts assumed several renewal functions previously performed by the department and now share responsibility for other functions with the department. Exhibit 1 shows current district and department teacher certification responsibilities.

Florida law mandates that teacher certificates must be processed within 90 days. The department continues to be responsible for processing teaching certification applications that require special analysis. These include processing initial certification applications and certificate renewal applications from persons not presently employed in a school district, as well as re-issuing certificates, issuing duplicate certificates, processing certifications for persons teaching out of their certification field, and adding new certification areas to teachers' files.

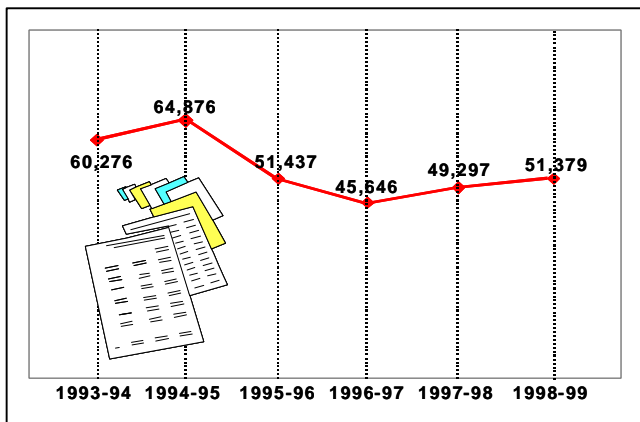
**Exhibit 1
Teacher Certification Renewal Responsibilities Since Decentralization**

District Responsibilities	Department Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advise teachers of the renewal requirements collect a completed application form and a \$56 renewal fee from teachers 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> verify that the renewal requirements have been met 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> check the applicant's criminal history (reporting cases to the department's Office of Professional Practices Services as needed) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> authorize the department to print the certificate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> print certificates and mail the original to the applicant
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> update the applicants' renewal information on the Florida Teacher Certification Database 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> maintain the Florida Teacher Certification Database
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> validate payment and remit \$20 of the renewal fee to the department for deposit into the Educational Certification and Service Trust Fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> validate and post district payment for its portion of the renewal fee; the bureau transfers \$2 to the department's Education Practices Commission and the Recovery Network Program for Educators.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce monthly district invoices of renewal fee payment

Source: Compiled by OPPAGA based on information provided by the Department of Education.

In 1994-95, the last year before decentralization, the bureau processed 64,876 applications. After decentralization in January 1996, the number of applications the bureau processed dropped to a low of 45,646 in 1996-97 and has increased to 51,379 in 1998-99. (See Exhibit 2.)

**Exhibit 2
Number of Applications Processed Dropped After Decentralization But Is Rising Again**

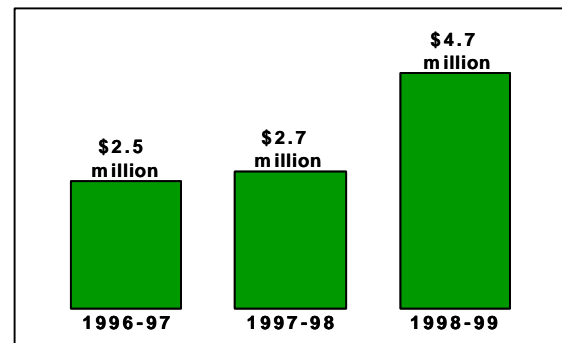


Source: Department of Education, Bureau of Educator Certification.

Florida law mandates that certification activities be self-supporting. Department certification activities are funded from the Educational Certification and Service Trust Fund, which is composed mostly of teacher certification and renewal fees.

The department's certification activities are administered by its Bureau of Educator Certification. Exhibit 3 shows the bureau's expenditures, which increased from \$2.5 million in Fiscal Year 1996-97 to \$4.7 million in Fiscal Year 1998-99. This increase includes approximately \$1.5 million for new technology over the three-year period.

**Exhibit 3
New Technology Purchases Almost Doubled Expenditures**



Source: Department of Education, Bureau of Educator Certification.

Prior Findings

The teacher certification renewal process was decentralized as of January 1, 1996. OPPAGA's February 1997 [report](#) found that it was too soon to determine the long-term impact of decentralization. School

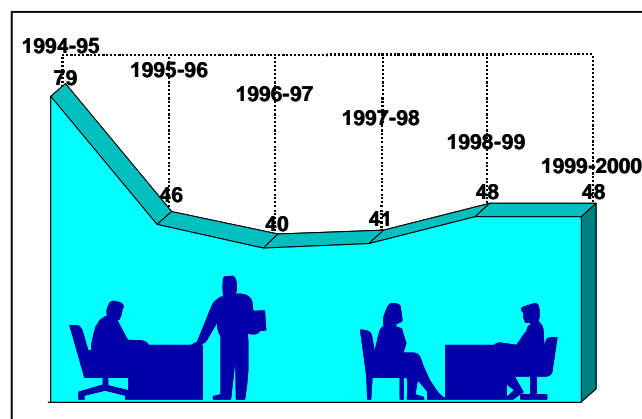
district staff reported that the initial impact of decentralization was to end duplication by state and district offices, provide funding for districts, and reduce department renewal response time from up to three months to between one or two weeks. However, district staff were sometimes uncertain what information to look for when processing and verifying renewal applications at the local level. At the time, the department did not have a system in place to ensure uniform and consistent application of renewal requirements throughout the state.

Our prior report also found that decentralization had reduced the bureau's workforce and reduced costs at the state level. The bureau reduced its workforce 42% in Fiscal Year 1995-96, when decentralization occurred. In 1996-97 and 1997-98, the bureau used OPS staff to receive and scan applications and process fees received. Department administrators determined that these functions were critical and ongoing and in 1998-99 established seven FTE positions to perform these duties. Exhibit 4 shows bureau positions since 1994-95.

Finally, our prior report found that while decentralization made the certificate renewal process more efficient, it slowed processing of other certification activities, such as initial certificate requests and out-of-field certifications, and increased the workload for the downsized staff at the bureau. The bureau estimated that the average time to issue certificates it still processed doubled from 30 days to more than 60 days after decentralization. However, the bureau was generally meeting the 90-day processing time required by law. The department had reduced bureau staff in the expectation that decentralization of the renewal process and technological improvements at the department would reduce the workload; however, the bureau's workload did not decrease as much as anticipated. In order to meet the workload with reduced staff, the department proposed a workflow analysis to identify ways to increase the efficiency of the certification system and make use of new technologies.

OPPAGA recommended that the department conduct its proposed workflow analysis to determine the changes needed to improve the efficiency of the certification system and ensure that applications are processed timely. We also recommended the department assist districts in establishing processes for reviewing renewal applications to ensure that criteria for renewal were applied uniformly across districts. Finally, we recommended that the Legislature require the department to submit a suggested time frame to which the department could be held accountable for issuing certificates when requesting additional funds to upgrade technology. While the department has a 90-day statutory deadline, a shorter time frame could be expected from efficiencies resulting from technological improvements at the bureau.

Exhibit 4
The Bureau Decreased Its Workforce
After Decentralization



Source: Department of Education, Bureau of Educator Certification.

Current Status

Since our prior report, the department has implemented new technology and changed some processes to bring greater efficiency to the certification process. While the bureau does not track the number of days it takes to process all applications, staff said that the bureau is issuing renewal certificates more quickly than it did prior to decentralization.

The department has completed its workflow analysis, which showed that department staff handled applications too

Progress Report

many times. In its prior process, the bureau received applications, and then sent them to the department's Data Center to be manually entered into a computer. Then bureau staff would work on the applications. Of the different types of certification activities, most applications took 60 days to process; data processing consumed two weeks of that time.

To expedite this process, the department has purchased image character recognition technology and re-designed application forms so that staff can process applications using computer imaging, which ended the need for data processing. The new system was implemented in October 1999, three months ahead of schedule.

The new system is yielding positive results in processing applications. The department's goal for processing teacher certification applications from individuals who have completed approved programs is now two days. Based on a department estimate, these applications account for 30% of the applications processed. Program staff stated that this goal would be incorporated in the department's performance-based program budgeting measures for future budget requests.

However, the department does not currently maintain data on how long it takes to process other types of teacher certification applications, such as applications that require special analysis. To improve accountability, the department should track such data and set a processing goal for each type of certification applications that it handles.

The department provided training to district staff to help ensure consistent review of applications

The department has provided training and guidance to district certification staff to help ensure that districts process teacher certification renewal applications in a uniform and consistent manner. The department offers training twice a year for district staff that work with certification

issues and supplemental training at school personnel administrators' conferences. The Bureau of Educator Certification also produces guidance materials, which help district staff verify the completion of certificate renewal requirements. Further, the bureau's automated certificate renewal system has electronic checkpoints that prompt district staff to verify that all renewal requirements have been met.

In addition to training activities, bureau staff work with assigned contact people in each district to answer questions about the certification process. If the bureau receives a pattern of questions on a particular subject, it offers additional training or publishes guidance memoranda.

Conclusions

The department has compensated for reduced staff in its Bureau of Educator Certification by implementing new image character recognition technology which, when fully implemented, should make teacher certification processes more efficient. When the new technology is fully implemented and staff are using the system efficiently, the department should review staffing levels and determine the appropriate level of staffing to process certification applications in a timely manner.

To improve its accountability, the department should track how long it takes to process all types of teacher certification applications that it handles and establish processing time goals for these actions. A portion of these measures and goals should be incorporated in the department's performance-based program budgeting measures and reported to the legislature, while the department should maintain the remaining measures and data internally.

The department has provided additional training and guidance for district certification personnel in order to ensure uniform and consistent review of teacher certification renewal applications.

OPPAGA 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 in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021 or 800/531-2477), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475).

The Florida Monitor: <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/>