Making a Difference

Spotlighting How ESAs Impact the Nation's Education System
2023

Finding New Ways to Solve the Teacher Shortage

It takes a team to tackle a challenge as large as the national teacher shortage. Just ask the staff at Region 13 Education Service Center in Austin, Texas. Region 13 recently launched four new online pathways to train teachers in conjunction with Lamar Institute of Technology (LIT) and Abilene Christian University.

"Our number one reason for doing this is we need more educators," said Region 13 Executive Director Rich Elsasser. "We've created this college of education within Region 13 that creates more value to what we do."

After Elsasser came to Region 13 eight years ago, he realized the need to find new ways to enhance career and technical education in the schools the center serves. To do that, he looked at ways to partner with institutions – business leaders and others – who were outside the K-12 education field.

However, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools, work on these efforts ceased, too. But the shift to virtual instruction prompted by the pandemic also created some new options for learning including a new way to address the teacher shortage in Central Texas.

"We took it as a chance to be innovative," said Elsasser.

The four online programs are designed to meet the needs of students at different points in their educational careers.

The Classroom to Career track allow students in high school to take an online curriculum through LIT that gives them dual credit and allows them to graduate high school with an associate's degree. They can then receive certification as an education paraprofessional and start work in a classroom.

The Bachelor of Science in Integrated Studies offers paraprofessionals the chance to take online classes through Abilene Christian University and earn a bachelor's degree while they continue to work in the classroom. They are simultaneously enrolled in Region 13's teacher certification program so they earn their teacher certification at the end of the program.

For current teachers who want to earn a master's degree or students who already have a bachelor's degree and want to switch careers, the Master of Education in Instruction and Learning is an opportunity to take online courses and earn alternative teacher certification through Region 13. They are paid as teachers while they take classes toward their certification. Current teachers can also participate and earn a master's while they continue to work.

A fourth partnership allows current educators an opportunity to earn a Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership through a fully online program.

The portfolio of programs and partnerships is intended to give anyone who wants to be an educator the best way for him or her to achieve that goal.

This is the first year, so there is no data yet on the initiatives' success rate, but there are even more programs to come. "We're not done," Elsasser said. "We're continuing to look at ways to get more educators in the field."

REGION 13
EDUCATION SERVICE CENTER

Leading the Way: Artificial Intelligence as an Effective Teaching Tool

"Don't ban it – embrace it as the effective teaching tool it is."

That's the message Dr. Alicia Gallegos Butters, Director of Educational Technology for the Innovation Division of the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), brings to local school districts and Educational Service Agencies (ESAs) around the country during her presentations on Artificial Intelligence, and specifically, ChatGPT.

"It's really no different than anything else that's been around for years and years," Butters said. "It's just another tool."

The advent of any type of new educational technology or resource is typically faced with concern and resistance at first, she explained, comparing ChatGPT to encyclopedias or portable calculators. Encyclopedias' instant access to information and calculators' ability to solve math problems with the push of a button are simply "old school versions" of ChatGPT, she said.

ChatGPT is a web-based Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool developed by OpenAI that can answer questions, write stories and write code. It can read, analyze and generate up to 25,000 words of text and accept images as input. It can write code in all major programming languages and even passed the law school exam.

Shortly after its release in March, the SDCOE devoted one of its "Curious About" virtual series on educational technology topics to ChatGPT. The response was huge and SDCOE was flooded with requests for more information. Butters has been visiting local districts to share information with staff and also presented a webinar on ChatGPT for AESA members and others.

During her presentations, Butters discusses ways teachers can use ChatGPT inside and outside of the classroom. Outside of the classroom, teachers can use it to boost their productivity by running documents through spell checks and grammar checks instantly. It can also compose emails to parents or fellow teachers in a variety of styles: professional for colleagues and more casual for parents, for instance. It can generate quizzes and scoring rubrics.

Counselors can use it to instantly compose letters of recommendation after giving it specific information about a student – name, activities, interests, GPA.

In the classroom, ChatGPT can be used in a variety of ways. Students can ask it to assume the identity of a famous historical figure or scientific expert and interview it as part of a research project. It can generate math problems on a specific concept, give steps toward the solution, and explain each step to help the student arrive at the correct answer.

To help students learn how to write an essay, ChatGPT can generate a variety of sentence starters that students can use to produce their work.

"It will change the way teachers teach," Butters said.

Used correctly in the classroom, ChatGPT acts as a tutor helping students delve deeper into subjects and learn more than they could before, she added.

Some districts have talked about banning ChatGPT but Butters does not advise that. Banning it simply does students a disservice since the chatbot is not going away. It also becomes a matter of equity. Students who have access to technology at home will still be able to use ChatGPT, giving them an advantage over those students who do not have access to technology at home.

Moving forward, Butters believes ChatGPT will be refined and improved. As use expands, she also hopes its programming will begin to reflect a more diverse world view since most programmers now are white and male.

But for right now, the educational opportunities of ChatGPT are up to individual teacher's imaginations.

"It's an interesting tool and teachers need to play around with it and think about how they can use it in the classroom," Butters said.

san diego county office of
EDUCATION
FUTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES℠