

**Office of Inspector General
Educator Certification**

Report #A-1314-015

March 2015

Executive Summary

In accordance with the Department of Education's (department) fiscal year 2013-14 audit plan, the Office of Inspector General conducted an audit of the Educator Certification process. The purpose of this audit was to ensure educator certifications were issued in compliance with regulations. During this audit we noted that, in general, educator certifications were appropriately issued. However, there were instances where improvements could be made to strengthen controls. For example, we cited instances where unauthorized personnel had access to the Bureau of Educator Certification Partnership Access & Services System (BEC-PASS). The Audit Results section below provides details of the instances noted during our audit.

Scope, Objectives, and Methodology

The scope of this audit included the period of July 1, 2013, through January 31, 2014. We established the following objectives for our audit:

1. Ensure educator certifications are issued in compliance with state regulations and department policies and procedures;
2. Determine if application processing fees are appropriately collected and deposited in the Educational Certification and Service Trust Fund;
3. Ensure only authorized personnel have access to the Bureau of Educator Certification Partnership Access & Services System (BEC-PASS); and
4. Determine if the BEC contact center is adequately addressing all inquiries.

To accomplish these objectives, we reviewed applicable laws, rules, and regulations; interviewed appropriate department staff; reviewed policies, procedures, and related documentation; reviewed a sample of applications and supporting documentation; reviewed application fees and deposits; reviewed system access documentation; and reviewed communications data.

Background

The purpose of school personnel certification is to protect the educational interests of students, parents, and the public at large by assuring that teachers in the state are professionally qualified. The legislature has established certification requirements to assure that educational personnel in public schools possess appropriate skills in reading, writing, mathematics, technology, and relevant subject matter competence so as to demonstrate an acceptable level of professional performance. Further, the legislature has established a certificate renewal process which

promotes the continuing professional improvement of school personnel, thereby enhancing public education in all areas of the state. The Department of Education issues professional certificates, temporary certificates, athletic coaching certificates, and nonrenewable 2-year temporary and 5-year professional certificates. The Bureau of Educator Certification (BEC) is responsible for implementing the certification provisions in Florida Statutes and State Board of Education administrative rules. BEC certification responsibilities include:

- Evaluating credentials and issuing certificates;
- Providing certification information through extensive online resources, a toll-free information line with direct customer assistance, and an office visitor center;
- Supporting district certification officers by providing a partnership training program, newsletters, update presentations, a dedicated certification specialist, and technology systems and supports; and
- Supporting college and university certification advisors with certification training and a dedicated certification specialist.

Audit Results

Certificate Issuance

We reviewed a sample of educator certificate applications to determine if eligibility requirements were met prior to the issuance or renewal of a certificate; the addition of a subject and/or endorsement to a certificate; or reinstatement of a certificate. We reviewed the applications and supporting documentation to ensure the application package was complete and the applicant met all related requirements. This included the review of educational requirements, mastery of general and subject area knowledge, background screening, specialization requirements, and fee payments. We found for those applications approved by BEC, the applicants met all related requirements prior to the issuance or renewal of the certificate. For those applications that had not yet been approved, BEC continued to timely process the applications utilizing BEC systems to document each applicable requirement as it was met.

Finding: Unauthorized personnel had access to the Bureau of Educator Certification Partnership Access & Services System (BEC-PASS)

Effective management of system access privileges includes the timely removal of employee access when employees terminate or transfer positions. Access to BEC-PASS is granted to BEC employees, as well as employees in other areas of the department who require access to BEC-PASS in order to fulfill their responsibilities. BEC also grants access to employees of the school districts to allow them to conduct employment screening, process certificate renewals and additions, or update employee information.

There were 81 active department users and 527 active district users at the time of the review. We determined that 26 of the 81 department users (32.1%) and 94 of the 527 district users (17.8%) had either terminated employment or transferred to a job that no longer required the use of BEC-PASS. This information was provided to BEC so they could take appropriate action regarding system access.

We then reviewed the last activity date for those terminated and transferred users still having access to BEC-PASS to determine if the system had been accessed after the date of termination or transfer. We were unable to review the last activity date for department users because this information is not recorded or tracked. We were also unable to determine if the system was accessed after the termination or transfer date for 33 of the 94 district users because the resignation or last logon date was not provided. However, the information provided showed that 19 of the remaining 61 district users accessed the system after their termination or transfer date, ranging from 1 to 1,828 days after termination or transfer.

BEC requires that districts provide notification when a district user terminates employment or transfers to a position that does not require access to BEC-PASS. However, districts do not always comply with this request, making it difficult for BEC to timely remove access to BEC-PASS for district users. BEC additionally utilizes a process whereby they periodically purge user IDs which have not been utilized for a period of over 90 days. Nonetheless, based on our comparison of termination or transfer dates to access removal dates, it did not appear the purging was conducted consistently. There were 5 to 18 months between the termination or transfer date and access disable date for 11 of the 19 district users.

Without timely removal of former employees' access, the risk is increased that access privileges could be misused by the former employee or others.

Recommendation

We recommend the department remove access to the system for those department and district users who no longer require the use of BEC-PASS. We also recommend BEC strengthen its controls related to the removal of access privileges, including the enhancement of policies and procedures to govern the removal of access privileges.

Management Response

Based on this audit finding and recommendations, bureau staff immediately terminated access by unauthorized personnel, then initiated review and revision of its policies and procedures governing authorized user access to BEC resources. Moreover, the BEC intends to adopt and routinely practice more exacting control procedures to ensure that access to BEC resources is restricted to authorized personnel only.

Through the course of the audit, the analysis results identified several school district User ID accounts for which administrators failed to notify the BEC. Upon discovery, the auditor communicated suspect accounts to BEC staff who immediately verified the findings to determine each user's need for continued access to BEC resources and promptly terminated access for those for whom it should no longer be authorized. Though previously not a requirement, the BEC expanded its authorization procedures to require completion of a User Agreement form by employees within other DOE bureaus and offices who require access to BEC resources. As an example of new activities to strengthen its procedural controls, BEC staff recently compiled lists for each district of active user accounts and distributed the lists with instructions to review and respond confirming or rejecting the need for continued access to the BEC-PASS. Through this

initial User Account Review process, BEC staff received responses from 97.5% of its partner districts resulting in termination of 103 out of 588 user accounts.

Communication Section

The BEC communications section responds to email and phone inquiries relating to educator certification. The phone system provides the caller the option to speak with a representative or use the automated system to check application, certificate, or document status; access general certification information; or request certification materials. We reviewed the communications tracking information for the period of January 2013 through December 2013 to determine whether they are adequately addressing inquiries.

Calls Answered

During the months of January 2013 through December 2013, there were 108,560 attempted calls to the BEC communications section. The months of June and July had the largest volume of calls at 13,568 and 13,795 per month, respectively. The volume of calls tends to increase during the summer months as school personnel are seeking to renew their certification and employers are recruiting candidates to fill instructional vacancies. December had the lowest number of calls at 4,939. There was an average of 9,047 calls per month, or 1,296 calls per position for the months of January 2013 through December 2013.

The goal of the BEC communications section is to assist at least 85% of the attempted calls, or those calls where the caller selects to speak with a representative. In order to determine the percent of calls assisted, we compared the total attempted calls and the total calls answered. During the months of January 2013 through December 2013, the BEC communications section, on average, assisted 91% of the calls attempted. The section met its goal of 85% for each month reviewed.

Emails Answered

We attempted to obtain the percentage of emails answered for the months of January 2013 through December 2013, but were not able to reach a reliable figure due to the way the emails were being tracked at the time of the audit. Using the information provided, the emails were answered at a rate of 112%. This was because numerous emails were sent from the BEC communications section, but not in response to an email received by the BEC communications section. For example, if a general certification email was routed to the section by anyone other than BEC, the staff member's response to the email would be counted as a response although it was never counted as received. The communications section also sometimes responded to phone inquiries by email. The communications section has since changed the process to count the email as being received by BEC on the same day the specialist makes the response.

Comparison to Other Agencies

We collected information from other state agencies operating call centers in order to compare the statistics of BEC's communications section with those of others. Because the call centers

respond to varying inquiries and have differing resources, this comparison is presented for informational purposes only.

We compared call center data for the month of August 2013 for BEC, the Department of Revenue (DOR), and the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). BEC assisted 92% of calls attempted, DOR assisted 87.5% of calls received, and DJJ assisted 100% of calls received. The ratio of staff to volume is provided below:

<u>Department</u>	<u>Staff</u>	<u>Total calls Received</u>	<u>Ratio</u>
DOR	165	693,878	1:4,205
DOE	7.6	10,541	1:1,387
DJJ	7	653	1:93

The BEC call center responds to calls from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays and is comprised of 8 Program Specialist (PS) I and 4 PS II positions. The primary responsibility of the PS I positions is to answer phone calls. The PS II positions primarily return escalated calls and respond to emails.

The DOR call center responds to calls from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. Seventeen of the DOR call center employees are trained to handle web chat between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. These employees rotate in three-hour shifts of five to seven agents.

The DJJ call center responds to calls from 6:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. on weekdays, and 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. on weekends and holidays. The call center employees work various shifts to cover the call center hours.

We also compared call center data for the month of December 2012 for BEC, the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA), and the Department of Children and Families (DCF). BEC assisted 90.6% of calls attempted, ACHA assisted 81.3% of calls received, and DCF assisted 21% of calls received. The ratio of staff to volume is provided below:

<u>Department</u>	<u>Staff</u>	<u>Total calls Received</u>	<u>Ratio</u>
AHCA	120	101,492	1:85
DOE	5.7	4,591	1:805
DCF	450	1,864,000	1:4,142

There are 500 employees in DCF's call center, but approximately 10% of these employees are dedicated to quality assurance and processing report changes. DCF's center responds to calls from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays.

There were 120 employees in the AHCA call center in December 2012. The agency has recently consolidated the call center and decreased the number of employees to 42. AHCA's center responds to calls from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays.

In summary, BEC's staffing ratio fell in the middle when compared to call centers for other agencies in December 2012 and August 2013. Likewise, their response rate fell in the middle for the month of August 2013, though it was higher than that of the two agencies compared in December 2012.

Goals and Tracking

BEC does not currently track the abandon rate, busy rate, average talk time, or average wait time for its calls. The current system does have the capability of tracking these items, but is not being utilized at this time. The communications section tracks the calls by agent and looks at the overall percentage of calls assisted. They indicated the average talk time is not tracked due to the modest size of the communications section and the varying complexity of inquiries made by the callers. Other reviewed agencies track the following:

- Blockage rate – percentage of callers attempting to call the toll free number who receive a busy signal versus the total number of attempts;
- Busy rate – calculation of callers requesting to transfer from the self-service portal to speak to an agent who receive a busy signal versus the callers who are successfully transferred to a queue;
- Average wait time – amount of time callers remain in queue while waiting for the next available agent;
- Calls transferred and answered;
- Abandoned rate;
- Self-serve wait; and
- Average talk time.

BEC has established one overall goal for the communications section, which is to assist at least 85% of the attempted calls. Additional targets or goals are currently in place for the communications section, but are limited to those essential for conducting quality performance assessments of individual call center employees. Other agencies have established targets for their call centers, to include blockage rate, busy rate, average wait time, and abandonment rate.

Additional system-wide goals and tracking could help BEC improve their communication center and positively impact caller satisfaction.

Recommendation

We recommend BEC develop additional targets and goals and utilize the system to track the abandoned rate, busy rate, wait times, and other applicable measures.

Management Response

The BEC monitors its 85% callers assisted target as an overall performance measure for the Contact Center and captures additional evaluative metrics through routine reviews of individual agent services in response to customer inquiries. The auditors collected extensive information and resources throughout the audit process that the BEC plans to review in order to identify other technology system metrics as meaningful measures for tracking resources and activities to statistically improve Contact Center services to BEC customers.

In collaboration with department IT leadership, the department initiated a Legislative Budget Request (LBR) to modernize the agency communication technology systems to include full integration with the BEC Contact Center system. Pending LBR approval, implementation of the new integrated BEC Contact Center technology system will include capture and routine reporting of system metrics identified to monitor performance. In addition, the BEC intends to fully integrate email and other communication methods into the new BEC Contact Center technology system for more reliable monitoring of all customer contacts to improve services and customer satisfaction.

Closing Comments

The Office of the Inspector General would like to recognize and acknowledge the Bureau of Educator Certification staff for their assistance during the course of this audit. Our fieldwork was facilitated by the cooperation and assistance extended by all personnel involved.

To promote accountability, integrity and efficiency in state government, the OIG completes audits and reviews of agency programs, activities, and functions. Our audit was conducted under the authority of section 20.055, F.S., and in accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, published by the Institute of Internal Auditors, and Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspector General, published by the Association of Inspectors General. The audit was conducted by Rachelle Gouthro and Tiffany Hurst and supervised by Janet Snyder, CIA, CGAP, Audit Director.

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