

KEYS to Teaching Success: OER Supports Georgia's Preservice Teachers

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Introduction

“Professional dress doesn't make a teacher. Comfort does.”

A preservice teacher (PT) wrote this comment during a recent orientation session prior to starting a practicum experience. During a discussion about professional appearance, the PT had just reviewed Georgia's policy for teacher attire and grooming. While the statement makes sense in some respects and lacks logic in others, it speaks to the confusion PTs experience as they develop their professional skills.

In the past few years of supervising PTs at [Georgia Southern University](#), we observed that such confusion arises from several sources. First, PTs learn one set of expectations from teacher preparation courses but then different behaviors among faculty in practicum settings. Also, we have observed that PTs are often unprepared to communicate formally with classroom/university supervisors, especially when receiving constructive feedback or asking for clarification or guidance. Furthermore, PTs have questioned the

fairness of expectations to demonstrate multiple professional skills simultaneously—professional appearance, ethical compliance, professional communications, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge—while they are still learning about them.

After reflecting on much anecdotal evidence, we recognized a critical gap in how Georgia prepares PTs for the profession. While the state provides a ten-standard rubric, titled [InternKEYS](#), to communicate how PTs will be assessed to earn initial certification, teacher preparation programs must draw from varied sources—texts, videos, and presentations—to help PTs meet those ten standards. So we wondered, *What would be the impact of a composite resource that directly aligns with the InternKEYS standards?*

With grant funding from [Affordable Learning Georgia](#), we recruited a team of writers, reviewers, and editors to develop and pilot the first component of [KEYS to Teaching Success](#), a digital, open text to support all PTs in Georgia, whether

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enrolled in traditional university teacher education courses or alternative teacher preparation programs. We're encouraged by its impact on PTs' performance and confidence. Even better, we're also reaping rewards in the development process as we collaborate with other teacher preparation faculty, classroom teachers, and PTs themselves.

Meeting the Standards

The ten performance standards outlined in *InternKEYS* mirror the standards of the [Teacher KEYS Effectiveness System](#), the assessment Georgia uses for all its K-12 faculty. In short, all teachers and prospective teachers should meet standards under the following categories:

1. Professional Knowledge
2. Planning
3. Instructional Strategies
4. Differentiation
5. Assessment
6. Use of Assessment Data
7. Positive Learning Environment
8. Challenging Learning Environment
9. Professionalism
10. Communication

Through classroom instruction and field experiences, PTs engage in scaffolded opportunities to progress toward mastery of the ten InternKEYS standards. Field placements in K-12 classrooms enable PTs to address most of those standards. PTs also complete specific courses in content knowledge and pedagogical content strategies to accompany field placements. However, no courses in their programs include student learning outcomes targeting ethical compliance, appropriate teacher attire, appropriate online behavior (which are expected under Standard 9), professional written and spoken communications, or collaborating/ networking with colleagues (which are expected under Standard 10). PTs must use supplemental materials and model those skills through various courses.

From 2019 to 2021, PT behaviors indicated gaps in several performance areas: avoiding person-to-person interactions with school personnel; avoidance of conversations when confused about supervisors' feedback; sending unedited, unclear email messages to supervisors; or dressing in athletic wear for field placements (or wearing clothes too formal for such work). While such skills are mentioned piecemeal on syllabi and in orientation sessions, the absence of direct instruction suggested a need for specific information to *show* PTs what the state of Georgia expects of its educators.

The first component of *KEYS to Teaching Success*, then, aligns directly with Standard 9 and Standard 10. Each topic in this resource not only elaborates on expected behaviors and skills but also explains the reasons behind those expectations and offers various specific scenarios to exemplify appropriate and inappropriate choices.

For instance, an important topic included under Standard 9 is appropriate teacher attire. The content first includes an explanation of the state policy for Georgia teacher appearance. It then explains that the rationale for the policy is for teacher/student safety, reasonable teacher mobility, and avoidance of learning distractions. Images of actual teachers (licensed under [Creative Commons](#)) illustrate appropriate and inappropriate choices according to Georgia's policy. More importantly, those images demonstrate that where teacher appearance is concerned, PTs have flexibility in making appropriate choices while also avoiding definite inappropriate ones.

Impact on PT Performance

We piloted the initial two components during Fall 2022 orientation sessions prior to teacher field placements in one secondary education program. For junior-level PTs beginning their initial coursework and field placements, they were engaged through reading assignments,

self-assessments, small group activities, and large-group discussions. These PTs examined their existing knowledge of professional skills and reflected on new knowledge that would help them succeed in their upcoming internships. Senior-level PTs read segments of *KEYS to Teaching Success* and reflected on areas for improvement based on their senses of self-efficacy and previous formal assessment results.

Assessment data were encouraging. After using the OER during Fall, 2022, we assessed not only PTs' abilities to meet Standards 9 and 10 but also their perspectives on the resource itself. PTs said the specific scenarios under each topic "enhanced [their] understanding of material" by showing them "ways to apply concepts," especially those illustrating compliance and non-compliance with [Georgia's ethical code for educators](#), which "brought professionalism to life and made it real."

Quantitative data from surveys also indicated a positive impact on PTs' professional skills. Over seventy percent of PTs at the junior level ranked the professionalism materials (Standard 9) as "very effective" and the remaining as "effective." Over ninety percent of these same candidates evaluated the communication resources as "effective" or "very effective" with some variation within the overall portions of the communication chapter. At the senior level, more than fifty percent of PTs evaluated the communication resources as "very effective" with the remaining evaluations as "effective" for content about professionalism and communication.

These results also reveal that PTs found the OER effective. Junior level students rated the communication chapter with more "effective" than "very effective" scores, which may be due in part to the depth and perceived relevance of the material in their program. Senior level students scored more "effective" levels, which may indicate a need to add specific examples and make other adjustments to support varied readers/users of the resource.

Anecdotal data also indicate the positive impact of this resource. For instance, when PTs email us with questions about internship procedures, they typically follow the formatting guidelines they learned from the content under Standard 10. When they submit teaching demonstration videos, we notice fewer attire choices that warrant intervention. Their spoken and written reflections indicate a heightened awareness of the effects of their online behavior. As one PT noted, "One assessment helped greatly, the call to Google myself in Chapter 9. [It] gave me an interesting perspective of how easy it is for people or companies to gain access to my information or photos I have made public."

Cost Effectiveness

Another positive outcome of developing *KEYS to Teaching Success* is that it helps reduce the cost of teacher preparation. Although teachers earn modest salaries (at best), the path to teacher certification is costly (Espinoza, et al. 2018; Lambert, 2023). People seldom understand the expenses PTs incur as they work toward their profession. Tuition, fees, and textbooks take up the bulk of those costs, but preservice teachers must also pay for travel to and from field placements, which often involve distances up to 70 miles one way. Liability insurance, professional attire for the classroom, certification exams, and classroom materials add to a PT's expenses.

The pressure to cover those costs is a common reason for attrition in teacher education programs. Mitigating those costs is challenging, but scholarships, clothes closets, and carpools can only do so much. As a no-cost, digital text, *KEYS to Teaching Success* reduces and sometimes eliminates textbook costs.

While designed to address PTs' initial knowledge of InternKEYS indicators, *KEYS to Teaching Success* embeds instructional text, photos, and scenarios for reflection, which enhance its

versatility, thereby maximizing its cost efficiency. Because it can be used at multiple levels of a PT's development, faculty, supervisors, and other administrative personnel (such as advisors) can use it to introduce a topic, reinforce skills, support remediation plans, or inspire written PT reflections.

Not only that, but the resource is also a strong step toward supporting PTs' transition to the profession. [A 2022 study and symposium on teacher burnout](#) includes in its list of recommendations "establishing strong induction and mentoring programs for beginning and struggling teachers" (Carl Vinson Institute, 2022, p. 17). We already have initial data indicating the value of *KEYS to Teaching Success* in teacher preparation, but it can also be used as a support resource during professional improvement plans for PTs falling short of professional expectations. As an openly accessible resource, *KEYS to Teaching Success* is also available to faculty and school administrators as support materials for teachers in their crucial first years.

Fostering Professional Community

One important goal of this project was to give all content a thorough peer review. Knowing that many faculty question the quality of OER (Martin & Kimmons, 2019; Irvine, Kimmons & Rogers, 2021), we organized a development process to garner feedback from those who would teach with that resource, those who would learn from the resource, and those who would eventually call those learners colleagues. Our grant enabled us to recruit a diverse team of PTs, public school teachers, and teacher educators to offer constructive feedback using a rubric modeled after Swaffield's (2004) [Critical Friends Protocol](#). They suggested content revision and reorganization, and occasionally requested additions influenced by their own professional experiences.

From urban, suburban, and rural Georgia districts, our team members represented multiple disciplines, including all four core subject areas (math, ELA, science and social sciences). They also represented various cultural backgrounds and multiple levels of experience.

The collaboration enabled new and preservice teachers to engage in a grant-funded endeavor, which was a valuable form of professional development. They also appreciated the opportunity to "review performance standards 9 and 10," which made them more aware of "how well [their] actions aligned with or could better align with exemplary levels" of performance. The more seasoned team members appreciated the chance to learn more about school districts in other parts of the state, especially how those districts oriented and supported new faculty.

Throughout the collaborative process, the team became a small statewide professional community, lending a pay-it-forward spirit of scholarly writing, which gives *KEYS to Teaching Success* a strong chance of persisting and growing.

Conclusion

While we initially intended *KEYS to Teaching Success* to be applicable to curriculum courses and field experiences, its expansion will make it useful in methods and assessment courses. Colleagues at our university have adapted it for use in pre-professional education courses for students who intend to declare education majors. Now that we've seen how our initial installment of *KEYS to Teaching Success* has made a difference to our future teachers, we've identified several goals as we add content for the remaining standards.

One objective is consistent assessment of new and existing content, especially its use of professional language. PTs express frustration when different faculty/supervisors use different terminology to communicate the same skills and pedagogical concepts. Although these differences often reflect

nuances in the changing field of education, *KEYS to Teaching Success* can better support PTs' entry to the profession by maintaining language norms that will scaffold PTs' effective use of professional discourse. Over time, as the discourse evolves, we can adapt *KEYS to Teaching Success* to reflect those trends. Regular content updates enhance cost efficiency while also ensuring materials address current standards and highlight research-informed best practices.

Our team is already at work to develop additional segments addressing two more InternKEYS standards: Professional Knowledge (InternKeys Standard #1) and Positive Learning Environment (InternKeys Standard #7). Those segments will help PTs refine their skills in making subject matter relevant to students and build their confidence in managing K-12 classrooms. Developing these new components points to another goal for this OER: helping PTs understand the connection between policy and practice. In Georgia, recent legislation—collectively referred to as “[Divisive Concepts Laws](#)” and “[The Parents’ Bill of Rights](#)”—directly relates to how teachers lead classroom discussions, select instructional texts, and communicate these selections to parents (Office of the Governor, 2022). New content in *KEYS to Teaching Success* can illustrate effective ways PTs can employ best practices while also complying with the law.

Although *KEYS to Teaching Success* was designed with Georgia standards in mind, teacher preparation programs in other states can adapt its content to align directly with their own standards, especially after the resource grows. Any teacher, regardless of location, must plan appropriately, teach effectively, meet the needs of varied learners, and assess accurately. While the InternKEYS rubric outlines state-specific expectations of those teaching skills, the content of our digital resource can be adapted to suit the various ways other states outline their expectations.

Of course, as this resource grows, it opens more opportunities to investigate the overall value of OER. If further assessment data indicate potential to support preservice *and* new teachers, then those data will add to the knowledge base of OER's impact on America's teacher shortage and perhaps professional skills in general.

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