

Promoting Teacher & Student Skills
Certification Testing: A View from the Inside

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A Best Practices Study regarding Dr. Mary Ramirez, Former Business Education Adviser for the Los Angeles Unified School District – Division of Adult & Career Education, and her experience with Microsoft® Office Specialist and Certiport Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®) in the school systems.

Introduction

When Dr. Mary Ramirez accepted her new position in March 2000 as the Business Education Adviser for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) – Division of Adult & Career Education (DACE), she hardly realized the impact that computer certification would have on the teachers and students in Los Angeles.

After spending 24 years as an instructor of business education and computer applications courses, she enthusiastically accepted her new role as the adviser. Her responsibilities involved the establishing, creating, and developing of goals and innovative trainings for teachers.

"I was determined to develop a teacher training theme that focused on the synergistic connection that exists between the use of technology and the teaching and learning process," Ramirez says. "So I began to chart a professional development agenda to feature technology and its use for teachers in the teaching and learning."

The Professional Development Agenda – Microsoft Office Specialist

The path to developing a professional development agenda for the Business Education instructional area began with a Microsoft Office Specialist preparation course curriculum. The certification exam, administered worldwide by Certiport, Inc, provides a valid and reliable measurement of a student's proficiency, expertise, and overall comprehension of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and other Microsoft Office computer applications.

"The [Microsoft Office Specialist] curriculum aligned perfectly with the objective of our Division's mission to provide students with industry-inspired skills and trainings that would lead to employment," Ramirez says. "The course was created to provide students with the computer skills verification they will need to qualify for jobs in the workforce."

Teachers who wanted to teach the Microsoft Office Specialist preparatory course were given the experience of taking and passing the Microsoft Office Specialist test before they could instruct students. As a result, teacher certification became the Business Education instructional area's teacher professional-development agenda.

"Teachers should certify their computer skills because the certification acknowledges computer expertise, competency, and productivity," Ramirez says. "Certification also increases employment opportunities and credibility with employers, and it encourages greater earning potential and career advancement."

Selling the Vision of Certification

With the professional development agenda that featured teacher certification training, Ramirez shared her vision of skills certification with the senior-level administrators of the Division of Adult and Career Education (DACE).

"I asked them to visualize a graduation day where students would receive two "diplomas"—one for academic accomplishments and one for computer skills verification," Ramirez says. "I challenged them to become a 'futures inventor.'"

To help make the group clearly understand the benefits of MOS for both teachers and students, Ramirez helped them visualize the requirements of today's workforce and the corresponding requirements of today's students. Ramirez connected that vision to the LAUSD's vision and mission.

Armed with support and endorsement from administration, Ramirez contacted Delmar Publishing to get a Microsoft Office Specialist expert who would serve as facilitator of the training session. Arrangements were also made for a Delmar Publishing technician to coordinate the administration of the Microsoft Office Specialist practice test and certification exams.

Accepting New Paradigms

Although Ramirez continued to sing the praises for both teacher and student certification at her meetings with administration, the reaction from coordinators, principals, and assistant principals was lukewarm.

"This concerned me, but it did not surprise me," Ramirez says. "I knew that new paradigms are difficult to embrace. Besides, who among us is anxious to take a test?"

The deadline to sign up for the exam was just days away and only 20 reservation forms had been received for the 40 computer spaces available for testing. Then an unexpected twist in events occurred. Ramirez started receiving phone inquiries about the test from teachers outside of the business education realm. Basic Education teachers and K-12 teachers asked if they too could participate in the testing.

"I was not prepared for this twist," Ramirez says. "But since there were only a few days left until the sign-up deadline, and because I only had 25 registrants for the test, I told the teachers that they would be welcomed to join us." Ironically, after the deadline date phone calls came flooding in from teachers who said they hadn't known about the test.

Testing Day

On the day of the test, the 35 teachers who had previously signed up arrived—with an additional 10 teachers. They came hoping to somehow participate. Although not every one could because of limited testing resources, some started asking when the next test would be administered.

The Role of Victories – Creating a "Ground Swell" of Interest

At the end of the day's session, the teachers who passed all test sections left feeling victorious and full of enthusiasm and accomplishment. The results from the first MOS test revealed that of the 38 teachers who took the test, 21 passed.

"I considered these statistics to be very good," Ramirez says. "The most amazing part of the testing, however, was the interest among the 'non-passers' to take the test again."

Congratulatory cards were sent to teachers and principals two weeks later. But the elation of the first Microsoft Office Specialist test takers fueled excitement for other exams. Word of the first exam circulated among the DACE and the LAUSD K-12 community.

The second Microsoft Office Specialist exam was administered just four months later, with two more exams following shortly thereafter. Course Technology -Thomson Learning served as the training underwriter for subsequent Microsoft Office Specialist tests. Each subsequent exam has achieved success similar to the first one administered. To date, 14 DACE schools are now Microsoft Office Specialist authorized test centers.

IC³ Skills Certification

Between the second and third exams, Ramirez learned about another certification program administered worldwide by Certiport. The Certiport Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³) basic skills testing was also offered through Course Technology – Thomson Learning. Ramirez quickly investigated IC³ possibilities and was interested in discovering the difference between Microsoft Office Specialist and IC³ skills certification testing.

IC³ is a global, validated, standards-based training and certification program that measures one's basic computing and Internet literacy. This seemed like a logical precursor to Microsoft Office Specialist certification—a way to help some test takers ramp up skills leading to Microsoft Office Specialist testing.

“Because IC³ provides skills validation in these key areas—computing, key applications, and living online, I thought it would represent another level of skills validation that would fit with the Business Education professional development agenda,” Ramirez says.

During her tenure as Business Education Adviser, Ramirez scheduled three IC³ skills certification tests. In each test, the pass rate for the teachers was remarkably high. The teachers perceived the IC³ skills test as less challenging than Microsoft Office Specialist, which resulted in even more sign-ups for IC³ than before with Microsoft Office Specialist.

“I achieved positive results from IC³ because I followed the same planning, coordination, and development ‘prescription’ with IC³ that I used for Microsoft Office Specialist,” Ramirez says. “To date, 19 DACE schools qualify as authorized Microsoft Office Specialist and IC³ test centers.”

Conclusion

Throughout this project the old philosophy held true: When one teaches, two learn. Ramirez says teachers must enrich and renew themselves in order to engage students in the learning process.

"MOS and IC³ skills certification provided the teachers and students of the Los Angeles Unified School District – Division of Adult & Career Education with an opportunity to truly practice 'when one teaches, two learn,'" Ramirez concludes.

For more details about Dr Ramirez's project, you may send an email request to mediarelations@certiport.com.