

# Alternative Certification

## The **BALANCED VIEW:**

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information on  
timely topics

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### *What is alternative certification?*

Research shows that good teaching matters. The best teachers are able to get an additional year's worth of learning out of their students. Some studies suggest, moreover, that having a very good teacher for four or five years in a row can essentially close the achievement gap. Yet, there are serious disagreements about what constitutes an effective teacher as well as what it takes to prepare teachers well. The debate has sharpened recently with concerns about widespread teacher shortages in some areas of the country and the pressure to improve the quality of the teaching force—a requirement of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

In an effort to meet the demand for more teachers while still maintaining or improving quality, many states have turned to *alternative certification*—programs or licensing routes that allow people to enter the teaching profession without completing a traditional four-year undergraduate teacher education program. Alternative certification programs are all similar in one respect: they must be authorized by the state. Beyond that, programs vary greatly on many dimensions:

❖ *Admissions Standards* – Some programs are highly selective, requiring candidates to have at least a bachelor's degree, an above average GPA, and a passing score on a rigorous screening test. Other programs have minimal entry requirements, favoring experience

over college credentials or academic achievement.

❖ *Goals* – Some programs seek to increase the pool of teachers statewide, while others aim to create a larger or more diverse workforce in specific communities/districts (e.g., urban or rural) or specific content areas (e.g., math or science).

❖ *Components* – Some programs provide teaching candidates with both training before they enter the classroom and a system of support from experienced mentors as they teach. Other programs lack these components—learning takes place on-the-job with little or no support or supervision.

❖ *Duration and Intensity* – Some programs require a full year of pre-service and several years of structured mentoring. Others allow individuals to enter the classroom with only a few weeks of preparation.

Over the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of “fast-track” alternative programs—those that offer a short but intense training before sending prospective teachers into the classroom. One example is Teach for America, a well-known national program that recruits non-education majors from prestigious colleges and places them in high schools after five weeks of summer training.

In light of all the variation among alternative routes, some experts have sought to identify characteristics of high-quality programs. Features that have emerged from the admittedly thin research base include the following:

- ❖ high entrance standards and rigorous screening procedures,
- ❖ extensive mentoring and supervision,
- ❖ ample training in classroom basics and teaching methods,
- ❖ frequent and substantive evaluation and feedback, and
- ❖ high exit standards.

### *Why is alternative certification important?*

Alternative certification programs are growing rapidly in the United States. To date, 46 states and the District of Columbia offer some type of alternative means of certifying teachers. According to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI), a non-partisan research organization, an estimated 200,000 people have been certified through alternative routes since 1985, with most growth occurring during the 1990s. NCEI also estimates that alternative programs produce one third of the teachers needed annually and will yield even more as the programs continue to grow. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has also shown keen interest in alternative programs,

having authorized billions over the next five years to recruit and train

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high-quality teachers through traditional or *alternative* certification routes. What's more, DOE funds the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, which has developed a system for certifying skilled professionals who enter the teaching profession through alternative means. School administrators, too, are eager to try alternative models of teacher preparation, primarily to ease teacher shortages and improve the quality of the teaching force. But whether alternative certification programs will be able to develop new pools of qualified teachers, particularly in the nation's neediest districts, is the subject of fierce debate.

This issue of the *Balanced View* examines the arguments for and against alternative certification. We also report on the existing body of research on the topic—the interpretation of which underlies much of the debate.

### *What do people say about alternative certification?*

Alternative certification has both advocates and critics. The advocates call into question the value of traditional methods of teacher

preparation and policies governing teacher licensure. They argue that colleges of education have failed to provide the country with a sufficient number of teachers who are well prepared and able to educate all students. High-quality teaching demands attracting the “best and the brightest,” but the advocates feel that the best and the brightest are too often deterred from entering the teaching profession because of bureaucratic hoops and a raft of unrelated course requirements. Proponents also claim that teaching is best learned on the job, and that candidates with subject-matter competency can apply their expertise with minimal exposure to pedagogical courses, especially the so-called “Mickey Mouse” methods courses that teacher licensure requires. They say there should be as few obstacles as possible to talented, competent people willing to try their hand at teaching.

Other major arguments for alternative certification include the following:

- ❖ to diversify the teaching force by drawing in more men and minorities,
- ❖ to reduce teacher shortages in subject-matter specialties such as mathematics, science, special education, or bilingual education,
- ❖ to increase staffing levels in urban and rural schools or “difficult-settings,”
- ❖ to bring bright college graduates into teaching—those with higher academic qualifications than students in traditional teacher preparation programs, and
- ❖ to attract highly skilled people from the private sector who already

have a broad-range of knowledge and real-world experience with subject matter.

Indeed, according to proponents, a chief strength of alternative certification programs

**Advocates say that alternative certification programs will attract the “best and the brightest” to teaching.**

**Critics counter that such programs will further jeopardize struggling schools and hinder student learning.**

lies in their ability to attract and hold a segment of the population not currently engaged in education. Without the accelerated path offered by these programs, many talented and diverse people would be lost to teaching.

Opponents of alternative certification disagree with all points. They say that teaching is not just about command of subject matter, it is also about understanding how children learn and how to organize curriculum, instruction, and the classroom so that they *can* learn. They argue that to improve the quality of education, subject-matter competency must be grounded in a solid foundation of pedagogical training and education theory. From their perspective the answer to the problem of inadequate teacher preparation is not to circumvent college-based programs, but to continue to strengthen these programs through adherence to strict standards and other substantive changes including changing the status, conditions, and compensation within the profession.

Improvements in teacher preparation, thus, would stem from more substance, content, and length of study—not from recruiting candidates into the classroom armed with only a bachelor’s degree and minimal pedagogical training.

Opponents also express other fears about alternative certification:

- ❖ Potential harm to students – Alternative certification programs shortchange participants and therefore the students they teach because they provide inadequate opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to be effective upon entry into the classrooms.
- ❖ Undermining the profession – Downgrading the importance of certification and training prior to practice moves teaching in the direction of a trade rather than a profession. It communicates a dangerous message: that it doesn’t take much to become a teacher.
- ❖ Hidden costs – Alternative certification may be appealing as a quick fix, but over the long haul the higher attrition rate among alternative route teachers will prove costly and will further jeopardize struggling schools that need a stable staff.

In the end, the critics say, increased rigor and requirements along with important structural changes would do more to attract the “best and the

brightest” to teaching than any other recruitment effort.

### ***What does research say?***

Several questions figure prominently in the debate over alternative certification. To summarize what research tells us about these questions, we have drawn heavily from recent scholarly reviews of rigorous studies.

### ***Do alternative certification programs recruit a more diversified group of teachers?***

Research verifies that alternative certification programs have been successful in recruiting a more diverse pool of teachers. On average these programs have a higher percentage of males, minorities, and people over age 30. Further, alternative path teachers are more likely to have a broader range of work experience outside education and teach where the job demand is greatest—in inner cities and outlying rural areas—and in high-demand subject areas such as mathematics and science.

### ***Do alternatively certified teachers have higher attrition rates?***

Studies conflict over whether alternative-route teachers leave teaching sooner than traditionally prepared teachers. In both cases, staying on the job seems to be a function of the quality of the preparation program. Still, the evidence suggests that in the *short-term*, attrition rates for alternatively prepared teachers are comparable to those traditionally trained. As for longer-term results, the research is inconclusive. Still, there is some evidence that

alternative route teachers may not have as strong a long-term commitment to teaching as traditionally prepared teachers.

### How important is pedagogical knowledge/preparation for effective teaching?

One of the most contentious arguments concerning alternative certification is the extent to which knowledge and skills in pedagogy are important to successful teaching. Alternative route programs are based on the assumption that subject-matter knowledge and strong verbal skills should be the most important determinants of teaching effectiveness—that only minimal pedagogical skills are necessary. Research generally confirms the importance of teachers' content knowledge and verbal ability as they relate to teaching effectiveness. At the same time, it suggests that some mastery of pedagogy is also necessary, particularly subject-specific pedagogy and basic knowledge of core pedagogical skills. What is less obvious is whether such skills are best acquired through coursework or field experiences, or can be picked up on-the-job, as alternative certification proponents contend.

### Are alternative certification programs effective?

An equally contentious research question is whether alternative certification programs are effective. But drawing sweeping generalizations here is problematic. Not only

do alternative certification programs vary widely in design and quality, researchers use vastly different approaches for measuring their effectiveness including teach-

ers' self-reports, supervisors' ratings, independent observation, and student achievement. Despite these limitations, there is enough data to justify the following modest conclusion: *some* alternative certification programs are as effective as traditional teacher preparation programs, that is, they graduate teachers whose classroom performance and student outcomes are similar to that of traditionally prepared teachers. As to the question of what program characteristics contribute to effectiveness, the research is inconclusive. It may be that success is as much a function of the attributes of those who enroll in alternative certification programs as any particular program component; but that should not take away from their accomplishments. Indeed, one of the arguments for alternative certification programs is their ability to attract highly talented people to the teaching profession.

### Implications

A reasonable, though cautious, conclusion from this research review is that alternative certification programs hold promise for providing a solution to the multifaceted problems of teacher supply. Not only can these programs produce teachers who are as effective as those traditionally trained, they can make an important contribution to

diversifying the teaching force and reducing teacher shortages where the job demand is greatest—in hard-to-staff schools and specialized subject areas. At the same

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time, policymakers need to be aware that not all alternative certification programs are alike and not all are equally effective. The best programs feature strong recruitment policies, sound and relevant curriculum, and solid field experience under good supervision—elements that must be in place to ensure their success. Furthermore, policymakers should understand that alternative route programs might not provide a long-term solution to teaching shortages. The challenge of working in low-performing, often dysfunctional, schools—where many alternative route teachers are assigned—may dampen any long-range plans to remain in the profession. These conclusions, however, must be considered prudently for much remains to be learned about alternative certification programs. A number of ongoing research projects, fortunately, may shed more light on the characteristics of effective programs and the factors that contribute to their success.

The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments. Primary references used are available upon request.