



Policy Brief

Alternative Certification

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A Growing Trend To Address the Teacher Shortage

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What is Alternative Certification?

"Alternative certification" is a general term for nontraditional avenues that lead to teacher licensure. Alternative teacher certification programs (ACPs) are generally geared toward aspiring teachers who already have a baccalaureate degree but who require additional education methods coursework and classroom experience. Such programs vary in requirements and sophistication and can be administered at the federal, state or district levels.

ACPs appeal to prospective teachers and to state education officials dealing with teacher shortages because they typically can be completed in a shorter timeframe and may be more affordable than traditional education-degree programs. A key component of most alternative certification programs is their flexible or compressed scheduling, with many courses offered in the evenings and on weekends, making them more accessible to participants who are currently working.

History

Since 1985, an estimated 200,000 candidates have pursued alternative routes to become certified teachers. Driven by teacher shortages and changing requirements – including passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 – close to one-third of all new teachers certified annually in the United States enter the field via alternative certification programs currently offered in 45 states and the District of Columbia.

Alternative certification programs for teachers began in the mid-1980s in two states, New Jersey and Texas. Program development increased with the NCLB provisions that recognized alternative certification programs as an effective method to train teachers; states were encouraged to become involved in this effort. Title II of the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (NCLB), *Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High Quality Teachers and Principals*, supports programs that recruit qualified professionals from other fields and provides them with alternative routes to teacher certification, including two in particular, Transition to Teaching and Troops to Teachers.

In the 2003 federal fiscal year, Congress appropriated \$41.65 million for the Transition to Teaching program to enable mid-career persons to pursue alternative routes into the classroom. Troops to Teachers provides support to military personnel who have a bachelor's degree to become a teacher through alternative certification programs. In addition, the Department of Education created the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), which has developed exams to provide nontraditional candidates a way to become certified as teachers.

Recent numbers from alternative certification programs across the nation show that significant interest in teacher training exists among professionals outside education. In the first year that New York offered an alternative certification program, 2,300 people applied for 250 spots; in the second year, 7,800 applied for 1,500 openings. Similarly, a Massachusetts ACP had more than 900 applicants for 105 slots.

Increasing Diversity in the Teaching Force

Programs often are targeted toward attracting potential teachers from underrepresented ethnic or racial groups, underserved geographic areas, or individuals with subject expertise in high-demand fields. Alternative certification proponents argue that, by drawing from the pool of people who have a variety of work and life experiences, the programs boost the quantity, diversity and quality of teachers at the same time.

Some alternative certification programs have increased the number of minorities in the teaching force:

- In Texas, 9% of all teachers are minorities and 41% of those who prepare through alternative routes are minorities.
- In New Jersey, 9% of all teachers are minorities; 20% of alternatively certified teachers are minorities.
- In the Troops to Teacher program, 90% percent of participants are male, compared with 26% of teachers nationwide, and 30% are minority compared with 10% nationwide.

Alternative certification programs also may address critical shortage areas:

- Twenty-nine percent of teachers who came to teaching through alternative routes end up teaching math
- Twenty-four percent teach in the sciences
- Eleven percent teach special education
- Twenty-five percent (compared with 16% overall) teach at inner-city schools.

Program Requirements

Individuals entering an alternative teacher certification program must have a bachelor's degree and usually an undergraduate major in the field for which they will be certified to teach. Eligibility requirements, including gradepoint average or other suitability standards, may be established by the ACP or the state. Candidates planning to teach at the elementary school level may qualify with a multi-disciplinary degree.

The length of alternative teacher certification programs ranges from a few months up to two years. Many deliver training through workshops scheduled throughout the year; others follow a more traditional course schedule. In some ACPs, candidates actually begin their assignment as a classroom teacher drawing a regular salary while still enrolled in the alternative program; others require training to be completed before the candidate starts teaching. Some ACPs require a person be offered a teaching contract before being accepted into the program.

Community College Involvement

Although ACPs can be found in nearly every state and are offered in a variety of formats through four-year colleges and universities, school districts, regional education service centers and for-profit education providers, a more recent development is the arrival of community colleges into the alternative certification marketplace. In 2000, Texas became the first state to formerly authorize community colleges to offer alternative certification programs for public school teachers. As of 2004, the Texas State Board for Educator Certification had approved 22 community college programs to offer ACPs. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), 328 alternative certification programs currently are offered through four-year colleges and universities across the nation. The number of community colleges involved with alternative certification was not reported.

Community college proponents argue that two-year colleges are uniquely qualified to offer alternative certification teacher training programs based on their history of preparing nontraditional students to enter the workforce. Community college programs offer flexible scheduling, online courses and sometimes salaried classroom internships. In addition, ACPs at community colleges generally cost less and may allow potential teachers to become certified within a shorter time period than traditional full-time baccalaureate teacher education programs.

Quality of Alternative Certification Programs and Lack of Research

Many professionals in the education community are concerned too many policymakers see alternative certification programs as “quick and easy” substitutes for traditional teacher education programs. The growth of alternative certification programs has occurred simultaneously with demands to raise standards of teacher quality. Some observers worry that programs place too much emphasis on quantity – filling slots – rather than teacher quality. While more than 130,000 teachers have been trained nationwide during the past five years through alternative certification programs, sufficient research has not been conducted to answer lingering questions about the quality of such programs. This ambiguity makes it difficult to judge whether alternative certification programs provide quality preparation comparable to traditional routes to teaching.

Concerns over the quality of alternative certification programs can be further exacerbated when a community college is authorized to offer such programs. Many in the education community are unconvinced that a community college, with its emphasis on lower-division education, can offer the pedagogical and upper-division subject-matter content needed by classroom teachers. Community college teacher education proponents, however, argue that community colleges have a long tradition of developing and offering quality customized education to meet the needs of business and industry in a wide range of fields. That broad experience of educating and/or training working adults could make community colleges ideal providers of programs for nontraditional teacher candidates with college degrees and hands-on work experience.

Accountability and ACPs

The 1998 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Title II, created a national reporting system on the quality of teacher preparation in the United States. States are required to report test data to the U.S. Department of Education on candidates completing alternative certification programs, including those offered by community colleges. Performance data from ACPs in the past have been reported in the aggregate, making it impossible to examine the quality of individual programs at this time.

As the number of alternative certification programs increased, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) reviewed its policies related to the types of organizations that may seek NCATE accreditation. In 2003, NCATE changed its constitution to include organizations or institutions that use alternative techniques to prepare new teachers. NCATE will soon begin considering applications to accredit community colleges to train teachers, in particular those with alternative certification programs.

As states consider the adoption of alternative certification tracks for teacher education, it is important that programs be built and approved on the basis of appropriate standards of teacher knowledge and performance. New alternative certification programs should be judged on whether they lead to desired outcomes. This should be the case whether the program is offered through a four-year college, school district, community college or other nontraditional provider.

Conclusion

The limited amount of research on whether alternative certification programs are equal, better or worse than traditional programs is inconclusive. What does seem apparent, however, is that alternative certification programs have the ability to recruit and deliver more minority, male and older teachers into urban and rural areas. With federal programs providing increasing support and oversight, and organizations such as NCATE accrediting community college programs, alternative certification programs are not only evolving, but also gaining wider acceptance.

State Examples

Arizona

Alternative certification programs were developed in Arizona after the state board of education revised its teacher certification policy in 1998. The revised policy allowed institutions other than four-year colleges and universities to offer certification programs. ACPs in Arizona provide both residents and out-of-state students with a path to teacher licensure in elementary, secondary or special education.

Students enrolled in **Pima Community College's** Advanced Certificate in Teacher Education program can complete their Arizona teacher certification in two years. Courses are offered every six weeks and can be taken onsite, online or through television or video. A notable requirement of Pima's program is the development of an online teacher portfolio which demonstrates students' skills and comprehension. These portfolios can be shared with other students or used for job interviews or back-to-school nights. Pima's ACP costs approximately \$1,500-2,000 for in-state residents, depending on the type of certification pursued (elementary or secondary).

Rio Salado College is one of 10 community colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District. Its postbaccalaureate teacher certification program has provided more than 800 participants with the skills and support to transition successfully into the public school system. Rio Salado's program is self-paced, with new courses offered every two weeks and an option to finish courses early. Participants are expected to complete online coursework, a nine-week internship and "master teacher seminars" before they are eligible for licensure. The seminars are available on videotape for out-of-state and international participants. Rio Salado's faculty are available to help teacher candidates identify local schools in the community where they can fulfill their classroom practicum requirements. Upon completion of the program, students receive an Arizona teaching certificate, which is recognized by many other states as valid teacher certification through reciprocal licensure agreements. Enrollment in Rio Salado's ACP is approximately \$1,800-2,500 for in-state residents, again depending on the type of certification sought.

Texas

Since 1995, Texas has trained 19,000 candidates through alternative routes. In 2002, 27% of all teachers had completed an alternative certification program; and by 2004, 22 community colleges had approved programs in place. Alternative certification programs in Texas must demonstrate the ability to address standards required of all teachers, provide yearlong internships in the classroom on a full salary and collaborate with districts, institutions of higher education and regional education service centers. Texas does not require all ACPs offer the same number of credit hours, but all programs must include some combination of classroom instruction, observation and field experience.

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