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# Life in the Fast Track: How States Seek to Balance Incentives and Quality in Alternative Teacher Certification Programs

SUSAN MOORE JOHNSON, SARAH E. BIRKELAND,  
and HEATHER G. PESKE

*The prospect of overseeing the rapid preparation of many participants in fast-track alternative certification programs presents several challenges for state education officials who seek to maintain, or even enhance, the quality of the state's teaching force. This study examined a range of fast-track alternative teacher certification programs in 11 sites in three states—Connecticut, Louisiana, and Massachusetts. We found that participants were attracted by the incentives of the fast-track programs but also expected to have coursework and student-teaching experiences that would prepare them well to teach in September. Overall, candidates were satisfied with what the programs offered, though many wanted more preparation in content-based pedagogy and better student-teaching placements. There were advantages and disadvantages to centralized and decentralized approaches by the states to ensure quality of participants.*

**Keywords:** *alternative teacher certification; teacher preparation; teacher quality; certification*

STATE LEGISLATURES AND DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION in the United States have long controlled entry to teaching, setting standards for new teachers' preparation and then granting licenses to individuals who

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completed approved coursework or programs (Cronin, 1983). Although the state retained formal control of the standards for training and licensing new teachers, preservice preparation was largely designed and delivered by local colleges and universities. Typically, a prospective teacher completed at least one full year of coursework and student teaching in a state-approved university program before attaining a license and assuming full responsibility for a class of students.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, however, some states introduced alternative certification, another means of attaining licensure that requires far less preservice preparation. The states did so for two, sometimes related, reasons. First, they were responding to a projected teacher shortage that would require an estimated 2.2 million new teachers between 2000 and 2010 (Hussar, 1999), far more individuals than were preparing to teach in traditional teacher education programs. State officials sought to meet this anticipated staffing demand by authorizing alternative certification programs to recruit large numbers of teaching candidates and prepare them to enter the classroom quickly. Second, some state officials and members of the public were dissatisfied with the quality and extended length of teacher education programs sponsored by colleges and universities. Those critics contended that a streamlined preservice program, which might be designed and delivered by non-university staff, would better meet the needs of prospective teachers. Some officials linked these two reasons by arguing that a shorter, more efficient preparation program would be attractive to a larger pool of strong teaching candidates and could therefore fill more teaching vacancies. This larger pool might include experienced professionals from other fields who were attracted to teaching but discouraged by extensive requirements of a traditional program (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998).

Alternative routes to certification proved to be very popular policies. By 2003, 46 states and the District of Columbia had instituted or approved at least one such program (Feistritzer & Chester, 2003). Today, many states authorize local school districts, consortia of school districts, or nonprofit organizations to sponsor those programs and award teaching licenses. There is tremendous variety among current alternative certification programs. Programs exist within a range of settings and have diverse goals, requirements, and available resources. All of these programs, however, move prospective teachers into full-time, paid teaching positions before they have completed the requirements for professional, or permanent, licensure (Hawley, 1990). Alternative certification, once seen as a last resort strategy to fill gaps in the teaching force and replace emergency certification, has evolved into a widely accepted model of recruiting, training, and certifying qualified new teachers (Feistritzer & Chester, 2003).

One common approach to alternative certification is the fast-track program, which delivers all preservice preparation within one summer. Fast-track programs are meant to attract and accommodate mid-career entrants, who are often unwilling to commit time to preservice preparation. The summer program, which is essentially an ultracondensed version of a traditional teacher education program, includes abbreviated coursework and a field experience of student teaching or classroom observations, the entire preservice component being 5 to 8 weeks long. On completion, participants are provisionally licensed to assume full-time teaching positions. Candidates in fast-track programs, who typically begin their training in late June or early July, assume full responsibility for their own classes in September.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION

Alternative certification programs have attracted considerable attention because of their short duration and because they opened teacher training to providers other than colleges or universities. Much of the research and writing about alternative certification programs has been used to advance one side or the other of a combative debate about the policy's value. Often analysts have sought to assess and compare the effectiveness of subgroups of teachers who have completed either alternative or traditional programs (e.g., Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1999; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). However, for a variety of methodological and ideological reasons, this research has been inconclusive, and controversy persists about whether one group of teachers is more effective (Seftor & Mayer, 2003).

Another line of research has focused on the programs—evaluating their success in reaching recruitment goals (Bliss, 1990; Fowler, 2003; Rice & Brent, 2002; Stoddart, 1990), examining the contexts in which those programs operate (Bliss, 1990; Natriello & Zumwalt, 1993; Stoddart, 1990; Zumwalt, 1991), and elucidating differences and similarities among various program designs (Dill, 1994; Stafford & Barrow, 1994).

For the most part, researchers have studied alternative certification programs from the outside (by examining state policies or program documents) or from a distance (by analyzing large data sets that include information about teachers' preparation and their students' standardized tests scores). With the exception of one study of the New York City Teaching Fellows Program (Buice, 2003), research about alternative certification has paid little systematic attention to participants' views of the programs.

Little note has been taken, as well, of the state's redefined role in teacher education and licensing. Rather than keeping a distance in their oversight capacity, states increasingly assume more responsibility for the programs, from recruiting and selecting participants to overseeing final assessments.

### THE STATE'S ROLE

The prospect of overseeing the rapid preparation of many new teachers in fast-track programs presents several challenges for state education officials who seek to maintain, or even enhance, the quality of the state's teaching force. First, they must decide who will provide the programs. This might be the state, or one of an array of program vendors who propose to offer condensed summer programs that meet the state's minimal standards for licensing. Second, states must develop a means to ensure that these programs recruit and select strong candidates and that those candidates match the fields of shortage. Third, state officials must ensure that the coursework and clinical experiences offered by the programs provide sufficient preservice preparation for candidates to teach satisfactorily in September. Finally, because the preservice preparation is so abbreviated, the state must ensure that candidates for alternative certification are adequately assessed before becoming fully licensed. There is little agreement about what array of experiences and assessments constitute adequate training for new teachers and little experience or research for states to draw on in overseeing the programs.

#### *To Centralize or to Decentralize?*

As the state develops and implements its alternative certification program, officials must decide whether to take a centralized or decentralized approach; that is, should they assume responsibility for recruiting and selecting candidates, developing a preservice curriculum, identifying sites for student teaching, and assessing the candidates' performance, or should they delegate some or all of those responsibilities to local vendors?

In general, organizations deliberately centralize program implementation to maintain consistent standards, to achieve predictable outcomes across program sites, to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale, and to draw on a greater pool of knowledge, expertise, and resources. Program implementation is deliberately decentralized to respond to local needs, priorities, and circumstances; to move authority closer to the work to be done so that appropriate adjustments can be made; and to encourage local initiative and draw on multiple sources of capacity and expertise. Mintzberg (1979) observed that, in reality, very few programs are fully centralized or fully decentralized: "Centralization and decentralization should not be treated as absolutes, but

rather as two ends of a continuum” (p. 185). He presented a third option, “selective decentralization,” an arrangement in which “power over different kinds of decisions rests in different places in the organization” (p. 187). In a selectively decentralized arrangement, a state might retain control over some aspects of its fast-track alternative certification program while delegating others.

#### *Focus of the Current Study*

We began this research convinced that there is much to be learned from considering a variety of alternative certification programs within their state contexts, for there are notable differences in the states’ approaches to managing programs, some exercising more centralized control than others. Therefore, we grounded this article in the perspectives of administrators and participants of 11 alternative certification programs located in three states. We focus on the following research questions:

What responsibilities do the states assume and what responsibilities do they delegate in sponsoring their fast-track programs?

What are the reported consequences, for program implementation and for the participants’ experiences, when the state chooses to centralize or decentralize particular elements of program development and delivery?

In seeking to understand what extent of decentralization is warranted and wise, we chose to focus on states that exercise different levels of control and regulation in the design and delivery of alternative certification programs. These states—Connecticut, Massachusetts and Louisiana—fall at three points on a continuum ranging from centralized to decentralized management and control. For example, Connecticut centralized its approach to recruiting and selecting participants in its Alternative Route to Certification program (ARC), developing and delivering the training, and conducting final licensing assessments. In 2002, when the state expanded beyond its original site and opened new programs to serve two urban districts, Connecticut officials relied on a franchise model of expansion, closely controlling the new programs to ensure that they would replicate the strengths of the original. Louisiana, on the other hand, takes a decentralized approach to its fast-track programs, setting broad parameters and authorizing all vendors whose proposals meet the regulations. Louisiana program vendors are responsible for all aspects of their program: recruiting and selecting candidates, designing and conducting training, and initially assessing those who complete the program. Massachusetts stands between these two, with a selectively decentralized approach. The state retains control over initial recruitment and selection

as well as final assessment, while delegating many aspects of program design and delivery to satellite sites and vendors.<sup>1</sup>

## DATA SOURCES AND METHOD

### *Site Sample*

So that we could consider a range of fast-track programs, we chose to study 11 sites in these three states. Three sites are located in Connecticut, including the original site of the state's ARC and two expansion sites opened in 2002. We studied three sites in Louisiana that were part of Louisiana's Practitioner Teacher Program—one run by a university, one by a local district, and one by a partnership between a local district and a nonprofit organization. We also included five sites from the Massachusetts Institute for New Teachers (MINT); two are university run, and three are managed by a nonprofit organization (see Table 1).

### *Respondent Sample*

The respondent sample includes program directors, selected faculty members, and 4 to 8 participants at each site, depending on the size of the programs. At some program sites, we selected program participants from a list of volunteers. At others, respondents were solicited for interviews by program directors. Where possible, we sought variation in respondents' certification area, gender, race or ethnicity, and career experience at entry (first career or midcareer). We also included representatives of program partnerships, such as school district officials or nonprofit administrators, where applicable. We ensured participants confidentiality and anonymity.

### *Data Collection*

*Interviews.* In summer 2002, we conducted semistructured, in-person interviews ranging from 1 to 2 hours with administrators, faculty, and selected participants at each site. In some cases, where programs were small, we interviewed all of the participants in the program. In other cases, we selected a range of participants and invited them to participate in the study. We used semistructured interview protocols to gather comparable data across sites but tailored the protocols to the particular program. In all, we conducted interviews with 11 program administrators (many of whom served as primary faculty members), 7 additional faculty members, and 71 participants across the 11 programs. In the spring and summer of 2003, we conducted sixty five 30- to 40-minute follow-up interviews with participants.<sup>2</sup> These follow-up interviews—some conducted in person and some by telephone—focused on the

Table 1  
*Alternative Certification Program Sites in the Study Sample, Including Sponsoring Agency, Areas of Certification Offered, and Number of Participants Served in 2002*

| <i>State</i>  | <i>Sites (Pseudonyms)</i> | <i>Sponsor</i>                       | <i>Areas of Certification Offered</i>  | <i>Number of Participants</i> |
|---------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Connecticut   | Hansbury                  | State Department of Higher Education | English (MS and HS); math (MS and HS); social studies (MS and HS); science (MS); biology (HS); chemistry (HS); physics (HS); art, music, K-12 language   | 168                           |
|               | Blaineville Northborough  |                                      | English (MS and HS); math (MS); science (HS); art (K-12)   | 72                            |
|               | Bay City                  | National nonprofit organization      | K-12 language; K-12 bilingual education; biology (HS); math (HS)   | 55                            |
| Massachusetts | Bay City                  | National nonprofit organization      | English; math; science; social studies; business; foreign language; English as a second language (all certification in Grades 5 through 12) (special education in addition to content certification) | 70                            |
|               | Huntsville                |                                      | Same as Bay City   | 15                            |
|               | Westview Lyceum           | State university                     | Same as Bay City   | 26                            |
| Louisiana     | Greyson                   | Private college                      | Science; math; social studies (all certification in Grades 5 through 12)   | 20                            |
|               | Ogletree                  | Private university                   | English; math; science; social studies; foreign language (all certification in Grades 5 through 12)  | 29                            |
|               | Red River                 | National nonprofit organization      | Math (HS); science (HS); special education   | 8                             |
|               |                           |                                      | Elementary (4-8); elementary special education; English (HS); math (HS); science (HS); foreign language (HS); social studies (HS)  | 38                            |
|               | Plumville                 | Rural parish (district)              | Special education  | 6                             |

*Note:* MS = middle school; HS = high school.

candidates' views of the programs from their perspectives as newly practicing teachers. How did they assess the programs some months later? In what ways did they feel most and least prepared to teach? All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

*Document analysis.* For each of the sites in the sample, we reviewed the relevant state legislation to learn about the program's origins, the state's goals, and the regulations for program design. We studied other documents such as program descriptions, selection criteria and processes, and federal grant applications to further understand how each program works. We read course syllabi and state teaching standards to understand the design of program components such as coursework, clinical experiences, and follow-up support. Where available, we reviewed program evaluation documents.

#### *Data Analysis*

After each interview, we completed narrative summaries for each respondent, including information on topics such as career experience, clinical experiences, and coursework. From those summaries, we identified patterns of responses and themes across respondents, sites, and states. We then conducted a rigorous analysis of the interview transcripts, coding and subcoding the transcripts using categories that we had identified in the research questions, subjects that were prominent in the research literature, topics that had surfaced in the analysis of the narrative summaries, and codes that emerged from the transcripts. We used an iterative data analysis process, moving back and forth from the categories, topics, and themes we had identified to the details of individual transcripts to the emerging findings from cross-case analysis between programs. We created matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to summarize data and facilitate cross-case comparisons. For example, a matrix of the timing and character of participants' job placement experiences illuminated the role of the state in job placement. We completed case analyses to describe each site's program elements in design and implementation. In some instances, we engaged in detailed sorting and numbering. For example, we reviewed participants' teaching assignments to determine how many taught in urban, rural, or suburban districts. We regularly wrote analytic memos during the data collection and analysis phases, posing particular questions of the data that allowed us to compare findings across program sites, to illuminate overarching findings among programs, and to consider that which was surprising or puzzling (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Throughout the data analysis, we tested the validity of our findings with several interpretive communities including colleagues on the Project on the

Next Generation of Teachers and teams of advanced doctoral students who assisted with coding and analysis. Given that the data included directors, faculty, and participants, we also used these data to triangulate findings (Maxwell, 1996). Furthermore, we conducted a total of 85 interviews and included 11 program sites in an effort to promote the validity of the findings (Seidman, 1991) and to capture patterns across individuals and programs.

### THE TENSION BETWEEN INCENTIVES AND QUALITY CONTROL

Alternative certification programs have proliferated, in part, as an effort to respond to shortages of qualified teachers. Therefore, the state, or its designated provider of abbreviated teacher preparation programs, must ensure that there are sufficient incentives in the programs to attract enough prospective teachers to fill vacancies. In other words, the state or the program provider must not only design and build the program but also ensure that the program will command interest and draw response from potential applicants. This is particularly challenging when the policies are designed to attract individuals to public school teaching from other sectors.

Incentives to teach, tied to the potential rewards of the profession, are typically divided into two domains—extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are those that are “primarily external and material, such as pay and promotions” (Johnson, 1990). Lortie (1975) defined intrinsic rewards as those that “consist entirely of subjective valuations made in the course of work engagement” (p. 101). Johnson (1990) provided examples of such intrinsic rewards, such as pride in work or achieving a sense of efficacy (p. 57).

When individuals consider whether to become a teacher—whether as first-career or mid-career candidates—they often cite the quest for intrinsic rewards, seeking meaningful work with students, as their primary motivation (Farkas, Johnson, Foleno, Duffett, & Foley, 2000; Johnson, 1990; Lortie, 1975). In addition, those who might teach examine the extrinsic rewards of the profession, particularly the salary they can earn in the short and long term (Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991).

After deciding to teach, prospective teachers must decide what route they will take to the classroom. As individuals consider whether to enter an alternative certification program to teach, they weigh such factors as the length of time of the program and the opportunity costs of completing the program, such as lost salary (Peske, 2002). Policy makers and program designers must structure the costs of the program—out-of-pocket and opportunity—so that prospective candidates will respond favorably to the incentives and apply to

the program. Simultaneously, they must offer preparation that will help these new recruits to attain the anticipated intrinsic rewards that initially attracted them to teaching.

In addition to the challenge of ensuring incentives for participants to complete alternative certification programs, the state, or its designated program provider, designs and implements the program within a policy context increasingly focused on teacher quality. Although the debate about the characteristics of a high-quality teacher is far from resolved (see, e.g., Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2000); No Child Left Behind Act (2001) established federal sanctions for states and districts that fail to employ a high-quality teaching force. Within this context, state policy makers and program directors face the challenge of designing and implementing appealing, fast-track preparation programs that will also ensure teacher quality. They must simultaneously attract large numbers of candidates and reassure stakeholders—the public, the state, and the federal regulators—that program graduates are qualified and prepared to assume full-time teaching responsibilities. Inevitably, tension exists between maintaining the incentive of inexpensive, rapid licensure and offering an in-depth program of coursework and clinical experience.

The states shorten the preservice preparation largely by reducing what they require programs to provide. In response, often the programs minimize attention to theory or research about such topics as cognition or child development and maximize attention to practical techniques with here-and-now applications, such as classroom management or lesson planning. Typically, these alternative certification programs address a state's full range of licensing standards but in much less depth than traditional programs do. Required topics often are combined and dealt with simultaneously, and particular courses or experiences are credited for addressing multiple standards.

The states offer these programs at substantially less cost than traditional teacher education not only because of their short duration but also because they provide fewer options for participants. Sites may decide to accept candidates in a small number of subject fields or teach them in groups, for example, by combining mathematics and science teachers in one course. In addition, these programs often are staffed in skeletal fashion with a small core of one to four key faculty members, who are supplemented by individuals presenting small segments in their area of expertise, for example, special education. Moreover, overhead on these programs is often low, either because the vendors are providing the no-frill program, in part, as a public service or the standard costs imposed by colleges and universities are waived. Ultimately, however, the small budgets of these programs further limit what they can offer candidates, leading critics to contend that they unwisely compromise quality.

## PREVIEW OF FINDINGS

Overall, we found that participants were not only attracted by the incentives of the fast-track programs but also expected to have coursework and student-teaching experiences that would prepare them well to teach in September. Overall, candidates were satisfied with what the programs offered, though many wanted more preparation in content-based pedagogy and better student-teaching placements. There were advantages and disadvantages to centralized and decentralized approaches by the states to ensure quality.

The following discussion first considers the incentives that fast-track programs offer candidates—brief, inexpensive training and the prospect of rapid access to a teaching job in September—and the varying success with which the states and their programs deliver on that large promise. Next we consider the components of the program through which the states or their sites seek to ensure quality. These include the recruitment and selection of candidates, the design and delivery of coursework (generic and subject specific), the provision of field-based practica, and the final assessment of candidates' performance. We return then to the role of the states in sponsoring fast-track programs, examining the tensions and trade-offs of centralized and decentralized program management. Finally, we consider the ongoing challenge of developing sufficient capacity to deliver on promised incentives while simultaneously ensuring quality.

## PROGRAM INCENTIVES

Through these fast-track programs, the states offered participants three incentives: rapid training, reduced costs of becoming certified, and immediate access to a job. Our respondents offered remarkably consistent accounts of the appeal that these fast-track programs had for them. First and foremost, they were attracted by the prospect of rapid training and immediate entry to a paid teaching position—what one MINT respondent called the “quick launch.” For all candidates, but especially for those entering teaching at mid-career, any time required for training meant lost income. From this perspective, the faster the transition from a prior workplace to a new classroom, the better. For example, a Louisiana respondent said that he did not have the luxury of being able to take a year for full-time coursework: “I wouldn't [be in a position] to do that, and I don't think a lot of people are.”

In addition to avoiding the opportunity costs of a year-long teacher education program, there were solid financial incentives for candidates to choose fast-track programs. Candidates' tuition cost in fast-track programs was substantially lower than that charged by traditional, year-long programs at pub-

lic or private universities. For example, in Massachusetts, tuition costs for 1 year of study ranged from approximately \$7,000 at a public university to approximately \$26,700 at a private university.<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts fully subsidized MINT candidates' tuition costs of \$2,500. Thus, MINT participants could expect to save approximately \$7,000 to \$26,000 in tuition costs. Participants in Connecticut's ARC program paid \$3,000, although those who enrolled at one of ARC's two urban sites could receive a \$1,000 tuition reduction by committing to teach in that urban district for 2 years. Connecticut's fast-track candidates who received the subsidy could expect to pay approximately \$3,000 to \$17,000 less for their license than they would pay at a university within the state.<sup>4</sup> Louisiana candidates, who might pay approximately \$3,500 for public and \$30,600 for private university tuition, would spend between \$500 and \$1,700 for fast-track preparation, thus saving approximately \$3,000 to \$29,000.<sup>5</sup> In each case, therefore, candidates could expect to save substantial time (6 to 10 months) and money over what a traditional program would require, while avoiding the opportunity costs of lost income.

For these mid-career entrants, the promise of job placement was also an appealing incentive to participate in these fast-track programs. In making what many described as a financial sacrifice to become teachers, they wanted assurance that a job would be there for them in the fall. Fast-track programs offer the prospect of quick access to a paid teaching position, an outcome that many candidates believe is virtually inevitable given the well-publicized and growing teacher shortage. Knowing what and where they would teach, and how much they would be paid, would allow the new entrants to spend the summer undistracted by a job hunt while they focus on learning to teach. Although the states could guarantee that participants would have condensed, practical, inexpensive training, they were much less able to provide jobs. In fact, only 1 of the 11 sites in our sample—a small, district-run site with only six candidates preparing to teach special education—succeeded. Other programs, particularly those that were more centralized, struggled to deliver on this promise of job placement, largely because hiring is a local matter over which the states have little control.

Massachusetts officials made no offers of assistance in job placement, having found in the 1st year of MINT that they could not ensure jobs. Connecticut struggled to place candidates in the two urban sites where these individuals had signed a commitment to teach. Yet district budget cuts eliminated positions that the candidates were preparing to fill, and the state released candidates as free agents to search elsewhere. The Louisiana programs varied greatly in the assistance they offered candidates in finding jobs, ranging from guaranteeing jobs in one site, to finding jobs late in the summer for the participants, to leaving participants to fend for themselves altogether.

In the end, because hiring is locally controlled, programs that were decentralized and locally operated appeared to have a better chance to arrange jobs for candidates. This was particularly true when programs were sponsored by, or worked in close partnership with, a district. However, even in decentralized arrangements, program providers did not always have the will, the relationships, or the know-how to help participants find jobs in a timely way. The programs' inability to match candidates with jobs before the start of summer training meant that candidates began their preparation without knowing what jobs they would have, and as a result, their training was less focused and deliberate than it might have been.

### MAINTAINING QUALITY

Having provided the incentives of rapid, inexpensive training and quick entry to teaching, states and program providers inevitably faced the challenge of maintaining quality. How, given the abbreviated preparation, could they ensure that the candidates would be prepared to teach effectively in September? At several stages during the course of the program, state officials and program administrators took steps designed to maintain quality. These included soliciting applicants and carefully choosing who would participate in the program, deliberately planning the content and experiences that the program would provide, and assessing the candidates' competence when they completed the program.

### RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

One of the primary ways states could ensure the quality of program graduates was to regulate admission, ensuring that the programs would recruit and select strong candidates. Although the states varied in the extent of involvement and control they exercised in this effort, all three of the states in our sample developed minimum entry standards for candidates in alternative certification programs.

Connecticut required that applicants demonstrate content knowledge in their intended fields and pass the PRAXIS I and II, national standardized examinations designed to measure academic skills in reading, math, and writing as well as subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts' Department of Education mandated that participants pass the Massachusetts Test of Educator Licensure and also established criteria, for example, undergraduate grade point averages, for entry that indicated academic and professional success. Louisiana stipulated that program applicants hold a 2.5 grade point average from their undergraduate institution

and pass PRAXIS I and II. Although the state set the minimum entry standards, programs could set more stringent requirements. Some chose to do so whereas others did not.

There were advantages and disadvantages to a highly centralized system and a highly decentralized system of recruitment and selection. A centralized approach allowed the state to capitalize on economies of scale. It could apply consistent admissions standards while casting a statewide net to bring in a larger number of well-qualified candidates, particularly in shortage areas. However, it is hard to tailor a statewide approach to address specific local shortages. Furthermore, given that district shortages can change quickly or be difficult to predict, the states' efforts ultimately may be misaligned with districts' needs and priorities. However, decentralized approaches might match new teachers to specific local vacancies. Decentralized selection may, indeed, enable program providers to predict prospective participants' fit with a specific program, perhaps improving the likelihood of candidates' success and retention. Decentralized selection might also promote program administrators and school-based personnel to invest in candidates differently than they might if they did not have a role in selection. However, local programs are likely to attract mostly local candidates, and a limited pool of applicants may not have within it the range of experience and ability that the local schools need.

Connecticut recruited participants for all three program sites, and the result was a large pool of applicants from which to choose. Massachusetts' Department of Education conducted a broad advertising campaign to recruit candidates but subcontracted the bulk of the selection process to a private vendor. From the beginning, the MINT program had little trouble in attracting prospective applicants because the alternative certification program was coupled with the Massachusetts signing bonus, a state-funded \$20,000 incentive to attract applicants from other careers to teaching. The department's efforts to advertise widely for able candidates and the incentive of the signing bonus yielded 1,500 applications from within and outside the state for approximately 50 positions.

Louisiana's program sites were more local in their approaches, preferring to "grow [their] own" as one director put it. The sites had to comply with the state's entry standards but otherwise were on their own to recruit and select their participants. As a result, their programs' applicant pools were much smaller than the state-run programs. In one case, the program only received 8 applications for 20 available positions. In another, the program received 15 applications, interviewed seven candidates, and admitted six.

The selection process worked in tandem with recruitment efforts as a critical gatekeeping mechanism for many programs. Massachusetts and Con-

necticut controlled the selection process at the state level. Although the director of the MINT program characterized recruitment as a “cattle call,” he said that selection was competitive and “absolutely has to be the foundation” of a statewide alternative certification system.

The decentralized sites in Louisiana were each responsible for selecting their own participants, and their approaches differed in response to the context. For example, the purpose of the individual programs often played a role in the selection process. Whereas Plumville selected their own candidates, Red River contracted with a nonprofit company to train district employees in that company’s selection model and to run the process. Program administrators at Oglethorpe University selected candidates entirely on their own, accepting every applicant who met their minimum standards.

When centralized recruitment yields a large and strong pool, admission can be more selective. However, because local programs are concerned with hiring teachers for local schools, decentralized recruitment and selection may yield a pool of candidates more likely to accept jobs and stay in the classrooms. However, those individuals’ credentials may not equal those of candidates selected in the statewide programs. Furthermore, given that teachers are likely to remain teaching in locations close to where they live (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002), decentralized recruitment may be a better strategy for filling local shortages.

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMS

Another way that the state could ensure quality is by offering well-designed program components that, when sequenced and combined effectively, can prepare teachers of high quality. The fast-track programs that we studied were much alike in structure, which is not surprising, given the similarities in the policies (request for proposals [RFPs] and state regulations) that established the program guidelines. The programs’ central components involved participants in coursework and a field-based experience, which was either student teaching or observing in summer school classrooms. These programs were not innovative in structure, for they were patterned on traditional teacher education programs. Rather, they were “alternative” in that each segment was an abbreviated version of what colleges and universities might offer in a full-year program. In the following discussion, we examine the components meant to ensure that participants would be prepared to enter classrooms in the fall—coursework, field-based practica, and assessment.

It must be emphasized that, overall, respondents reported great satisfaction with the programs, often commenting that the compressed schedule necessarily limited what might be offered. Repeatedly, respondents explained

that they had come to the program with realistic expectations, never thinking that every activity would directly relate to their work, that all their questions would be answered, or all their needs met. One participant said that he had been “looking to hit 60%” of his expectations and was satisfied with what he experienced. Another explained, “I don’t know that you can provide a perfect situation in the summer, but I would rather have had this than nothing. . . . At least I’ll get the accelerated, condensed version.” These individuals, similar to the large majority of respondents in the current study, were entering teaching at midcareer, bringing with them work and life experience that they expected would compensate for whatever gaps might exist in their condensed training.

Many participants also believed that much of their learning would come on the job while they were teaching, rather than during the course of the program. A participant in a Louisiana program said, “And I think teaching’s like fishing. You can read about fishing all you want, but until you fish, you’re not going to be very good at it.” Nonetheless, they were far from indifferent about the substance of the programs, particularly as they realized what it might mean to become responsible for a classroom within weeks.

#### *Coursework*

Traditional, university-run certification programs have long structured their course requirements in response to state regulations and standards established to ensure that all certified teachers would be exposed to comparable content and experiences. Similarly, one way that states seek to ensure the quality of alternatively certified teachers is to regulate the curricula of the programs. State officials who authorize or sponsor alternative certification programs today must decide what coursework is minimally required, what the content of the coursework will be, who determines that content, and who is authorized to deliver it.

Each of the states studied established a minimum threshold of coursework credit hours for fast-track alternative certification programs as well as requirements for including particular topics. Connecticut state officials in the Department of Higher Education centrally coordinated the delivery of the ARC coursework, as well as assuring that it met state standards. Massachusetts delegated the responsibility for developing curricula to three vendors at seven sites, which were closely supervised by the Department of Education. Louisiana allowed each program to plan and deliver its own coursework, with minimal oversight from the state.

*Generic versus subject-specific pedagogical training.* Each program site offered regular sessions (four to five afternoons each week) dealing with a

range of generic pedagogical issues, for example, how to maintain order in the classroom, how to develop and use assessments, or how to conduct group work. At each site, the cohort group of candidates, which ranged in size from 6 to 168, met for these sessions altogether or in small groups.

In Connecticut, generic coursework dealing with broad issues of pedagogy took the form of a state-organized lecture series delivered by expert consultants for all participants at every ARC site. These consultants delivered lectures on topics such as brain research and how students think, cooperative learning, and lesson and unit design. This approach enabled the state to regulate the content and consistency of the content; however, it did not allow any tailoring of content for specific district or school contexts.

Coursework in generic pedagogy differed much more from site to site in Massachusetts and Louisiana, in response to priorities and expertise of program administrators and faculty members. For example, the director of one university-based program in Massachusetts, a former principal with considerable experience in teacher supervision, built this part of the curriculum on an analysis of instructional skills called *The Skillful Teacher*, by Jonathan Saphier and Robert Gower (1997), while another director, who was an expert in special education, focused on how to teach students with special needs and different learning styles.

In addition to learning about general teaching topics, program participants also said that they needed to learn how to teach in their content areas. Those enrolled in fast-track programs usually had majored in the subjects they planned to teach, and often work in previous careers had required them to regularly use the content. Despite such knowledge and experience, these candidates reported needing to develop additional skills in how to teach their subject, pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). Knowing a great deal about cell biology did not lead automatically to understanding how to organize and teach a lab for students. Experience as a journalist did not translate neatly into a writing program for middle school students.

The programs we studied devoted far less time and attention to subject-specific pedagogy than to generic teaching strategies, despite the value that candidates saw in it. There were, however, notable differences from state to state. For example, Connecticut grouped their large pool of candidates by subject area and offered daily afternoon methods classes on subject-specific pedagogy, taught by master teachers from Connecticut public schools. Because its program was large, Connecticut could offer these methods courses in many subjects. Nevertheless, although well regarded, these ARC methods courses could not tailor pedagogical training to local contexts, such as a particular mathematics curriculum that a district might choose.

In contrast, the Massachusetts MINT sites offered, at most, one session in subject-specific pedagogy per week, often addressing two or more content areas in one session, for example, biology, chemistry, and physics. In the extreme, participants in the MINT sites that were operated by a nonprofit company had only one full day of subject-specific workshops during their entire training, which many respondents judged to be inadequate and minimally useful.

The difficulty Massachusetts faced in offering subject-specific pedagogical training to participants at each site resulted partly from the fact that they offered certification in many subjects at each site. For example, one program site, staffed only by two veteran English teachers, offered certification in math, science, foreign language, English, and social studies. The program faculty did not have the expertise to prepare candidates in each of those content areas and, instead, tried to provide generic instruction.

In Louisiana, the three sites we studied had very different offerings in subject-specific pedagogy. The site that focused exclusively on preparing special education teachers for one district offered pedagogical training that was not only subject specific but also grounded in local educational practica. In contrast, the national nonprofit organization, responsible for the largest of the three Louisiana programs, offered prospective teachers no specialized training in their certification subject areas. The third Louisiana site offered two separate methods courses: one for special education candidates and another for the five math candidates and one science candidate.

Although opinions differ about whether subject-specific training is necessary, or even worthwhile, participants in the current study consistently said that they valued it, and program providers, in general, tried to provide it. However, the relatively small size of the cohorts at most sites and the limited number of faculty each program could afford made it hard to provide such targeted preparation. Program sites in Massachusetts served cohorts of 15 to 70 participants in four to six content areas, without the resources to staff classes in content-based pedagogy for each subject. Programs in Louisiana that offered fewer certification areas could limit their training to only a few subjects; however, sometimes small numbers of participants (e.g., one science candidate) made specialized training impossible.

#### *Field-Based Practica*

Each of the states required some form of field-based experience—student teaching in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and student teaching or classroom observations in Louisiana. All who were involved in these programs—state officials, program directors, faculty, and participants—saw value in

having a practice teaching experience that would offer the prospective teacher a realistic experience in a setting that resembled a regular school.

For several reasons this was rarely possible to ensure. First, the only public school classes in session while fast-track programs were underway were conducted in summer school, which typically offered small classes in a limited number of subjects for a short time each day. Sometimes the curriculum consisted of enrichment courses not even taught during the regular school year. In other instances, the summer schools offered only remedial classes in state-tested subjects. In addition, the summer school setting rarely reflected the intensity and demands of the regular school year—a tight schedule, a crowded lunchroom, competing demands for computer space. Moreover, summer school classes were not necessarily taught by master teachers who could serve as mentors, and sometimes they were taught by teachers working outside their field. For example, in one case, a home economics teacher was assigned to teach an English class where an alternative certification candidate had been assigned.

Although they faced many similar obstacles, programs had varying levels of success in providing worthwhile practice. A program's success depended on having a strong working relationship with the cooperating district so that assignments of the candidates could be made thoughtfully. Program directors working in more decentralized contexts, such as Massachusetts and Louisiana, had an easier time forming those relationships, although decentralization provided no guarantee of success. At sites where there was animosity toward the alternative certification program, student-teaching placements often proved to be poorly organized or unsatisfactory. Where tenuous relationships existed, the experiences of student teachers were uneven.

Although Massachusetts requires a classroom teaching experience that provides MINT candidates "significant responsibility for student achievement in a classroom that replicates, as much as possible, the full-time teaching responsibilities the candidates will have in the fall," many participants had teaching placements that did not match their subject or grade level. Sometimes a program director assigned a candidate to work with a strong mentor, even if she or he taught in a different content area. Other times it was because the subjects in which candidates sought certification simply were not offered in summer school. Mismatches were more often the rule than the exception.

Connecticut participants completed 4 weeks of student teaching under the supervision of a cooperating teacher in a public school. At the original ARC site, the state administrators had built strong relationships during 16 years with local districts and the cooperating teachers. Thus, for the most part,

ARC participants at the original site taught classes that matched their fields of certification, and they generally reported satisfaction with those placements. However, at the expansion sites in Connecticut, the directors scrambled to establish new relationships with summer schools and to arrange appropriate student-teaching placements with cooperating teachers. One director explained, "We'd like it to be close to the classroom experience. It's not always that easy to do in summer school." One ARC participant in a new site characterized the student-teaching placements that he and his peers had as "an embarrassing situation"; some mentors were not even licensed.

In Louisiana, the state with the least centralized approach to the development and regulation of programs, there was the greatest variation from site to site in how the field-based component was implemented. The state specified only that "all teachers will participate in field-based experiences in school settings" while completing the summer courses. At one site, participants did student teaching, much like their counterparts in Connecticut and Massachusetts. At a second site, participants completed structured observations in the schools where they would be teaching in the fall. At a third site, participants independently arranged and completed observations in whatever summer school classrooms that they could get access to, which often meant observing outside of their area of license.

Within the context of a summer program, it is difficult to provide sufficient practical experience for fast-track participants. The Connecticut and Massachusetts requirements for appropriate and relevant placements were difficult for program providers to meet, but not because they were reluctant to comply. Establishing appropriate field-based practica was a complicated enterprise, yielding uneven results, and state officials could only encourage and support the programs in their effort to establish good, productive experiences. Even in decentralized arrangements, in which local program sponsors and school officials are supposed to work together to coordinate student-teaching placements, developing strong partnerships takes time, shared interests, and sustained effort.

As with job placement, neither the state nor the alternative certification programs it created could ensure that candidates would have appropriate and productive clinical experiences unless the local district collaborated to make them possible. The best chance of arranging good matches existed in a program, such as Plumville's, that was sponsored by the district itself. Given the peculiarities of summer school, however, even a district-sponsored program could not ensure that fast-track candidates would have a relevant and productive experience.

## ASSESSMENT

The three states in our sample had one final means of monitoring the quality of the teachers prepared through alternative certification programs: They could assess their performance after they completed the program. Each state chose a slightly different approach; however, the end results were strikingly similar: In all 11 programs, final assessments of participants' knowledge and skills were relatively undemanding. The vast majority of participants who completed the summer session passed the assessments and were awarded initial certification.

Connecticut required that participants pass ARC program requirements to attain initial certification—completing a paper on educational theory, attending all courses, and receiving passing scores on teaching observations conducted by ARC faculty members. By all accounts, few participants did not pass these program-based assessments. Connecticut mandated that in their 1st year of teaching, all new teachers, including ARC participants, complete Connecticut's state-sponsored induction program, the Beginning Educator Support and Training Program (BEST). The director of the ARC program remarked, "I sleep better at night knowing that the BEST program exists." The state developed more extensive special requirements for ARC program graduates than traditionally certified candidates—including 2 years of school-based mentor support, an initial assessment of their competence after 90 days of teaching, and additional hours of professional development.<sup>7</sup> All new teachers in the state submit a portfolio at the end of their 2nd year of teaching, which state assessors review before granting professional certification.

The Massachusetts MINT program also relied on a centrally reviewed portfolio assessment. Candidates completed an end-of-summer portfolio. On passing this portfolio and the summer program requirements, they received provisional licensure. After the 1st year of teaching, MINT graduates completed a second portfolio—a requirement for attaining the next level of certification. Both portfolios were collected by the state and sent to a team of reviewers contracted by the Department of Education. Candidates reported receiving feedback that ranged from a little to a lot, useless to useful. Whatever the feedback, there was little in the way of consequence. At least one MINT candidate never turned in his portfolio yet still passed the program. The MINT director conceded that the portfolio functioned more as a "rubber stamp" than a quality control mechanism and reported his plans for overhauling the process.

The assessment processes in the Louisiana program were not, in every case, easy to identify. As in Connecticut, participants moved from the alternative certification programs into a state-sponsored induction and assessment system. Program providers were responsible for determining if candidates were ready to pass into that system. Indeed, the program providers in all three sites did conduct end-of-summer assessments but gave little indication that these assessments carried any weight. In fact, a faculty member at one site reported that he was not allowed to fail students.

In sum, none of the programs in our sample emphasized final, end-of-program assessments as a means of ensuring the quality of the candidates they trained. They instead relied on the districts and the state induction programs to evaluate the quality of the provisionally certified teachers they produced.

#### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We found that participants in fast-track programs were attracted by the incentives that these states offered through their programs—brief and inexpensive preparation, coupled with the prospect of rapid entry to a paid teaching position. Many candidates, particularly the large number of mid-career entrants, reported that they could not have afforded the out-of-pocket and opportunity costs of longer, more expensive teacher education programs. They welcomed the short, inexpensive programs, and those candidates who received assistance in finding jobs appreciated it.

However, the states were responsible not only for creating a set of attractive incentives to draw strong candidates into teaching but also for ensuring that these teachers would be ready to teach at the end of the summer. In doing so, the states (or the vendors they selected) relied on various strategies for ensuring quality—recruiting and rigorously selecting candidates; offering well-designed, expertly taught coursework; providing high-quality student-teaching experiences; or conducting final assessments of participants' performance. If the skills and performance of entering teachers were to be ensured, the incentives of abbreviated preparation and placement had to be balanced with such quality controls.

Notably, the candidates, too, were concerned about quality. They were not seeking the equivalent of mail-order licenses and did not believe that subject knowledge, alone, would enable them to succeed in the classroom. Most realized that a short summer program could only equip them with basic tools and preliminary experience; however, they also knew that they would be on their own at the head of a class in less than 2 months' time. Thus, candidates sought focused preparation in pedagogy, including generic teaching strategies, subject-

specific methods of instruction, and a useful experience practice teaching in the field. These expectations—tempered as they were by realistic views about what was possible—placed large demands on the state officials and program providers. In most cases, neither had the capacity to deliver all that was needed.

The extent to which a state centralized or decentralized its approach to managing particular components of these programs influenced the capacity of sites to serve candidates well and to ensure that they would be prepared to begin teaching in September. Centralized and decentralized approaches had strengths and limitations. Centralized recruitment yielded large pools of applicants and made it possible for them to be selective; however, this approach offered no assurance that the individuals who were selected would match local staffing needs or be willing to fill vacancies throughout the state. Decentralized approaches to recruitment and selection yielded smaller pools of applicants, thus limiting programs' options to be selective. However, these decentralized programs could better respond to districts' needs and fill current vacancies with teachers who understood the local setting and might stay in their positions over time.

Large, centralized programs could monitor the quality of coursework and take advantage of economies of scale by providing specialized courses in many content areas. Decentralized programs could tailor coursework to local conditions, and a particular district's curriculum, but because they were small could not offer courses in how to teach a wide range of subjects. Meanwhile, decentralized programs—particularly those that were sponsored by districts—generally could arrange better field practica than centralized programs because they had established partnerships with the schools that served as settings for practice teaching. However, all sites that we studied had trouble providing realistic teaching experiences in summer school. Assessment, which might have been conducted effectively through a centralized portfolio review process or a decentralized review of classroom practice, did not serve as a strategy for quality control. Candidates who were admitted to the program and completed the requirements—attended classes regularly, met minimal expectations in student teaching, and submitted required portfolios—could expect to receive provisional teaching licenses.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

These findings yield several implications for policy and practice related to the design and management of fast-track alternative certification programs.

First, although states can actively contribute to the wide recruitment and rigorous selection of fast-track program participants, local programs appear

to be more effective in recruiting people to fill local needs. In particular, locally grounded programs with connections to school districts are in a much better position to place candidates in jobs. Therefore, if the goal is to ameliorate local shortages by recruiting teachers to fill particular positions, candidate selection must be handled close to the district level.

Second, program administrators are pressed for time and resources. They typically rely on their own judgment to make the best use of the summer, rather than closely following state-mandated curricular requirements. In addition, assessment of candidates' quality at the end of the programs typically happens as a ritual, or an afterthought, rather than as a stringent mechanism of quality control. Therefore, it is likely that graduates of fast-track programs have spotty exposure to relevant theory and coursework and have not been rigorously assessed by the program. This shifts the burden of quality control and support to school-level evaluation practices and state-run teacher assessment programs. It is the administrators and staff of the schools in which these teachers are hired who will eventually be expected to judge their quality and determine whether they earn professional certification, through evaluation processes that typically span several years. This may effectively provide oversight for longer term teachers but will miss those who enter through fast-track programs and teach for only a few years. Therefore, local districts must quickly assume the responsibility to assess new teachers' performance and to dismiss inadequate entrants well before they receive tenure.

For alternative certification programs, significant partnerships with local school districts are of central importance. Through these partnerships, the districts can facilitate useful summer school teaching experiences and timely, effective job placement. The program providers can tailor training to meet district needs and provide on-the-job support that schools may not have the capacity to provide. These partnerships are formed through personal connections and trust; the state, on its own, does not have the wherewithal or local presence to make them work.

Finally, all of the programs we studied, particularly small ones, struggled with problems of human resource capacity and financial and physical resources. Although effective summer clinical placements and job matching must be facilitated by local programs, there are things that the state can do. For example, states could develop centralized resources that these programs might draw on—key speakers, curricula, selection strategies, formative assessments for candidates, guidebook for mentors—rather than leaving this entirely to the local programs. State involvement at this level would alleviate some of the burden from local agencies and small programs, while leaving them to focus on what they do best.

In the end, a selectively decentralized model of fast-track program delivery—one in which the states increase programmatic capacity by providing resources, while local agencies control selection and job placement—appears to be the most efficient way to prepare large numbers of high-quality teachers quickly. If alternative certification continues as a primary policy device for recruiting and training a qualified teacher for every classroom, then policy makers would do well to carefully consider their design and delivery, to make the best use of people and resources.

## NOTES

1. Since we collected data for this study in 2002, additional alternative certification programs have developed around the state. Although they are still authorized by the state, the Department of Education has been less involved in the oversight of these programs than it has been in the Massachusetts Institute for New Teacher (MINT) program.

2. We attempted to interview all the participants we had originally interviewed; however, some of them did not respond to our requests for follow-up interviews. In several instances, the contact information was incorrect.

3. This range is based on 1 year of tuition at the University of Massachusetts compared to 1 year of tuition at Clark University, Worcester (2003-2004). Available at [www.clarku.edu/offices/business/tuition.shtml](http://www.clarku.edu/offices/business/tuition.shtml).

4. These figures are based on 1 year of resident (in-state) graduate tuition at the University of Connecticut, reported for fall 2003, available at [www.grad.uconn.edu/fees.html](http://www.grad.uconn.edu/fees.html), compared to 1 year of resident graduate tuition at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, available at [www.sacredheart.edu/admissions/financialaid/cost/](http://www.sacredheart.edu/admissions/financialaid/cost/).

5. This calculation is based on a comparison between 1 year of resident graduate-level tuition at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, reported for spring 2003, available at [www.bgtplan.lsu.edu/fees/02-03/grad](http://www.bgtplan.lsu.edu/fees/02-03/grad), and 1 year of tuition for graduate students at Tulane University, New Orleans, 2003-2004, available at [www.tulane.edu/finaid/2004gradcoa.shtml](http://www.tulane.edu/finaid/2004gradcoa.shtml).

6. PRAXIS I and II are nationally administered standardized tests. PRAXIS I measures candidates' academic skills in math, reading, and writing. PRAXIS II, Subject Assessments, measures candidates' knowledge of the subjects they will teach, as well as general and subject-specific pedagogical skills and knowledge. For more information, see [www.ets.org/praxis/prxaboutI.html](http://www.ets.org/praxis/prxaboutI.html).

7. "A Guide to the BEST Program for Beginning Teachers," Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Curriculum and Teacher Standards, August 1999. Available at [www.state.ct.us/sde/brta/index.htm](http://www.state.ct.us/sde/brta/index.htm).

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