



Realizing the Promise

How State Policy Can Support Alternative Certification Programs

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Center for American Progress



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Executive summary

A recent McKinsey & Company analysis of the top performing school systems in the world found that, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”¹ The education community is in virtually unanimous agreement that effective teaching is critical to all other education reform efforts. This consensus has led to an increase in policies focused on improving teacher quality. Yet the question of how policy can drive changes in the quality of the teaching force is complex and yields no easy answers. One increasingly promising strategy is the development of alternative preparation and certification programs. These programs can increase the supply of talented teaching candidates, particularly for subject shortage areas and high-needs schools.

In most states, teachers obtain a certificate by graduating from college, taking a specific set of education courses, and completing a practice teaching component.² The course requirements vary depending upon the teaching assignment.³ In contrast, alternative certification programs generally target applicants who already have an undergraduate degree but need education coursework to meet the state’s requirements for certification. These programs frequently streamline many of the licensure requirements expected from graduates of traditional programs.⁴ Alternative certification programs, for example, may require shorter but more intensive practice teaching assignments and more targeted coursework and learning experiences.⁵ Also, teachers in alternative certification programs usually assume the duties of a classroom teacher while taking education courses and working toward a standard teaching license.

Alternative certification programs have proliferated in recent years. According to data from the National Center for Education Information, more than half of current programs have been established in the last 15 years. In 2008, all states and the District of Columbia had some type of alternate route to teacher certification.⁶

These programs are among the most promising strategies for expanding the pipeline of talented teachers, particularly for subject shortage areas and high-needs schools, yet states frequently do not have policies in place to develop and expand robust alternative certification programs. This paper analyzes the policies that are needed and puts them into three categories: minimizing participant burden, ensuring program quality, and encouraging innovation and growth.

Minimize participant burden

States should ensure that alternative certification programs are affordable to a wide range of nontraditional candidates by strategically requiring university coursework and learning experiences that are essential to a beginning teacher. States should specify the competencies new teachers must demonstrate in order to be certified, rather than the numbers of courses or credit hours new teachers should take. Providers of teacher preparation programs could then design courses and learning experiences to ensure new teachers demonstrate these skills. Programs should select candidates who have already mastered their content area and only need training in teaching methods. States that do not take costs and time commitments to participants into account when developing policies are likely to limit the pool of candidates interested in alternative certification programs, reducing the programs' selectivity and thus the caliber of participants.

Ensure program quality

In order to ensure program quality, state policies should support the recruitment of talented candidates, assessment and support of program participants, mentoring and induction support, and accountability for programs to produce effective teachers.

One critique of alternative certification programs is that they are not sufficiently selective. States and institutions of higher education could address this problem in both traditional and alternative certification programs by setting higher standards for candidates' minimum grade point averages and cut scores—the minimum score needed to qualify—on licensing exams. States should commission analyses that weigh the costs and benefits of the proposed higher standards to ensure they raise the quality of program entrants, not bar from teaching those who would otherwise be effective with students.

High quality programs assess participants and deliver formative feedback, both to monitor participants' skills and help them grow professionally. States should consider including a performance-based component in teacher certification that would encourage both traditional and alternative certification programs to provide teachers with learning experiences that help them demonstrate these competencies and assess their progress toward meeting them. States could also build this ongoing assessment of candidates' performance into the approval process for teacher preparation programs.

States can also ensure program quality by designing and funding high-quality mentoring and induction programs for alternate route teachers, since research finds that these programs increase teacher retention.

Finally, one of the primary ways states can improve program quality is by strengthening accountability for both traditional and alternate route programs. Programs should be

judged by the performance of their graduates, at least in part based on their effects on student achievement. This measurement requires robust state and district data systems that can link teachers to students, and a variety of processes to ensure that the systems are accurate. Therefore, states must work to establish the underlying infrastructure needed for such accountability systems which, once in place, would also allow the state and others to study the effectiveness of a variety of programs and to determine which components of training programs are most critical for preparing successful teachers.

Encourage innovation and growth

States should take steps to ensure that their alternate route programs are truly designed to foster innovation and the expansion of promising programs. In this matter, states should establish a certificate or a license specifically for alternate route candidates. They should not bring nontraditional candidates into the classroom on an emergency or temporary certificate, or a permit, because these credentials are usually not designed to ensure that nontraditional candidates are “highly qualified” or on track to obtain the next type of license. Additionally, if states are truly committed to expanding the teacher pipeline, they should issue licenses to alternate route teacher candidates across all subject areas, grade levels and geographic areas.

To encourage the development of programs that are more customized to meet the needs of school districts and the alternate route candidates themselves, states should allow nonprofits, districts, and charter schools to serve as teacher preparation programs, while ensuring all providers meet state standards of quality. Allowing multiple providers would foster healthy competition, potentially improving the quality of all programs. It would also provide more opportunities for evaluation and learning that can inform all programs. Moreover, recent studies have shown that teaching candidates prepared by these providers can be as effective, if not more so, than teachers from university providers.⁷

Finally, federal funds should support the development and expansion of high-quality, innovative alternative certification programs, through state grants targeted at serving high-needs schools and subject areas.⁸ The grants should focus on funding innovative programs that have had some success, but could scale up with an additional infusion of resources.

How to promote effective policies

Establishing alternative certification programs that meet quality criteria without imposing unnecessary barriers is best accomplished by creating strong statutory and regulatory language. Passing supportive legislation and regulations in most states is no small endeavor and requires specialized knowledge of the process and the political players involved. It is sometimes argued that entrepreneurial organizations in education reform should take

the lead in making the needed statutory and regulatory changes happen across the states. However, as Fredrick Hess and Chester Finn argue, the best role for such organizations is to serve as “proof points” that such policies can work.⁹ Working in concert, advocates and entrepreneurial organizations in the education sector can collaborate with state legislators to bring about the needed policy changes.

Conclusion

A large body of evidence indicates that efforts to improve student learning will not be successful without increasing the supply of effective teachers, particularly in high poverty and low performing schools. Alternative certification programs are a promising strategy for addressing that necessity. Yet, for the benefits of alternative certification programs to be realized, policymakers need to institute policies that ensure the programs are able to attract and retain talented participants and provide them with high quality preparation programs.

Introduction

My experience as a corps member has completely changed my career trajectory. I have always wanted a career that would allow me to be directly involved with improving the lives of children, hence medical school (with the goal of becoming a pediatrician). I never thought of working in the education field until joining Teach For America. I plan to stay in this field and I really look forward to the possibilities that doing so is sure to bring.

LaToya Johnson, Teach For America Alumnus, South Louisiana, 2003, currently teaching 8th grade in KIPP DC: AIM Academy in Washington, DC.

LaToya probably would not have taught if she had not had access to an alternative certification program. She did not major in education and was not planning to teach until she learned about Teach For America and applied. She illustrates the value of alternative certification programs: attracting talented teaching candidates to the schools that need them the most.

Yet the promise of alternative certification programs has not always been realized. While alternative certification programs are an important policy lever for improving teacher quality, the programs vary tremendously in scope and quality. This paper will recommend policy changes to expand the supply of high quality programs. We will consider two kinds of alternative certification programs. The first, which includes most university-based programs, certify teachers directly. The second, including programs such as Teach For America, recruits and prepares teacher candidates but partners with other organizations to provide the coursework required for certification.

In most states, in order to receive a teaching certificate through a traditional route, teachers must graduate from college, take a specific set of education courses, and complete a practice teaching component. The course requirements vary depending upon the teaching assignment but generally comprise about 30 credit hours. In contrast, alternative certification programs are targeted toward applicants who already have an undergraduate degree but need the education coursework to meet the state's requirements for certification. These programs frequently streamline many of the licensure requirements expected of graduates of traditional programs. Alternative certification programs may require shorter, but more intensive practice teaching assignments and more targeted coursework and learning experiences. Also, teachers in alternative certification programs usually assume the duties of a classroom teacher while taking education courses and working toward a standard teaching license.

As with traditional teacher preparation programs, alternative certification programs vary tremendously in nature, scope, and quality. Programs like Teach For America and the New Teacher Project have become increasingly popular and have expanded in scale. These programs recruit college graduates or working professionals who did not major in education, identify program participants through a robust and highly competitive selection model, provide enrollees with training and support, and help them find teaching positions in high-needs school districts. These organizations generally do not certify teachers themselves; instead they partner with universities or other certification providers, such as school districts, to provide the coursework for certification.

Alternative certification programs have proliferated in recent years. According to data from the National Center for Education Information, more than half of current programs have been established in the last 15 years. In 2008, all states and the District of Columbia had some type of alternate route to teacher certification. These programs prepared approximately 57,000 teachers in about 500 programs in 2006-07, compared to about 20,355 teachers in 2000-01. About a third of teachers hired nationally are prepared through alternative certification programs.

This policy brief first describes alternative certification programs, the needs they were designed to address, and what is known about their impact from research. It then outlines state policies that would encourage the development and expansion of high-quality, alternative certification programs. The policies are categorized into three buckets: minimize participant burden, ensure program quality, and encourage innovation and growth.

The need for alternative certification programs

Alternative certification programs are intended to increase the pool of talented teaching candidates, particularly for high-needs schools and subject areas. They also address the dual challenges of teacher supply and quality. Many traditional teacher education programs are unable to supply enough teachers for specific states and regions, schools such as those of high poverty urban and rural areas, and certain subjects like math, science, and special education. Alternative certification programs often target subject shortage areas and recruit teachers who are suited to and interested in filling these hard-to-staff positions. Moreover, by increasing the supply of teacher applicants for hard-to-staff positions, many districts are able to be more selective in choosing teacher candidates, thus increasing the caliber of their teaching workforce. In other words, if District X used to receive two applicants for special education positions, and now receives four applicants because of an alternative certification program, District X can be more discriminating and hopefully select a better applicant.

In terms of quality, the main critiques of traditional programs continue to be that they are not selective, their curricula are not very rigorous, and they are not training teachers adequately for specialized teaching environments. One four-year study of 28 education schools released in 2006 and authored by Arthur Levine, the former president of Teacher's College at Columbia University, found that these university-based programs had low admission and graduation standards and had an outdated vision of teacher education.¹⁰ A national survey of education school alumni also found that about 62 percent reported that “schools of education do not prepare their graduates to cope with the realities of today’s classrooms.”¹¹ Traditional programs that are rigorous, effective, and meet the needs of school districts do exist, but there are not a sufficient number of them.¹² Alternative certification programs can help to fill this gap. While they may have originally been designed to fill staffing shortages, alternative certification programs can also provide high-quality teaching candidates across all teaching areas, and have the potential to motivate other teacher preparation programs to raise their standards.

Alternative certification programs can be designed to be more selective and attract a higher caliber of applicant, but this is not uniformly the case. An analysis of seven alternative certification programs with different designs, for example, found that “although alternative route teachers are overall more likely to have graduated from competitive IHEs (institutions of higher education) than from noncompetitive ones,” there was wide variation between programs in the quality of their participants.¹³

Alternative certification programs also have the potential to innovate and to better serve the needs of a state, district, or even a school, since they are often created by these entities to meet an expressed need. For instance, the teaching fellows programs developed by The New Teacher Project are designed in partnership with school districts to find promising candidates to fill hard-to-staff positions in high poverty schools and subject shortage areas, and provide those candidates with the necessary training to ensure they are successful. Such programs also have the potential to diversify the teaching workforce by recruiting candidates with a variety of career and educational experiences, and they often include a higher percentage of minority teaching candidates than traditional programs.¹⁴

The efficacy of alternative certification programs

Recent research has found that teachers vary a great deal in their effectiveness regardless of how they enter the profession.¹⁵ Considered one of the more rigorous studies, a recent evaluation of the impact of alternative and traditionally certified teachers in 63 schools confirms this finding.¹⁶ This study, conducted by researchers at Mathematica Policy Research, found that students of alternatively certified teachers performed similarly in reading and mathematics to those of traditionally certified teachers.¹⁷ This research bolsters the case for alternative certification programs. Because a teacher's pathway into the profession doesn't predict performance, state policies should help districts recruit the best teacher candidates through either traditional or alternative certification programs.

The Mathematica study purposefully excluded the more selective alternative certification programs like Teach For America and The New Teacher Project. So it is likely that more selective programs could indeed have a more positive impact on student achievement. And, in fact, a handful of rigorous evaluations have shown that teachers recruited, trained, and, in some cases, certified by Teach For America and The New Teacher Project are as effective, if not more effective, than teachers who completed traditional certification programs. One study found that Teach For America teachers had a positive effect on students' mathematics achievement, compared to other teachers in similar schools, and produced results similar to other teachers in improving students' reading achievement.¹⁸ Another study found that Teach For America teachers had a more positive effect on high school students' achievement compared to other teachers, with results particularly strong in mathematics and science.¹⁹ An additional study of pathways into teaching in New York City that included teachers from both Teach For America and the New York City Teaching Fellows program found that alternatively certified teachers produced smaller initial gains in student achievement, but most of these differences disappeared after a year of teaching.²⁰ What's more, the differences *within* pathways to teaching were far greater than differences *between* pathways to certification.²¹

Another recent study looked at seven teacher preparation programs in Louisiana and assessed the impact of their graduates on student achievement. The researchers found that teachers who participated in the Louisiana Practitioner Teacher Program—which is run by The New Teacher Project and includes participants from Teach For America and two programs administered by the New Teacher Project—are more effective than experienced teachers in increasing student achievement in core subjects.²²

While there is strong research evidence supporting the effectiveness of Teach For America and the programs of The New Teacher Project, there is little empirical evidence about the efficacy of other alternative certification programs. The qualitative research, however, suggests that the quality of programs varies tremendously.

The need for policy changes

The promise of alternative certification programs has not yet been realized, as recent survey research makes clear, but state policies can help facilitate improvements. Kate Walsh and Sandi Jacobs of the National Council on Teacher Quality, in a report produced for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, found that alternative certification programs are often “alternative in name only.”²³ Many of the programs they surveyed were similar to traditional routes in their course and admission requirements, and provided little flexibility to meet the needs of non-traditional candidates.²⁴ And, a recent survey by Paul E. Peterson and Daniel Nadler finds that while 21 states have alternative teacher certification programs with less burdensome course requirements, 26 states have alternative certification programs with requirements that are virtually identical to traditional programs.²⁵

At the same time, Walsh and Jacobs found that alternative certification programs often do not provide adequate training and support to their participants, with “less than half of the surveyed programs provid[ing] a practice teaching opportunity in the summer before participants start to teach.”²⁶ While 83 percent of the programs they surveyed provide new-teacher support, “only about a third of the programs require a mentor to visit the new teacher’s classroom at least once a week, even during the first semester of teaching.”²⁷ As we discuss in more detail later in the paper, mentoring and new teacher support increases teacher retention.

To realize the promise of alternative certification programs, states must make policy changes that reduce barriers to the expansion of innovative programs while maintaining program quality. The next section identifies policy changes that would spur quality, innovation, and growth in alternative certification programs. The policies were identified through research, analysis of the needs of alternative certification programs, and the experiences of one innovative program, Teach For America. In this brief, we have grouped the policy changes needed into three categories: minimize participant burden, ensure program quality, and encourage innovation and growth.

Minimize participant burden

In order to attract talented applicants to the teaching profession and ensure they have as much time as possible to focus on their new teaching assignments, states should minimize the cost to participants and carefully target coursework and learning experiences.

Moreover, states should remove unnecessary requirements for certification that have little connection to participants' ability to teach, such as requiring prior work experience.

Affordability and targeted coursework

States should ensure that alternative certification programs be free or cost very little for participants by limiting the amount of university coursework to only that which is essential for a beginning teacher. Participants in alternative certification programs are required to hold a bachelor's degree; thus, they have already incurred the substantial cost of obtaining a college education. They must also bear the cost of lost wages for the summer prior to beginning teaching, when initial program requirements are usually completed. And those with work experience may sacrifice potential earnings by changing fields: The average teacher's salary in 2007 was \$51,009, while the average for comparable professions was \$72,678.²⁸

Furthermore, obtaining an initial teaching license in most states is not a trivial expense. In New York City, for example, where the starting teacher's salary is approximately \$45,000, the licensure testing and fingerprinting costs alone amount to over \$300, while the cost of completing a certification program ranges from \$8,000 to \$17,000, depending on the university partner. These costs are likely to deter nontraditional candidates from pursuing teaching.

The key to affordability lies in strategically targeting coursework and learning experiences to ensure new teachers are prepared to teach, but aren't overwhelmed by courses that have no connection to student achievement. States should specify the competencies new teachers must demonstrate to be certified, rather than the numbers of courses or credit hours new teachers should take. This way, alternative and traditional teacher certification programs can design purposeful learning experiences that help new teachers demonstrate effective skills. There is little research evidence that most of the courses required by traditional programs are needed to effectively train teachers.²⁹ In fact, a recent study comparing alternatively and traditionally certified teachers by researchers at Mathematica Policy Research found that students of teachers who had greater levels of teacher training coursework performed no differently than students who had teachers with less coursework.³⁰

Courses and learning experiences should focus instead on areas most relevant to new teachers, such as instructional methods in their content area and classroom management.³¹ And the amount of coursework required in an alternative certification program should be carefully scrutinized, as time devoted to unessential studies translates into time taken away from students.

Several studies reviewing the research on teacher preparation have found that while subject matter knowledge is important, more courses are not necessarily better. In fact, a major is not more predictive of student achievement than a specific number of courses

in the subject.³² And teachers can attain subject matter knowledge in a variety of ways, such as prior work experience, other non-qualifying coursework, practice teaching, and professional development.³³

States must specify the knowledge and skills students should have and provide multiple means for candidates to demonstrate it: through a major, coursework equivalent to a major, or passage of a content knowledge exam. Where states often stumble is in doubling up the requirements, requiring that candidates have a major *and* pass a content knowledge exam. There is little to no research that shows that a major is more predictive of teacher effectiveness than proven proficiency on a content exam. Instead, the important factor is that the teacher has the content knowledge and can demonstrate it, rather than that the teacher completed a specific number of courses.

In following the “more is better” strategy with regard to coursework, states unnecessarily limit the pool of high-quality applicants to their alternative certification programs. Jason Kamras, a Teach For America alumnus and the 2005 National Teacher of the Year, provides just one example. Jason was a public policy major at Princeton University, but was a highly effective secondary math teacher. He was able to become a math teacher in the District of Columbia because it is one of 16 states that allow nontraditional candidates to demonstrate content knowledge by passing a test.

Alternative certification programs should be designed to select candidates based on their *prior* content knowledge so that additional content coursework is not needed. Universities and other providers could instead offer limited and targeted coursework on content pedagogy, that is, the most effective ways to deliver content to elementary and secondary school students. While a number of studies have found that coursework in general pedagogy has little impact on student achievement, coursework in content pedagogy has been found to have a positive impact.³⁴

A remaining obstacle is that there is no conclusive evidence about how pedagogical content should be delivered and no consensus that coursework is more effective than practice teaching or learning on the job.³⁵ Therefore, coursework in pedagogy should be focused on content, limited, and supplemented by other forms of learning about pedagogy, such as practice teaching experiences.

Other unnecessary requirements

States should also avoid instituting other requirements with no demonstrated link to effective teaching. Licensure policies or alternative certification programs in some states, for example, include work experience as an eligibility requirement for alternative licenses or program admission. It is unclear why; perhaps work experience was originally believed to be a measure of content knowledge. Yet today the requirement is

unnecessary and eliminates from the candidate pool recent college graduates who did not complete a teacher preparation program.

Some states specify that a license cannot be issued to an alternate route teacher unless a district verifies that it cannot find a current teacher with a license. In some cases, the state may ask the district superintendent to attest to the fact that the position was advertised. States may also require alternate route teachers to obtain a position before issuing a license or certificate. Such policies make the process of becoming a teacher more difficult with no apparent benefit to schools or students and ultimately deter some candidates from completing the process. Policies that have no demonstrated link to effective teaching should therefore be eliminated.

Ensure program quality

There are a number of steps that states could take to ensure alternative certification programs are of high quality. In order to attract academically talented candidates, states could raise entry standards, including minimum grade point averages and passing scores on licensure tests. States should consider including a performance-based component in teacher certification that would encourage both traditional and alternative certification programs to provide teachers with learning experiences that help them demonstrate core competencies for effective teaching and assess their progress toward meeting them. This ongoing assessment of candidates' performance could be a part of the approval process for teacher preparation programs. Finally, states should institute high-quality mentoring and induction programs for alternate route teachers, to ensure they are receiving sufficient support in learning about their new roles and responsibilities.

Applicant selectivity

One way to examine the quality of a program is by assessing the caliber of its participants both before and during the program. A shopworn critique of the teaching profession is that it is not considered to be a prestigious field, at least in the United States. Teaching suffers from this reputation in part because its entry standards remain low. At the same time, there are more than 3 million teachers in this country, making it challenging for states and districts to set criteria that make the profession more selective. Both traditional and nontraditional teaching candidates are required in most states to pass a basic literacy exam, such as the Praxis I; have a minimum GPA; and, at the secondary level—and in keeping with the highly qualified teacher requirements of No Child Left Behind—have a major, or coursework equivalent to a major, or pass a content knowledge exam, such as the Praxis II. To ensure that they have enough teachers, many states set the cut score for their licensing exams at low levels, and states and institutions of higher education set the minimum GPA as low as 2.5.³⁶

States and IHE's could boost the prestige of the teaching field by setting higher standards, benefitting both traditional and alternative certification programs. Increasing the minimum GPA for applicants just to 2.75 would raise the profile of the teaching profession and, hopefully, attract candidates with stronger academic backgrounds.

States should also examine where they set their cut scores—the minimum score required for teachers to be certified—on exams like Praxis I and II. Cut scores could likely be set higher, although states should commission analyses that weigh costs and benefits of raising cut scores. Research generally finds a small positive relationship between licensure test scores and student achievement,³⁷ but Dan Goldhaber's recent analysis of three years of data from North Carolina suggests that setting cut scores too high may create barriers to entry for teachers who might otherwise have been effective.³⁸ Similarly, other studies find that certification tests may have adverse effects on the proportion of minority teachers, because black and Hispanic teachers tend to have lower pass rates on these tests.³⁹

Performance assessment and support for participants

High quality programs assess participants and deliver formative feedback throughout the program, both to monitor participants' skills and help them grow professionally. These programs observe participants and assess their performance during pre-service training, coursework, and other learning experiences, and provide them with supportive feedback and assistance. High quality programs also assess new teachers' performance in the classroom once they are serving as a teacher of record. Through this ongoing assessment, feedback, and support, programs ensure that alternative certification candidates are developing the skills that they need to be successful in the classroom.

States could encourage all teacher preparation programs to focus on performance assessment in certifying new teachers, just as California has done. The state now requires a performance-based assessment as one criterion for initial licensure.⁴⁰ Building candidate performance into the teacher certification process would encourage both traditional and alternative certification programs to provide teachers with learning experiences that help them demonstrate these competencies and assess their progress toward meeting them. States could also build this ongoing assessment of a candidate's performance into the approval process for teacher preparation programs.

Mentoring and teaching effectiveness

States should establish high-quality mentoring and induction programs for alternate route teachers. The majority of research evidence finds that mentoring and induction programs increase teacher retention. An analysis of national data from the Schools and Staffing Survey found that “beginning teachers who were provided with a mentor in the

same subject field and who participated in collective induction activities, such as planning and collaboration with other teachers, were less likely to move to other schools and less likely to leave the teaching occupation after their first year of teaching.”⁴¹ Another review of 10 rigorous studies found that “assistance for new teachers—and in particular, teacher mentoring programs—have a positive impact on teachers and their retention.”⁴² Research has not yet determined the essential components and intensity needed for successful mentoring and induction programs. In fact, one recent study found that a comprehensive, more intensive induction program does not yield better outcomes than the standard induction programs received by teachers in the 17 districts that participated in the study.⁴³ Some effective teacher preparation programs for nontraditional candidates, such as Teach For America, consider the ongoing support they provide to corps members during their two years of teaching to be essential to their program model.

Few rigorous studies have examined the link between mentoring and student achievement, but one study on the effects of mentoring in New York City did find that that “student achievement in both reading and math were higher among teachers that received more hours of mentoring, supporting the notion that time spent working with a mentor does improve teaching skills.”⁴⁴ More research is needed to determine which aspects of mentoring and induction are necessary to increase teacher retention and student achievement. The bulk of the research shows that it is a promising strategy at least for teacher retention, however. States should therefore ensure that alternate route teachers participate in some type of mentoring and induction program.

Teach for America’s mentoring program

Teach For America’s mentoring program model involves intensive observation and coaching. At least four times per year, teachers, known as corps members, and their Teach For America-provided mentors, known as program directors, engage in extended “co-investigations” of the progress students are making. The program’s teaching framework and rubric provide the central structure for both self- and coach-driven evaluations during that process. These cycles of co-investigation are centered on student achievement results from corps members’ classrooms.

Using the student data, program directors and corps members engage in joint problem-solving conversations to identify the reasons for current gaps in achievement, prioritize the key levers for moving achievement forward, identify the students who need the greatest degree of

attention, and develop actionable plans to increase the achievement of the prioritized group. Through these conversations, corps members develop the skills and practices to conduct this type of analysis on their own, and corps members are expected to independently approach their teaching in this fashion.

Many teacher mentoring programs are rooted in developing teachers based on a framework or rubric of teaching practices, but it is unclear whether such programs are also collecting student achievement data and using it to determine teaching effectiveness to improve practice and student outcomes. States and districts should examine their mentoring programs to determine whether such practices are, in fact, part of their program, and if not, how they can be incorporated.

Georgia teacher alternative preparation program⁴⁵

Georgia's TAPP program is a robust alternative certification program supported by many of the policies recommended in this report. TAPP requires a reasonable amount of coursework, significant support for new teachers, and meaningful evaluation and opportunities for improvement. Georgia's alternative certification program met six out of nine criteria for genuine alternative teacher certification programs identified by the National Council on Teacher Quality in its 2007 policy yearbook (See Appendix).⁴⁶ The TAPP program is open to teachers in all major subject areas in any district, and teachers enrolled in this program are eligible to receive full certification after two years.

TAPP is designed as "an alternative option for individuals who hold a bachelor's degree or higher from an accredited institute, but who did not complete teacher education preparation requirements as part of their degree programs."⁴⁷ The program is intended to give teachers the tools they need to begin their teaching careers, but also builds in a supervised internship and induction program that will help them progress in their craft.

In order to be admitted to the program, candidates must have a bachelor's degree in an appropriate field with a minimum grade point average of 2.5 and a passing score on Georgia's Assessment for the Certification of Educators, or GACE, the state's certification exam. SAT, GRE, or ACT scores may be substituted for the GACE general education exam. In addition, teachers are required to pass the GACE in the subject area they intend to teach; middle grades teachers must have 15 credits in their main assignment area, and high school teachers must have 21 credits. Teaching candidates must also have an offer of a full-time teaching position by a participating school system to be admitted to the program. Candidates begin teaching on an Intern Certificate and can upgrade to a standard certificate after their second year once they successfully complete the program's requirements.

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality's 2007 Policy Yearbook, "The amount of required preparation is reasonable: 140 clock hours (approximately nine credit hours)."⁴⁸ Coursework providers may be colleges or universities, regional education service agencies, or local education agencies. Each teacher receives an individualized plan of study that includes any necessary content coursework in addition to the education courses provided to all participants. Required courses focus on instructional methods, including identifying and teaching children with special needs, teaching reading, and integrating technology in the classroom.

TAPP provides a significant amount of support and follow up for new teachers in their first two years of teaching. Each participant is supported by a three-person team at the school site, including a school-based mentor and school-based administrator, and candidates must also observe experienced teachers. Although not all teacher candidates have the opportunity to practice teach, each one is assigned a school-based mentor. The route's mentoring requirements are comprehensive: Mentors are required to provide more than one hour of mentoring to each candidate every week over two years, and they must complete several mentoring modules with the candidate. At the end of the first year, candidates are assessed using a rubric for measuring teaching practice—Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching—and must be recommended by their principal for continuation or denial of their Intern Certificate for the second year.⁴⁹

In their second year, interns continue to take education courses, as well as seminars targeted to the teacher-candidates' identified problems and interests. They also continue to receive mentoring and assessment from their support team. Interns must complete an achievement portfolio and, at the end of the second year, are again evaluated by their support team, using the same rubric.

Accountability for alternative and traditional certification programs

One of the primary ways to improve program quality is to strengthen state accountability for both traditional and alternative certification programs. As Davida Gatlin has recommended in a report for the Center for American Progress on innovative alternative certification programs, "all programs, traditional and alternative, should be held to the same high standards of quality,"⁵⁰ determined by the performance of their graduates in the classroom. Programs should judge graduates' performance in part based on their impact on student achievement, and in part based on their ability to demonstrate specific competencies expected of all newly certified teachers in the state.

To hold programs accountable for student achievement data requires robust state and district data systems that can link teachers to students, and a variety of processes in place to ensure that the systems are accurate. These data systems would also allow state departments of education and other parties to study the effectiveness of a variety of programs and to determine which components are most critical for preparing successful teachers.

States should require every certification program to report on a variety of outcomes for teacher candidates. Accountability measures would encourage programs to examine their outcomes and continuously improve their programs.

“The Same High Standards” doesn’t mean the identical standards

It is crucial for state accrediting authorities to hold both traditional certification and alternative certification programs to high standards. Also, it is imperative that states examine their program approval processes and ensure that program approval standards function optimally both for traditional and alternative programs, even if that means allowing for differences in how programs meet high standards. State accreditation processes, for example, often examine the quality of instructors in a traditional or alternative certification program. However, standards requiring most faculty members to hold a doctorate and engage in research and publishing tend to eliminate *de facto* many high-quality alternative certification programs that primarily employ exceptional practitioners as faculty, and have proven results associated with that approach. The critical take-away is that the program approval process itself—often buried deep in regulation and policy—must be thoroughly examined to ensure that unnecessary barriers to high quality alternative certifications are not embedded in the process.

Encourage innovation and growth

States can take steps to ensure that their alternative certification programs are truly designed to foster innovation and expansion of promising programs. In most cases, this requires that states examine the type of license issued to alternative certification candidates and the diversity of providers within alternative certification programs. Federal funding can also help encourage innovation at the state level.

Alternative certificates and licenses

States should establish a certificate or a license specifically for alternative certification candidates. They should not bring nontraditional candidates into the classroom on an emergency or temporary certificate, or a permit, because these credentials are not designed to ensure that nontraditional candidates are “highly qualified” or even on track to obtain the next type of license. Additionally, states should ensure that the certificate or

license for alternative certification candidates will not lead to complications as a teacher moves forward in her career. The certificate should instead allow for a smooth transition to the regular or standard certificate or license.

In some states, certificates or licenses for alternative certification candidates are only offered in high-need subject areas like math and science, at the secondary level, or for specific geographic areas like large cities or rural communities. To truly embrace alternative certification programs as a source of quality teachers, states should issue licenses to these candidates across all subject areas, grade levels, and geographic areas. Doing so will expand the pool of highly qualified candidates.

Diversity of providers

State policies should allow for a diversity of teacher preparation program providers, but require all to meet state standards of quality in a manner that is consistent with their program model. Allowing multiple providers encourages the development of programs that are customized to the needs of school districts and the alternative certification candidates themselves. It also encourages healthy competition among providers, potentially improving the quality of all programs. Recent studies have shown that candidates prepared by alternative certification providers can be as effective, if not more so, than university providers.⁵¹

Federal funding for high-quality, innovative alternative certification programs

Gatlin also proposed directing federal funds to support the development and expansion of high-quality, innovative alternative certification programs through state grants targeted at high-needs schools and subject areas.⁵² Unlike the Transition to Teaching Grants included in the No Child Left Behind Act, these grants should be conferred to states and conditioned on the implementation of policies to ensure program quality and innovation as discussed in this paper. The grants should be focused on funding innovative programs that have had some success, but could use an additional infusion of resources to scale up.

How to get it done: promoting effective policies

One of the critical first steps in establishing robust alternative certification programs is creating policies supported by strong statutory and regulatory language. Getting supportive legislation and regulations passed in most states is no small endeavor and requires specialized knowledge of the process and the political players involved. But such a path is perilous, even with this knowledge. Language supporting a new alternative certification structure can be readily undone when regulations are being made to provide guidance in implementing statutes, which requires constant vigilance from proponents along the way. In some states, regulatory language must pass through both the professional standards board and the state board of education, meaning the language is at risk not once but twice, as it is voted upon and, perhaps, altered.

It is sometimes argued that entrepreneurial organizations in education reform should take the lead in making the needed statutory and regulatory changes happen across the states. However, as Fredrick Hess and Chester Finn argue, the best role for such organizations may be to serve as “proof points of successful alternative approaches.” Hess and Finn convincingly contend:

Serving as field marshals for large-scale policy change is the proper role of advocates, whose interests do not always coincide with those of entrepreneurs. Indeed, advocacy groups are typically tone-deaf to some challenges facing entrepreneurs—such as the need for human capital, better R&D, increased access to venture capital, back-office services, and incubation—and are thus unhelpful at cultivating the full set of reforms that might help entrepreneurial ventures to prosper. If advocacy organizations wish to pave the way for more entrepreneurial activity, they need to attend to such issues.⁵³

Working in concert, advocates (see descriptions of the PIE Network and ConnCan on page 21) and entrepreneurial organizations in the educational sector can collaborate with state legislators to bring about the policy changes needed. One “proof point” worth highlighting resides in the state of Louisiana and the creation of its practitioner teacher program.

Success in Louisiana’s Practitioner Teacher Program⁵⁴

In its 2007 State Teacher Policy Yearbook for Louisiana, the National Council on Teacher Quality, or NCTQ, highlights the state’s alternative certification program, the Practitioner Teacher Program, as a model. The program met eight out of nine of the Council’s criteria for a genuine alternative certification program (see the appendix), including candidates’ ability to demonstrate content knowledge through a test, the amount of coursework required, and the versatility of providers.⁵⁵ The only criterion Louisiana did not meet relates to the admission standards, which NCTQ cites as not being rigorous enough.

The Practitioner Teacher Program resulted from the recommendations of The Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Quality in Louisiana, which included 31 state, university, district, school, and community leaders. The commission was subsequently reconstituted as the Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence and charged with overseeing the implementation of its recommendations, including the Practitioner Teacher Program, first implemented in 2002. The program currently includes 382 participants, nine universities and two private providers, The New Teacher Project and St. John the Baptist School District. The program has developed into a model program in part because it is supported by strong regulatory language, including a provision allowing private providers to act as teacher preparation programs.

Evidence suggests that the Practitioner Teacher Program is an effective teacher preparation program. As previously mentioned, a multi-year study of teacher preparation programs in Louisiana released in 2007 found that teachers who participate in TNTP’s Louisiana Practitioner Teacher Program—most of whom are Teach For America corps members—are having a positive effect on student achievement in mathematics.⁵⁶ The study recognized the LPTP program as a “Level 1” program, which is defined as a program with evidence that “new teachers prepared by the program are more effective than experienced teachers, as well as other new teachers, in increasing student achievement”—a rating that far surpasses what the authors define as reasonable expectations for programs preparing new teachers. A follow-up to this study reached similar conclusions.⁵⁷ “We find the Practitioner Teacher Program to be a valuable and collaborative partner in effectively certifying and training our corps members in Louisiana,” states Michael Tipton, executive director for Teach For America in Southern Louisiana.

State education advocacy

PIE Network

Founded in 2007, the Policy Innovations in Education Network, or PIE Network, is a partnership among four prominent national education policy organizations—The Center for American Progress, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Education Sector, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute—that work with state-based education advocacy organizations, or EAOs, to promote education reform. The four partner organizations and the EAOs work to broaden the ideological policy spectrum, but share a commitment to three policy principles:

- **Accountability:** Schools must be held accountable for improving student achievement.
- **Equity:** Children of all backgrounds deserve the highest quality education.
- **Autonomy and choice:** School leaders should have the freedom to innovate to achieve the results for which they will be held accountable.

The PIE Network's theory of action is that by partnering with EAOs they can create a ready network for robust advocacy and implementation in the policy arenas envisioned by the PIE Network founders. The EAOs are recognized, credible, non-partisan organizations and are often lone voices for reform in their respective state capitals. While like-minded colleagues exist in other states, these groups have lacked an organizational infrastructure that would connect them for exchange of best practices. This network will build the capacity of the EAOs to do advocacy and policy research and allow them to share best practices.

EAO on the move: ConnCan and Teach For America

In January 2005, a core group of Connecticut philanthropists along with leaders from Connecticut's business, higher education, and civic communities created the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now: a 501c(3) non-profit advocacy organization designed to be a catalyst for the fundamental education reforms needed to close the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their peers. Since then ConnCan has enjoyed a number of successes with its education reform agenda, including legislation allowing Teach For America to come to Connecticut, reforms facilitating the expansion of high performing charter schools, funding for a statewide longitudinal student data system, a preschool quality rating system and significantly enhanced state powers to intervene in failing schools and districts.

ConnCan played an instrumental role in bringing Teach For America to Connecticut. The coalition's knowledge of the ins and outs of the state policymaking process smoothed Teach For America's path during the 2007 legislative session. ConnCan and its supporters had existing relationships with all of the state policymakers involved, both at the legislature and at the state Department of Education. Once it became clear that the approval process had hit some obstacles near the end of the legislative session, ConnCan's members figured out what the issues were and cleared up some fundamental misunderstandings. In some instances this was as simple as making introductions between Teach For America's national team and key state officials; in others it required making the case for Teach For America directly. Because state policymaking often moves quickly during the final days of the legislative session, even a simple procedural obstacle can be fatal, and so ConnCan's ability to keep a well-trained ear to the ground and guide Teach For America's national team proved to be a critical asset in seeing the authorizing legislation through to completion.

Conclusion

A large body of evidence indicates that efforts to improve student learning will not be successful without increasing the supply of effective teachers, particularly in high-poverty and low-performing schools. Alternative certification programs are a promising strategy for addressing that need. Nevertheless, in order for the full benefits of these programs to be realized, policymakers need to institute policies that ensure the programs are able to attract and retain talented participants and provide them with high quality training. A recent survey of potential career changers found that there is a large pool of promising candidates from other fields who are interested in pursuing a teaching career—over 40 percent of college graduates ages 24 to 60 would consider becoming a teacher.⁵⁸ The study also found that potential career changers were more likely to have attended selective colleges and have higher average grades than other college graduates.⁵⁹

In order to tap into this potential pool of candidates, policymakers need to ensure that the programs are attractive to talented candidates—including those who did not study education in college. They need to be rigorous and of high quality, provide sufficient support to new teachers, and not be unduly burdensome.

Appendix

What distinguishes a genuine alternative certification from other postbaccalaureate paths into the teaching profession?

	Genuine alternate route	Postbaccalaureate traditional route	Classic emergency licensure
Premise	Candidates with strong academic backgrounds begin teaching while completing streamlined preparation program.	Candidates pursue traditional preparation program at the graduate rather than undergraduate level.	Virtually any candidate is given a temporary license to teach; standard certification requirements must be fulfilled to convert it to a regular license.
Selectivity	Teacher provides evidence of above average academic performance (e.g., 2.75 or 3.0 GPA)—with some flexibility for mid-career applicants.	Teacher has a 2.5 GPA.	Teacher need not provide any evidence of previous academic performance.
Subject matter knowledge	Teacher can demonstrate subject matter knowledge on test.	Teacher has a major in the subject; may have to pass test.	Teacher need not have a major, college degree, or pass test until program completion.
Annual course requirements	Requires no more than one course at a time during school year (roughly 12 credits per year, exclusive of mentoring credits).	15 credits per year on average.	Requirements vary with teacher.
Cap on coursework	Offers accelerated study (e.g., would not exceed 6 courses, exclusive of any credit for mentoring, over duration of program).	30 credits total on average.	Unlimited—depends on individual.
Types of courses required	Relevant to immediate needs of teacher—such as reading instruction; seminars grouped by grade or content.	Full program of professional study.	Awards standard certificate when coursework is completed; maximum generally set for number of years emergency license is valid.
Program length	Earns standard certificate after two years.	Earns standard certificate after two years.	Awards standard certificate when coursework is completed; maximum generally set for number of years emergency license is valid.
New teacher support	Has practice-teaching opportunities and/or strong induction program—does not require teacher to quit previous job before summer.	Has practice-teaching and/or strong induction—may require teacher to quit previous job before summer.	Goes through standard district induction program.
Provider diversity	Districts, nonprofit providers, and IHE can operate programs; coursework need not be credit bearing.	Only IHE.	Only IHE.
Use	State actively encourages districts to use the route.	State actively encourages districts to use the route.	State terms route “source of last resort.”

Source: National Council on Teacher Quality, State Teacher Policy Yearbook 2007.

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