



# A DIFFERENT ROAD

***Looking for teachers? Consider those who have followed a nontraditional route to certification***

By Vicky S. Dill and Delia Stafford-Johnson

She is typically young, middle class, and suburban, her idealism matched only by her naivete. Her student teaching was most likely done in a quiet suburban setting, close to her university, helping a veteran teacher who had earned the right to work with the more accomplished students.

Then she starts her first real job. When the school year begins she is thrust into a much different environment, often far from home, teaching minority kids, poor kids, children with special problems and a host of special needs. Is it any wonder that she, and many more like her, don't last?

Schools of education, and the districts that hire their graduates, are recognizing the problems inherent in this common scenario. One way they are responding is by offering their students more practical, hands-on training in the classroom. Another is by creating alternative teacher certification programs that open the field to more "nontraditional" candidates—typically older, more mature people who have college degrees in fields other than education and experience in careers other than teaching.

Across the nation, the number of alternative certification programs is growing. To date, more than 175,000 people have

been certified through alternative routes, according to Emily Feistritzer, president of the National Center for Education Information, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization in Washington, D.C. Forty-five states offered some type of alternative certification program in 2002, compared to just eight in 1983.

More attuned to results than process, these programs prepare teachers for the real world—where the majority of teaching vacancies exist—not the artificial world so often encountered in student teaching. This difference is crucial: When newly hired teachers are ill-suited for the school environment they find themselves in, the result is high teacher turnover. By contrast, alternative programs are often "vacancy driven." Program directors focus on a vacancy and fill it, often with someone who is less likely to quit and more likely to be homegrown—attuned to the students' culture, and committed to the community.

Should your district have an alternative certification program? If so, should you go it alone or partner with a local college or regional service center? And if you choose not to operate your own program, how do you know that the applicants from alternative programs elsewhere have the requisite

skills and qualifications to become good teachers? To answer these questions, let's look at some characteristics of successful alternative certification programs and what they might offer.

### **New routes to teaching**

As with traditional teacher education programs, there are effective alternative programs and ineffective ones. The effective programs, however, are quite different from the traditional routes to certification and are well-known for attracting people who can bring valuable life experiences to the classroom.

Alternative certification programs also have a reputation for producing teachers who are more mature and often more successful with challenging students. Data show they tend to be older than traditional graduates and more frequently minority and male—attractive characteristics to any school district seeking a diverse staff and male role models.

What are the characteristics of effective programs? They begin with high standards. It is generally agreed that candidates for alternative certification must have a college degree and a minimum grade point average of 2.5. High-quality candidates demonstrate thorough content knowledge that is fairly current and appropriate to the K-12 system. And they should be able to show, through research-based interviews, that working with the most challenging students will inspire and not discourage them.

In addition, the program should include hands-on pedagogy or “how-to-teach” experiences both before the school year starts and throughout the first year. This on-the-job training will help candidates who are strong in content knowledge learn how to teach in an age-appropriate manner. It should occur under the guidance of at least two individuals: a trained mentor from the school district and another mentor or supervisor from the certification program.

Other shared characteristics of effective programs include an assessment center that maps out professional development goals for the year, ongoing observations by mentors and principals, and course work as needed at a local university.

Certification typically comes after a year (or sometimes two) of full-time teaching. Recommendations for certification should be made by the principal (not a dean in a college miles away), a group that mentors the intern, and/or members of the school's site-based team.

This procedure is another crucial aspect of alternative programs; it recognizes that those who have worked with new teachers, watched them in class, and bear the responsibility for hiring them have the most stake in the certification decision. Many observers have pointed out that colleges of education don't have to live with the licensed graduates of their traditional programs. School districts, on the other hand, do, and with alternative certification do not have to license interns unless they are willing to hire them for another year.

### **Many models, one purpose**

Effective alternative certification programs do not all look alike, although they share some characteristics. The most common

are university-based programs, regional service center programs, and school district programs.

In the university model, students take courses before beginning to teach, as in the traditional model. However, instead of student teaching, the beginning teacher or “novice” becomes an intern and actually teaches for a year at a beginning teacher's salary, rather than undergoing a half year of student teaching. The intern is guided or mentored by faculty from the university in addition to the district mentor.

The regional service center model follows an entirely different process. Specialists in the content area, such as math or English as a Second Language, sit down with professors from the local cooperating universities, master teachers in cooperating districts, and specialists in teacher education for the state. Together, they build a competency-based teacher education program that reflects local needs and requirements. Candidates are then taught via a combination of service center, district, and university instruction.

In the school district model, non-credentialed candidates apply for a job with a principal, and those who are hired enter a program taught almost exclusively by district employees. Individual consultants in classroom management teach particular courses in that area, and district personnel present the district's approach to teaching content, dispute resolution, assessment, classroom management, and so on. Courses might be required from local universities or taught in the district by adjunct university faculty.

These basic models—along with a variety of new hybrids—are popular in places like Texas, California, New Jersey, and Connecticut. In these states, a prospective teacher may enter a certification program run solely by a not-for-profit foundation or a commercial concern such as Sylvan Learning Systems.

Nationwide, the number of online teacher certification programs is growing. Offering hands-on and cyber experiences, they may include college course work online or in real time, streaming videos of classroom experiences, e-mail with teachers and professors, as well as discussions on various topics. Western Governors' University, a 20-state consortium of colleges, is starting an online alternative teacher certification program in January 2003 that will be the first of its kind in the nation.

Why is alternative certification flourishing? One reason is the type of candidates it attracts: people who are adults, not late adolescents. The profile of most education school graduates, by contrast, is that of a young white woman from the suburbs who wants to teach in the suburbs. How can this newly certified teacher expect to survive in the areas where there are the most vacancies—urban centers with at-risk students who have already witnessed many of life's difficulties and are much more streetwise than their young teachers?

Alternative teacher certification is also flourishing because it provides mature teachers for students in high-risk categories: urban or rural students, students at risk who are overage for their grade, and students from minority groups. Alternative teacher certification also attracts more minority teachers than

do traditional routes. And it provides mid-career individuals with a workable way to enter teaching while remaining responsible to their families and their careers.

### **More study needed**

As variable as alternative certification programs are, it is difficult to do “pure” research on the effects of different types of certification programs on student achievement. However, data are now available to compare the achievement of students whose teachers were alternatively certified in California and Texas, through programs like Teach for America and Troops to Teachers, and from large-scale reviews of studies by regional research institutions.

One common conclusion, not particularly flattering to either traditional or alternative routes, comes from a 1999 study by researchers Carol Newman and Kay Thomas, who found that both traditional and alternative routes to teacher preparation need improvement.

“Although current alternative routes may not significantly improve teacher learning, they are deemed to be no worse than many university-based teacher preparation programs,” Newman and Thomas wrote.

Feistritzer, of the National Center for Education Information, is more optimistic. In testimony before Congress last year, she said alternative certification programs attract more minority applicants and people with degrees in subjects other than education and work experience in noneducation-related fields. Also, a greater percentage of the prospective teachers in these programs are men.

States that have strong alternative certification programs say their teachers perform just as well on certification examinations as their peers from traditional programs, and sometimes better, Feistritzer said. And administrators who work with these teachers say they are very satisfied with their performance.

Some data also show lower teacher attrition rates. Feistritzer said this might be because these teachers are older, have more life experiences, and can make more-informed decisions about wanting to help young people. In alternative

programs, new teachers receive intense, on-the-job instruction in the classroom from mentors or master teachers. They spend more time teaching and less time simply learning *about* teaching.

“One of the reasons given for the high attrition rate for new teachers in their first few years of teaching is that they receive very little support and professional development as beginning teachers,” Feistritzer said. “This issue is directly addressed in the very design of alternative preparation programs, which, if anything, err on the side of getting prospective teachers into classrooms too early.”

A recent study of an alternative teacher certification program at Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) in which 94 percent of the teachers were Hispanic and teaching largely Hispanic student bodies is indicative of this high rate of retention, according to Claudio Salinas, assistant professor of education and author of the report. Where the accepted national attrition rate for novice teachers is 70 percent over the first three to five years of their career, the average attrition rate in the TAMIU program was 6 percent for the three years studied. Further, 91 percent of the study’s participants were Hispanic and approximately 30 percent were male.

It would be useful to have more meaningful research on the impact of alternative certification—and, with the number of programs increasing nationwide, we will probably see this in the near future. In the meantime, school districts looking for dynamic teachers would be wise to examine alternative certification programs and the new type of candidates they are preparing for the classroom.

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