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Alternate Path for Teachers Gains Ground

By Lisa W. Foderaro
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Not long ago education schools had a virtual monopoly on the teaching profession. They dictated how and when people became teachers by offering coursework, arranging apprenticeships and granting master's degrees.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Dan Cosgrove, in his second year with Teach for America, in his classroom at Leadership Prep in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

But now those schools are feeling under siege. Officials in Washington, D.C., and New York State, where some of the best-known education schools are located, have stepped up criticisms that the schools are still too focused on theory and not enough on the craft of effective teaching.

In an ever-tightening job market, their graduates are competing with the products of alternative programs like [Teach for America](#), which puts recent college graduates into teaching jobs without previous teaching experience or education coursework.

And this week, the [New York State Board of Regents](#) could deliver the biggest blow. It will vote on whether to greatly expand the role of the alternative organizations by allowing them to create their own master's degree programs. At the extreme, the proposal could make education schools extraneous.

“In a lot of respects, what the Regents have done is the ghost of Christmas future,” said Arthur Levine, a former president of [Teachers College](#) at [Columbia University](#) and now president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. “Education schools are on the verge of losing their franchise.”

While alternative programs now operate in most states, only a few, including Rhode Island and Louisiana, allow these programs to effectively certify their own teachers.

[Arne Duncan](#), the United States secretary of education, is also trying to expand these programs. The 2011 federal education budget doubles the financing for teacher training through a \$235 million fund that will go to both alternative and traditional preparation programs focused on high-needs schools and subjects. And in the [Race to the Top](#) competition, points are given to states that provide “high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals” including “allowing alternative routes to certification.”

At an appearance at Teachers College last fall, Mr. Duncan highlighted some “shining examples” of education schools, including Teachers College. But he also fired a shot across the bow: “Many, if not most, of the nation’s 1,450 schools, colleges and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom.”

David M. Steiner, who became commissioner of the New York State Department of Education last year, insists that as much as he wants to introduce “new actors” into the realm of teacher preparation, he also wants to encourage education schools to reform themselves. Dr. Steiner, who in 2003 published a paper critical of the required reading at 16 elite education schools, says that colleges still devote too much class time to abstract notions about “the role of school in democracy” and “the view by some that schools exist to perpetuate a social hierarchy.”

As dean of the Graduate School of Education at [Hunter College](#), he sought to elevate the practical aspects of teaching: when to make eye contact, when to call on a student by name, when to wait for a fuller answer. He now urges the use of video, a tool he pioneered at Hunter, to help student teachers see what works and what doesn’t in the classroom (“Like taking apart a serve in tennis,” he says).

In New York, teachers can begin working without a master’s degree as long as they have had some education courses as undergraduates, but they must earn a professional certification within five years by receiving a master’s degree from a teaching school. New York is one of a dozen states that requires teachers to get a master’s degree. Alternative certification programs like [Teach for America](#) offer a quicker path for graduates who did not study education in college, allowing them to begin teaching from the outset while pursuing a master’s degree after hours.

Under the Regents’ proposal, which the board is expected to approve on Tuesday and does not need the approval of the State Legislature, Teach for America and similar groups could create their own master’s programs, and the Regents would award the master’s degree, two powers that are now the sole domain of academia.

The Regents are looking for academic programs that would be grounded in practical teaching skills and would require teachers to commit to working in a high-needs school for four years.

“Ten years ago, this would have been an incredibly tough sell,” Dr. Steiner said.

Education school deans say they are grateful that groups like Teach for America, which recruits heavily among recent college graduates, and [N.Y.C. Teaching Fellows](#), which attracts young professionals seeking to change careers, have managed to rebrand teaching as both sexy and noble. Some in New York have formed partnerships with these programs.

But the deans also say that the charge that they are mired in theory is outdated. Geoffrey L. Brackett, provost of [Pace University](#) in Manhattan, pointed to Pace High School in Chinatown, which the university created in 2003 and functions as something of a laboratory for the university's education school. "You have our students at the graduate level being placed in that high school, but you also have current teachers working with our faculty on best practices and innovation," he said.

Susan H. Fuhrman, president of Teachers College, said she had another concern — the potential separation of teacher training from what she called an "explosion of new research" into how children learn. Teachers College has chosen not to team up with alternative programs, in part because of philosophical differences over the concept of anointing a neophyte to be the "teacher of record" — the one responsible for a classroom — from the first day of school.

"We're at a huge frontier when it comes to understanding learning," she said. "Divorcing teacher preparation from this research would suggest to me that you would prepare doctors with hands-on tools without their benefiting from medical research."

La Toya C. K. Caton, 26, of Baldwin, N.Y., decided to become a teacher after she was laid off as a systems analyst. Last spring, she applied to Teach for America but withdrew at the last minute, enrolling at Teachers College instead. "During that time I was a substitute teacher in middle school and high school, and I felt that more training was necessary," said Ms. Caton, who will complete her master's in May.

"Teachers College really provides you with an amazing opportunity to learn from supportive teachers," said Ms. Caton, now a student-teacher at Public School 180, the Hugo Newman School, in Harlem. "They really act as mentors. They've given me the space to become the teacher I want to be."

Dr. Steiner said that the alternative groups would have to shape their own certification programs subject to Regents approval. While those programs would involve some theoretical classroom learning, he said, they would be "given some relief from the traditional constraints of course credits and hours."

"We believe there are a few institutions that have earned their right to the table," he said, although he declined to identify them. "They would be held to exactly the same performance assessment that the traditional schools of education would be held to."

A spokeswoman for Teach for America, which has 800 new teachers enlisted in its two-year program in 300 schools in New York City, said the group would consider submitting a plan for a certification program.

Some education schools have already seen a drop in their application numbers as a result of the allure of alternative programs, though the effect has been blunted by the recession, which has helped fill up graduate schools in general. In a weak economy, alternative programs are especially attractive because participants can earn a regular starting salary from the outset while also receiving a discount on tuition for a master's degree.

In contrast, annual tuition for a master's degree program at a public university like [City College of New York](#) costs \$7,360, while tuition at a prestigious private institution like Teachers College runs \$26,040 for a full course load. (For a student living in a dormitory, Teachers College puts the total cost for nine months of study, including tuition, books, fees, room, board and other expenses, at \$63,196.)

In Brooklyn, Dan Cosgrove, 24, is now in his second year with Teach for America, teaching fourth grade at Leadership Prep Bedford-Stuyvesant Charter School. He joined Teach for America after graduating from Trinity College, unsure which career path to follow but eager to right the social inequalities he had studied as a sociology major.

Despite a grueling schedule (teaching all week and pursuing a master's degree on weekends and in the summer), Mr. Cosgrove is sold on teaching. At Leadership Prep, classrooms have co-teachers, which has helped him develop classroom-management skills.

"It's incredibly challenging and difficult, but it's also extremely rewarding," he said. "I think the best way to learn is by watching people here and being in all kinds of situations."