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Who do you want teaching your children?

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Many high school principals cite a critical need for teachers who have the ability to apply real-world experiences to classroom learning, as well as improve student's critical thinking skills, according to a report released Monday by the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning. This finding is especially true for underserved, high-poverty schools.

Unfortunately, the same report goes on to label as "underprepared" the very teachers who are filling that need simply because they do not go through the same teacher preparation process as other beginning teachers.

There are nearly 50,000 examples of former scientists, child advocates, lawyers and federal prosecutors, military men and women, and many others who chose to switch careers and bring their wealth of experience and career expertise to the classroom. They were able to do so through California's more than 70 alternative certification programs. These teachers are second-career professionals, and other content experts, who want to serve their community and teach in the public schools in greatest need, including hard-to-staff and high-poverty schools. They bring with them the very real-world experiences the center reports is needed in California high schools.

There are some who continue to mislabel these well qualified teachers as "underprepared." This is despite the fact that these professionals have already had real-life experiences in the subjects they teach, must pass a rigorous subject-matter competency test and then take an additional semester's worth of instruction prior to ever entering the classroom and continue with coursework concurrent to their teaching for approximately two years.

California is expecting a critical shortage of highly-qualified teachers due to retirements in the coming years. Alternative certification programs are preparing today for the challenges ahead by recruiting talented, second-career professionals into the teaching profession. Just last year, nearly 50 percent of new California math teachers came from alternative certification programs. These teachers were able to enter the classroom promptly where they were needed because of the career-expertise they brought with them and the flexibility offered by alternative certification programs. Many of these professionals would not have entered the teaching profession without this pathway.

According to a survey commissioned by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, more than 90 percent of principals ranked teachers from alternative certification programs as good or better than teachers from traditional programs. More important, nearly 95 percent of principals would hire additional teachers from alternative certification programs. It is clear that the school districts that hire teachers from alternative certification programs recognize their value.

California needs to continue to take bold steps to improve public education, and this must include strengthening new routes to teaching so that those who have high subject-matter knowledge, and the ability to impart that knowledge to our youth, can enter the teaching profession. Alternative certification programs can play a major role in helping to meet the increasing need for teachers in the coming years, especially in the communities that need them most. The California Teacher Corps shares Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning's goal of ensuring every school has access to high quality teachers. The center should join principals and students in appreciating the value that second-career teachers bring to classrooms most in need.

Catherine Kearney is the president of the California Teacher Corps.