

# EDUCATION REPORT

## Michigan's meaningless teacher certification reform

**BY Ryan McCarl**

July 27, 2010

Teacher certification requirements often seem to result from policymakers sitting around a table and asking: What college courses, judging by their names, might it be useful for teachers to take? The result is often a laundry list of costly requirements that stand between prospective teachers' desire to teach and their ability to apply for teaching jobs in public schools.

These requirements are barriers to entry into the teaching profession that bar or deter individuals from applying for teaching jobs. They thereby *reduce* the overall quality of the teacher labor pool.

In a feeble effort to correct some of the shortcomings of the traditional certification regime, Michigan policymakers recently passed legislation that Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed into law — [House Bill 5596](#) — that allows for, but heavily restricts, the creation of alternative routes to certification. The more alternative routes to teaching are created, the stronger the teacher talent pool will become. The new law, however, does not go nearly far enough, and it does not represent serious reform.

The text of House Bill 5596 exhibits a continuing addiction to strict state regulation of the teacher labor market and a fundamental lack of trust in the capacity of local school officials to use their professional judgment to evaluate prospective teachers on a case-by-case basis, just as hiring professionals do in most fields in the private sector. Michigan policymakers continue to presume that traditional certification provides some sort of quality guarantee that alternative certification does not. But this position is not supported by either evidence or logic.

The alternative routes to teaching created by the new law will retain most of the same costs as the traditional route, adding Michigan to the growing list of states that have set up a framework for alternative certification that is really no alternative at all.

The main reason for the weakness of most alternative certification laws is that they are written under the heavy influence of teachers unions and schools of education. These powerful groups are deeply invested in the traditional certification process.

Teachers unions benefit from the restricted teacher labor market that certification requirements create. Onerous licensure requirements create artificial labor shortages and drive up wages. They allow unions to stamp all of their members as equally well-qualified, a fiction which helps unions make the case for seniority-based pay and "last in, first out" retention systems that take no notice of teacher performance or student outcomes, but fit easily into collectively bargained contracts and promote a steady and reliable base of union dues.

Education schools, meanwhile, benefit from certification requirements that force prospective and current teachers to shower teacher training programs with tuition revenue in order to gain and retain their "certified" status — often at substantial personal cost. Such certification and "professional development" requirements make the manufacturing of teachers a lucrative business, and it is difficult to believe that all 32 of Michigan's state-approved teacher education programs could survive if the state did not essentially force teachers to fund them.

Michigan's new alternative certification law keeps traditional education schools protected. For instance, the law requires that all alternatively certified teachers purchase "the equivalent of at least 12 college credit hours" from a state-approved education school and endure the abysmal [Michigan Tests for Teacher Certification](#).

In addition, the alternative certification programs will only be approved if they systematically deny admission to applicants with undergraduate GPAs below 3.0 - no matter what college or university the applicants went to, how many years have elapsed since the applicants graduated from college, or what the applicants have accomplished since college graduation. Michigan's teacher colleges are not held to any such requirement.

Furthermore, alternative certification programs applying for state approval must submit to an outcome-focused evaluation process that will hold such programs to a tough double standard. While the state has displayed little interest in investigating whether its traditional certification requirements and programs have produced more effective teachers and raised student outcomes, alternative certification programs will have to demonstrate that they have "a proven record of producing successful teachers in 1 or more other states or (be) modeled after a program that has a proven record of producing successful teachers in 1 or more other states."

This ensures that the ultimate authority for determining whether an alternative certification program can set up shop in Michigan will rest with the State Board of Education and with state panels such as the Professional Standards Commission for Teachers (PSCT), which is dominated by individuals affiliated with or closely connected to teachers colleges and unions.

Finally, the law mandates that districts must provide "intensive observation and coaching" for an alternatively certified individual's first three to six years in the system. Depending on how it is interpreted, this requirement could dramatically raise the costs to districts of hiring alternatively certified teachers, creating a major disincentive for them to do so.

There are better ways to increase the number of effective teachers in Michigan than forcing prospective and current teachers to sit through countless education courses (which vary widely in quality and have no proven relationship to increased student achievement). For starters, decisions about who ought to teach, and who should be allowed to apply for teaching positions, should be made locally. These decisions should not be made in Lansing or Washington in the format of rigid, one-size-fits-all barriers to entry into the teaching profession.

Local school officials elected by district residents should be allowed to invite applications for teaching positions from all comers, judge applicants according to locally set criteria related to academic excellence, professional demeanor and experience, and hire the best applicant for each position. They should also be given the flexibility to remove teachers who are ineffective and fail to make needed improvements.

The new alternative certification law has the potential to attract a small number of additional talented teachers to Michigan's schools by creating less-costly routes to certification and

allowing teachers to circumvent a few of the enormous costs and annoyances of traditional certification. But it will not generate large-scale improvements in teacher quality. Real reform requires that state-mandated certification be scrapped in favor of an open and flexible labor market for teachers.

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