

Education Week

Panel Finds No Favorite in Teacher-Prep Pathways

By Debra Viadero

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After six years of study, a national panel of prominent scholars has concluded that there's not enough evidence to suggest that teachers who take alternative pathways into the classroom are any worse—or any better—than those who finish traditional college-based preparation programs.

The finding comes in a [report](#) released today by the National Research Council, which is an arm of the National Academies, a scientific body created to advise the federal government on scientific matters.

“Now we can see that we've looked at the best available evidence, and the evidence suggests that there are not significant differences,” said Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, the chairwoman of the 24-member panel.

Nationwide, an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of new teachers enter the classroom through nontraditional, or alternative, routes, such as Teach For America or the New York City Teaching Fellows program. That number has grown exponentially over the last 20 years, and over time, many of those programs have become closely linked to postsecondary education programs.

Studies commissioned by the committee and others show, in fact, that differences among various alternative-certification programs are often as great as those between alternative programs and the traditional ones.

A more fruitful line of research, the report adds, is to compare particular aspects of such programs, such as the timing of students' field experiences, the level of teachers' content knowledge, or program selectivity, and how they affect K-12 students' learning.

According to the panel, the lack of solid evidence to answer the perennial debate over alternative-certification vs. traditional college-based programs reflects the generally thin research base in the field over how best to prepare the nation's 3.8 million teachers.

A growing body of evidence suggests that teachers are the single most important school-based influence on children's learning. Yet experts and policymakers disagree on the best way to train the estimated 200,000 people who complete some sort of U.S. teacher-preparation program each year, according to the report from the Committee on the Study of Teacher Education Programs.

“The research we have on teacher education isn’t up to answering some of the most basic questions that people would like to have answers to,” said panel member Andrew C. Porter, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania’s graduate school of education. “We don’t want to be in the same position 10 years from now.”

Coordinating Data

To prevent that from happening, the panel calls on federal education officials to take the lead in coordinating and linking states’ longitudinal databases on education so researchers can better track who enters teacher-preparation programs, where they end up, and how effective they are on the job.

The study was ordered by Congress in 2004 and commissioned a year later by federal education officials. Yet the lack of rigorous research on many of those questions delayed the project, as the committee was forced to commission its own studies on some of the questions. Ms. Lagemann also said the investigation was prolonged by disagreement among the panelists, a politically and academically diverse group that included scholars in history, mathematics, medicine, and economics, as well as education.

“We spent a lot of time discussing and debating what was evidence,” said Ms. Lagemann, a research professor and senior scholar at the Levy Economics Institute at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y. “We felt very constrained to say things for which there was strong evidence.”

In the end, though, the group failed to win the assent of one panelist, economist Michael Podgursky of the University of Missouri, in Columbia. In a brief dissent, he criticizes the panel for making recommendations beyond its charge and relying on “descriptive and qualitative studies, as well as the opinions of teachers and teacher-educators.”

The panel also looked specifically at the research on teaching in three subject areas—reading, mathematics, and science. It found the strongest evidence base was in reading and the thinnest was in science. Even so, it concludes, “little is known about the best way to prepare prospective teachers in reading.”

To create the kind of nationwide data set the report envisions, the panel suggests capitalizing on the longitudinal education data systems that states are now building with help from the federal government. Beginning in 2005, the department’s Institute of Education Sciences began providing states with grants to build comprehensive, student-level data systems, and that effort has continued and expanded with recent efforts such as the Race to the Top Fund.

The challenge, the report adds, would be to set consistent definitions from state to state on what constitutes passing levels on state teacher-licensing exams, for example, or what is meant by out-of field teachers.

But the resulting product could help answer a wide range of basic questions on teacher education that can’t be answered now, the report says.

Researchers could find out, for example, who enters what kind of teacher-preparation pathway, where they end up, how long they stay on the job, and how their knowledge and teaching practices differ. The data set could also be used to weigh how changes in state or national teaching policy affect schools.

“If we can build a nationwide data set, that, in itself will encourage more research,” Ms. Lagemann said.

Some states, such as Louisiana and Florida, have already begun to collect data tracking teachers coming out of teacher-preparation programs. And Louisiana, in fact, has plans to evaluate such programs based on the test scores of the K-12 students taught by graduates of those programs.

While such efforts are important for research purposes, the report says, it also cautions against drawing definitive conclusions about teacher-preparation programs based on value-added models that measure students’ academic growth over the course of a school year—in part because the models don’t capture the full range of teachers’ skills or factors outside the classroom that influence teaching, according to the panel.

Separately, the report calls on federal education officials to launch a national study of the various mechanisms in place around the country to accredit teacher education programs and whether they line up with best practices in accountability. Those accreditation entities include the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the Teacher Education Accreditation Council, and state and regional licensing authorities.

Arthur E. Levine, the author of a highly critical report on university-based teacher education programs in 2006, said the report’s findings echo those of another report on teacher education research that was published in 2005. In that report, which was put together by a committee of the American Educational Research Association, panelists also bemoaned the lack of research in the field.

“What this study shows,” said Mr. Levine, currently the president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation in Princeton, N.J., “is that we haven’t made as much progress as we wanted to in the last five years.”