



The Hechinger Report

Stumbling blocks remain for newly minted teachers, career-switchers

By Alexandra Moses

Ana Arroyo-Montano spent the first year in front of her class fearing she'd be fired.

After training in the Boston Teacher Residency <<http://www.bostonteacherresidency.org/>> program, the business major with five years' experience in financial aid services wasn't prepared for a room of kindergartners who didn't speak English.

"Here I had all these kids and they're lagging behind all the general-ed kids, and I'm wondering if it's me," she says. "José can't count in English yet. Is that because it's developmental? Is it because he doesn't understand a word I'm saying?"



David Johnson (center) switched careers to become a teacher in Indiana (Photographer: Todd Moore, courtesy University of Indianapolis)

Career-changers like Arroyo-Montano are increasingly entering classrooms across the country. Their numbers have doubled over the last 20 years, in part due to alternative certification programs that welcome professionals from diverse backgrounds. There's a new push to expand these pathways as states scramble to increase their chances of winning second-round money in President Barack Obama's Race to the Top

<<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>> competition, which is aimed at

reforming and improving U.S. education.

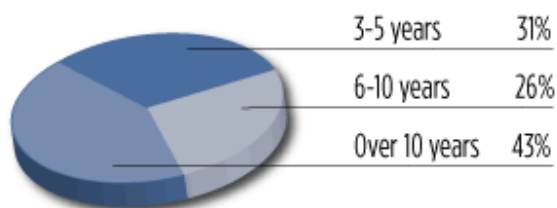
But as Arroyo-Montano's experience illustrates, training this cadre of career-switchers has proven a challenge for even the best programs. A national survey released in February by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation <<http://www.woodrow.org/>> found that career-switchers entering the teaching profession feel unprepared in key areas, such as working with new classroom technology and English language learners. And once on their own, they often have no one to turn to for help.

"It's clear we all need to do better," says Jesse Solomon, who heads the Boston Teacher Residency program.

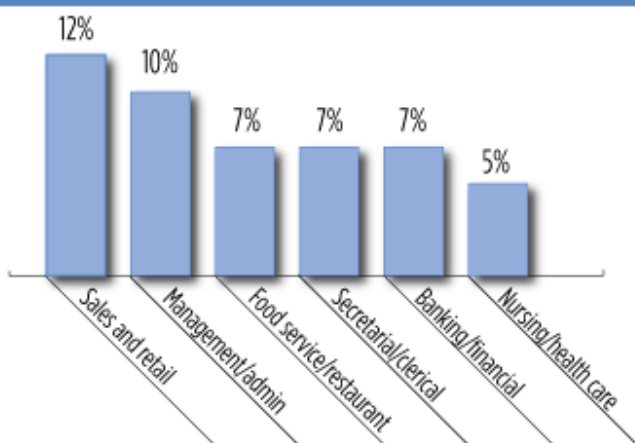
Despite budget cuts that slashed thousands of education jobs, the new teachers are in high demand, especially if they're math and science experts willing to work in hard-to-staff urban schools. And both President Obama and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, unhappy with the quality of teachers trained in traditional education schools, are pushing new models to attract career-changes into the field. In a series of speeches last fall, Secretary Duncan criticized education schools <<http://ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/10/10222009.html>> for not adequately preparing teachers for a global economy, saying they must focus on helping teachers learn the practical skills of running classrooms.

Career-changers, unlike undergraduate education students, require more exposure to modern teaching methods because much has changed since many of them were students. They range greatly in age, education and professional experience, and now account for a third of all new teachers in the U.S.

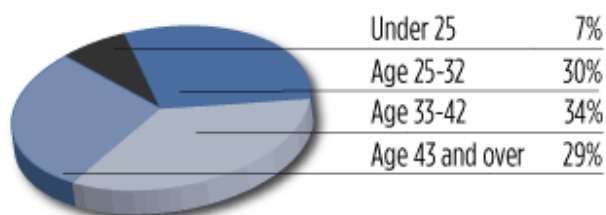
How long were career-changers in their old jobs?



Which fields do career-changing teachers leave?



At what age did career-changers make the switch?



Source: CAREER CHANGERS IN THE CLASSROOM: A National Portrait, Feb. 2010

Nationally, a third of new teachers quit after just three years and half are gone after five years, according to Richard Ingersoll <<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/faculty/ingersoll>> , a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania <<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/>> . There is insufficient research on how long career-switchers

remain in the classroom, although anecdotal evidence suggests they're more likely to stay in their new profession longer than teachers entering through traditional pathways.

States are considering a range of solutions to get better teachers in U.S. classrooms. In New York, the Board of Regents <<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/>> voted last month to let alternative certification programs offer a master's in education outside the university system – a blow to education schools, which have long held a monopoly on teacher training and graduate degrees in education.

And new models are still emerging for how teachers are trained. The New Teacher Project <<http://www.tntp.org/>> , founded in 1997 to address issues of teacher quality and shortages, is also working with school principals to help them attract and hire the best teachers. It has set up some 75 programs and initiatives in 31 states.

Even among alternative certification programs, nearly half of the 600 across the nation exist within colleges and universities, programs that nine out of 10 career-switchers attend, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation <<http://www.woodrow.org/>> found.

How New York will structure its program isn't certain, though, and complaints from career-changers persist no matter where they were trained. Education schools also face criticism for relying too much on theory and not enough on practical application. Even those within some education schools are alarmed, including Katherine Merseth, who directs Harvard's teacher education program and thinks most traditional teacher education programs are inadequate and should be shut down.

Merseth made headlines last year when she told *U.S. News & World Report* <<http://www.usnews.com/blogs/on-education/2009/03/25/what-you-should-consider-before-education-graduate-school.html>> that “The dirty little secret about schools of education is that they have been the cash cows of universities for many, many years, and it's time to say, ‘Show us what you can do, or get out of the business.’ ”

Solomon and others, including Arthur Levine <<http://www.woodrow.org/about/directory/president.php>> , president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, believe programs aimed at career-changers need to create solid connections between theory and practice in real time, similar to a doctor's residency program. If a program gives a lesson on assessment, for instance, teacher candidates would at the same time go into classrooms and look at assessments in action, Levine says. That type of training could also benefit traditional education students, who often complete coursework prior to student-teaching.

Hanne Denney, a special education teacher in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, found such

connections invaluable. “It was wonderful for me to sit in a class about classroom management, and think ‘oh yeah, I’m having trouble with one’ ” group of students, says Denney, who went through a teacher residency program sponsored by the county in 2004-06, after 12 years as a childcare provider. “I could put into practice what I was learning pretty much right away.”

Several programs, new and old, emphasize clinical time. Teacher candidates in the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship program <<http://education.uindy.edu/teachingfellowship/>> at the University of Indianapolis <<http://www.uindy.edu/>> spend several months observing before gradually taking over classes.

Fellowship student Laura Cummings, who graduated from college in 1989, started teaching five sections of high school chemistry in March, after observing classes in the fall and teaching one section for a few months. She’s learned how to set up a lab, where to find good resources and how to help students work productively in groups.



Indiana teacher Alan Stuckey changed careers after more than 20 years in sales. (Photographer: Todd Moore, courtesy University of Indianapolis)

Cummings, who made the switch after the youngest of her four children started school, didn’t want to enter the classroom without such training. “You make it harder on yourself. I can’t imagine a doctor, a lawyer, a professional musician, a reporter going into the field without a fair amount of guidance,” says Cummings, who is job-hunting and will be certified in June, with a master’s degree to follow in 2011. The Wilson fellowship covers tuition and provides a small stipend, which is making Cumming’s career transition possible.

Career-switcher Neil Gahagan was hired to teach fourth grade in Florida after passing an exam

on elementary education. The state grants temporary teaching certificates, valid for three years, to those who demonstrate subject-area knowledge and find a teaching position. Such certificates are not renewable.

“I had significant life experience. I wasn’t interested in being an undergrad again,” says Gahagan, who turned to teaching after being downsized out of his management job of 20 years. Gahagan doesn’t regret his decision, but he went into the classroom cold and found himself working 12-hour days that first year.

In his second year, Gahagan enrolled in a fast-track program at Florida Gulf Coast University <<http://www.fgcu.edu/>> because it allowed him to keep teaching full-time while he met state requirements for a professional certificate.

To woo prospective educators via its website, Florida Gulf Coast University promises magic <<http://www.fgcutip.com/>> : “The Teacher Immersion Program (TIP), a state-approved program, is magical: It accepts those who only dream of becoming teachers and miraculously turns them into well-qualified, competent teachers.”

The language of magic and miracles is alluring, but it also raises the question of whether some programs overpromise and under-deliver. According to a 2007 National Council on Teacher Quality report <https://tmail1.tc.columbia.edu/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.nctq.org/p/publications/docs/Alternative_Certification_Isnt_Alternative_20071124023109.pdf> , too many alternative programs set low academic standards and provide insufficient mentoring.

Clearly, though, fast-track programs remain attractive to both career-changers and new college graduates. Teach for America <<http://www.teachforamerica.org/>> , responding to strong demand, has doubled in size since 2005, with 4,224 incoming corps members this year. The program recruits about 15 percent of its fellows from other fields and helps train and place them.

No matter how teachers train or arrive on the job, though, big questions remain about how effective they are. Recent research <<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/04/29/31teachered.h29.html>> suggests that teachers prepared in alternative programs aren’t any better – or worse – than those who follow more traditional routes.

Despite the challenges she faced as a first-year kindergarten teacher, Arroyo-Montano didn’t go in cold – she spent a year training before getting her own classroom. It just wasn’t the type of classroom she was prepared for, she says.

Solomon, the Boston program's director, says future teachers need to have "a close approximation to doing the work without being alone, isolated," and at the expense of kids.

That's an experience the University of Maryland at College Park <<http://www.umd.edu/>> hopes to provide when it begins its Maryland Science Mathematics Resident Teacher program (MSMaRT) <<http://www.education.umd.edu/EDCI/MSMaRT/>> in June. The program offers a compromise between full immersion in the classroom and giving up a paying job to work on a master's in education. It will allow career-changers to work on "job-shares" – two people will be in charge of a single classroom, splitting their time in county middle schools while completing coursework for certification.

The willingness of programs to evolve is a sign of what's to come. In Boston, Solomon considers Arroyo-Montano's experience a good lesson. Now all teachers, who also earn a master's degree through the University of Massachusetts-Boston <<http://www.umb.edu/>> , are prepared to teach English language learners. It's a response not just to teacher feedback but also to the district's needs, as 17 percent of Boston students are English language learners.

Schools and teacher-preparation programs must take clinical time to this next level, Solomon says, and programs must work with districts to offer continued support to all new teachers through mentoring and professional development.

"We've got a responsibility to keep supporting [new teachers]," Solomon says. "Nobody thinks that a teacher's done on graduation day."

Alexandra Moses, a former Associated Press reporter, is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer specializing in K-12 issues.