

# Education Week

## The Impact of Alternate Routes to Teaching

How Teacher Preparation Has Changed, and Why It May Need to Change More

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Who would have thought 25 years ago, when New Jersey created its then-controversial alternate route to teacher certification, that having such quick paths to the classroom would be a criterion for the distribution of huge sums of federal money, as it is in the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative? While New Jersey, and subsequently other states, created such alternatives as a way to improve the quality of the teaching force by offering programs attractive to liberal arts graduates, alternate routes have been derided by some as substandard, "scab programs," and merely fast-track ways of getting warm bodies into classrooms.

So why are about one-third of new teachers hired in this country coming through some 600 programs being implemented under the umbrella of 125 state alternate routes to certification, with such options available in nearly every state?

Alternate routes have not only proliferated, but have also had a profound influence on the way we think about the preparation of teachers.

Moreover, why are scores if not hundreds of thousands of individuals with at least a bachelor's degree attracted to these programs as a way to enter teaching? Why are career-switchers, men, people of color, mathematicians, scientists, and recent graduates of top universities all over the country trying to get into teaching through alternate routes? And why are colleges of education becoming big players in this space?

Simple answer: because alternate routes are market-driven. From day one, they have been created to meet market demand on both sides of the supply-and-demand equation—schools' need for more and better teachers *and* the needs of a nontraditional market of individuals who want to help meet those demands.

Alternative teacher-certification programs generally don't exist unless there are teaching jobs that need to be filled. They have been created to recruit, select, train, and certify individuals to teach in schools that need teachers in specific subjects and grade levels. This is why most alternate-route programs are in urban areas and outlying rural areas in the South and in Western and Eastern regions of the United States: Those places are where the demand for teachers is greatest.

This is also why alternative programs produce more math, science, and special education teachers, since those are the subject areas of greatest demand. And more male and minority candidates are entering teaching through alternate routes because these subjects and geographic areas are where the greatest concentration of men and minorities are.

Alternate routes come and go—if there is no market demand for teachers and no applicants, the programs die. And that is not a bad thing.

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For the last half-century, America has relied for its teachers almost exclusively on high school students going to college and enrolling in a state-approved undergraduate teacher education program. It was not that long ago that teacher quality was measured by the SAT scores of students indicating they intended to major in education when they got into college.

Data from the federal [Schools and Staffing Survey](#) show that only 57 percent of brand-new entrants to the teaching profession in 2003-04 were recent college graduates (most likely to have come through a traditional program). And today about 40 percent of undergraduates who train to teach do not go into teaching. The U.S. Department of Education's [Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study](#) shows that only about a third of education majors (33.5 percent in 2001) go directly into teaching, and fewer than three-quarters teach at some point in the 10 years after finishing their bachelor's degrees. This is not an efficient model for teacher production.

There is more than a sheer market phenomenon at work. Alternate routes have not only proliferated, but have also had a profound influence on the way we think about the preparation of teachers. Much to the chagrin of critics, one of the hallmarks of alternate routes is that they get candidates into classrooms early—sometimes right away—as teachers of record. The National Center for Alternative Certification's database of alternate-route providers indicates that virtually all participants teach with salary and benefits during their programs (79 percent full time, and 21 percent part time). Support from mentor teachers and other school or university personnel also is a major component of most alternate-route programs.

All of these programs, including those administered by colleges of education, stress on-the-job training. And this strikes many in the field as the wave of the future. At a recent Education Department policy discussion on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, for example, one participant cited Finland's brand of teacher preparation as a model. There, candidates practice-teach throughout their education. They are in the classroom literally from the day they begin study.

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The federal Institute of Education Sciences has come out with three startling reports over the past year: one basically concluding that the pathway to teaching doesn't matter in the production of effective teachers, and the other two indicating that mentoring and induction are not all they've been cracked up to be in producing teachers who improve student achievement or in retaining teachers.

The reports and statistics go on and on. What does it all mean? What have we learned about how best to prepare teachers? Here are some thoughts:

- There are now hundreds of diverse pathways into teaching, with varying entry and program-delivery components.
- There are vastly more educated, talented, eager adults who want to teach in high-demand subjects and geographic areas than there are jobs available.
- No research, to date, has found that the pathway one takes into teaching makes much difference in classroom effectiveness (which translates to student achievement).
- The continuing debates about alternative vs. traditional teacher preparation, and such nonsensical phrases as “alternative is not alternative,” are a waste of time at this juncture.
- Most school districts do not want to run teacher-training programs.

Maybe—just maybe—counting courses, defining program-quality indicators, lining up licensing credentials, and providing other measures of “highly qualified teachers” are not the way to go. Perhaps decisions about the preparation of teachers can be made based on answers to the “effective teacher” questions: What, if any, components of existing teacher-preparation programs—recruitment and selection, mentoring and induction, curriculum/content and assessments—make a difference, and under what circumstances?

Thankfully, an evolving critical mass of smart people is focusing on *effective teachers* for answers—teachers whose students really do learn. How do we know an effective teacher when we see one? What makes an effective teacher effective? Can we make them, or do we just find them?

While answers to these questions are being sought, we also need to focus attention on what kinds of teachers will be needed going forward and how we get them. After all, practically the same cast of characters that was around when the college-assured teacher education model began in the early 1950s (the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education was formed in 1948; the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 1954) is still running colleges of education. And that was about the time that television was first showing up in living rooms across the country. Think about it.

The rapidity of technological advancements and their impact on teacher and student learning are immense. The Internet began to be widely used less than two decades ago. Google was started by a couple of college kids in 1998. We all began walking around with cellphones about 10 years ago. The BlackBerry came out in 2002, and the iPhone two years ago. And then there is the recent explosion of social networking, and cloud computing on the horizon.

That pace of change prompts the question: How are kids going to learn 10 years from now? And, going further, what role will teachers play?

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