

Center for American Progress



Realizing the Promise

How State Policy Can Support Alternative Certification Programs

Robin Chait and Michele McLaughlin February 2009

Executive summary

A recent McKinsey & Company analysis of the top performing school systems in the world found that, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”¹ The education community is in virtually unanimous agreement that effective teaching is critical to all other education reform efforts. This consensus has led to an increase in policies focused on improving teacher quality. Yet the question of how policy can drive changes in the quality of the teaching force is complex and yields no easy answers. One increasingly promising strategy is the development of alternative preparation and certification programs. These programs can increase the supply of talented teaching candidates, particularly for subject shortage areas and high-needs schools.

In most states, teachers obtain a certificate by graduating from college, taking a specific set of education courses, and completing a practice teaching component.² The course requirements vary depending upon the teaching assignment.³ In contrast, alternative certification programs generally target applicants who already have an undergraduate degree but need education coursework to meet the state’s requirements for certification. These programs frequently streamline many of the licensure requirements expected from graduates of traditional programs.⁴ Alternative certification programs, for example, may require shorter but more intensive practice teaching assignments and more targeted coursework and learning experiences.⁵ Also, teachers in alternative certification programs usually assume the duties of a classroom teacher while taking education courses and working toward a standard teaching license.

Alternative certification programs have proliferated in recent years. According to data from the National Center for Education Information, more than half of current programs have been established in the last 15 years. In 2008, all states and the District of Columbia had some type of alternate route to teacher certification.⁶

These programs are among the most promising strategies for expanding the pipeline of talented teachers, particularly for subject shortage areas and high-needs schools, yet states frequently do not have policies in place to develop and expand robust alternative certification programs. This paper analyzes the policies that are needed and puts them into three categories: minimizing participant burden, ensuring program quality, and encouraging innovation and growth.

Minimize participant burden

States should ensure that alternative certification programs are affordable to a wide range of nontraditional candidates by strategically requiring university coursework and learning experiences that are essential to a beginning teacher. States should specify the competencies new teachers must demonstrate in order to be certified, rather than the numbers of courses or credit hours new teachers should take. Providers of teacher preparation programs could then design courses and learning experiences to ensure new teachers demonstrate these skills. Programs should select candidates who have already mastered their content area and only need training in teaching methods. States that do not take costs and time commitments to participants into account when developing policies are likely to limit the pool of candidates interested in alternative certification programs, reducing the programs' selectivity and thus the caliber of participants.

Ensure program quality

In order to ensure program quality, state policies should support the recruitment of talented candidates, assessment and support of program participants, mentoring and induction support, and accountability for programs to produce effective teachers.

One critique of alternative certification programs is that they are not sufficiently selective. States and institutions of higher education could address this problem in both traditional and alternative certification programs by setting higher standards for candidates' minimum grade point averages and cut scores—the minimum score needed to qualify—on licensing exams. States should commission analyses that weigh the costs and benefits of the proposed higher standards to ensure they raise the quality of program entrants, not bar from teaching those who would otherwise be effective with students.

High quality programs assess participants and deliver formative feedback, both to monitor participants' skills and help them grow professionally. States should consider including a performance-based component in teacher certification that would encourage both traditional and alternative certification programs to provide teachers with learning experiences that help them demonstrate these competencies and assess their progress toward meeting them. States could also build this ongoing assessment of candidates' performance into the approval process for teacher preparation programs.

States can also ensure program quality by designing and funding high-quality mentoring and induction programs for alternate route teachers, since research finds that these programs increase teacher retention.

Finally, one of the primary ways states can improve program quality is by strengthening accountability for both traditional and alternate route programs. Programs should be

judged by the performance of their graduates, at least in part based on their effects on student achievement. This measurement requires robust state and district data systems that can link teachers to students, and a variety of processes to ensure that the systems are accurate. Therefore, states must work to establish the underlying infrastructure needed for such accountability systems which, once in place, would also allow the state and others to study the effectiveness of a variety of programs and to determine which components of training programs are most critical for preparing successful teachers.

Encourage innovation and growth

States should take steps to ensure that their alternate route programs are truly designed to foster innovation and the expansion of promising programs. In this matter, states should establish a certificate or a license specifically for alternate route candidates. They should not bring nontraditional candidates into the classroom on an emergency or temporary certificate, or a permit, because these credentials are usually not designed to ensure that nontraditional candidates are “highly qualified” or on track to obtain the next type of license. Additionally, if states are truly committed to expanding the teacher pipeline, they should issue licenses to alternate route teacher candidates across all subject areas, grade levels and geographic areas.

To encourage the development of programs that are more customized to meet the needs of school districts and the alternate route candidates themselves, states should allow nonprofits, districts, and charter schools to serve as teacher preparation programs, while ensuring all providers meet state standards of quality. Allowing multiple providers would foster healthy competition, potentially improving the quality of all programs. It would also provide more opportunities for evaluation and learning that can inform all programs. Moreover, recent studies have shown that teaching candidates prepared by these providers can be as effective, if not more so, than teachers from university providers.⁷

Finally, federal funds should support the development and expansion of high-quality, innovative alternative certification programs, through state grants targeted at serving high-needs schools and subject areas.⁸ The grants should focus on funding innovative programs that have had some success, but could scale up with an additional infusion of resources.

How to promote effective policies

Establishing alternative certification programs that meet quality criteria without imposing unnecessary barriers is best accomplished by creating strong statutory and regulatory language. Passing supportive legislation and regulations in most states is no small endeavor and requires specialized knowledge of the process and the political players involved. It is sometimes argued that entrepreneurial organizations in education reform should take

the lead in making the needed statutory and regulatory changes happen across the states. However, as Fredrick Hess and Chester Finn argue, the best role for such organizations is to serve as “proof points” that such policies can work.⁹ Working in concert, advocates and entrepreneurial organizations in the education sector can collaborate with state legislators to bring about the needed policy changes.

Conclusion

A large body of evidence indicates that efforts to improve student learning will not be successful without increasing the supply of effective teachers, particularly in high poverty and low performing schools. Alternative certification programs are a promising strategy for addressing that necessity. Yet, for the benefits of alternative certification programs to be realized, policymakers need to institute policies that ensure the programs are able to attract and retain talented participants and provide them with high quality preparation programs.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

