



Mitigating Teacher Shortages: Alternative Teacher Certification

JULIE ROWLAND WOODS

The first brief in this series, *Teacher Shortages: What We Know*, explores research on teacher shortages and highlights recent state task force findings. This report is one of five policy briefs examining strategies states are using to address shortages:

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Providing alternative routes to teacher certification is an approach to **recruit** teachers. A definition of alternative teacher certification is provided, followed by a summary of the research on this strategy, state policy examples and considerations for policymakers.



What is alternative certification?

While every state provides some form of alternative certification, these programs vary significantly. Because of the variety, what is classified as an alternative program in one state may look more like a traditional program in another state and vice versa. However, some common themes exist across most alternative certification programs. In general, the goal of these programs is to provide a quicker path into the teaching profession than traditional programs while still providing more preparation than might be required for an emergency credential.

Alternative programs allow individuals who have already obtained a bachelor's degree to bypass the time and expense involved in attaining a teaching degree or completing a graduate program. Completion of alternative certification programs typically results in a standard teaching certificate or an alternative or provisional certificate. Providers of alternative certification can be colleges of education, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, or school districts.

Although some alternative routes are nearly indistinguishable from traditional ones, alternative programs focus on providing the most efficient path to a career change. To fast-track new teachers into the classroom, these programs often focus more on “on the job” training rather than theory. Participants frequently begin working in the classroom while completing their coursework—sometimes from the very beginning of the program—rather than in the last year of a traditional program. Some programs allow candidates to earn a teacher's salary or stipend while completing the program, making them more appealing to a mid-career professional than a traditional path. However, while alternative certification programs can offer quicker paths to teaching, in some cases the required coursework and program length are the same as traditional paths.



What does the research say?

Teacher shortages can be addressed in two ways: by recruiting more teachers and by keeping more of the teachers who are already in the classroom. This section examines using the strategy of alternative certification programs to not only increase the number of teachers in a state but also to enhance their diversity and skillsets, as well as how alternative routes may affect teacher retention.

RECRUITMENT

Increasing Quantity & Diversity

Roughly 20 percent of new teachers are already entering the profession through alternative certification programs.¹ Many of these programs are less selective than traditional programs and attract a broader pool of applicants, especially mid-career professionals looking to change their career tracks. By attracting a broader pool of applicants, alternative programs may not only increase the supply of teachers but contribute to the diversity of the teacher pool.



Research shows that alternative programs also attract more minority and male recruits and these recruits may be more likely to choose to work in urban or high-needs schools.² Moreover, many alternative programs specifically target hard-to-staff schools by placing new teachers in these schools during their program.

Increasing Teaching Quality

Alternative certification programs can provide a means for content experts to transition to teaching relevant courses, such as a chemical engineer who becomes a chemistry teacher or a lawyer who teaches social studies.³ Teachers with an education or professional background relevant to the subjects they teach can bring new ideas and relevance to students' classwork and may even have more subject area content knowledge than traditionally certified teachers. More importantly, alternative programs may be more likely to attract professionals with a background in hard-to-staff subjects, such as science, who already have a degree and seek a low-cost career change.

The certification route new teachers choose does not appear to have a significant effect on teaching quality, nor does teaching quality vary much between types of certification program applicants. Teacher effectiveness is similar across programs with low and high coursework requirements and across highly selective or less selective programs.⁴ Additionally, research has found no distinction between alternatively and traditionally certified teachers as far as their "scores on college entrance exams, the selectivity of the college that awarded their bachelor's degree or their level of educational attainment."⁵ In fact, alternatively certified teachers may be more likely to score higher on licensure exams than traditionally certified teachers.⁶ Therefore, policymakers may find it more useful to focus less on the types of applicants recruited, amount of program coursework or level of selectivity and more on strategies such as reducing financial barriers to certification or providing quality induction and mentoring for new teachers.

RETENTION

Certification route alone does not appear to have a significant impact on whether a teacher remains in a classroom for many years. Rather, preparation and support may be a key factor in teacher retention. Teachers who feel better prepared to teach may remain in the profession longer and coursework that focuses on methods of teaching may contribute to their sense of preparedness.⁷ Additionally, research suggests that enhancing support mechanisms—such as mentoring and induction programs—for alternatively certified teachers may increase retention and improve the quality of instruction.⁸ Retention rates also vary by the type of alternative certification. For example, one study in an urban district found that Teach for America teachers had lower retention rates than other alternatively certified teachers.⁹



State examples

VARIETY OF PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Alternative certification coursework requirements can vary widely within and among states. State policies may require alternative route teachers to complete anywhere from a two-week training to a master's degree and these requirements may need to be completed before or during a teacher's first year of teaching.¹⁰ For example:



In **Louisiana**, the Practitioner Teacher Program requires, at a minimum, nine-12 credit hours of relevant coursework before a teacher's first year in the classroom. During the first year of teaching, new teachers complete a three-hour seminar each semester and receive one-on-one supervision.¹¹



Oklahoma's initial alternative teaching certificate does not require coursework beyond the applicant's bachelor's degree, but applicants must have at least two years of work experience related to the anticipated teaching subject area. Like many certification programs, applicants must pass certain state tests required of all educators. Within three years of receiving the initial certification, teachers must complete additional 12-18 college semester hours or professional development hours to qualify for standard certification.¹²



In **Utah**, applicants to teach at the elementary level through an alternative route must have a bachelor's degree and complete at least 27 credit hours in elementary curriculum content areas. However, to teach at the secondary level, alternative route teachers need not complete additional coursework if the applicant has a bachelor's degree in a relevant major.¹³

Teacher Residencies

While not always classified as alternative certification programs, residency programs often target individuals who have already completed degrees in other subjects and provide them an alternative path to teacher certification or a graduate degree. These programs partner with local schools to place residents in the classroom from the start.

Residencies allow districts to target their unique needs by funneling students into specific schools or tailoring their programs to prepare teachers in particular subject areas. Many residencies place their students in high-needs or hard-to-staff schools, often requiring a commitment to remain in that school for a prescribed number of years. The coursework residents must complete can be co-developed by the residency program and the district, allowing the residents to better understand the unique needs of the school and district in which they will work.¹⁴

In the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR), residents complete an initial, two month summer training and then spend the school year completing graduate coursework and taking on increasing responsibilities in a classroom.¹⁵ BTR is intended to be an affordable path to teaching and residents receive a stipend and health care benefits through AmeriCorps while earning an initial teaching license and a master's degree in education. For residents who complete their three year commitment, BTR waives the entire program fee.

Residents receive a discounted tuition rate for the master’s program, and eligible residents also receive an “education award” toward student loans upon graduation.¹⁶

At the end of the 13 month program, residents commit to teaching in Boston Public Schools classrooms for three years, but 80 percent of residents remain beyond that period.¹⁷ According to research, “the BTR has been successful in recruiting teachers in hard-to-staff subjects, in increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce and in reducing turnover among novice teachers in Boston Public Schools.”¹⁸ BTR requires all resident to pursue dual licensure in special education or English as a second language.¹⁹



Policy considerations

When developing these policies, policymakers should consider how to:

- Reduce financial barriers to enter these programs through stipends, reduced tuition at university-based programs or other financial assistance. For more information about the financial incentives, see Education Commission of the States’ *Mitigating Teacher Shortages: Financial Incentives* by Stephanie Aragon.
- Recruit and select strong candidates through GPA minimums, admissions testing or other academic indicators.
- Reward alternative teacher candidates for the expertise they bring with them by, for example, allowing candidates to test out of certain coursework requirements.
- Require coursework that helps teachers feel prepared to teach and meets their immediate teaching needs while limiting the amount of coursework required, especially during the first year of teaching.
- Ensure that teachers receive certification at the end of the program.
- Provide support for alternatively certified teachers before and during teaching through induction, observations and mentorship. For more information about induction and mentorship, see Education Commission of the States’ *Mitigating Teacher Shortages: Induction and Mentorship* by Julie Rowland Woods.
- Develop and consistently implement alternative certification program standards.
- Ensure that teachers of all grades and subject areas—but especially shortage areas—can be certified through an alternative program.
- Use innovative options, such as online courses, varying module lengths, and concurrent learning and teaching responsibilities.



Endnotes

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AUTHOR

*Julie Rowland Woods is a policy analyst with Education Commission of the States. She has her law degree and master's degree in education policy. When she's not thinking about policy with the K-12 team, Julie loves camping with her husband in Colorado's state parks. Contact Julie at jwoods@ecs.org or **303.299.3672**.*

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