

Brief Synopsis of Literature on Alternative Certification

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Overview

In response to real and anticipated shortages of qualified teachers, education policymakers have implemented policies designed to bring new candidates into teaching quickly. One approach, alternative certification, offers on-the-job training and supervision to candidates with little or no prior experience. In 2003, 46 states and the District of Columbia reported having some type of alternative means of certifying teachers (Feistritzer and Chester 2003). The debate over merits is best understood in the context of the two confluent forces that spurred this policy's creation:

a highly publicized teacher shortage
growing public concern about teacher quality

The consequences of the teacher shortage form part of the rationale for alternative certification policy: to recruit new candidates to fill retiring teachers' classrooms, to diversify the teaching force, to better distribute the corps of qualified teachers among all schools, and to certify large numbers of unlicensed teachers. Fears about declining teacher quality have been exacerbated during this era of accountability, and have stoked the fires of the debate about who makes an "effective teacher" and how best to attract, prepare, and retain them.

The debate about alternative certification has become polarized between those who argue for higher certification standards and increased regulation and those who argue for removing regulations, promoting alternative routes, and allowing schools and districts to choose qualified candidates. The debate often neglects to consider the programs' variety and complexity, contextual factors, differences in design and program components, and multiplicity of purposes.

As the nation's student population grows increasingly diverse and its teacher population grows increasingly white, many officials stress the importance of recruiting more teachers of color. There is some evidence that alternative certification programs recruit males and minorities in greater proportions than do traditional programs. Programs like Pathways to Teaching have successfully recruited teachers from the pool of para-professional educators. However, there is also evidence that alternative certification policies that rely primarily on testing could exclude minority candidates.

The body of effect studies is also mixed, resting on a range of assumptions about the causes and indicators of effective teaching, and ranging in terms of sample size and location (i.e., small, one-site study vs. large, national dataset). The research on individual programs has documented various program components; explored the policy contexts

within which programs were created; and demonstrated the differences in program designs and assumptions about quality.

Some of this more recent research includes participant interviews, which helps to illuminate what they find attractive about these programs and what they find useful both before and after they begin teaching. Current research examines cross-site similarities and differences among programs; examines participants' perspectives; and illuminates effective program components. The research provides useful lessons for understanding a) how to design and implement alternative certification programs and b) what factors to consider in balancing tensions toward creating a program that will attract teachers and ensure their quality.