

Are All Special Education Teacher Preparation Routes Equal?

What States Should Know About Alternative Route Certification Programs

There has been a shortage of qualified special education teachers for decades. Traditional special education teacher preparation programs have not kept pace with the need. Indeed, graduates from these programs account for a surprisingly small percentage of newly hired teachers annually. At the same time, almost all open special education positions are filled each year, suggesting that people are willing to become special education teachers. Thus, the question becomes one of how to get interested individuals trained, licensed, and teaching successfully in special education classrooms.

Providing **alternative routes to certification** is one strategy by which states have attempted to address the shortage of qualified special education personnel. Although alternative certification route programs vary, all provide access to standard teaching credentials and circumvent traditional teacher education.

By 1997, 75,000 individuals had received certification through state-run alternative certification programs—and the numbers are increasing. Because state policymakers approve certification waivers, they must ensure that alternative certification route programs provide high-quality teacher preparation and

that the graduates of such programs are qualified. What do states need to know to make a sound assessment of quality? Read on to gain insights from the research.

Have You Considered How Alternative Route Certification Programs Differ from Traditional Preparation Programs?

No two programs are alike; however, the following features tend to differentiate alternative routes from traditional ones:

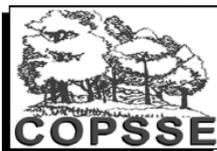
- **Length and structure of the program.** Alternative route preparation programs usually are shorter than traditional ones, and they are structured to allow candidates to enter the classroom immediately or soon after beginning their studies.
- **Delivery mode.** Alternative route programs tend to present instruction in nontraditional ways, such as through distance education, extensive use of on-the-job experience, etc.
- **Pool of teacher candidates.** Alternative route certification programs recruit a different pool of potential special education teacher candidates than do traditional programs.

Typically, alternative route program candidates do not have a substantial back-

IN THIS WATCH

Alternative route certification programs in special education are increasing in numbers—Have you considered the advantages and disadvantages?

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ground in general or special education. If they have a bachelors degree, it usually is not in an education field. Alternative route programs tend to attract more people who are over 25 and who have had business, industry, or military experience.

Alternative route programs have been more successful than traditional preparation programs in recruiting candidates from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (21 percent, versus 13 percent in traditional programs). Moreover, 87 percent of teachers who choose an alternative route to certification and who are from diverse backgrounds work in urban schools, compared to only 67 percent of teachers from diverse backgrounds who complete a traditional teacher preparation program.

Have You Considered the Indicators of Promising Alternative Route Certification Programs?

The following features tend to be associated with the development of qualified personnel and are necessary attributes of alternative route programs.

- **Meaningful collaboration.** Alternative route programs that are a collaboration between a district and institute of higher education show more promise than district-only programs. Although most alternatively certified teachers are considered to be minimally competent,

graduates of collaborative programs tend to be judged as superior (by outside observers and building principals) to those who complete district-only programs.

- **Substantive content.** Alternative route programs that take a programmatic approach are superior to those that make extensive use of unrelated courses and add-on activities.
- **On-site supervision.** Successful alternative programs use on-site supervision that incorporates features of traditional preparation supervision and building-based coaching and mentoring. Mentoring for alternative route certification candidates is more extensive than for traditionally prepared teachers.

Have You Considered the Strengths and Weaknesses of Alternative Route Certification Programs?

Credentialing inadequately prepared individuals can have a negative effect on student achievement for years. When deciding whether to approve an alternative route certification program, consider the following cautions:

Will you eliminate shortages? Alternative programs have been found to address shortages in urban areas, but not in rural and suburban districts. In addition, attrition rates are considerably higher for teachers who are prepared in alternative programs.

Do you know what you are getting? Teachers in traditional preparation programs and alternative route programs usually receive the same certification. Yet, in most cases, their preparation will differ significantly. Traditional spe-

cial education teacher preparation programs generally adhere to high professional standards (e.g., National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education), while some alternative route programs might not be held to the same standards.

For More Information

Information reported in this brief was based on *The Proliferation of Alternative Routes to Certification in Special Education: A Critical Review of the Literature*, a paper prepared for the National Center for Professions in Special Education, by Michael S. Rosenberg and Paul T. Sindelar. This document can be found on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.

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Alternative is not a synonym for quick and easy. Research offers no support for the proposition that abbreviated preparation is a viable alternative to traditional teacher education.

WATCH THIS...

Contrary to news reports, career changers in alternative route certification programs tend to come from lower paying jobs rather than from the professional or managerial ranks.



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