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Alternative Certification: A Research Brief

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Introduction

Alternative teacher certification (ATC) encompasses a broad range of programs that prepare teachers in non-traditional, accelerated ways (Suell and Piotrowski 2007). The number of teachers prepared through alternative routes has increased considerably in the past decade. As of 2011, 16% of public school teachers nationwide had entered the profession through some kind of alternative program, and in the last five years, 40% of new hires have come through ATC programs (Feistritzer 2011).

In this brief I offer a short overview of research on the outcomes of alternative certification programs compared with traditional certification, summarize findings about what makes for effective alternative certification programs, and describe ATC programs in Alaska.

Generally, ATC programs are aimed at people who are interested in becoming teachers and have at least a bachelor's degree, as well as extensive life experience. But how these programs are defined and what they include varies considerably (Humphrey and Wechsler 2007). In this brief, alternative certification is defined as a program in which teacher candidates work as the instructor of record while completing their teacher certification. These programs are considered to be both a means of alleviating teacher shortages and a way of improving the quality of the teaching workforce. In addition to shortening the preparation time and being more flexible for working participants, ATC programs also typically incorporate mentoring (Mikulecky, Shkodriani et al. 2004; Scribner and Heinen 2009). The programs range from initiatives run by school districts and state departments of education to university-operated efforts run alongside traditional teacher preparation programs (Yao and Williams 2010).

Alternative Certification versus Traditional Certification

There are a number of widespread assumptions about how alternative certification programs work: that professional experience in other areas translates into effective teaching practices; that teachers who are older when they begin teaching persist longer in the profession than those who start younger; and that students in classes taught by teachers from either traditional or alternative certification programs have similar experiences. Recent research findings are mixed and conflicting about whether ATC programs successfully address teacher shortages, quality, and preparation. Some studies have found no evidence of improvement in any of these areas, while others have found that ATC successfully increases numbers of minority teachers and shortages in specific subject areas (Suell and Piotrowski 2007; Scribner and Heinen 2009). Likewise, the research so far has found no conclusive evidence about whether student outcomes in classes taught by ATC prepared teachers are worse, better, or the same as those in classes of traditionally prepared teachers. Several studies have found little apparent difference in achievement among

students in classrooms of teachers prepared either traditionally or alternatively (Suell and Piotrowski, 2007). Other research summaries, however, cite evidence that teachers who are certified through traditional programs have more positive effects on student learning (Center for Urban and Multicultural Education, 2010).

ATC programs do seem to help diversify the teaching profession; some attract more men, minorities, and older candidates than traditional programs. But that isn't true of all ATC programs. Teach for America, for instance, recruits new college graduates who are on average 23 years old—but that program requires only a two-year commitment from participants, which may make it more attractive to younger adults still deciding on careers. And overall, the proportion of men pursuing alternative certification is only slightly larger than it is for traditional programs (Humphrey and Wechsler 2007). Programs also vary considerably in the number of candidates they attract who had attended competitive universities—presumably leading to better subject matter expertise and higher quality teaching (ibid).

Teacher retention and turnover is an area of great concern in education. But research specifically on retention and turnover among alternatively prepared teachers is limited, and for the most part inconclusive and conflicting. Ng and Peter's review of research (2010) suggests that teachers prepared either alternatively or traditionally are equally likely to quit teaching or leave urban schools (Ng and Peter 2010). Suell and Piotrowski (2007) identify studies that found higher retention rates among traditionally trained teachers, and less commitment to teaching as a long-term career among ATC prepared teachers—but they also cite research finding that older, second-career teachers more likely to stay in the profession than younger educators.

Effective Alternative Certification Programs

One of the difficulties in assessing the effectiveness or quality of alternative teacher certification programs is that many evaluations and studies have been done either at the macro level—aggregating outcomes across very different types of programs at the national level, without considering the program differences—or at an extremely micro level, such as single-site case studies that are not generalizable across the broad range of ATC options (Scribner and Heinen 2009). Yao and Williams (2010) note that the question for researchers now is not whether ATC programs are viable, but whether those that are put into practice are succeeding in preparing high-quality teachers.

One study explored the characteristics of effective ATC programs (Humphrey, Wechsler et al. 2008), looking at seven different models across the nation, ranging from a statewide program in New Jersey to Teach for America to district and university models in New York, Milwaukee, and North Carolina. A key finding of that research was that placement matters: teacher candidates placed in dysfunctional schools were less likely to persist than those in schools with strong leadership and a good climate. This finding is not surprising, but if ATC is being used to address shortages of teachers in difficult-to-staff schools, it may work against what policymakers are trying to achieve. ATC programs found to be effective have placed candidates in schools with strong leadership, collegiality, and sufficient supplies and materials. Successful programs also selected educated applicants and strengthened their subject-matter knowledge; they tailored the coursework to candidates' backgrounds as well as to the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Quality mentoring was important, with sufficient time and resources. The study authors argue that effective programs also need to assess candidates' skills, knowledge, and teaching performance throughout the program and collect data on candidates' development

through multiple methods—and to use that data to tailor the experiences of and support for each candidate. Other researchers, Suell and Potrowski (2007), cite several studies pointing to effective practices for ATC programs: careful selection of participants, field-based or on-the-job training, good coursework and curriculum, and strong mentoring or coaching. Again, these do not differ considerably from best practices in conventional teacher preparation.

Alternative Certification in Alaska

There are two alternative certification options in Alaska, both of which allow candidates to pursue initial teacher certification while working as the teacher of record, if they hold a bachelor's degree in the field in which they are teaching. The first is the statewide alternative certification program, the Transition to Teaching program (AKT²), offered by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. That program expedites certification for teacher candidates in secondary core-content areas (excluding social studies and government) willing to work in one of the 15 program partner districts. Candidates complete coursework and other requirements as established by the department. The program provides candidates a route to becoming certificated at little cost to the candidates (Alaska Transition to Teaching (AKT²). As of late 2011, six teachers had completed this program, which is relatively new. Of those, five are teaching in rural Alaska, and one is looking for work in Fairbanks. Another 23 candidates were in the process of getting their certificates; seven were in their second year of teaching and sixteen in their first year.

In a second alternative certification program, the candidate teacher must be enrolled in an approved post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program in an accredited institution. They can teach with a “subject-matter expert limited teacher certificate” that lasts for one year and is renewable for an additional year (Subject-Matter Expert Limited Teacher Certificate, 2001).

The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) has graduated a number of teachers via this alternative certification route. Since 2002, 65 teacher candidates have enrolled in the ATC program at UAF. Of those, 51 received their certification; most of these graduates completed the program via distance education. Another 9 students started but did not complete their teaching certification, and 5 were enrolled as of late 2011. These ATC students taught in communities across the state, from Barrow to Buckland to Chevak and even Anchorage.

Between 2005 and 2010, the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) offered a master of arts in teaching (MAT) alternative certification program, responding to a need for teachers in specific subject areas in the Anchorage and Mat-Su school districts. Of the 25 teacher candidates initially enrolled in the program, one withdrew and three transferred into the regular MAT program, while the other 21 completed their teaching certification via this alternative route. Of those, 16 (as well as one who completed the regular MAT program) are still teaching in the state. Two of the UAA alternative certification graduates were also nominated as Alaska Teacher of the Year.

The GPO and the WEP: Disincentives for Alternative Certification?

Finally, there are also questions about whether becoming a teacher as a second career has financial disadvantages. The Government Pension Offset (GPO) and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) may be disincentives for experienced adults to enter the teaching workforce. A full explanation of these provisions of federal law is complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but essentially they can reduce Social Security benefits for those who have government pensions

from public jobs not covered by Social Security, or are surviving spouses of those with such pensions. Many public entities (including some in Alaska) have opted out of the Social Security system in favor of pensions of their own. There is legislation pending in Congress (co-sponsored by Alaska Representative Don Young) to repeal the WEP (NEA Alaska, 2011). In the meantime, some people are concerned that eligible and interested older adults may be choosing not to pursue teacher certification, rather than risk reducing their Social Security benefits.

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