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# The Road Less Traveled: Alternative Routes to Certification

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## ABSTRACT

*Washington State has recently designed alternative routes to certification for those who have worked in the schools as paraprofessionals and those coming into the profession from another career. Alternative routes to certification along with alternative certificates are becoming increasingly popular as teacher shortages increase and public demand grows for teachers better prepared in their subject areas. When incentives such as signing bonuses and higher pay do not entice enough certified teachers in urban areas, alternative certificates are offered. In its quest for quality teachers, Washington has decided to institute three alternative routes to certification rather than issue alternative certificates to those with no teacher preparation. This article describes these newly developed routes to certification and compares them to the solutions created by other states and large cities facing teaching shortages.*

Mike looked up from his cubicle in the accounting section of Boeing and realized that he could not continue this work for another 30 years. He needed to do something he loved: teach. Kendra, had always fought becoming a teacher because her father, mother, and grandmother were teachers. After earning her degree in journalism and working at a variety of jobs for a couple of years, she was ready to follow in her family footsteps. She took a position as a paraprofessional in a writing center. Three years later she recognized that she wanted to have her own class in a rural area with shortage of teachers. Melissa had attended two years of college and received an AA degree before she quit to get married. Later, she became a paraprofessional in a special education classroom. She loved her work and after five years, realized that she could become the teacher. Mike, Kendra, and Melissa, are all candidates for the new routes to certification recently developed in Washington State.

Alternative routes to certification and alternative certification are becoming increasingly

popular as teacher shortages and public demand for better teachers grow. The State of Washington is developing alternative routes to certification for three populations: those working as educational paraprofessionals in critical areas, non-certified degree personnel working for a school district, and career changers. The first two are internal routes targeted at those already working in a school district while the third, an external route, is intended for those with subject matter expertise in shortage areas such as science and math. Will the state be able to satisfy the need for future teachers with these plans or will they be forced to take more drastic measures like those taken by Chicago, New York City, and the states of New Jersey and California?

## NATIONWIDE TEACHER SHORTAGE

There is no shortage of models for alternative certification and the number of routes is increasing with the onset of the long-predicted teacher shortage. Lack of teachers seems to be particularly acute in urban areas. Ninety-five

percent of the nation's largest school districts need math teachers and ninety-eight percent of them need science and special education teachers. Vacancies also exist for teachers of English as a Second Language and educational technology. Minority teachers are also in short supply in urban districts (Lewis, 2000.) The next decade will witness the hiring of two million new teachers to fill vacancies created by increased enrollment and teacher retirements. (Bohning, 1999). There is a fear that schools will have to return to the climate of the 1960s when Chicago public schools advertised on the radio for college graduates to apply for teaching positions. (Martinez, 1999a). Chicago is now recruiting teachers in certain subject areas from overseas. School officials receive 100 temporary work visas per year to recruit top-notch teachers to fill shortages in science, mathematics, and foreign languages. (Martinez, 1999b).

The shortage before the start of school this past fall (2000) caused school systems to offer jobs and bonuses to lure prepared teachers into the classroom. Harold Levy, Chancellor of New York City Schools sent a letter to every certified teacher in the state offering them jobs in city schools (Goodnough, 2000c). In an attempt to fill 578 teacher vacancies this past fall, Maryland officials offered a \$1,000 hiring bonus to new teachers and raised that bonus to \$2,000 for teachers certified in specialty areas. They also lifted restrictions on hiring retired teachers and gave a 10% salary raise. Omaha, Nebraska began hiring long term substitutes to fill 40 teaching positions still open at the beginning of school. Half of these positions were in special education. Arlington, Texas offered signing bonuses of up to \$3,000 for the 2000-2001 school year. Massachusetts offered a \$20,000 signing bonus to be paid over four years. In Kentucky, superintendents want to allow more teachers to apply by lowering the minimum scores teachers must earn on a national test (USA Today, 2000).

When school systems failed to entice certified teachers into their classrooms through salary bonuses, they found ways to give alternative certificates to those willing to teach. Faced with teacher shortages and pressured to remove uncertified teachers from the classroom, educa-

tors recruited subject matter experts with bachelor's degrees in subjects such as science and math, gave them a highly abbreviated summer of educational course work, and put them into a classroom. As these alternative teachers worked through their first year, sometimes with a mentor and sometimes without, they took additional courses at night and on weekends.

## DESCRIPTION OF WASHINGTON'S PROGRAMS

Washington State decided against offering alternative certification to college graduates who have no teacher training. Instead, the Professional Educator Standards Board has designed routes to alternative certification for aspiring teachers in three categories.

The first design is intended for experienced paraeducators like Melissa who are already working in the fields of special education or English as a Second Language. A paraeducator with three years of successful interaction with students and who already possesses an AA degree may take this two-year route to become a teacher. During that time he or she will participate in a one-year mentored internship and will take flexible coursework. A Teacher Development Plan, which will determine a course of study, will be prepared individually for each candidate by representatives from a school district and a higher education institution. The courses may be offered by a single teacher education program or by a consortium of programs. Flexible coursework will be scheduled outside of the regular workday and could be offered on line or by teleconference or at off-campus sites like a school or an ESD. The coursework will be supported by a state-provided conditional loan to be repaid when the paraeducator has taught for three subsequent years (Washington State PESB, 2000).

Route two is designed for non-certificated staff like Kendra who have earned a BA or BS degree and had three years of successful student interaction and leadership as a paraeducator. This one-year route is intended for those who will teach in a state identified subject shortage or geographic shortage area. The paraeducator

taking this route will spend one year in a field-based internship with a mentor who will provide on-the-job training. Additional training and flexibly scheduled coursework will be held during the school year. As with the first route, a Teacher Development Plan will be created for each candidate and the coursework will be supported by a state-provided conditional loan (Washington State PESB, 2000).

Route three is intended to bring individuals with expertise in areas where there is a teacher shortage into the teaching profession. Candidates like Mike with five years of work experience and demonstrated successful experience with children will be eligible for this route. Cohorts of students will attend an intensive summer Teaching Academy, complete a full-year paid employment by a school district as a teacher intern followed by a second summer of Teaching Academy II. Candidates who show proficiency may complete the program in the Spring. As in the other two routes, a Teacher Development Plan will be created for each candidate and any coursework needed beyond the academy will be offered flexibly (Washington State PESB, 2000).

All three routes to teacher certification will involve mentors who have been trained at the Washington State Mentor Training Institutes or district-provided mentor training programs that meet state guidelines and criteria (Washington State PESB, 2000).

A program of this magnitude will require funding sources for loan forgiveness, intern and mentor stipends, and mentor training. The paraeducators in route one will earn their current salary while working in the internship. Those in routes two and three will have a full year paid mentored internship. While sources of these funds are not yet fully identified, the Professional Educator Standards Board is urging the legislature to make loan forgiveness available to those participating in routes 1 and 2. School districts will be expected to share the cost of mentor or intern stipends (Washington State PESB, 2000).

How does Washington State's plan for addressing the teacher shortage compare to those in other parts of the nation? New York City, facing an immediate crisis, instituted a program

to recruit teachers from other fields while other school systems found ways to train teachers while paying them full salaries.

### **THE NEW YORK CITY SOLUTION**

Harold Levy, chancellor of the New York City School District with its 75,000 teachers, designed a system to produce teachers instantly. In August of 2000 he found himself under legal pressure from state education officers because most of the 12,000 uncertified teachers in his district were teaching in low performing middle and high schools. He developed a plan that produced 350 teachers willing to teach in these particular schools (Goodnough, 2000c). The New York City Teaching Fellows, as they are called, began with training in August of 2000. Each seven-hour day included discussing and practicing different teaching methods and studying for the certification exam. At the end of the five week session, each fellow received a temporary certificate and began teaching on September 7. Every teacher received a mentor and committed to taking night courses during the school year. The program paid for the teachers to get a master's degree in education from a city university within two years if they committed to work in low-performing schools for at least two years (Goodnough, 2000a).

Each teaching fellow costs the New York School system about \$20,000 and Chancellor Levy plans to expand the number to 3,000 for next year. He will begin recruiting in April, 2001 and next year's fellows will have a full summer of preparation. Levy already calls his program successful because the majority of the first year fellows passed the main certification exam on their first attempt. However, retention may prove to be a problem. About 25 fellows dropped out during the training period in August and 20 more left during the first month of school (Goodnough, 2000b).

### **TEACHING WHILE BECOMING CERTIFIED**

Other systems have devised programs for getting teachers into the classroom both with and

without university support. Some universities train teachers while they are being paid to teach. Students in George Washington University's "Transition to Teaching" project are paid as permanent substitute teachers during their 13 months of training. Other school districts prepare teachers themselves. For example, a project designed to get multicultural teachers into urban settings in the Los Angeles Unified School District now trains its own teachers and also pays them as they are undergoing the training (Black, 1999).

The passage of a class-size reduction movement in California caused an immediate teacher shortage in 1996. Hundreds of Emergency Permit Teachers (EPTs) entered the classrooms; many of them had an undergraduate degree without teaching preparation. The availability of the emergency permits tempted many education students to leave their university programs after their coursework in education was completed but before their student teaching experience. They then completed their student teaching experiences as paid teachers.

A study of those who left student teaching to become paid teachers found them both satisfied and dissatisfied with their experience. They overwhelmingly felt positive about receiving salary and benefits but were negative about missing the role modeling provided by working with a cooperating teacher in a student teaching experience. They missed the immediate feedback, constructive criticism, and suggestions about their teaching. They found themselves quite alone in their classrooms. Researchers concluded that this solution works best when the teacher is strong and the district supplies strong new teacher mentoring. (Turley & Nakai, 2000).

New Jersey has been hiring candidates with bachelor's degrees in a subject matter but without teacher training for the past 15 years. They have prepared approximately 7,000 alternate route teachers in the state's elementary and secondary schools since 1984. The alternate pool was made up of graduates from liberal arts institutions, career changers, and private school teachers who wanted to earn certification (Cooperman, 2000).

## WHO CHOOSES ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION?

Alternative certification and alternative routes to certification have both proven to be particularly attractive to college graduates who are older and going through a change of career (Chaddock, 1999). Homemakers who have raised their families, military veterans, victims of business downsizing, and paraprofessionals who want to become teachers often turn to alternative certification programs to gain teaching skills and necessary certification. A doctor and a lawyer from the New York City Teaching Fellows program chose to go into teaching "because it's the socially responsible thing to do" (Goodnough, 2000a). Mid-life career changers often find that they work harder as teachers than they did for a million-dollar company. "Before I was making money, now I'm making a difference" commented a successful businessman and father of three who retrained to become a teacher after setting aside enough money for his retirement and his children's college education (Goodnough, 2000a).

## CAUTIONS

Not all alternative routes to teacher certification are successful. Pennsylvania's education secretary, Eugene W. Hickok, unveiled an alternative program in the Spring of 2000 that was endorsed by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators. However, no one applied for the program. A lawsuit, filed by the Pennsylvania State Education Association and the Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Teacher Educators, asked that the program be declared illegal, charging that Mr. Hickok had no authority to create the program and did not let the State Board of Education and teacher-training colleges play a role in creating or administering the program. They also charged that he failed to seek public comment on the program (Basinger, 1999).

## CONCLUSIONS

Alternative routes to certification flourish where there is a need to increase or change the available pool of teachers. Urban centers like New York City have offered free education to those willing to work in low performing middle and high schools. Other urban centers like Chicago lure teachers of science, math, and foreign languages from other countries. The State of California has devised a variety of paths to certification to solve its teacher shortage. Most routes are created by a collaboration of school districts and universities, although some take place within the boundaries of the school district.

Will Washington State's program produce teachers to fill the classrooms in needed areas? Will the proposed routes to certification taken by Mike, Kendra, and Melissa attract enough candidates to fill the vacancies in the state? These questions will not be answered immediately. If the state agrees to create and fund demonstration grants for alternative route partnerships, the programs will begin in Summer of 2002. Whether they will be attractive enough to compete with programs like those in New York City that offer full salary while being certified and free tuition for a Master's degree is yet to be seen. However, with certified teachers being lured away by signing bonuses of as much as \$20,000 over four years, offering alternative routes to certification for those already in the state may be the best answer.

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