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## Are Alternative Certification Programs Good Enough? The Case of NC TEACH

During the last several years, one of the most common solutions to the teacher shortage problem has been encouraging states and school districts to create alternative certification programs. Given the inadequate number of teachers being prepared and licensed by traditional university-based programs, there is no question that alternatives are seriously needed to attract the quality and quantity of teachers needed for America's public schools. However, policymakers' enthusiasm for alternative certification does not always include a careful assessment regarding the quality of the program components. Some alternative certification programs provide teacher candidates with only a few weeks of training and no supervised teaching internship. These short-cut programs are attractive to some policymakers because they are relatively inexpensive and presumably attractive to older adults who cannot afford and/or do not want to return to school in order to teach.

Many alternative certification programs are also based upon the assumption that in order to teach effectively, teachers only need content knowledge and not the teaching skills stressed by education schools. Alternative certification, widely touted by the current U.S. Department of Education, is often viewed as an antidote for out-of-touch education school faculty who do not prepare the future teachers needed to help K-12 students perform well on standardized achievement tests.

According to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI), 47 states and the District of Columbia reported to have at least one type of alternate route to teacher certification in 2005. In total, NCEI reports that there are 122 different alternative routes found in 619 sites, allowing 35,000 individuals to enter teaching in 2004 ([www.ncei.org](http://www.ncei.org)).

However, not all alternative certification programs are of the same quality, and not all deliver on the preparation and support they promise. Some alternatives are designed to place teachers in classrooms

within a few weeks; others may last from 6-15 months. Recently, *Education Week* (2005) reviewed alternative certification programs and revealed that only thirteen states required any classroom training, and only nineteen states required a mentoring component. And among states with a mentoring requirement, only nine required mentors to match the subject area in which the alternative route mentee was teaching, and only five provided release time for the mentors. The frequency of the required mentoring sessions varied from one meeting a month in New York to twenty-three meetings a year in Kentucky.

Researchers have not reached much of a consensus on alternative certification—in large part because most of the research studies have not distinguished between the alternative certification programs that expect teachers to meet standards before they begin teaching, and those that do not. Despite counterpunching by both the proponents and opponents of alternative certification, little is actually known about the types of programs that prepare highly qualified teachers who are willing to stay in teaching.

To help fill this research gap, SRI International and the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) have recently completed a national study of seven different alternative certification programs<sup>1</sup> to understand who is recruited to these programs and how they learn to teach. Our research methods drew upon a wide range of data over time.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant findings from the national study runs counter to conventional wisdom:

Most of these alternative certification programs do not necessarily attract candidates from the high demand, private sector occupations, and the extent to which candidates have already had teaching experiences influences their sense of effectiveness in the classroom, a factor known to be related to student achievement (Humphrey and Weschler, 2005).

In 2003 and 2004, CTQ conducted an extensive case study of North Carolina's NCTEACH—as one of the seven programs studied nationally. What we found in North Carolina was quite similar to what was found in the other alternative certification programs in California, Wisconsin, Texas, New Jersey, and New York, as well as one national program.

## The Case of NC TEACH

Policymakers view NCTEACH as a solution to the North Carolina's well-documented teacher supply and quality problems.<sup>3</sup> As an alternative program for *lateral entry* teachers, NCTEACH rightly bills itself as a high-quality route to certification for those with related academic training and experience in other fields.

*Lateral entry* is North Carolina's label for alternative certification. Individuals can begin teaching on a lateral entry license if they hold at least a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited institution in the subject area in which they will teach and have either a 2.5 college GPA or passed the PRAXIS I (a basic skills teacher test). Lateral entrants are expected to complete a 10-day training course before they begin teaching in the schools or submit evidence of equivalent training. The teachers then are expected, within three years, to complete an approved teacher education program through a college/university program or through varied courses offered through one of the state's regional alternative licensing centers.

Relative to other lateral entry programs, NC TEACH is far more selective in terms of who they accept for program admittance. Prior to becoming teachers, participants in NCTEACH complete rigorous and dense pedagogical training for five weeks during the summer and continued support and coursework is provided to participants after entering the classroom. NCTEACH might be best described as a condensed teacher education program, which is not surprising, given the major role university-based teacher educators played in developing the program.

Launched in 2000 with start-up funding from the U.S. Department of Education Higher Education Act, Title II grant, NCTEACH is administered by the University of North Carolina Office of the President, in collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

NCTEACH has grown considerably during the last five years. The 2000-2001 cohort group included only 87 individuals who completed the program, and that number reached as high as 438 for the 2002-2003 cohort group. Since 2000, NC TEACH has prepared, placed, and retained 1,000 teachers who are working in at least 80 of the state's 117 school districts. It seems possible that in some cases other, less intensive lateral entry programs in the state may be undermining the ability of NC Teach to recruit applicants.

Our two-year investigation surfaced several major findings regarding the effectiveness of the program and the teachers it prepares. The highlights of these findings and their implications are described below.

## Major Findings

1. *NC TEACH has high standards and challenging program requirements, which impact dropout rates.*
  - ✓ NC TEACH has high admission standards—only accepting about half of its applicants. The program also loses a considerable percentage of program participants, as many drop out and do not complete the five-week program. Some participants seem to dropout due to the rigor of the program while others, especially those with no teaching experience, drop out because they find that teaching is not for them.
    - ◆ For the 2002-03 cohort (latest complete data made available to us), NC TEACH accepted 539 of its 1427 applicants. Of those accepted into the program 462 enrolled and 450 completed the five-week training program, and of these 407 were employed as teachers. Approximately 19 percent of participants employed as teachers left the profession after one year (based on 2002 data).
2. *Program recruitment appears to be influenced by economic context.*
  - ✓ The post-9/11 economic recession helped NC TEACH attract and select a wider range of mid-career professionals who sought “a safe job” like teaching.
    - ◆ Between 2001 and 2002, NC TEACH saw its applicant pool triple from 419 to 1427.
3. *NC TEACH does **not** primarily recruit from the ranks of high-demand, private sector career-switchers—instead drawing on many recruits with previous teaching experience.*
  - ✓ A significant portion of NCTEACH recruits (24 percent) had been classroom teachers in the year prior to entering the program. This may be due, in part, to direct marketing by NC TEACH to all first year emergency and lateral entry teachers in the state. Thirty-three percent had had previous experience as a classroom teacher at some time before entering the program, 19 percent had served as a teaching assistant, and 34 percent as substitute teachers.
  - ✓ Only 32 percent of NC TEACH participants reported that their previous job was in the field of either management/human resources, administration/customer

service, sales/marketing, legal, or financial services/accounting.

- ✓ Only 9 percent reported previous jobs in high demand math and science fields, and 2 percent were in health.
- ✓ 28 percent of the NC TEACH recruits actually earn a salary increase by becoming a teacher.
- ✓ 31 percent reported that teaching had “always been (their) calling.”

4. *NC TEACH brings in teachers the state needs, in terms of demographics and also subject matter taught.*

- ✓ 41 percent of those enrolled in the program (not completed, however) were male and 30 percent minority (2003-04 cohort report).
- ✓ 21 percent of the enrolled in the program (not completed, however) intended to teach high school math and sciences while another 15 percent intended to teach middle grades math and science (2003-04 cohort report).
- ✓ By the third year of the program, NC TEACH was producing more secondary science and math teachers than any other single teacher education program in the state.

5. *NC TEACH recruits are valued by principals.*

- ✓ Principals are quite positive about their NC TEACH recruits, especially in comparison to other lateral entry teachers who enter teaching without as much preparation.
- ✓ NC TEACH recruits are viewed as being “poised and professional.”
- ✓ NC TEACH recruits who were inexperienced in teaching were found to struggle more in terms of student readiness for, and interest in, what they had to teach.
- ✓ Despite their generally positive feeling toward teachers from NC TEACH, principals still preferred to hire, experienced, certified teachers, when available.

6. *Unfulfilled Promises and Unmet Needs*

- ✓ NC TEACH recruits did not always have access to the mentors they were promised. The consistency of quality mentoring efforts across the state remains a problem for all new teachers, not just NC TEACH participants. But lateral entry teachers who most need mentors, often teach

in schools least likely to provide quality mentoring programs.

- ✓ NC TEACH recruits, who come to teaching with varied experiences, are offered a uniform curriculum that does not always meet their needs. NC TEACH participants receive a customized plan from their host site outlining the core methods and content courses they must complete to be recommended for licensure. However this does not achieve the level of customized support required to prepare teaching candidates based on their respective needs.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

NC TEACH was developed largely by teacher educators, and implemented by individual UNC system-wide campuses through traditional university-based courses. The five-week program with 12 months of follow-up support and coursework compares very favorably to the variable quality of an assortment of other lateral entry programs currently operating across the state.

NC TEACH attracts a diverse group of teachers, much more so than traditional university-based teacher education programs, and according to interview data, is annually preparing more math and science teachers than any single school of education in the state. These are positive developments for teaching quality in the state.

However, the data we collected reveals that only a small proportion of the NC TEACH participants are the high profile, math and science business professionals that some policymakers assumed the program would attract. Counter to conventional wisdom, the program is not primarily recruiting mid-career switchers who have decided to enter teaching because they can avoid a traditional teacher education program. Rather, large numbers of NC TEACH recruits have prior teaching experience or experience working with children in classroom settings, which contributes toward their success as classroom teachers. A sizable proportion actually began to earn more money after becoming a teacher, revealing the program is not attracting the highly paid professionals that some policymakers assumed NC TEACH would bring to the profession.

NC TEACH recruits described their five-week preparation period before entering the classroom as intense and interesting. However, unless the participants had considerable experience teaching, many program completers reported having difficulty making sense of the education theory content and the teaching practices they were expected to use. The program’s mentoring component is also subject to the inconsistencies that plague mentoring efforts across the state.

As a result, the extent to which NC TEACH completers receive the in-school support promised in program guidelines seems to rest on the “luck of the draw.”

Our analysis suggests that North Carolina needs alternative certification programs—but they must be significantly improved in order to solve the vexing teacher quality and quantity problems facing state policymakers. Based on our research, we recommend that NCTEACH:

1. Develop a more customized curriculum (e.g., an individual professional development plan) for the diverse recruits attracted to the program;
2. Consider creating a high-profile scholarship program like IBM's recently launched Transition to Teaching program, so a greater proportion of the "true" mid-career switchers can be better prepared by going through a supervised student teaching experience before taking on their own classroom;
3. Fund a more extensive mentoring component and guarantee that each recruit has access to expert teachers for a minimal amount of time per week. These mentoring services should be delivered regardless of inconsistencies in the capacity of local districts for delivering such mentoring efforts.
4. Collect more substantive data on the lateral entry, NCTEACH, and traditional teacher education graduates in terms of participants' background, characteristics of the preparation and support participants receive, retention rates and their respective impact on student learning.

Our investigation into NC TEACH strongly suggests that policymakers are ill-advised to believe that alternative certification programs are more effective than traditional programs—or vice versa. There are no simple solutions for solving teacher supply and quality problems.

More detailed and longitudinal information is needed on all of North Carolina's teacher pathways. However, this study suggests that investing in more comprehensive alternative certification solutions may cost more on the front end, but prove cost effective in the long term—for both teachers and the students they serve. The creators of NCTEACH have taken a big step forward in developing and implementing an alternative certification program needed for North Carolina schools—but much more needs to be done if programs like NC TEACH are going to help ensure a caring, qualified, well-supported, and effective teacher for every student in the state.

## References

*Education Week* (2003). "State of the States. Quality Counts 2005." Bethesda, Md.: Author.

Humphrey, D.C., & Wechsler, M.E. (2005). "Insights into Alternative Certification: Initial Findings From a National Study." *Teachers College Record*, Sept. 2, 2005. <http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 12145, Date Accessed: 9/14/2005. 7:23:28 AM

## Endnotes

1. The seven programs are the Teacher Education Institute in Elk Grove (Calif.) Unified School District, Milwaukee's Metropolitan Multicultural Teacher Education Program, North Carolina's NCTEACH, the New Jersey Provisional Teacher Program, the New York City Teaching Fellows Program, Teach for America, and the Texas Region XIII Education Service Center's Educator Certification Program.

2. The research teams assembled data at both the program and participant levels. Case studies of each program were built from multiple interviews with key personnel, document reviews, and available data as well as two surveys of the program participants—at the beginning of their participation in the program and then at the end of their first year of teaching. We also systematically observed a sample of 10-13 participants teaching and interviewed them both at the beginning and end of their first year of teaching

3. With growing numbers of teachers retiring, Sunbelt migration and student enrollment increases, and daunting teacher turnover rates, North Carolina needs to hire annually about 11,000 teachers, one-eighth of the current teaching workforce. The state's 51 colleges and universities prepare only 3,300 new teachers each year, down from the approximately 4,200 annually that were produced in the late 1990s. To make matters more vexing for state policy makers concerned about teacher supply and quality only 64 percent of the state's teacher education graduates enter North Carolina classrooms, and 30 percent of them will still be teaching two years later.

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