

## Are All Special Education Teacher Preparation Routes Equal?

### What District Administrators 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.

Hiring teachers who have obtained certification through nontraditional, alternative routes is one strategy by which school districts have attempted to address special education teacher shortages. 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 alternative route program candidates receive the same teaching credential as their traditional program colleagues,

differences in the outcomes of preparation are at issue. What do districts 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:

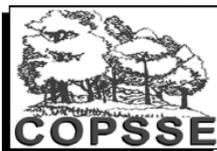
- **Length and structure of the program.** Alternative route preparation programs usually are shorter than traditional ones, and they are structured to allow candidates to enter the classroom immediately or soon after beginning their studies.
- **Delivery mode.** Alternative route programs tend to present 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?

FEBRUARY 2004  
PB-8



CENTER ON PERSONNEL  
STUDIES IN SPECIAL  
EDUCATION

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 tradi-

### 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.

tional 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 alter-

native 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 preparation program.

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

The following features 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. School district mentors should be selected based on their superior teaching skills, experience working with student teachers, and willingness to participate in novel approaches to the development of novice 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 hire a teacher who has completed an alternative preparation program consider the following cautions:

**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 teacher preparation programs generally adhere to high professional standards (e.g., National Council for

the Accreditation of Teacher Education), whereas some alternative route programs may not be held to the same standards.

### 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.

### 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](http://www.copsse.org).



CENTER ON  
PERSONNEL  
STUDIES IN SPECIAL  
EDUCATION

### About COPSSE

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The policy briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.

University of Florida, 300 Norman Hall,  
P.O. Box 117050, Gainesville, FL 32611  
352-392-0701 (X283), [www.copsse.org](http://www.copsse.org)



Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education.