

RESEARCH

previews

NEW FINDINGS FROM COPSSE

Increasing Supply—Are Some Alternative Route Options More Cost Effective Than Others?

...“We probably won’t solve the special education teacher shortage problem with graduates from traditional teacher preparation programs,” says **Paul Sindelar**, researcher and director of COPSSE. “Once we accept this reality, it opens the door to considering alternative routes to certification.”

Alternative route special education certification programs are designed to provide entry into the teaching profession to individuals who otherwise would have limited access. Their purpose is to supplement the supply of new teachers by adding individuals who represent diverse backgrounds and characteristics. However, alternative route programs should not supplant or even compete with existing preparation programs because doing so would simply duplicate capacity and add to the cost of preparation.

Are special education alternative route programs cost effective? To ensure efficient allocation of limited training funds, the costs and benefits of various alternative route approaches to increasing special education teacher supply should be considered. Read on to gain insights from COPSSE research.

Cost and Attrition—Key Cost Effectiveness Variables

In a simple supply-and-demand scenario, raising salaries usually can attract enough workers to eliminate shortages. However, this generally cannot work in teaching because most teacher salaries are determined by negotiated agreements. Individuals are paid on the same pay scale and not by the subject that they teach.

“The challenge is to find people who will work—and continue working beyond three to five years—for the prevailing salary and under the prevailing working conditions,” Sindelar points out. “This is one of the reasons why preparation costs and attrition must be figured into any cost effectiveness analysis.”

Cost effectiveness varies as a function of cost and attrition. In order for state dollars to be distributed in a way that maximizes the potential supply of new teachers who will persist in teaching beyond the first three years, alternative route programs must:

- Attract entrants who are more likely to remain in teaching.
- Tap new pools of potential teachers and draw few entrants away from existing programs.

THIS JUST IN

Research offers insights about the cost effectiveness of special education alternative route programs for step-up and mid-career changers.

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- Prepare entrants in a way that makes them more likely to remain in teaching.
- Be cost effective.

To reduce risk, alternative route programs should seek qualified people who won't readily return to previous employment. Program participants who are taking large pay cuts or who are moving from fields quite unlike education may not persist. Similarly, previous school experience and strong ties to the district or the community generally translate into higher retention rates.

Are Some Alternative Routes Safer Bets Than Others?

The *No Child Left Behind Act* provides funds for states to provide alternative routes for, among others, mid-career changers (e.g., accountants, former military personnel, etc.) and step-up candidates (e.g., paraprofessionals). Let's apply the cost effectiveness discussion to each group to determine if one is a better bet to persist as teachers than others.

Economists say that mid-career changers from outside the public schools can be a riskier clientele, depending on their reasons for changing careers, the salary

differential, and the differences between teaching and their previous careers. For example, some mid-career changers may view teaching as a temporary job.

Sindelar describes a typical example. "Consider a software engineer making \$90,000 after 15 years. After being let go following a company buy-out and consolidation, she switches to teaching, where she earns \$30,000 because she has only a bachelor's degree and no experience. She might be keen to return to the high-tech arena, whatever the joys of teaching. If her time in the alternative route program was subsidized, the state would lose much of its subsidy if she quit teaching."

Former military personnel pose other risks. Although they may not experience salary differentials, their lack of experience with the social milieu of schools may make it too uncomfortable for them to remain in teaching.

On the other hand, economists say that step-up individuals, such as capable paraprofessionals, are more likely to remain in teaching because they bring significant job-specific and location-specific human capital to work, do not take an earnings hit from the switch, and generally have strong ties to the district and community. "The

down side is that there usually is not an unlimited supply," Sindelar cautions. "Because these programs often select the most highly qualified paraprofessionals, districts will need a plan for replenishing those ranks."

Economists believe that participants in step-up programs are better bets for retention than mid-career changers. Nonetheless, mid-career changers still may be a viable option. The selection process should screen the motivations of mid-career changers. If an individual has good intentions (e.g., enough money and truly wants to serve humanity by teaching), then he or she may be a good bet.

For More Information

Information reported in this preview was based on research that COPSSE researchers—**Paul T. Sindelar, Michael S. Rosenberg, David Denslow, James Dewey, and Chifeng Dai**—crafted into professional presentations (available on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org).



New alternative route programs are being tailored to specific groups, such as retirees and individuals from a particular profession.

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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 research previews are produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.



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