

Title

Alternative Route to Certification Programs in Special Education: What States are Offering and What We Know About Them

Questions Addressed

- What preparation options have states made available to prospective special education teachers?
- What are the requirements for these various options?
- How do they differ in terms of (a) program sponsorship/alignment, (b) program length/intensity, (c) participant profile, and (d) specific program characteristics? How do state and district policies affect the supply, quality, and retention of alternatively certified teachers?

Investigators

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Description of the Study

At the same time that rigorous teacher preparation standards are being hailed as the bedrock of teacher quality, traditional sources of special education teacher supply – freshly minted graduates of university degree programs – have been unable to meet the growing demand for teachers. Not surprisingly, this need for high quality teachers, particularly in high demand areas such as math, science, and special education, has been a major impetus for the emergence and growth of alternative route to certification (AR) programs. Indeed, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) has proclaimed that “ARs, as opposed to the traditional routes offered by colleges of education, streamline the process of certification to move candidates into the classroom on a fast-track basis” (p. 15). Candidates are required to pass the same certification or licensure exams, but coursework in educational philosophy, pedagogy, and practice teaching are either shortened or waived entirely.

Still, we know very little about the nature and extent of AR programs in special education. In a comprehensive review of AR programs in special education, Rosenberg and Sindelar (2001) found that while large numbers of uncredentialed personnel are receiving training that leads to certification, there is very little empirical research on the nature and efficacy of specific programs in the professional literature. It was asserted that the available literature represented merely the “tip of the AR iceberg” and that a large underground economy for teaching credentials is in place in many areas of the nation. Moreover, so variable have AR programs become that treating them as a homogenous class may no longer be reasonable; LEAs, and IHEs vary greatly with options ranging from Spartan emergency certification survival training to sophisticated, high tech programs for individuals with unique life experiences (Feistritzer, 1998; Hillkirk, 2000).

The purposes of this study are both to index and describe the breadth and depth of AR programs currently being offered for the preparation of special education teachers. In partnership with the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, we have developed a searchable web-based data-base that lists and describes AR programs for all 50 states. Descriptive data have been aggregated across programmatic dimensions (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001), including (a) program sponsorship/alignment, (b) program length/intensity, (c) participant profile, and (d) specific program characteristics (e.g., degree, categorical, dual, etc.). Consequently, we have been able to index the proliferation of AR programs for special education preparation and describe the range of program features that comprise these programs.

Related Research

Feistritzer, C. E. (1998, February). Alternative teacher certification-An overview [Online]. Available: <http://www.ncei.com/Alt-Teacher-Cert.htm>

Hillkirk, R.K. (2000). Effective models for alternative programs in teacher education. In D.J McIntyre & D.M. Byrd (Eds.), *Research on effective models for teacher education: Association of teacher educators yearbook VIII* (pp. 195-202). Thousand Oaks, CA:

Corwin.

Rosenberg, M. S., & Sindelar, P. T. (2001). The proliferation of alternative routes to certification in special education: A critical review of the literature. Arlington, VA: The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, The Council for Exceptional Children. Available: www.special-ed-careers.org.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Office of Policy Planning and Innovation (2002), Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge: The Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality, Washington, D.C.: Author.

Workplan

1. Certification officers in each of the states will be contacted by the Clearinghouse; these officers will identify those individuals responsible for monitoring AR programs.
2. Statewide information will be cross-referenced with Title II data that reports on AR activity in each state.
3. A structured interview reflecting the four programmatic features will be developed.
4. AR program directors will be contacted and a telephone interview will be conducted.
5. Data will be aggregated for programs within and across states as well as across programmatic features.

Timeline and Initial Findings

To date, 199 AR special education programs in 37 states have been identified. Two states (CA & TX) account for 39.6 of the alternative programs found. We have collected data on 95 of the programs. The data indicate that there are creative partnerships among IHEs, SEAs, and LEAs, and that instruction is delivered through a mix of university-based coursework, district staff development, supervised fieldwork, and distance education. The great majority of programs used national standards to develop their offerings and they provide support through mentors and well as stipends and salaries. Most important, these programs are attracting new people to the profession. The great majority of programs (83%) require full time teaching in the schools, and almost half require less than 3 months of preparation prior to entering the classroom as a teacher (nearly 15% require no training at all). Complete demographic data are available on PowerPoint presentation slides on this website.

We anticipate completing additional analyses on the data-base including the investigation of relationships among programs of varying lengths/intensities and the characteristics of participants in AR programs by December, 2004.