

Policy Focus

Alternative Teacher Certification

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Too many students don't get a quality education from our public schools. National test scores and graduation rates show millions leave K-12 public schools unprepared for college and the workforce.

Researchers know having a good teacher is one key to a student's success. Unfortunately, the system used by too many school systems fails to put in place (and then retain) great teachers.

Expanding the pool of people eligible to become public school teachers is key to improving the quality of the teaching workforce. Typically, schools required that applicants have a teacher certification or license. Getting those credentials require education-specific coursework, a costly and time-consuming process, which drives many potential teachers out of the field. Troublingly, research shows that a teaching certificate doesn't guarantee a teacher's classroom success, and isn't associated with better student performance.

One promising strategy for improving teacher quality is alternative teacher certification programs. These programs allow candidates to earn a license by meeting certain requirements—including having a college degree and passing a background check—and demonstrating mastery of subject-area knowledge. This makes it easier for many qualified candidates to apply.

A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that creating real alternative certification options for aspiring teachers is a promising way to modernize the teaching profession, bring new talent into the classroom, and improve the overall quality of public education in America. That's great news for millions of enthusiastic, educated women who may want to consider jobs teaching, and for all the parents who want their children to get the education they need and deserve.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Americans deserve the world's best education system, and that requires having the best teachers. Here's why you should support alternative teacher certification programs:

- **The High Cost of a Bad Education:** Poor public schools create the equivalent of a permanent national recession. It costs our country billions, and limits the life prospects for millions of children.
- **Teacher Quality Matters:** Research confirms what parents know: Good teachers matter. A student taught by low-performing teachers for three years will learn half as much as one taught by a teacher on the top 20 percent of the effectiveness scale.
- **Traditional Teacher Certification Doesn't Guarantee a High Quality Teacher:** Research doesn't support the idea that certified teachers are better teachers.
- **Opportunities for Women:** Many highly qualified women would love to teach if it was easier to get in the classroom. Dropping education-related coursework requirement would free college women to explore different topics, giving them more professional options.
- **Better-Prepared Students:** Alternative certification can lead to better teachers in the classroom, and better student outcomes. And that's what our public school system is supposed to be about!

MORE INFORMATION

Who Should Be A Teacher?

Consider the following hypothetical: Jennifer is a mother of two. She's been out of the workforce for almost a decade, but once worked on Wall Street. Always a whiz with numbers, she got a bachelor's in business and mathematics from Georgetown University.

With her kids in school, Jennifer wants to go back to work, but doesn't want Wall Street's long hours. She wants to be a middle school math teacher. Jennifer hears that the local school district has a shortage of qualified mathematics teachers, and thinks it's the perfect opportunity.

In most public school systems in America, the local principal wouldn't be able to consider Jennifer for the open math teacher positions because she doesn't have a teaching license. Jennifer would likely have to complete 30 hours of education-related coursework to earn a master's degree in education to become eligible.

Jennifer weighs the costs. Earning a master's degree in education would cost \$30,000 in tuition and take a year and half. Despite her eagerness to become a teacher, she scraps her plan to go into teaching and looks for other opportunities.

Of course, we don't know whether Jennifer would be a good math teacher. But the question is if the traditional strategy of certification and licensing is the best way to attract the best teachers into American classrooms. In short, wouldn't it be better if principals could consider applicants like Jennifer?

The Current, Flawed System of Evaluating Teaching Candidates

Today, teaching candidates need teaching certificates to be considered in most public school districts. Generally, someone needs a college degree and to have completed education-related coursework to get a teaching certificate.

Policymakers view this credentialing strategy as a reasonable way to create a qualified teaching workforce: After all, in other professions, such as medicine and the law, people rely on certification systems.

Yet it isn't clear that teaching certificates are related to being a good teacher. In fact, researchers (such as Dr. Jay Greene of the University of Arkansas) have concluded that "the presence or absence of a teaching certification on a teacher's resume does not make a noticeable difference in the classroom."

Dozens of evaluations compare the academic achievement of students taught by teachers who earned traditional certification and those who entered the profession through another route, such as alternative teacher certification. Overall, the evidence suggests that traditional teacher certification isn't an accurate predictor of better teaching.

Strategies for Bringing New Talent into the Classroom: Alternative Certification

So what can policymakers do to boost the performance of the teacher workforce? One compelling strategy would be to expand the pool

of candidates to give school officials more choices for open teaching positions. To return to our hypothetical example, policymakers should give principals the ability to consider aspiring teachers like Jennifer.

Strong alternative certification pathways allow qualified people to earn teaching certificates without jumping through all of the hoops of traditional certification.

Simply put, alternative certification programs lower the costs associated with entering the teaching field. They provide people who want to become schoolteachers a way to earn certification without going back to school to earn a degree in education. They allow aspiring teachers to prove that they meet a basic standard for becoming an instructor at a particular level without needing to obtain education-specific degrees.

And, indeed, alternative teacher certification programs are increasingly popular. Today, most states offer some form of alternative teacher certification, and one in five teachers enters the classroom through an alternative certification.

The Benefits of Alternative Teacher Certification

While alternative certification programs are growing in popularity, they differ significantly in the types of programs available to aspiring teachers. In many states, the programs that qualify as "alternative certification" are not significantly different from the traditional teacher certification programs.

In 2008, Harvard University researchers surveyed state programs and reported that only 21 of the 28 states provide what the researchers called “a true alternative pathway.” These twenty-one states offered programs that let people earn a teacher’s license without completing coursework that is similar to that required by a traditional teacher certification program. Interestingly, the researchers found evidence to suggest that having a *real* alternative certification program could be effective in improving educational outcomes for students.

Improving Minority Representation in the Teaching Workforce

First, the Harvard researchers found that states with real alternative certification programs increase representation of minority groups in the teaching workforce. Of the sixteen states that report the ethnicity of alternatively certified teachers, fourteen states reported that the percentage of minority candidates earning alternative certificates exceeded the percentage of minority teachers in the state overall.

This could be key to improving classroom performance of minority children. Researcher Thomas S. Dee examined the link between a teacher’s race and students’ test scores and concluded: “The results are troubling. Black students learn more from black teachers and white students from white teachers, suggesting that the racial dynamics within classrooms may contribute to the persistent racial gap in student performance...”

While the results may be troubling in terms of the role that race still plays in America, this finding supports the notion that more minority teachers could benefit minority students.

Overall Improvements in Academic Achievement

The Harvard University evaluation also found that states with real alternative certification options had seen greater improvement on the so-called “Nation’s Report Card” examination. Students in states with real alternative certification programs improved their academic achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics tests more than students in states that lack strong alternative programs.

The study cautions that the presence of an alternative certification program was not necessarily the cause of the improvement in achievement. But the positive test scores do cast doubt on any claim that alternative certification programs weaken the quality of the teaching workforce.

An Affordable Strategy

Policymakers can enact alternative certification programs that are affordable, both for the state and for the aspiring teacher. Given the difficult fiscal circumstances facing many state governments, alternative certification presents an option for strengthening public education without increasing government spending or the deficit.

Why Women Would Benefit from Alternative Teacher Certification and a More Flexible Teacher Workforce

While everyone should be concerned about the quality of the American teacher workforce, policies affecting teachers should be of particular interest to women. Seventy-nine percent of public school teachers were women as of 2001.

Some women may see alternative certification programs as a threat, creating new competition for teaching positions and lowering the value of education-related degrees (which are overwhelmingly earned by women).

However, the benefits of a more flexible teaching field will outweigh perceived costs to women. First, research suggests women will still be more likely to participate in alternative teaching certification programs, particularly among career changers (one estimate found that 65 percent of those pursuing alternative teacher certification were women).

Women, who are more likely to take time out of the workforce to raise children, are more likely to consider changing careers, and would therefore benefit more from these new opportunities. The existence of alternative certification programs would also allow women who want to be teachers to pursue fields beyond education during college.

For example, the ability to major in a non-education subject and still become a teacher would give a person more flexibility throughout their career. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education surveyed teachers about their willingness to teach

again. Among the respondents, whose median age was 46, more than 20 percent said that they would “probably not” or “certainly not” be willing to teach again. This suggests that many teachers are not satisfied by their careers. If teacher certification was more flexible when they were in college, it is possible that many of these teachers would have pursued academic subjects in other fields and today would have more workforce options.

The Importance of Highly Effective Teachers

Academic research shows that a talented teacher can produce significant improvement in a student’s performance. These findings probably seem obvious to anyone who has spent time around a school: Moms and Dads know instinctively the profound effect that having an engaging, highly motivated teacher can have by encouraging learning; they also know how an unmotivated, ill-equipped teacher can do the opposite.

But for policymakers’ sake, it’s nice to have some specific data to back up and quantify this common sense finding. Dr. Eric Hanushek of Stanford University found that having a highly-effective teacher for five years in a row could erase the difference between low-income and middle-income student performance.

Similarly, Dr. William Saunders of the University of Tennessee, a national expert in value-added assessments (which measure students’ learning gains over time), found that a student who is taught by low-performing teachers for three years will learn approximately 50 percent less than a student who is taught by a teacher from the top 20 percent of the effectiveness scale.

These research findings suggest that policymakers should focus education reform strategies on bringing the most talented, effective people into the classroom.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can help improve teach quality!

- **Get Informed:** Get the facts about our nation's education system and promising reforms. Visit:
 - The Independent Women's Forum (www.iwf.org)
 - American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence (www.ABCTE.org)
 - Center for Education Reform (www.edreform.org)
- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

- **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group of friends together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few committed people can change the world.
- **Remain Engaged Politically:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your local school boards and other education leaders know your opinions!

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website www.iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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