

POINT OF VIEW

Deconstructing Teacher Certification

Alternative certification programs are now the source of surprising numbers of our nation's teachers. Mr. Baines has taken a close look at these programs and is convinced that, because they vary so extremely in their requirements, all of them cannot possibly be producing highly qualified teachers.

BY LAWRENCE A. BAINES

TWENTY years ago, few states had alternative programs for certifying teachers, and those that did dusted them off only in case of emergency. Today, two kinds of alternative certification programs are proliferating: those delivered by agencies not affiliated with an institution of higher education (sometimes called NUCPs for Non-University Certification Programs) and pared-down degrees delivered over the Internet by universities and corporations specializing in "for-profit" educational endeavors. In California, approximately one in five new teachers enters the profes-

sion through NUCPs; in Texas and New Jersey, one in four new teachers comes from NUCPs.

NUCPs usually receive their charge from legislation, such as California's S.B. 57, which gives school districts and other agencies the right to certify teachers. S.B. 57 states that people may become teachers "by successfully completing tests and classroom observations in lieu of traditional teacher preparation coursework and student teaching." In lieu of coursework or student teaching, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) requires next to nothing. That is, prospective teachers in the Los Angeles program can move from applicant status to full-time, salaried teacher without bothering to gain experience in an actual classroom, and the only courses required by the LAUSD are delivered in-house in brief seminars or online during the first year of teaching.

Many states are in the process of following California's lead by dramatically loosening requirements for teacher certification. Recently, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush signed into law a mandate that every school district be given the authority to certify teachers. The paradox is that, while universities in Florida face increasingly difficult accountability standards from NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education), from professional organizations (such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Science Teachers Association), and from regional and state accrediting agencies (such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Florida Department of Education), no such accountability is required of Florida's NUCPs. As with the ranking system of public schools, the sole indicator of quality for teacher certification programs has become the percentage of teacher candidates able to pass multiple-choice exams. In a politically savvy move, the NUCPs have started using teacher exit tests, such as the Florida Teacher Certification Exam (similar to Praxis II in many states), as prerequisites for entry into their programs, thereby securing a perpetual passing rate of 100%.

In the span of a few years, teacher certification has been transformed by the surge in alternative certification and the proliferation of distance-education degree programs. To "take the pulse" of teacher certification,

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for the past year I gathered data on the more than 1,000 institutions and agencies that certify teachers in the U.S. Because the gritty details of certification — across the broad spectrum of grade levels and subject areas and across states and institutions — made analysis too unwieldy, I decided to focus on certification in secondary English (usually grades 7-12). Unlike mathematics, science, bilingual education, and special education, English is not a “high-need” certification area. Thus there is little reason to push for alternative certification in English. Using this logic, I surmised that trends in secondary English might be comparable to developments in social studies but would probably understate the prevalence of alternative programs and distance-education programs in science, mathematics, bilingual education, and special education.

THE GROWTH OF ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION

My study confirmed an incredible variability across institutions and NUCPs. Some programs have rigorous requirements governing admission, internship, and graduation; others require little more than a heartbeat and a check that clears the bank. When I compared the number of English teachers who graduated from universities with the number who took alternative routes via NUCPs, the differences were startling:

- NUCPs in California certified 168 English teachers; the University of California, Berkeley, graduated 22; Stanford, 11.
- NUCPs in Texas certified 168 English teachers; the University of Texas, Austin, graduated 27.
- NUCPs in Georgia certified 75 English teachers; the University of Georgia graduated 26.
- NUCPs in Colorado certified 51 English teachers; the University of Colorado, Boulder, graduated 36.
- NUCPs in Louisiana certified 22 English teachers; LSU graduated 14.
- NUCPs in Florida certified 39 English teachers; Florida State University graduated 23.
- NUCPs in New Jersey certified 101 English teachers; Rutgers University graduated 39.

As with programs in California, the NUCP in New Jersey offers a “learn while you earn” plan that enables holders of a bachelor’s degree to teach right away. New Jersey operates its NUCP through community colleges, whose instructors also teach the classes. According to New Jersey’s recruiting brochure, “The Alternate Route is different in that the preparation for teaching is done

while on the job rather than prior to entering a classroom.” In more ways than one, New Jersey is redefining *preparation*.

Not one of the five largest secondary English programs in the U.S. in 2004 is located in a major university. Rather, the largest programs were the California NUCP, the Texas NUCP, National University (California), the New Jersey NUCP, and Western Michigan University. Of the five largest programs, three are “learn while you earn” NUCPs (California, Texas, and New Jersey); one delivers a degree and certification via the Internet (National University); and one is a traditional university (Western Michigan University) with eight branch campuses — in Battle Creek, Grand Rapids, Holland, Lansing, Muskegon, South Haven, Benton Harbor, and Traverse City.

Data confirm that NUCPs are certifying waves of new teachers, yet even more students are obtaining their teaching credentials over the Internet. The five largest graduate programs in education are Internet-based: the University of Phoenix, National University, Walden University, Nova Southeastern University, and Capella University. Their combined enrollment of education students is more than 40,000 students.

Lured by the dollars generated by Internet-based programs, some traditional institutions of higher education have added “100% Internet” degrees. For example, the second-largest producer of English teachers in Texas (behind Texas NUCPs) is the program at the University of North Texas. North Texas offers a traditional on-campus, field-based undergraduate degree in education, but it also offers a one-year, accelerated, graduate program over the Internet. According to the university’s website:

The Online Teacher Certification Program was designed for mature students who have a bachelor’s degree and want to earn initial secondary teacher certification at the graduate level. The program consists of 12 graduate credit hours and a 3-6 hour mentored internship. Content for all four courses is delivered 100% online.¹

Similarly, National University has a small, accredited undergraduate program on campus, but it also features a huge, unaccredited online graduate program in education. National University offers both certification and a master’s degree in a single package, though the program includes no courses in the teaching of English, writing, or reading. According to National University’s promotional materials, field experience and student

teaching may be waived for prospective students who have spent time at “summer school, after-school programs, and outdoor education programs.” National University produced 147 English teachers in 2004; UCLA, which requires an extensive program of studies, including a yearlong internship, and the maintenance of a 3.0 grade-point average, produced just 17.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

In a comprehensive, large-scale study of alternative and traditional certification, Harold Wenglinsky found that students who had teachers from university teacher preparation programs significantly outperformed students who had teachers who were alternatively certified.² In 2005, a research team headed by Linda Darling-Hammond released a large-scale, longitudinal study of alternative certification in which alternatively certified teachers were found to have deleterious effects on student achievement. Using student achievement measures across six different tests, the researchers found that “uncertified teachers showed negative effects across all six tests . . . [and] alternatively certified teachers had negative effects on achievement on five tests.”³

Despite evidence that student achievement suffers when teachers are certified by NUCPs or “point-and-click” alternative programs, these programs have expanded at exponential rates. State legislators have actively promoted the migration of teacher certification from universities to school districts, community colleges, and — apparently — any NUCP or agency that promises

to provide a fresh supply of warm bodies for the front lines of teaching on the cheap.

One of the few bright spots of the federal government’s notorious No Child Left Behind law was its emphasis on teacher quality. However, as long as such wide variations exist across certification programs, claims that they produce “high-quality teachers” can have no validity. If one were devising a plan for the demise of the teaching profession, it would include the following steps:


- Hire a former lobbyist for the University of Phoenix for the federal department that oversees postsecondary education.
- Provide federal dollars for institutions and agencies that provide 100% of their degrees over the Internet.
- Allow states to draft laws to purposefully circumvent universities for teacher preparation.
- Require no accountability of NUCPs.

In fact, such a scenario is not hypothetical. It depicts the actual landscape of teacher certification today. At a time when global competition is heating up and the dire performance of American adolescents on internationally normed achievement tests puts the U.S. solidly in the bottom third of participating countries, the need for experienced, well-educated teachers has never been greater. The justification for a “quick and easy” entry into teaching seems to be that anyone has a right to teach — even those who never learned how. Expecting a student with little coursework and minimal experience working with adolescents to waltz into a classroom and begin teaching effectively is not hopeful — it is idiotic. Yet, in half of the states, an alternatively certified teacher is not required to set foot in a K-12 school prior to the first day of full-time teaching.

Though the idea of loosening teacher certification requirements has the appeal of providing an ample supply of teachers at minimal cost, its long-term effects are yet to be determined. Perhaps only after a generation of children have been schooled under the guidance of this new breed of teachers — unencumbered by the rigor of coursework or the difficulties of field experiences — will the value of university-based teacher certification programs become apparent.

1. It is not uncommon for universities and for-profit institutions to hail the effortlessness of taking courses delivered 100% online. The paragraph quoted was retrieved from the University of North Texas website on 16 October 2006, www.coe.unt.edu/becoming_a_teacher/#second.

2. Harold Wenglinsky, *Teaching the Teachers* (Princeton, N.J.: ETS Research Division, 2000).

3. Linda Darling-Hammond et al., “Does Teacher Preparation Matter?,” available at [www.schoolredesign.net/binaries/\(teachercert.pdf\)](http://www.schoolredesign.net/binaries/(teachercert.pdf)). 

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