



New Jersey's Alternate Route to Teacher Certification

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The Motivation for an Alternate Route

As part of a broader effort to improve beginning teacher quality, New Jersey's Alternate Route Program was established in 1984. Teacher preparation programs had produced many fine teachers over the years, but there were serious problems inherent in the traditional preparation and certification system and its reliance on a state prescription of undergraduate education courses.

Academics criticized many of the required education courses as weak and unchallenging, saying they often presented, on the one hand, undocumented theories and fads and, on the other, plain common sense. Since even the best educational theory is "soft" social science, the state-required courses did not guarantee teaching ability. Many veteran teachers said the education courses they took in college did not help them measurably in their careers, and they often expressed the view that some college faculties were not in touch with the realities of schools and classrooms.

Nevertheless, overspecialized certificates, requirements, and training courses had proliferated over the years. Rarely did a new certificate result from the state's objective recognition of a college discipline that had evolved over time into a clearly defined body of knowledge that had proven essential to effective performance. More typically, groups of school employees lobbied the state to create a new certificate as a means of according them status. In acquiescing, the state attached a 30-credit requirement to the new certificate, and college education departments responded by instantly creating training programs to meet it, often with significant inconsistencies from one to another.

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Proliferating education courses displaced academic studies in preparation programs, thereby diluting teaching candidates' undergraduate education and subject preparation. Top high school graduates, including many sincerely interested in teaching, avoided education degrees because of their weak academic reputation and poor marketability outside teaching. As a result, teacher education consistently attracted weaker college students, as evidenced by scores on college entrance exams.

Despite their academic weakness, few education students washed out of teacher preparation programs. Even when senior student teaching revealed that a student could not teach, the candidate was often given a passing grade anyway, so that he or she could receive a degree without having to start over. And, despite their low washout rate, teacher preparation programs did not provide a sufficient supply of new teachers. Forced to commit in their teen years in order to take the state-required undergraduate courses, some education students changed their minds by graduation time and did not go into teaching, while many others dropped out within a few years.

School Districts Suffered

At the same time, school districts were legally barred from hiring other college graduates who had a strong interest in teaching, personal qualities relevant to teaching success, knowledge of school subjects, records of academic and occupational success, and experience working with children. They included top graduates of prestigious universities and those seeking to change careers. Ironically, they also included experienced teachers from colleges and private schools, which are not required to hire state-certified individuals. Many of these college graduates were aggressively seeking teaching jobs, and school districts often chose them as the best qualified job applicants. But, when these candidates applied for state certification, they were barred by artificial requirements.

College graduate programs were largely unresponsive to the need for innovative approaches that would allow school administrators to hire these talented applicants and provide them with a job induction to help them succeed. And, because college education departments had a state-granted monopoly on teacher screening, districts were banned from providing induction programs on their own for the talented, nontraditional candidates they wanted to hire.

This, too, made no sense. School administrators are licensed by the state to evaluate teaching and supervise teachers' professional development. School principals and supervisors routinely have direct contact with K-12 teaching, and they have the physical proximity to supervise teacher development.





For all these reasons, colleges exercise their authority to screen teaching candidates by delegating it to school staff. In practice teaching, the aspect of their preparation that teachers often praise, the college turns its undergraduate over to a school so that he or she can learn to teach by instructing real students under the guidance of a school staff, who also evaluate the undergraduate's abilities.

However, the traditional system prohibited school staff from providing these same services directly to a talented college graduate who had not taken education courses, but who was judged to be the best qualified job applicant. Such an individual first had to enroll in a college, take the required education courses, and then be placed by the college in a district for practice teaching, often having to quit a current job in order to do so.

Time for Change

Nearly twenty years ago, New Jersey concluded that the traditional system was fundamentally flawed and producing the opposite of its intended effects. It forced districts to draw their new teachers from a perpetually inadequate supply of graduates with mediocre academic credentials and poorly regarded degrees. Furthermore, it imposed artificial hurdles that barred the same districts from hiring graduates with strong academic backgrounds, records of success, and personal qualities that are at least as predictive of teaching success as the number of education courses taken. The state concluded that any institution that follows such a path in the selection of new staff is itself doomed to mediocrity.

The structure was so broken that it had to be propped up with a nonsensical stopgap measure, through which the state waived any and all of its requirements and issued an emergency certificate when a district claimed there were no certified applicants for a job. Districts sometimes manipulated the emergency system by falsifying shortages to hire people who were highly qualified but uncertified. Yet, the system also allowed the employment of people who had not even studied the subjects they were to teach. Once hired, "emergency" teachers took the required education courses whenever colleges chose to schedule them, often taking years to earn certification. In the meantime, they were not required to have any special job support since they held state certificates, albeit ones that required no qualifications whatsoever.



An Alternate Route to Teacher Certification

New Jersey began to address these interrelated problems of quality and supply by reforming traditional undergraduate preparation. It brought together a panel of nationally recognized teacher educators, chaired by the late Ernest Boyer, to produce a concise definition of the common body of teaching knowledge for beginning teachers and in effect eliminate pseudo-specialization and other fringe requirements.

Education courses in undergraduate programs were pared down to about 12 credits in curriculum and assessment, student development, and school/classroom organization. This enabled the state to require prospective teachers to take substantially more liberal arts and subject courses in order to obtain more practical experience in the schools. This mentored school experience was the primary means by which they would acquire teaching skill, and the condensed education courses were intended more as a useful supplement than as the way to guarantee success. Traditional candidates were also required to pass a subject-knowledge test upon graduation, and college teacher education faculties were encouraged to have some form of contact with schools once every two years.

New Jersey also launched the nation's first statewide Alternate Route to Certification to further enhance quality. The Alternate Route Program gives school administrators the discretion to conditionally hire talented liberal arts graduates who did not study education in college and the direct authority to provide them with a job induction leading to regular certification. The "state-approved district training program," as the Alternate Route is called in regulation, contains the same basic elements as the reformed traditional route.

Like traditional candidates, the qualified alternate-route applicant must hold a liberal arts degree with a major in the teaching subject and pass the required subject test. If school administrators select the individual for employment, they must provide an orientation, assign a mentor teacher to give advice during the initial eight months, evaluate the novice's performance during that period, and provide the state with periodic reports and a certification recommendation at the end. The district must also provide the alternate-route teacher with instruction in the reduced education topics required of traditional candidates. The instruction is designed as a practical supplement to the induction and scheduled so that the teacher is assured of completing it within one year.

Since the two certification routes differ in format, not substance, state policy encourages school districts to treat them as equivalent, aggressively recruiting candidates from both, and freely hiring whichever individual candidates, traditional or alternate, they believe have the best qualifications overall.





A Dramatic Effect

This dual approach enables districts to recruit nationally from the broad pool of all college graduates of current and past years. The projected expansion of teacher supply enabled the state to remove all forms of emergency certification from regulation and take a firm stand that all new teachers had to be employed through either the traditional or alternate routes, fully meeting their requirements. Indeed, with only modest recruitment the actual supply of qualified applicants more than doubled and there was no instance through the year 2000 where the state had to issue an emergency certificate.

However, New Jersey's reforms in general and the Alternate Route in particular were aimed at enhancing the quality, more than the size, of the candidate pool. The State Board of Education closely monitored the alternative program during its first five years and concluded that it had a dramatic qualitative effect.

Of the 1,884 alternate routers during that period, one-third had graduated from college with honors, 18 percent held advanced degrees, more than half were over the age of 25, 70 percent had taught in formal or informal settings, and 28 percent were minorities. Alternate-route teachers had higher mean scores on the state subject tests than their traditionally prepared counterparts in 12 of 15 fields. An examination of a sample of 204 alternate-route applicants and 88 traditional-program graduates who voluntarily identified their ethnicity showed that minority alternate-route applicants had higher mean scores and pass rates than the overall pool of traditional-program graduates.

Perhaps most significantly, the first-year job attrition rate for alternate-route teachers was nearly three times lower than for traditionally prepared first-year teachers. This trend subsequently motivated the state to require that traditionally prepared teachers be mentored and evaluated during their first year of employment in order to receive a standard certificate at the end.

Since 1985, more than 10,000 new teachers have achieved certification through the Alternate Route Program. More than 98 percent of those hired have successfully completed the one-year program. Alternate routers have accounted for about a quarter of all new teachers hired on average over the years, and up to 40 percent in a given year. Nearly all of the state's 580 school districts have participated in the program at least once, and state statistics show that employment of alternate routers is evenly distributed among districts of various socioeconomic levels.



Alternate-route teachers have gone on to win various recognition awards, to serve as mentors to new teachers, and to receive appointments as school principals and district directors of curriculum and professional development. The program is an integral part of the teacher employment system. It has persisted, been nurtured, and steadily grown through three successive administrations of state government. Without question, it is one of New Jersey's most successful state education initiatives.

Operational Considerations

Since New Jersey adopted its Alternate Route Program in 1984, virtually every other state has enacted some form of alternative certification program. The question is often asked: Why has New Jersey's program enjoyed such widespread acceptance while many others are hardly used?

There are several reasons. One major reason is that the program is designed so that every district can implement it immediately upon making the decision to hire a nontraditional candidate. It is so designed because New Jersey's reforms reflect a different vision of how to achieve quality. The old system was based on regulatory prescription and compliance: the state mandated courses and checked transcripts to make sure the courses were taken. The state's newer policies are based on generating competition among a wide, diverse array of candidates and challenging school administrators to thoughtfully choose those with the best overall qualifications and take appropriate steps to ensure their success. This competition and choice generates quality in selection, while increased responsibility improves the chances of beginning teacher success and lays the foundation for greater school accountability.

Mentoring and Evaluation

To achieve that vision, New Jersey's policies assume that every district has the capacity to mentor the alternate-route teachers they hire and to evaluate their job performance, just as they do for college practice teachers. In order to hire such a teacher, the district mentors and evaluators need only sign and fax to the state an agreement to carry out the required functions and to forward periodic reports. The state's rules simply require that district mentors be certified, experienced teachers who are judged capable by certified district administrators.

The state has taken steps over the years to encourage the enhancement of mentoring capacity, but it has treated that complex, long-range task as separate and different from the regulation of mentoring. For example, they scrupulously avoided prescribing a "mentor training program," which an experienced teacher would have to complete before being allowed to





counsel an alternate-route teacher. If the state adopted such a regulatory mandate, training programs would immediately be fabricated without much consideration of what training ought to involve, who can credibly provide it, or even the extent to which effectiveness is a function of “training” in relation to other variables. Thus a mandate would virtually be assured of producing trained but ineffective mentors, as well as effective but untrained ones. And the hiring choices of schools would once again be subjugated to bureaucracy. If veteran teachers avoided mentor training because it was weak, the school would not be able to hire an alternate-route teacher no matter how talented and well qualified the job candidate or the veteran teachers. This would reinstate the same kind of thinking and artificiality that permeated the traditional system that the Alternate Route and related reforms were intended to eliminate.

Formal Instruction

The greater challenge to implementation of the Alternate Route Program was to find a way by which every district could reliably deliver the required instruction in education theory to each and every alternate-route teacher it chose to hire. As noted, the requirement had been reduced in the traditional route to about 12 credits in curriculum and assessment, student development, and school/classroom organization. Still, that meant that a school district would have to provide its alternate-route teacher with about 200 hours of instruction in those topics within the first year of employment.

Most of New Jersey's 580 school districts are too small and hire too few beginning teachers to justify maintaining such a training program on their own, and it was not likely they would be able to rely on college education departments for help. Most college faculties saw the district-owned Alternate Route Program as competition and opposed it, some openly saying that they would lobby the state to mandate their involvement and then undercut the program by boycotting it. Also, the program's training needs were ones that colleges historically had been unable or unwilling to meet.

It was not important to the success of the Alternate Route Program that the instruction involve graduate credit or be compartmentalized into individual courses, each taught on campus by an individual professor over the course of a typical semester. It was important instead that the instruction be made available immediately whenever the district hired an alternate-route teacher. It was important that it be scheduled at after-school times and locations convenient for practicing teachers. It was important that the instruction be structured so that the teacher would be assured of completing it within one year.



It also was important that the instructional component be connected to the job induction. It should not just present educational theory in isolation, but rather help the employed alternate-route teachers analyze and address the challenges they faced in adjusting to their new roles. It was considered important that the instructors include a mix of college theoreticians and school practitioners. It was important that these instructors participate in the overall performance evaluation of the alternate-route teacher, rather than assign separate academic grades for his or her participation in theory classes.

In his report to the state, Ernest Boyer summarized the dilemma of instructional delivery and college participation in the district-based Alternate Route Program, stating:

With respect to the issue of where professional knowledge can best be presented, there is no single answer, no one arrangement that is always best. Perhaps the best approach is to join the learning places, to build partnerships or coalitions among the separate institutions interested in teacher preparation with new organizational arrangements to help educators carry on their work. . . . At the same time, we are concerned that partnerships, when they do exist, frequently are dominated by higher education. The ideas of teachers are trapped within the traditional collegiate structures of semesters, credit hours and the like.

Making It Happen

Unless the problem was solved, the Alternate Route Program might exist only “on paper.” District hiring decisions would be obstructed by a Catch-22 inability to provide the required formal instructions. Or, those decisions and the desired training innovations would be held hostage to whatever conditions a college might impose—if a college would agree to provide instruction at all.

Before adopting its Alternate Route Program rules, the state convened another commission to recommend a solution, and the resultant instructional delivery system is one of the main reasons why New Jersey’s program works as well as it does.

Essentially, New Jersey’s rules authorize the state education department to set up a network of regional training centers to deliver formal instruction to alternate-route teachers. And, rather than requiring college participation, the rules instead require the state department to invite such participation in each center and to include the college if, and only if, it agrees to all of the





program's terms and conditions. If the invited college refuses, then the state education department is responsible for organizing, staffing, and operating the regional center on its own.

Under those conditions, nine colleges in New Jersey—all with education departments—now operate regional centers offering more than 40 classes a year to alternate-route teachers throughout the state. During the past 15 years there have been no instances in which the state has had to operate a center due to lack of college participation. It is fair to say that this universal college participation would never have materialized, nor would the Alternate Route Program have succeeded, had the state acquiesced to pressures to mandate college involvement. Colleges agreed to the terms of the program plainly and simply because it otherwise would have proceeded without their involvement.

Regional Centers at Work

In spring of each year, the state education department issues a standard request for proposals to colleges and universities seeking formal instruction for the alternate-route teachers hired in a given region during the following year. The RFP sets forth all of the conditions that must be met, and each college's proposal must describe how it will meet them. The proposal must detail the content of the 200 hours of noncredit instruction that will be provided. The college must agree to provide the instruction at after-school times and at locations that are convenient for teachers. It must agree to accommodate each and every teacher whom districts in the region elect to hire. It must agree to accommodate teachers hired mid-year, after the sessions have begun. Each college's proposal must describe the qualifications of the three instructors, at least one of whom must be a district practitioner. It must describe how the classes will be connected to the school-based component, including performance assessment.

When a college's proposal is accepted, these terms are formalized in a contract with the state, which in turn promises a grant of \$15,000 for each class that the regional center ultimately will establish.

During the fall hiring season, school districts register each alternate-route teacher for after-school instruction by sending a one-page form to the state department, along with a tuition payment of \$1,000. The district may pay the tuition or charge it to the teacher who will receive the training. Having made the necessary contingency plans in advance, the participating college must establish a class for every group of 30 teachers hired. Of the \$30,000 tuition



it collects for each such group, the state retains about half to fund the office that administers the program and provides the other \$15,000 to the college.

The contracting college is expected to use the funds to maintain a part-time coordinator and a clerical staff, and to pay the instructors in each class at a part-time rate slightly higher than the negotiated adjunct rate paid by public colleges. The balance of funds is used to cover fringe benefits and instructional supplies. Classroom space is usually provided by school districts in the region.

During the course of the year, instructors report any teacher absences from the after-school program to the school principal and the state education department. The instructors also submit to the teacher's principal periodic reports about the quality of that teacher's participation in formal classes. The principal periodically evaluates the overall performance of the alternate-route teacher, taking into account the information provided by the regional center instructors and consulting with them as needed. These assessments are conducted on forms that emphasize the successful integration of theory into practice, rather than just knowledge of theory. Therefore, while there are no academic grades, participation in formal instruction can have implications for employment and licensure.

Conversely, the state requires alternate-route teachers to evaluate the regional center program and reserves the right to direct changes in future years, including personnel changes.

An Evolving Program

The regional center program has evolved in several ways over the past 15 years. In the first year, there were only 12 classes statewide and getting them set up was a major challenge. Now, with more than 40 classes offered each year, the program has reached a point where it basically runs itself through contract renewal. Initially, colleges participated begrudgingly, and the negativity of some instructors was clearly perceived by alternate-route teachers. Now, it is more positive and constructive.

In the earlier years, the state rigidly insisted on adherence to the required curriculum and many instructors responded in kind, lecturing in the manner of a traditional college course without drawing enough connections to teacher job development. Thus, the instruction received the same kinds of criticisms from alternate-route teachers that undergraduates have always expressed about education courses. As a result of changes that were made, the regional centers have gradually become a venue where teachers gather to discuss problems they are encountering in the classroom and to help each other





come up with solutions, while also providing mutual support and encouragement. The sponsoring colleges now tend to assign as instructors college professors and public school educators, practicing or retired, who are skilled at putting the teachers' discussions in the context of the theory.

There are many reasons why New Jersey's Alternate Route Program is widely accepted and used by the state's public school districts. The most important reason is that the training format serves the employment needs of schools, rather than the other way around. The regional centers are the heart of the delivery system, and the evaluations submitted annually by alternate-route teachers suggest that their logistical workability is being surpassed by their substantive contributions to teachers' job development.

