



Attracting Personnel ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Description

Alternative certification routes bypass traditional preservice preparation such as 4-year undergraduate programs at institutions of higher education (Lohmann, White, & Johnson, 2019). Alternative certification routes are typically for individuals who have already obtained a bachelor's degree and are interested in pursuing early intervention, teaching, or serving as a related service provider but do not have an education or school-based background. Often, alternative routes help candidates receive provisional certification and allow them to complete requirements for full certification while working full-time in their placements (Lohmann et al., 2019).

Overview

New Jersey enacted the first alternative certification program in 1983 (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). The program allowed individuals with previous higher education experience to expedite their route to the classroom by reducing or eliminating “theory” courses from training and by using teacher leaders as mentors in the first years in the classroom. The model was shown to be highly effective and helped increase the size, quality, and diversity of New Jersey’s teacher candidate pool. It was quickly adopted by other States.

Today, alternative certification routes have been **authorized in virtually every State** (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Most States with alternative certification have **implemented policies** to establish, enhance, and fund alternative preparation programs (Woods, 2016).

The ability to **work full-time and earn a salary while completing coursework** makes alternative certification especially appealing to **career changers** and in-service practitioners interested in **transitioning from another subject area** to special education, early childhood, or related service professions (Bowe, Braam, Lawrenz, & Kirchhoff, 2011; Woods, 2016).

Diversifying the education workforce is an essential step to addressing the teacher shortage and to improving outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Alternative routes have a **larger impact** on diversification than **other attraction strategies because personnel of color are more likely to enter** the field of education through alternative pathways than their white counterparts (Carver-Thomas, 2016).

Research Findings

Research on alternative certification routes for personnel has found the following:

- Nearly 20% of new personnel already enter the profession through alternative routes (DeMonte, 2015).
- The certification route chosen by new teachers, whether traditional or alternative, does not necessarily dictate the quality of their teaching.
 - Alternative routes for preparation that involve **comprehensive coursework, strong mentoring, and extensive induction supports** result in educators of the **same quality** as those trained in traditional programs (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).
- **Regular observation and ongoing support** from entry into an alternative preparation program through the individual’s early career ensure quality teaching performance (Woods, 2016).
- Alternative certification routes are the most effective recruitment strategy for **career changers** to pursue certification in special education (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007; Kimmel, Sindelar, Rosenberg, & Mason-Williams, 2020).
- Many alternative routes have attracted a wider, **more diverse pool of applicants** than their traditional counterparts (Quigney, 2010; Rosenberg et al., 2007). In fact, educators of color are nearly twice as likely to enter through alternative routes as their white counterparts (Carver-Thomas, 2016).

Overview (Continued)

To effectively recruit, prepare, and eventually retain personnel of color, alternative preparation programs must **offer supports that are sensitive to the particular needs of personnel of color**, such as mentorship from a professional of a similar background (Chin & Young, 2007; NAAC, 2015).

Research Findings (Continued)

While research on the effectiveness of alternative certification is not new, disaggregating findings by race or gender has not been conducted at a large scale.

Part of a Strategic Approach

Alternative certification alone does not appear to have a significant impact on retention (Guha et al., 2016). Rather, retention seems to be **correlated with the quality of the program**. **Program quality, financial incentives, and induction supports** work in tandem to increase retention.

Exemplars

- [Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy \(GaTAPP\)](#). This alternative preparation program aims to create a pipeline for career changers as well as recent graduates who have earned a bachelor's or a higher degree but have not yet completed a teacher preparation program. The GaTAPP program provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate competence while being supported by their own candidate support team. Special education candidate participants complete additional instruction and receive supplementary induction supports. Successful completion leads to a recommendation for certification but not a degree.
- [Maine's Alternative Certification Mentoring Program \(MACM\)](#). MACM is an alternative certification pathway to support Maine's need for highly qualified special educators. The program offers intensive, focused support and mentoring during the special educator's critical first year of practice and ensures that each new conditionally certified special educator is mentored by a trained special educator. A one-semester online graduate course designed especially for MACM participants must also be completed.

(Additional exemplars can be found on the [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).)

KEY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

When recruiting personnel for an alternative certification program, stakeholders should consider the following:

- Identify **responsible parties for funding** the program and **funding sources** (e.g., Title II and IDEA funds, State and Federal grants, community organizations) (Rosenberg et al., 2007).
 - To support sustainability, alternative preparation programs should be funded through multiple sources.
- **Raise awareness** of the program among all personnel (e.g., faculty, administrators, certification officers, secretaries, webmasters).
- Inform academic advisors and career support personnel across institutions of higher education (IHEs) about the program.
- **Advertise** the program in newspapers and conferences and communicate with local education agencies (LEAs) (Abell et al., 2006).
- **Contact recent graduates** through career fairs and academic advisors.
- **Maintain a strong Internet presence** to disseminate information about the program to potential candidates and ensure easy access from IHE or program provider websites and departmental homepages (Abell et al., 2006; OSEP Symposium, 2019).
- **Overcome geographic constraints** by offering the program at a distance through synchronous and asynchronous instruction (Lohmann et al., 2019; OSEP Symposium, 2019).

Critical Components for Success

(Lists are not sequential)

Setting the Stage

- Identify existing relationships between the State education agency (SEA) and IHEs.
- Examine data related to the current workforce.
- Identify gaps in personnel related to a specialty (e.g., special education) or to race/ethnicity, gender, or another characteristic.
- Begin a dialogue between SEA and IHE personnel to determine a potential focus area for an alternative route to address one or more of the gaps.
- Investigate existing alternative route programs that could serve as a model for your own (see exemplars) and how they may or may not transfer to other States.
- Identify the components of the alternative certification program that will work best for your target candidates. Options include online courses, synchronous or asynchronous learning, varied course lengths and times, and concurrent learning and teaching responsibilities.

Related Services

Presently alternative certification routes are not common among related service professions. Research has found that alternatively certified teachers are **more likely to have received less clinical practice experience** than their traditionally certified peers (Carver-Thomas, 2016).

A 2020 focus group with researchers and practitioners from across related service fields indicated how the professions require personnel to have hands-on experience with populations with disabilities. Because alternative routes typically do not incorporate ample hands-on practice, the participants were hesitant to suggest alternative routes as a recruitment strategy. An additional concern raised was related to the **alignment of alternative routes** and State certification requirements.

Critical Components for Success (Continued)

Initial Start-Up

- Create a formal partnership agreement or memorandum of understanding between the SEA and IHE.
- Determine whether participants will earn credit toward a master's degree or a certificate.
- Identify which (if any) requirements participants may be able to test out of.
- Decide whether the program will be LEA or university based.
- Once an LEA has been identified (either for an LEA-based alternative route or as a partner site of the SEA-IHE partnership), select individuals who can serve in leadership roles across the LEA and IHE.
- Develop training to share with chosen LEA and IHE leaders.
- Determine all necessary supports (program, financial, induction, mentoring) for making the alternate route program attractive to candidates and effective at preparing and retaining participants.
- Identify the individuals who will assist in administering supports to the participants.
- Find individuals responsible for verifying completion of the alternative certification requirements.
- Identify potential funding sources (e.g., Federal and State grants, Title II and IDEA funds, community foundations, other local business partnerships).
- Design participant screening and selection processes.
- Identify data that may be useful in evaluating whether the target candidates are being attracted and retained.

Continuous Improvement

- Review preliminary data to look for evidence that the program has been successful. Have any identified initial gaps been addressed?
- Schedule regular check-ins with participants to see whether they continue to feel adequately supported.
- Provide regular feedback to program participants on their performance.
- Make refinements to the program based on data and lessons learned.

Leveraging Lessons Learned

- Evaluate program components and engage completers to ensure the program is high quality.
- Secure additional funding for the alternative route program.

Related Services (Continued)

Through its [State School Psychology Credentialing Requirements](#) resource, the National Association for School Psychologists examines whether each State accepts a Nationally Certified School Psychologist as an alternative route and provides links to further information on its alignment with State credentialing requirements. *More information on this resource can be found on OSEP's [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).*

Early Childhood

Early childhood special education (ECSE) and early intervention (EI) preparation programs often center on home visiting and building connections with families and communities. These populations should not be overlooked as essential stakeholders capable of **spreading awareness and aiding in the recruitment** of high-quality candidates into alternative preparation programs aimed at serving infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

While challenges with funding are common across alternative certification routes, ECSE and EI programs face additional fiscal challenges, as these programs are more likely to be impacted by State budget cuts than K-12 counterparts. Fiechtl and Hager (2019) suggest dealing with fiscal challenges by **identifying course content that is consistent across local alternative programs** (e.g., basic behavior management) and providing it across early childhood, ECSE, and EI alternative programs to **decrease the cost and number of faculty required** to teach courses.

ECSE alternative certification routes have grown significantly (Fiechtl & Hager, 2019), yet analyzing the effectiveness of alternative certification in attracting personnel to serve infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities is still an evolving area of study. **More research and disaggregated data analyses are needed** to determine the effectiveness of alternative certification in reducing personnel shortages.

Critical Components for Success (Continued)

- Share success stories.
- Determine the feasibility of sustaining and/or scaling up the program.
- Identify new IHE or LEA partners.
- Develop guidance, resources, and tools.

Stakeholder Spotlight

- **State Education Agency (SEA).** SEAs play an essential role in funding alternative preparation programs (Rosenberg et al., 2007). SEAs can designate State-allocated funds (e.g., ESSA, Title II, IDEA, SPDG) toward establishing alternative certification routes for EI and ECSE personnel. SEA licensure and certification staff are key stakeholders, as they often approve alternative preparation programs to ensure that they meet the same requirements as traditional preparation programs in the State. SEA policies may specify alternative certification routes that include clinical experiences to ensure all candidates receive high-quality and recurring practice-based opportunities throughout their preparation.

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