In California, alternative certification has become a crucial source of new teachers. It would be even more crucial if its cumbersome requirements didn’t dissuade so many promising candidates.

**Tortuous Routes**

**by David Ruenzel**

The urban school districts of California have a well-publicized shortage of teachers. So they’re eager to move well-qualified candidates into the classroom, right? Not always. Nontraditional candidates—namely recent college graduates and career changers who haven’t attended a standard teacher-preparation program—often encounter serious roadblocks, even with the state’s full endorsement of alternative certification programs that allow candidates to start teaching while working toward their certification requirements.

Take Eddie Wexler. Just a few credits and a dissertation short of receiving his doctorate in education policy at the University of California at Berkeley, he abandoned his graduate work in order to become a high-school history teacher in the Oakland Public Schools. He figured that his substantial coursework in education and his experience as an assistant teacher in a Montessori school, as a school psychologist intern at a low-income urban school, and as an instructor at Berkeley would make him a viable candidate.

In late February of 1998, Wexler arrived at the offices of Oakland Unified with his transcript, three letters of recommendation, and his fingerprinting clearance from the county. At the time, Oakland claimed to have such difficulty finding qualified candidates that 16 percent of its teachers were working on emergency permits and waivers. In California, these are teachers with, at best, a bachelor’s degree and a passing score on the CBEST, the state’s minimum competency test for teaching candidates. Yet the district was indifferent to Wexler’s inquiries. Wexler later passed the challenging Praxis exam in history,
“There is a terrible teacher shortage,” says California high-school teacher Eddie Wexler, “but it’s exacerbated by policies and paperwork that undermine the ability of good candidates to get a job in high-need schools.”

Wexler acknowledges that he could have applied to one of California’s many university- or school district–based alternative certification programs, but he didn’t think that the path to a credential would have been much easier. He still would have had to sit through hundreds of hours of coursework and workshops, most of which he felt were redundant in light of his background. The fact is that the routes of most alternatively certified teachers have been larded with almost as many superfluous, cumbersome, and costly requirements as traditionally certified teachers face. All for the privilege of earning a fraction of their former salaries, some of which they will then use to purchase the classroom supplies (basics like chalk, paper, and books) that districts often fail to provide.

Emily Feistritzer, president of the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) and an expert on alternative certification programs, says that Wexler’s story is typical, both nationally and in California. “The teacher shortage is a paradox, really a paradox—something created by the education bureaucracy. We need to minimize the obstacles to entry and get these people into classrooms right away, working with mentor teachers.”

Setting the Bar High

In California, as in most other states, alternative certification was created primarily to address teacher shortages. It began in California during the baby boom era. In 1955 Stanford and Claremont, with the help of a Ford Foundation grant, offered the first college-based internship programs. Candidates with a bachelor’s degree went through, much as they do now, a summer training program and then started teaching full time in the fall. In 1967 these programs were sanctioned by state law, ensuring their expansion. In 1983, as California’s student population soared, the legislature permitted districts to start their own alternative certification programs.
programs. This enabled hard-pressed districts such as Los Angeles and San Diego to move candidates quickly into their classrooms (See Figure 1 for the credential status of California’s teachers).

Both university- and district-based alternative certification programs are now well established in the state. Nevertheless, critics of alternative certification programs continue to claim that such programs are quick and largely ineffective fixes for teacher shortages. They insist that teachers are best trained in traditional programs based in education schools. Nonetheless, alternative certification’s success in recruiting and retaining talented, accomplished people like Wexler is undeniable. According to Feistritzer’s organization, 40 states now provide alternative routes into teaching, up from only 8 in 1983. Nationally, about 85 percent of alternatively certified teachers remain in teaching after five years. In California the rate is 84 percent—which is remarkable, considering that alternatively certified teachers work mainly in urban districts with notoriously high attrition rates.

Alternative certification also attracts a more diverse pool of candidates to teaching. Michael Mckiben of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) reports that ethnic minorities compose 46 percent of those entering alternative programs; 27 percent are males who want to teach in elementary schools—three times the national rate. Sixty percent have come to teaching from other careers. Altogether, alternative certification programs produced nearly a third (7,200, to be exact) of California’s 24,000 new teachers last year. About 2,300 of these teachers went through one of the state’s eight school-district intern programs, the largest by far of which is that of Los Angeles Unified. Most of the other teachers went through one of the state’s 74 university-based internship programs.

The programs may last one to two years, but only one program, according to the CTC, is as short as the statutory minimum of one year. The CTC reports that all require at least 120 hours of preservice preparation in child development and methods before the candidate begins full-time teaching. Interns must also be mentored by a certified teacher for the duration of the internship, though it is hardly a secret that the mentoring is frequently less than thorough—needy urban schools, where interns usually end up, typically lack enough veteran teachers for an effective mentoring program.

During the school year, nearly half of the programs offer instruction one afternoon a week in a three-to-four-hour block; slightly more than one-fourth meet two afternoons a week. The Los Angeles School District, which prepares about 85 percent of the state’s district interns, requires 120 clock hours of preservice, four-hour classes once a week after school (for one year), and an additional 64 hours of training during the second summer.

Within the broad framework outlined by the legislature, districts and universities have substantial leeway in structuring their programs. This makes generalizations regarding their character and quality difficult. Districts claim that their programs have the advantage of being extremely hands on and practical, while university program administrators often assert—though not for attribution—that district programs are shallow and insufficiently theoretical.

Alternatively certified teachers include engineers, biologists, lawyers, insurance representatives, and pediatricians. The quality of the applicants, says Anthony Lepire, chair of the department of secondary education at San Francisco State, is higher than it’s ever been. “One of the things that’s been uplifting for me after having been in the business for thirty years is the wonderful crop of people coming into teaching because they really want to be teachers. Most say, ‘I have to do something that saturates my soul—I want to give back.’”

Alternative certification has clearly played a vital role in staffing California’s schools with high-quality teachers and in easing the barriers to becoming a teacher. The sheer numbers speak for themselves. Nevertheless, becoming certified still requires enormous effort, even for candidates who have spent years teaching, but not in the public sector. Indeed, the impressive retention rates of alternatively certified teachers may say less about the programs themselves than about the fact that they have attracted candidates who so desperately want to become teachers that they will overcome any obstacle in their path. It is impossible to know how many good candidates have been dissuaded from becoming teachers because of the

**Drop in the Bucket (Figure 1)**

The requirements of alternative certification programs in California are nearly as cumbersome as those of the traditional route to certification. As a result, nearly 10 percent of the state’s teachers are still working on emergency permits.

 Credential Status of California’s Teachers During the 2001-02 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Category</th>
<th>Number of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Credentials</td>
<td>258,934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on Emergency Permits</td>
<td>29,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers in Alternative Certification Programs</td>
<td>13,343</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning
In California, someone may have taught science for ten years, but if that experience came in a private school, it's as if it didn't even happen.

maze of requirements involved. Many of the alternatively certified teachers I spoke with told me that they have friends who wanted to become teachers but were deterred by the number of bureaucratic hoops they would have had to jump through.

California’s alternative certification programs have the virtue of getting people into classrooms right away at a beginner’s full salary, a clear improvement over the previous system. The problem is that they do not exempt teachers from any of the CTC’s credentialing requirements. To get a clear credential, alternatively certified teachers, like traditionally prepared teachers, must pass a test on the U.S. Constitution, take a health-education course leading to CPR certification, and computer-education coursework. The intern's background makes no difference. Engineers, for instance, must take the computer coursework, which many describe as superficial at best.

Public school principals are still at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their peers in private schools: they don’t have the ability to judge for themselves whether a degree from an education school or required coursework is important. In other words, they can’t take a clearly bright candidate like Eddie Wexler and give him the experience and mentoring he needs to become a great teacher.

Those seeking alternative certification must pass subject-matter exams that are not required of traditionally prepared teachers, who have taken an approved sequence of courses in their majors. Non-traditional teachers have to do this before they can be accepted into internship programs. The failure rates on these exams, especially at the secondary level, are extremely high, even for those who have been successful in related careers. In 1996, 40 percent of whites passed the exam, 26 percent of Latinos, and 18 percent of African-Americans. Stories of teachers who have spent a year or two taking and retaking the tests are legion. While teachers certainly need to know their subjects, it seems that the bar is being set much higher for alternatively certified teachers than it is for those who attended education schools.

“I tell people that you should take the tests the first time to see what you’re in for, because you’re not going to pass them,” said Lisa Rath, who teaches environmental science and biology at Birmingham High School in Los Angeles. A former private school teacher and corporate trainer who passed on her second try, Rath describes the test as a necessary tool for screening candidates.

Rich Hedman, an engineer turned high-school teacher in Sacramento, said it took him a year and a half to finally pass the exams. "I have degrees in both mechanical and aeronautical engineering, but they still wouldn’t clear me to teach science," says Hedman. "Now that I’ve been teaching for five years I understand why—my background was all in applied science, and I needed to know more about biology and geology. Still, I’m not convinced that the tests accurately reflected my knowledge of science.”

Some of the teachers I spoke with were resentful at having to pass exams they see as repetitive and irrelevant in some cases. Heather Nevis, for example, was a history major in college and a corporate lawyer in San Francisco, but she still had to take the history exams in order to teach high-school economics and psychology in the San Francisco Bay area. She has been teaching full time on an emergency permit for two years because she still must pass the multiple-choice section of the test. “To me, it’s just more hurdles put in place by people who don’t think teachers are smart enough. For me to have to pass a multiple-choice test with questions on the economic systems of ancient Egypt and Greece just doesn’t make sense.”

Perhaps would-be teachers should be expected to pass a difficult test of their subject-matter knowledge. If so, shouldn’t all teachers be required to meet this rigorous standard? It would be quite illuminating to see what percentage of traditionally certified teachers could pass these tests. In any case, as McKibben notes, the difficulty of the subject-matter tests necessarily limits the expansion of alternative certification programs. "We have 37,000 teachers on emergency permits, partially on account of subject-matter concerns. When large numbers of teachers cannot pass the tests, schools are almost compelled to hire them on emergency permits."

Rigid Requirements

Passing these exams is only the beginning of an alternatively certified teacher’s labors. As noted earlier, they must endure at least a year, and usually two, of intensive seminars, workshops, and courses—while most are teaching for the first time in highly challenging urban schools. This is made worse by the fact that mid-career switchers, who compose the majority of interns, often lead busy family lives. "Internships aren’t for everyone," McKibben said. "You have to be a mature individual to handle the pressure.”

Lepire of San Francisco State, California’s second largest intern program, said, “Our teachers can complete the program in two semesters or two years—whatever fits into their insanity best. Full time means 16 units per semester. In either case, you’re barely surviving with coursework and seminars in the evening. You have no personal life.”

Few would argue that teaching is simple work, that no
professional coursework is necessary. Indeed, for some individuals—especially for those whose past experience has little connection with the skills required in teaching—the time commitments of the alternative certification programs may be perfectly reasonable. It's their inflexibility that makes them less of an alternative than they could be. A pediatrician may have spent decades treating children, but he or she will still have to take the full slate of child-development courses. Someone may have taught science for ten years, but if that experience came in a private school, it’s as if it didn’t even happen.

This inflexibility applies to salaries as well. The fact that new teachers entering an alternative certification program must start at the bottom of the salary scale, regardless of any related experience they may have had in other careers, undoubtedly limits the drawing power of such programs. Many veteran engineers interested in becoming math teachers—and math teachers are desperately needed—will likely blanch at the prospect of receiving the same pay as a 22-year-old just out of school. And the thousands of experienced private school teachers, a particularly rich source of expertise, are virtually shut out of public education altogether. Should they make the switch, their modest pay would become even more modest; they would also face the same credentialing requirements as those who have never taught a day in their lives.

The point is that alternative certification is, like so much in public education, bureaucratic and unnecessarily restrictive. There is no such thing as “holistic hiring,” as is found in businesses, colleges, and private schools. The administrator ultimately responsible for hiring a teacher lacks the ability to say, “Your experience suggests that you need to fulfill this requirement, but these others can be waived.” Alternative certification, like traditional certification, is still a matter of stipulations, credentials, and paperwork, to which no exceptions can be made.

**Selective Quoting**

An obstacle to both the expansion of alternative certification programs and the easing of their credentialing requirements is the widely held belief that there are few if any good substitutes for traditional teacher-education programs. No one has argued this more intensely than Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University and former executive director of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future. While she is no longer as dismissive of alternative certification programs as she once was, she regards all but a very few—those with the most requirements—with suspicion.

Darling-Hammond’s views of alternative certification became infamous with the 1994 publication of a long and vituperative article she wrote for Phi Delta Kappan. The article savaged Teach for America and its founder, Wendy Kopp, for placing new college graduates into urban schools with only a few weeks of hastily conceived training. Darling-Hammond attacked Teach for America for many things, but especially for its belief that good teachers are made primarily through experience. This belief is the cornerstone of all alternative programs.

As an example of why intense training is needed to become a teacher, Darling-Hammond cited the case of Jonathon Schorr, a Teach for America member who graduated from Yale. In a 1993 issue of the Kappan, Schorr had described how poorly prepared he was for the rigors of teaching in a Los Angeles school. However, Darling-Hammond quoted Schorr very selectively, using only those quotes that were critical of Teach for America. While he was teaching, Schorr also took a full load of education classes and concluded, “After two years of so-called teacher education, I can say that virtually nothing of what I know came from these classes. . . . Clearly, traditional teacher education does not hold the answers.”

Surveys conducted by Emily Feistritzer suggest that Schorr’s perspective is shared by a majority of teachers. Teachers consistently ranked experience as the most important factor to learning how to teach. They learn about teaching by teaching. Their second most valuable experience is working with other teachers. Way down on the list is education-school courses. This information, Feistritzer concluded, “makes a strong case for taking people with basic subject competency and getting them into classrooms and working with mentor teachers as quickly as possible.”

Most teachers I spoke with, both traditionally and alternatively certified, were decidedly unenthusiastic about their coursework experiences. Lisa Rath calls the education courses she took at California State–Northridge “a horrible waste of time, something out of the stone age—all theory with no applicability to the classroom.” Only when she left the traditional teacher-preparation program and entered the Los Angeles district's...
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 intern program did she get practical experience, on which she was able to reflect with mentor teachers.

“The ed school courses I took at Sacramento State didn’t at all prepare me for what I got myself into,” says Michelle Maranta, an HIV researcher at the bio-tech firm Genentech who taught biology for one semester at a low-income school in South San Francisco before returning to the company. “I was overwhelmed with 220 students a day and the planning killed me. The best scenario would have been for me to get training while there, in the school, with maybe some team teaching.”

“I don’t submit that teaching is so easy that you shouldn’t take any kind of class work,” said Heather Nevis, the corporate lawyer turned social studies teacher who has done her teacher preparation at the private Chapman University. “But the hard part of teaching is classroom management and developing lesson plans that will reach as many students as possible, and you don’t get that in class work. The real focus needs to be on learning while you’re teaching in the classroom.”

So why is there so much opposition to alternative certification? I asked this question of Michael Podgursky, an economist at the University of Missouri and a prominent critic of certification laws. I had expected him to point to economic incentives. Education schools, for instance, benefit financially when candidates must enroll in their programs. While not a complete solution, relaxing certification requirements for both traditionally and alternatively prepared teachers would certainly go a long way toward filling open positions with qualified candidates. The most promising candidates— those who have been successful in other careers— are least likely to embark on a tortuous route.

I asked Dennis Tierney, for many years the director of professional services at the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and now a consultant, what I would have to do in order to teach in a California public school. I told him that I spent five years as an English department chair at a private school and more than ten years as a journalist covering education. He answered, “There are lots of programs designed for people like you. You do have to pass the CBEST, be fingerprinted by the Department of Justice and FBI, and demonstrate subject-matter competence, which you can do by taking two tests. Then, after a summer of coursework, you can teach as an intern while you complete requirements toward your credential.”

Tierney spoke as if all these steps seemed perfectly sensible, but to me they seemed onerous, as I was sure they would to many others considering a mid-career change. Why would someone like me, with so many years of experience in education, want to fulfill what seemed like a series of redundant requirements? My years as an English teacher in a private school would count for nothing. I would start at the bottom of the salary scale unless a principal could somehow finagle me some extra dollars. I would also have before me a year or two of intensive coursework while working under the guidance of a certified teacher. For me, as for many others, alternative certification has yet to become a true alternative.

Help Wanted

Under the current system, any effort to meet the teacher shortage by placing alternatively certified teachers in urban schools is bound to fall short. Los Angeles, despite its ambitious program, still had almost 6,000 teachers, or 19 percent, working on emergency permits and waivers in 1996. (While more current figures are not available, no one suggests they have changed much.) Far more Los Angeles teachers work on emergency permits than on district internships; in 1998–99, about 1,900 were working as district interns. In all of California, more than 34,000 teachers served on emergency permits in 1998–99, the last year for which complete data are available. This was about 12 percent of the state’s total teaching staff of 276,000. About half of emergency credentialed teachers leave teaching within three years, usually to be replaced by more of the same (emergency permits must be renewed each year, up to a five-year maximum).

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