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An Interview with Catherine Kearney: About Alternative Teacher Certification

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1) When you talk about “alternative certification,” what exactly do you mean?

There are multiple pathways prospective teachers can take into the classroom, one of which is going through an alternative certification program. These programs provide innovative and rigorous training that enables teachers with both established professional experience and deep content expertise to teach in our public schools, while concurrently continuing with coursework towards their teaching credentials.

Teachers who pursue an alternate route into the classroom are often second-career professionals who are looking for a more fulfilling career and who are eager to apply their talents and skills in a California public school.

2) How well trained are these “alternative certification” teachers to work with students with exceptionalities?

Teachers who pursue an alternate route into the classroom are most often the best suited to work with children with exceptionalities, as well as serve in California’s hard-to-staff, high-need public schools. As second-career professionals, they bring with them years of life of experience and the skills necessary to meet the diverse needs of their students. All California Teacher Corps programs firmly link theory to practice, allowing our teachers to use their wealth of experience to benefit children in the classroom.

Most importantly, before they begin to serve in the classroom they undergo intensive training and preparation, including a minimum of 120 hours or the equivalent to a full additional semester of instruction. This pre-service coursework includes specific strategies for working with and meeting the needs of all students, including for example, special training to work with English Language Learners or Special Education students. Once they begin teaching, our teachers continue to take courses related to their teaching credential, which is coupled with on-site coaching and support from a veteran educator.

3) How do these principals evaluate these teachers? What are their criteria?

Every school district sets their own specific performance criteria for how they evaluate their teachers; those who are placed through alternate route programs are held to the same high

standards required of all teachers. Principals evaluate our teachers using exactly the same criteria as all other teachers at a given school.

Additionally, according to a survey compiled by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, principals who hire teachers from alternative certification programs are recognizing their value and success in the classroom. Over 90 percent of school principals across California ranked teachers from alternative certification programs as good or better than other beginning teachers, including in planning and implementing instruction, classroom management, and providing effective teaching strategies. More importantly, nearly 95 percent of principals would hire additional teachers from alternative certification programs.

4) Are these alternative certification teachers in urban or rural areas?

Teachers from alternative certification programs are teaching in both urban and rural school districts; in fact, our teachers go where they are needed the most. Alternative certification programs are nimble enough to quickly meet the ever-changing needs of individual schools, school districts and the students they serve. For example, California is in need of highly-skilled teachers who are experts in the fields of math, science and special education. Just last year, 50 percent of California's new math teachers came from alternative certification programs. In another example, this year California's Imperial Valley had a need for rural elementary teachers and those needs were met with targeted recruitment from alternative certification programs.

We are pleased to say that our programs are meeting the need for teachers of all grade levels both in urban communities, as well as California's more rural school districts.

5) Obviously the "alternative certification" teachers are older, wiser, more mature, perhaps more experienced. On average, what is the average age of the "Alternative certification" teacher?

Teachers who pursue an alternative certification program tend to be second-career professionals, with the average age in the mid-30's. They have established professional experience and are eager to teach in the public schools with the greatest need. These talented individuals are looking for a more fulfilling career, and may not otherwise pursue teaching if not for the availability of this pathway.

6) And how many undergraduate or graduate hours in teaching and pedagogy do they have, on average?

Prior to entering the classroom, these teachers must have earned their bachelor's degree, have demonstrated strong subject-area expertise, and have completed the equivalent of a full additional semester of instruction, which includes 120-160 hours of pedagogy. Additionally, while they are teaching in the classroom and working towards their credential, they complete additional coursework and are provided coaching and mentorship by veteran educators. Programs vary in length, but in general our teachers take approximately two years of graduate-level coursework.

7) How bad is the teacher shortage, and besides these alt cert programs, what is being done in California to make teaching more palatable?

Estimates show that as baby boomers reach retirement age over the next decade, teacher retirement rates will increase exponentially. According to a 2008 WestEd report, approximately 8,000 California teachers will retire each year over the coming years. As a result, the state will experience a critical shortage of high-quality teachers, especially in the fields of math, science and special education. As the state's public schools struggle with this shortage, the California Teacher Corps is working with school districts to alleviate this shortage by recruiting high-qualified professional who might not otherwise enter the classroom. In short, we're expanding the pool of talented professionals who want to teach.

To answer your second question, since all our programs have partnership agreements with the districts where our teachers are employed, we are able to work closely with the district to ensure that our teachers have the ongoing support they need to remain in the teaching profession. Additionally, California instituted the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program many years ago to help support newly credentialed teachers. As part of this program, Administrators also participate in training specifically aimed at addressing the needs of beginning teachers and examining what factors contribute to adding stress to teachers' work lives. This is a very successful program and has contributed greatly to increasing teacher retention.

8) Teachers often cite discipline problems and paperwork as the two main reasons for leaving the field. What is being done to address these two issues?

Our teachers are talented, second-career professionals who are committed to teaching and who want to serve in the classroom. They have been successful in other career fields and understand that paperwork, and other administrative duties, are an important part of their job.

More importantly, while nationally one in three teachers leaves the teaching profession within five years, teachers from alternative certification programs are remaining in the schools that need them. After five years, more than 80 percent of our teachers are still on the job. Our programs offer strong supportive services for our teachers, which includes coaching and mentorship by veteran educators, as well as professional development focused on classroom management, organization and all additional areas that contribute to a teacher's success.

9) What have I neglected to ask?

California is a leader in pioneering initiatives to enhance teacher preparation and ensure that the best teachers are in the public schools that need them the most. The California Teacher Corps believes that we must continue to take bold steps to improve public education, and this must include embracing innovative approaches to teacher preparation and recruitment, as well as supporting the efforts of alternative certification programs.

The California Teacher Corps would like to invite those second-career professionals, and other who want to serve in hard-to-staff schools to learn more about alternative certification at www.cateachercorps.org.