

An Interview with Catherine Kearney: Retraining Pink-slipped Teachers for High-Need Teaching Positions

By Michael Shaughnessy
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Catherine Kearney is President of the California Teacher Corps. In this interview, she responds to questions about the crisis in California, and the difficulties finding and training teachers in “high need” areas.

1) I understand that the California Teacher Corps is retraining pink slipped educators (those who have been “let go” or fired or downsized or whatever term you want to use) for “high need teaching positions.” How did this come about?

When California schools handed out pink-slips to more than 26,000 teachers this past March, the state once again put itself in jeopardy of losing its newest generation of talented teachers. The latest round of layoffs not only create a disincentive for good teachers to stay in the profession, but also puts California at a disadvantage as it struggles with a shortage of qualified, well-educated teachers in the important fields of special education, math and science.

To ensure that effective teachers remain in the classroom, the California Teacher Corps, which is a statewide organization representing alternative certification programs, is working with school districts across the state to provide pink-slipped and laid-off teachers retraining to move into the high-need field of special education. This alternative not only allows these committed teachers to remain in the teaching profession, but also addresses the critical teaching shortage in the special education field.

2) Who is funding it?

Alternative Certification programs are funded by multiple sources, including state and federal grants, private sector funding, and student tuition and fees.

3) I guess any job in education is better than no job in education- but would these teachers be able to return to their previous positions or will they be “locked into” special education or these high need areas for the rest of their lives?

The California Teacher Corps is reaching out to school districts to provide those teachers who are interested in shifting to special education the retraining to do so. Not all teachers who are pink-slipped or laid-off will choose this alternative and many may even decide to leave the

teaching profession all together. However, the Teacher Corps wants to ensure that those educators who are committed and passionate about teaching are able to remain in the classroom by moving to high-need subject areas.

A great example is Eric Bankston, who left the corporate world for teaching. He was a PE teacher at a middle school in West Contra Costa County before receiving a pink-slip in last year's round of layoffs. Committed to teaching, Bankston took the advice of his special education colleagues and decided to pursue a retraining option to shift into special education. Today, he is teaching in the same middle school, only now serving special education students.

Teachers who pursue this retraining option value remaining in the teaching profession and are committed to serving in the classrooms. By retraining to shift into special education, they are embracing new and relevant skills that will ultimately make them better teachers. These teachers are also willing to go where they are needed the most, and today that is in special education. They can always return to general education, but they will return armed with new skills.

4) Some teachers have very firm ideas as to the age of children they want to teach (some want kindergarten some want high school). How difficult is this transition and will they be receiving any kind of “adjustment counseling”?

General education teachers who pursue retraining come with established experience in the classroom, including working with the diverse needs of their students. Often times, teachers who are teaching in elementary schools already have students with disabilities in their classroom that they are serving. Retraining builds on this experience and provides these teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to best serve children with special needs.

Additionally, they are coached and mentored throughout by veteran educators who can help them shift into their new teaching role and environment.

5) Now some high need positions (such as working in special education) require a good deal of training say in working with children with autism, mental retardation, and serious emotional disturbance. How long does it take to re- tool these individuals?

Alternative certification programs have the ability to create an expedient pathway for fully-credentialed teachers to become retrained and shift to the special education field. Building on a teacher's established experience in the classroom, enhanced training includes coursework on behavior management, best practices in working with students with disabilities, special education law, collaborating with para-educators in the classroom, as well as coaching and support from veteran educators and mentors. The time it takes a teacher to acquire the skills he or she needs may vary by the experience they bring with them to the new program.

Teachers are immediately placed into the classroom where they are needed while they concurrently earn their special education credential. During this time the support, mentoring and training they receive through the alternative certification program continues.

6) Some high need special education positions require a gargantuan amount of paperwork and committee work. Are prospective teachers apprised of these items

before they make a commitment?

All teachers who decide to pursue retraining to move into special education are fully prepared by the alternative certification program for all facets of the job, including any administrative work that they must perform.

7) This program gives new meaning to the word “life- long learning” and really drives home the point that there may never be job security for teachers ever again in the United States of America. Your thoughts?

The California Teacher Corps recognizes the talent and passion of all California teachers who choose to serve in the classroom every day. These individuals, especially those who have pursued teaching as second-career through an alternative certification program, are committed to teaching and are eager to continue to serve in the state’s public schools. For these educators, teaching is a passion, not solely job security, and their commitment is to serving the children that need them the most.

The Teacher Corps also recognizes that this is a difficult time for all teachers in California. However, in the midst of the state’s budget crisis, it is important that school districts find ways to keep talented teachers, including working with the Teacher Corps, to serve in high-need fields.

8) It takes a certain amount of commitment to work with the visually impaired, and the hearing impaired. Is the California Teaching Corps addressing these issues?

Today in California, the shortage areas that are most in need are for educators to serve as mild-to-moderate and moderate-to-severe special education teachers. The California Teacher Corps is specifically focused on helping general teachers move into these high-need areas, and is providing enhanced training to do so.

9) It truly saddens me that many teachers, who have worked hard to teach math and or science now have to re-train to become highly qualified in another very tangential area. What concerns do you have about the longevity of teachers that do participate- do you expect them to devote 5, 10, 15 years to a totally different field of endeavor?

California is experiencing a critical shortage of high-quality teachers in the fields of math, science and special education. Therefore, more often than not, math and science teachers are not being pink-slipped or laid-off since there is a need for them in the classroom. Those general education teachers who are choosing to be retrained are elementary school teachers, and other single-subject teachers, that come from teaching specialties that currently are experiencing a surplus.

To answer your second question regarding retention, while nationally one in three teachers leaves the teaching profession within five years, teachers from California Teacher Corps

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.

10) Are math and science defined as “high need” areas? What are the specific high need areas?

Yes, California is struggling with a critical shortage of highly-qualified teachers for the math and science, as well as special education fields and that shortage is expected to get worse. In addition to helping retrain pink-slipped and laid-off general education teachers to shift into special education, Teacher Corps programs are also providing retraining options for the math and science fields. For example, in Kern County, teachers now have the opportunity to shift into the math and science fields due to a new partnership between the Kern County Superintendent of Schools and California State University Bakersfield's School of Math and Science.

11) Some individuals in special education have specific medical needs (they are “Other Health Impaired”) Do these teachers require additional training?

Yes, general education teachers who are being retrained for special education teaching positions require additional training to serve students with special needs. Teacher Corps programs are providing these teachers rigorous, enhanced training.

12) Do you anticipate these “relocated teachers” (for lack of a better term) to later move to adjacent states?

California Teacher Corps programs recruit and train committed teachers who are remaining in the schools that need them. After five years, more than 80 percent of our teachers are still on the job. However, those teachers who do move out of state are bringing with them a commitment and passion for teaching, as well as top-notch training to best serve in the classroom.

13) What have I neglected to ask?

The California Teacher Corps would like to invite those teachers who are interested in shifting into special education to learn more about the options available to them at www.cateacher corps.org.