

## Alternative Teacher Certification

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A lot has been said and written about alternative teacher certification over the last several decades, with Minnesota only beginning to adequately engage on the issue. As many are fond of pointing out, this state has long helped lead the national way in any number of educational areas. Making it more feasible, however, for talented *non-education* majors to contribute as teachers has not been one of them, as our pertinent law and accompanying rules are among the least conducive across the country.

Given how much of the germane terrain is increasingly familiar, permit me to start with a quick thought experiment; a “for-the-sake-of-argument” argument, if you will.

Let’s assume for a quick (and fallacious) moment that no group of elementary or high school students ever taught by alternatively certified teachers has ever done academically better than they would have done if taught by conventionally prepared and certified ones.

Let’s likewise assume that this “fact” is guaranteed to hold forever, meaning that no group of students taught by alternatively certified instructors *ever* will do better than they otherwise might.

Similarly, but more expansively, let’s also assume that if all the students in the United States taught by regularly credentialed teachers averaged 79.6 percent on some kind of standardized test (just to pick a score out of the wild blue), that all students

taught by “differently” credentialed teachers would average the same mediocre 79.6 percent: not a tenth of a point higher or lower, but exactly the same.

Question: If everything above were, somehow, completely the case, would alternative teacher certification still be a good idea; one in which educators and other officials, both in and out of elected office, ought to spend valuable time, energy, and political capital? The answer is decidedly “yes” for no other reason than such a reform would make it possible for large numbers of exceptionally talented and *unexpected* men and women to make their careers in education; dedicated individuals who never would have had a realistic chance of

pursuing such lifetime routes absent a liberalizing of the law.

Learning in Minnesota and the rest of the United States is already rich with many talented and dedicated professionals. But as in all fields, finding ways of getting even richer is a central goal. In the matter at hand, it’s just not very smart to put unnecessary lids on the number of first-rate people

who might inspire students and lead the rest of us for a generation or more. Educators who will not only strengthen existing institutions, but who also will conceive, create, and run invaluable new ones.

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Now needless to say (discarding the for-the-sake-of-argument device), alternative teacher education

has other empirically demonstrated virtues. But before noting them, albeit cursorily, what is the pertinent proposal currently before the Minnesota Legislature?

With seven bipartisan authors in the House, HF3093 would establish an alternative teacher “preparation” program, with the legislation including a corresponding “limited-term teacher license.” According to its chief author, Rep. Carlos Mariani (DFL-St. Paul), the bill would “target districts and charter schools where there is a teacher shortage [or] a demonstrated achievement gap.” It likewise would apply to situations where “existing teaching staff does not reflect the racial or cultural student population.” The bill recently passed the K-12 Education Policy and Oversight Committee on a 14-4 vote and awaits further action on the House floor.

On the Senate side, Sen. Terri Bonoff (DFL-Minnetonka) is the chief author of SF2757, companion legislation with a total of five bipartisan authors. As amended, it more recently passed the Education Committee on an 11-7 vote and now waits action in the Finance Committee.

Ecumenical as this sponsorship is, and even though the two bills are supported by a truly eclectic collection of minority organizations, business associations and other groups, it’s opposed with a vengeance by Education Minnesota, the state’s teachers union, with its President Tom Dooher repeatedly saying things such as, “[W]hen we are expecting more from students, why would we expect less from the teachers who are going to be teaching them?”

His specific reference was to “Teach for America,” a superb national organization which recruits graduates of some of the nation’s best colleges and universities who (as the group convincingly

asserts) “have what it takes to excel in high-need schools.” While TFA has been active and acclaimed around the country for twenty years, it’s only now ramping up in the Twin Cities. Mr. Dooher’s displeasure notwithstanding, leaders such as the new superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, Bernadeia Johnson, and her immediate predecessor, Bill Green, have been quite pleased about the group’s arrival.

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So much for a glimpse at which Minnesota players are fans of alternative teacher certification and which (fewer) ones are not. What does research say about it? Pulling from a quick review I wrote last spring, what follows are excerpts from a handful of studies and subsequent reports. Let’s start with a passage about teacher credentialing in general from an important 2009 book, *Liberating Learning*, by political scientist Terry M. Moe of Stanford and political scientist John E. Chubb of the Hoover Institution (and formerly of Stanford).

The effectiveness of the teacher is the number one influence on achievement—up to half a standard deviation in scientific terms, or enough to take a low achieving student from failure to success in just a few years if taught by an effective teacher. We also know that effective teachers are not easily identified by their credentials, education, or experience (beyond the first few years of teaching). With the exception of verbal aptitude and subject matter of competence, most of what makes a teacher successful is acquired on the job and can only be observed there.

Jay Greene, a political scientist at the University of Arkansas, concluded similarly (in 2005) in *Education Myths*.

[N]ot all forms of professional certification actually are reliable indicators that those who possess them will perform substantially better in their chosen fields. Teacher certification is one of the most clear-cut cases we have of a mismatch between the process required to obtain a professional credential and actual job performance. While the evidence does clearly establish that teacher quality makes a big difference in students' academic achievement, it also indicates that there is not much relationship between teacher quality and teacher credentialing. The presence or absence of a teaching certificate on a teacher's resume does not make a noticeable difference in the classroom. Even an advanced degree in education from a graduate school does not establish that a teacher will perform better when it comes to student achievement.

Economist Eric Hanushek of Stanford has perhaps done more seminal work in this area than any other scholar. Here are a few sentences from his 2003 paper, "The Failure of Input-Based Schooling Policies." It ran in *The Economic Journal*, published by the Royal Economic Society in Great Britain.

The idea that has been picked up by US policymakers at all levels is to increase the requirements to become a teacher. The notion is simple: if we can insist on better prepared and more able teachers, teacher quality will necessarily rise, and student performance will respond. This

argument—at least as implemented—proves as incorrect as it is simple. . . . Teacher certification requirements are generally advertised as making sure that there is some minimum floor on quality, but if the requirements end up keeping out high quality teachers who do not want to take the specific courses required, they instead act more like a ceiling on quality.

A year ago this month, Zeyu Xu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor, under the partial aegis of the Washington-based Urban Institute, released a revised and more methodologically sophisticated version of their 2007 paper, "Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America in High School." This, in part, is how the Washington-based Fordham Foundation summarized it:

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As before, the authors find that TFA teachers are more effective than traditional teachers, even those with more experience. In fact the 'TFA effect' on student achievement is 2-3 times greater than that of 3-5 years of teaching experience . . . . These positive results held across multiple subjects, but were especially strong in math and science.

It's readily granted that results are not as stellar in every study pertaining to alternatively credentialed teachers as this one. Then, again, never and nowhere, regarding any educational policy or practice, are results ever identical, as dueling social scientists always will be among us. (For a less-enthusiastic view on the subject, for example, see the Linda Darling-Hammond reference below.) Rest assured, though, that several decades of national experience make it clear that well-designed and implemented alternative teacher

education programs both help kids and invigorate the field.

All of which gets us to the following recommendation, which very much acknowledges the vision and courage of the proposed legislation's dozen—mostly DFL—legislative authors.

**Recommendation:** Legislators on both sides of the aisle should resist the severe objections and almost certain threats of electoral reprisals by Education Minnesota and support passage of HF3093 and SF2757. They should do so based on the bills' inherent merits as well as recognition of their greater obligations to low-income students and their families than to any special interest—even one with “education” in its name and immense bucks in its budget.

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