

# One Step Forward, Three Steps Backward: Alternative Certification Programs in Texas, Georgia, and Florida

by Lawrence Baines, Jackie McDowell, and David Foulk

Teaching is the essential profession, the one that makes all other professions possible. Without well-qualified, caring, and committed teachers, neither improved curricula and assessments nor safe schools—not even the highest standards in the world—will ensure that our children are prepared for the challenges and opportunities in America's third century.<sup>1</sup>

Emily is a bus driver for a local school. She greets the children warmly, drives carefully, and usually arrives at her pick-up and drop-off points on time. From all that we know about her, she seems to be a great bus driver. However, Emily recently told one of the authors that she is going to teach high school English. He asked Emily if she had majored in English in college, but she replied that she had majored in business management. Her only English classes were those required as part of general education. According to Emily, "I like stories and I like to talk. So that's why I want to teach English." When asked if she had any previous experience in the classroom, she replied that she had no experience, "technically speaking," but that driving the bus had taught her something about working with children.

Although Emily is likable and her ambition admirable, is someone with only two post-high school courses in English and no classroom experience really ready to serve as literary sage, poet,

grammarian, technologist, researcher, classroom manager, special educator, expert on the writing process, and evaluator for 120 to 180 adolescents? Emily was scheduled to begin her four-week teacher training (provided by the state) in mid-July, and then teach secondary English at a high school in Georgia beginning in August. If she can pass the PRAXIS II within two years, she will be a fully certified teacher.

Emily would seem as qualified to be a neurologist, plumber, electrician, or welder as a teacher. However, Emily would be unable to practice medicine, fix a faucet, wire a house, or weld a boat legally, because these professions and trades have strict guidelines for earning credentials. A neurologist must attain a bachelor's degree, a medical degree, a yearlong internship, and possibly three additional years of work and study. To become a certified plumber, one must first log at least 6,000 hours of work experience (three years of forty-hour weeks) supervised by a certified plumber and take a series of exams. To become a journeyman electrician, a trainee must also pass a series of exams after working under supervision for at least 8,000 hours (four years of forty-hour weeks). Welders must have a B.S. in engineering, at least one year of related experience (or a B.S. in a related field and five years of supervised experience), and a passing score on the Welder Engineer Exam. In contrast, to be a teacher in Georgia, Texas, or Florida, one needs only a bachelor's degree and a 2.5 overall grade point average. No previous experience with children or demonstrated expertise teaching is necessary.

Alternative certification programs, which currently flourish in forty-one states and Washington, D.C., are expected to proliferate over the next ten years. Although such programs are not identical, the alternative certification programs in Texas, Florida, and Georgia bear watching because they

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represent a new breed of teacher certification—one that is attained without ever setting foot in a classroom.

### **No muss, no fuss teacher certification**

One justification for eliminating teacher certification requirements is the prospect of burgeoning school enrollments. Recently the large numbers of teacher vacancies in cities such as Orlando, Houston, and Atlanta have received extensive publicity. But persuading teachers to take jobs in high-poverty, high-crime areas has always been a challenge. Tying school funding and teacher salaries to achievement scores only exacerbates an already-difficult situation.

A seldom-discussed fact about “the teacher shortage” is that increases in school enrollments are largely restricted to schools in the West and the South. The Midwest and the Northeast expect declining enrollments over the next few years. A second fact about “the teacher shortage” is that many certified teachers simply choose not to teach. For example, although Florida had 213,977 certified teachers in the state in 1999, only 129,731 (about 60 percent) were teaching.<sup>2</sup> So increasing the numbers of certified teachers may not necessarily increase the pool of available teachers. Certified teachers may quit, find other employment, or retire. Approximately 30 percent of newly certified teachers in Florida decide not to teach. This is not to dispute that, in some cities and rural areas, the teacher shortage may be real, but the specter of a shortage has been just as often inappropriately used to circumvent the certification programs of colleges and universities.

A tactic popular with some legislators and lobbyists has been to claim that the methods of preparing teachers in colleges and universities are ineffective. The National Center for Policy Analysis (2000) has declared that “Tough standards have all but disappeared and many teaching candidates no longer have to be able even to spell or write a coherent sentence.”<sup>3</sup> According to the National Center for Alternative Teacher Certification, “Alternative routes not only make the most sense, but also provide the best preparation.”<sup>4</sup> The twenty states whose teacher education programs were analyzed by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation were given an average grade of D-plus. One exception was Texas, whose “liberating” approaches to teacher certification earned the state a place on Fordham’s “honor roll.”<sup>5</sup> The American Council on Higher

Education has criticized teacher education as well, especially the academic preparation of prospective elementary teachers. As a result, some colleges and universities have stricken the word *education* from all degree plans. Thus, students who attend these institutions and want to teach elementary school cannot major in *elementary education*. Instead, they are required to major in *interdisciplinary studies*, *liberal arts*, or *applied learning*.

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The assumption implicit in attacking teacher certification programs at colleges and universities is that courses in pedagogy do not enhance student achievement, while courses in a content area do. Nowadays, when half the certified teachers are teaching out of field, such an assumption seems moot.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the “content movement” has great political clout, if somewhat less popular support. A national survey showed that more than 90 percent of the public wants teachers to be “well trained and knowledgeable about how to teach effectively as well as thoroughly educated in the subjects they will teach.” More than 75 percent of respondents opposed allowing persons with only a bachelor’s degree and no preparation in the field of education to teach.<sup>7</sup>

Although the evidence suggests that certification programs in colleges and universities are rigorous, challenging, relevant, and enduring, the myth that education courses are less intellectually demanding than subject-area courses persists.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, Robert Hutchins’ acclamation that “All that is needed to be a teacher is a good liberal education” still seems to carry weight despite the burgeoning special education populations, historically unprecedented numbers of fatherless families, increasingly complex bureaucracies within schools, and mediocre student performance on standardized tests.

### Alternative Certification in Texas

According to the Texas Board for Educator Certification, field experience is a crucial component of a teacher preparation program: "Educator preparation entities shall provide evidence of ongoing and relevant field-based experiences in a variety of settings with diverse student populations, including observation, modeling, and demonstration of promising practices." Despite the nod to field experience, students seeking certification in Texas are limited to eighteen hours of education courses in their academic preparation.

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Table 1 (page 35) compares the hours required for a typical Texas certification program with those for the alternative certification program in secondary English; secondary English composite (English plus reading and journalism); applied learning (elementary education); field experience prior to solo teaching; length of student teaching experience; screening for suitability to teach and SAT scores; and availability of additional help during the first year of solo teaching.

From content-area courses to field experience, the requirements for the traditional program are far more rigorous than for alternative certification. Courses in the traditional program usually begin in the sophomore year and progress over the final 3 to 3½ years of the degree. In alternative certification, prospective teachers (who may hold *any* degree) take two courses in July, begin full-time solo teaching in August, and then take two more courses over the course of the year. Not surprisingly, more and more prospective teachers in Texas are eschewing university programs for alternative certification. In 1998-1999, one in six Texas teachers was alternatively certified, and that number is expected to grow significantly over the next decade.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for the candidate who wants to get a teaching job quickly with a minimum of muss or fuss, the choice is clear. Alternative certification involves only two weeks of summer, whereas traditional programs

in colleges and universities require three or more years of course work; numerous checkpoints (admissions, evaluations, grade point requirements); and long, unpaid, uncredited hours working in public schools.

In Texas, districts sponsor candidates for their alternative certification programs, but they sponsor only those who have already passed the EXcET (Examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas). In contrast, teacher education programs in colleges and universities must post passing rates of at least 85 percent, and their programs must be reviewed by the Texas Board for Educator Certification, NCATE, and other accrediting agencies. In comparison, school districts face no scrutiny from NCATE or the state and have no passing rates about which to worry. They are independent, self-monitoring, and relatively unencumbered. Plainly, the "two-week" alternative certification programs in Texas violate the state board's own criteria for teacher preparation—particularly the edict that a teacher have "teaching knowledge and abilities."

### Georgia

Before 2001, alternative certification in Georgia was limited to specific programs at a handful of institutions. For example, Paine College and Armstrong Atlantic State University had alternative certification programs for bachelor's degree holders who had significant work experience in a discipline or as military officers. At Paine, the program required that students take a "fast track," semester-long block of courses held at local schools. In summer 2001, however, the state's Professional Standards Commission, with little notice to school districts or teacher preparation programs, adopted the Texas model for alternative certification. The new plan, called "Teach for Georgia," does not even require students to spend a semester learning the entirety of what a prospective teacher should know and be able to do. Instead, the curriculum has been crammed into a single, four-week course offered in late summer. Because the Georgia program is based on the Texas model, the differences between university programs and alternative programs highlighted in Table 1 are almost identical.

In the past, Georgia has allowed school districts and regional service agencies to offer endorsements in gifted and talented education, preschool, special education, teacher supervision, and vocational education. However, a batch of

Table 1:

**A COMPARISON BETWEEN A TYPICAL UNIVERSITY PROGRAM AND  
AN ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM IN TEXAS**

	STATE PROGRAM	ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION
<i>English major—course work in English</i>	36 hours minimum, 21 in hours upper division	Single field—24 hours, 12 hours in upper division
<i>Course work in composite English (includes reading, drama, journalism, and speech)</i>	66 hours	Not available through alternative programs
<i>Applied Learning (Elementary English)</i>	Total 130–139 hours, with a major in applied learning, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 18–25 hours in an academic specialization</li> <li>• 18 hours in teaching different curricula</li> <li>• 18 hours in professional education</li> </ul>	Bachelor's degree in any field  24 hours in any <i>combination</i> of English, math, science, and social studies (3 hours in each required)
<i>Field experience prior to solo teaching</i>	500–1000 hours, depending on the program	0 hours
<i>Length of student teaching experience</i>	Semester-long, full-time teaching	No student teaching required
<i>Screening for suitability to teach</i>	Multiple checkpoints, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recommendations</li> <li>• orientations</li> <li>• admissions</li> <li>• evaluations from previous field experiences</li> <li>• grade point averages</li> <li>• student teaching supervision (by university faculty)</li> <li>• cooperating-teacher evaluations</li> <li>• other assessments</li> </ul> <p>Grade point average in major of 2.5–3.0, depending on the institution</p> <p>No grade lower than C in any education course</p>	Mentor teacher assigned at the discretion of the school district serves as evaluator. 2.5 overall grade point average
<i>SAT score required for entry</i>	Middle 50% of SAT scores range from 1000 to 1300 for admission into Texas's four largest universities	No SAT minimum required
<i>Help during first solo teaching</i>	Provided by cooperating teacher, university field experience supervisor, and seminar professor	Dependent upon mentor, a fellow full-time teacher

laws accompanying the changes in alternative certification allow school districts to certify teachers in general. It is not known whether these school districts, like those in Texas, will remain free of the accountability that has been mandated for teacher education programs in colleges and universities.

### Florida

Rather than allow school districts to decide voluntarily whether they wish to become involved in teacher certification, Florida has mandated that every district develop a specific plan of action. Unfortunately, what constitutes an acceptable program has not been established. Colleges and schools of education may partner with school districts to devise plans, but they may not operate independently of school districts. No minimums have been established regarding pedagogical or content preparation.<sup>10</sup> The state, which is moving quickly to take advantage of political momentum for change, plans to negotiate standards independently with each school district.

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Still, persons seeking alternative certification in Florida must meet minimum state standards, which include earning a bachelor's degree and passing the NTE (National Teacher Exam), the FPET (Florida Professional Education Test), and the CLAST (College Level Academic Skills Test). Certification is a three-step process. To be eligible, an individual must have a bachelor's degree in the field (Step 1). To proceed to employment (Step 2, the issuance of a three-year temporary certificate), the individual must undergo fingerprinting and receive a job offer. By fulfilling only these requirements (bachelor's degree, fingerprinting, and a job offer), an individual may teach school in Florida for up to three years. To obtain a five-year, professional certificate, an individual must fulfill the "professional preparation requirement" and "successfully complete an approved system for demonstration of Professional Education Competence," as required in Step 3. This approval is determined solely at the discretion of the school district.<sup>11</sup>

### The iatrogenic consequences of alternative certification

One would think that teaching had finally begun to arrive as a profession with the growth and acceptance of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (which now accredits more than 517 institutions of higher education, an all-time high), the development of a sophisticated process of national certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and a slowly increasing salary scale. But this progress has been accompanied by three giant steps backward. Alternative certification programs in Georgia, Florida, and Texas give complete control over children's education to individuals with no previous experience in the classroom. Not only are alternatively certified teachers elevated to positions equivalent to those of university-educated teachers with three or more years' experience and twice as much education, but the law mandates that they receive equal salaries and benefits.

In medicine, the term *iatrogenic* identifies an illness or injury that has been caused by the treatment itself. While political leaders trumpet their desire for high-quality teaching and achievement, their changes in teacher certification undermine these goals. Placing an inexperienced alternatively certified teacher in a classroom may solve momentary staffing needs in a school clamoring for a warm body, but the iatrogenic consequence of this quick-fix mentality is that student morale and achievement may suffer. A teacher who has no idea what to do on Monday, how to break up a fight, how to get a troubled student some help, or how to perform a teacher's myriad other tasks is at a decided disadvantage. Like a neurologist expected to diagnose and prescribe a treatment for *Ataxia telangiectasia* (progressive, neurodegenerative childhood disease) after a two-week crash course on the human brain, this new breed of alternatively certified teachers is expected to know how and what to teach without the benefit of course work or real experience.

Recent studies confirm that the greatest challenges for first-year teachers are: (1) classroom management; (2) student motivation; (3) dealing with individual differences; (4) assessment; and (5) getting along with parents.<sup>12</sup> Most teacher educators readily acknowledge these challenges. They have devised coursework and field experiences so that their students have a good chance of being effective from day one.

Although teacher preparation programs are not infallible, they have the advantage of offering a logical sequence of academic coursework bolstered by practical, hands-on experience over a period of years. What a student needs to learn to become an effective teacher cannot be delivered in two weeks. It cannot be delivered without hands-on experience in the classroom. The proliferation of alternative certification programs in Texas, Georgia, and Florida represents three giant steps backward for the profession. These programs devalue the art and science of teaching at a time when the need for experienced, knowledgeable teachers has never been greater.

### Notes

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