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COMMENTARY

Learning to Teach

Comparing the Effectiveness of Three Pathways

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PACE | Policy Analysis for California Education

PUBLISHED: February 26, 2013

The work of teaching is complex and multifaceted, and preparing individuals to be effective teachers is a challenging endeavor without a universally agreed-upon methodology. University-based teacher preparation in particular has been challenged to prove its relevance and effectiveness in preparing teachers. California recognizes that initial teacher preparation is only the first step in a continuum of lifelong learning but there is a need for better information about what works and what doesn't in the state's credential programs. In January 2012, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson formed a 48-member Task Force on Educator Excellence to address fundamental questions about the education profession, including teacher preparation. Their report, in partnership with the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, *Greatness by Design: Supporting Outstanding Teaching to Sustain a Golden State* (September, 2012), articulates a number of recommendations, including strengthening accreditation by "incorporating the features of successful programs…" and "incorporating valid and reliable performance assessments into licensure and accreditation." However, we also need more research to help identify which programs are most successful and which assessments are useful.

One recent contribution in this area is the study "Learning to Teach: Comparing the Effectiveness of Three Pathways," by Robin Chiero, Susan M. Tracz, James Marshall, Colleen Torgerson and Paul Beare. The authors investigated differences in the effectiveness of three pathways for learning to teach offered across the California State University (CSU) System, the nation's largest university system with 23 regional campuses serving 433,000 students. The variable of interest in the study was the pathway: Traditional campus-based, internship, or CalStateTEACH, a statewide CSU online-supported credential program administered through four regional centers. The dependent variables were the ratings of the quality of preparation by program graduates at the end of their first year of professional teaching (N=12,590) and their employment supervisors (N=3781).

The study analyzed data collected annually over a seven-year period, from 2004 to 2010. The instruments used to collect the data were two separate but parallel 110-item surveys, one for graduates and the second for their employment supervisors, designed to collect information about the extent to which the teachers' program prepared them for important teaching responsibilities. Ratings were indicated on a four-point Likert scale from *Well Prepared* to *Not At All Prepared.* In 2003, the CSU Deans of Education grouped related individual items into composites, 15 for supervisors and 17 for teachers. The grouping of items in composites facilitates the analysis and interpretation of large amounts of complex data.

Results for Supervisors. An examination of the 15 composites for supervisors showed that the online-supported and intern groups were each rated highest on six composites and were tied for highest on three others. The traditional group was not rated higher than either of the other groups on any composite. However, the differences between the pathways were not statistically significant for any of the composite areas rated by employment supervisors, including *Overall Effectiveness*.

Results for teachers. The CalStateTEACH online-supported pathway had the highest means on all 17 composites for teachers. Furthermore, differences between the pathways were statistically significant for all of the composites. Statistical tests revealed that

the CalStateTeach group rated their programs significantly higher than the Interns on all composites, and higher than the Traditionally-prepared group on 16 of the 17 composites. In addition, the traditionally-prepared teachers rated their programs significantly higher than the Interns on 15 of the 17 composites. Features of the online pathway included a spiraling curriculum, candidates taught in cohorts across all coursework, fieldwork embedded in coursework, and extra mentoring available in addition to the usual university and district supervision.

For policymakers intent on reforming teacher preparation, these results provide an important starting point. Additional research is also needed to investigate differences in the characteristics of individuals who enter different pathways, as well as further exploration of the divergence between supervisor and teacher evaluations of the programs.

The full study is here: Robin Chiero, Susan M. Tracz, James Marshall, Colleen Torgerson & Paul Beare, Learning to Teach: Comparing the Effectiveness of Three Pathways, Action in Teacher Education, Volume 34, Issue 4, 2012, p. 368-380.

Suggested citation Policy Analysis for California Education. (2013, February). *Learning to Teach: Comparing the effectiveness of three pathways* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/learning-teach

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