

COMMENTARY

Traditional vs Alternative Teacher Certification

What Policymakers Need to Know

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PUBLISHED: February 18, 2014

Studies consistently show that teachers are the most important in-school factor for improving student achievement. It makes sense then, that policymakers would seek to create policies that help improve the overall quality of educators. They have often attempted to do so by raising barriers to entry. That is, politicians put in place licensure requirements in an effort to keep low-performing individuals from entering the classroom. But are current licensure requirements effective screens? Do they actually keep ineffective teachers from entering the classroom? This is a question that we addressed in [this study](#), published by *Educational Policy*.

Specifically, we asked whether traditionally-trained teachers were more effective than teachers who entered the profession through an alternative route. We also examined the relationship between performance on licensure exams and performance in the classroom. Our analysis was conducted using data from Arkansas, but may have implications for teacher certification in all states.

Traditionally-certified teachers have typically graduated from a university with a degree in education. During their preparation, they completed a student teaching experience and took courses in pedagogy. Alternatively-certified teachers, on the other hand, often enter the classroom with little to no experience in the classroom or training. You might expect that the better-trained, traditionally-certified teachers would be much more effective; but you would be wrong. Our analysis indicated that the difference, in terms of a teacher's ability to improve student achievement on standardized exams, between traditionally- and alternatively-certified teachers was negligible.

The most obvious reason for this is explained by what we found in our analysis of the relationship between licensure exams and teacher effectiveness—a positive correlation between performance on licensure exams and teacher effectiveness. Individuals who scored higher on teacher licensure exams tended to be more effective teachers. Consequently, alternatively-certified teachers in our sample scored significantly higher than traditionally-certified teachers on licensure exams, roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ of a standard deviation higher on the [Praxis I mathematics exam](#). Alternative pathways to the classroom seem to be attracting individuals with higher academic capabilities, on average, than the traditional route. The higher academic capabilities of alternatively-certified teachers seem to make up for the lack of training.

What does this mean from a policy standpoint? We believe it means that there is value in both traditional and alternative routes to the classroom. Each route has benefits and each route has drawbacks. More importantly, our analysis indicates that our current licensure screens are not perfect. Within both routes and at all levels of performance on licensure exams, there is tremendous variation in effectiveness. Traditional certification requirements keep some effective teachers out of the classroom and allow some ineffective teachers into schools. It is possible that these ineffective barriers to entering the teaching profession may simply serve to make other professions more attractive to highly-capable individuals.

Going forward there are two ways policymakers can remedy this situation: improve licensure screens so that they are better indicators of success in the classroom or reduce the hurdles to getting licensure and allow local school leaders to use their best judgment when hiring individuals. Since we are not aware of any sure-fire methods to identify the best teachers before they teach, we suggest moving toward the latter.

The [*full study*](#) (gated) is in James V. Shuls and Julie Trivitt, "Teacher Effectiveness: An Analysis of Licensure Screens." *Educational Policy* (2013): 0895904813510777.

Suggested citation

Shuls, J. V., & Trivitt, J. (2014, February). *Traditional vs alternative teacher certification: What policymakers need to know* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/traditional-vs-alternative-teacher-certification>



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