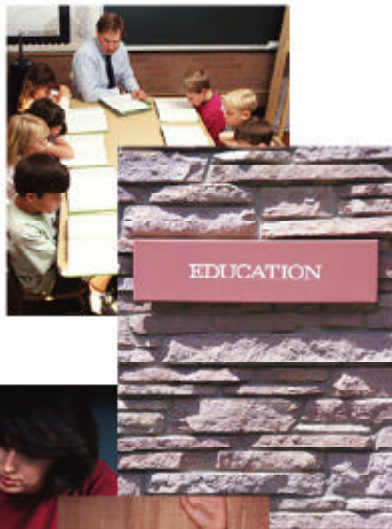

ALTERNATIVE TEACHER EDUCATION

Trends and Implications in Policies and Practices



Prepared for
Western Interstate Commission for
Higher Education (WICHE)

by
Robert Reichardt, Ph.D.
Mid-continent Research for Education
and Learning (McREL)

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Preface

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) has produced two companion reports on alternative teacher education – that is, post-baccalaureate teacher training – for the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) with the support of the Ford Foundation. Each report uses a different source of information to learn about the inputs, processes, and outputs of alternative teacher education. This report uses interview data from district alternative education administrators and practitioners to learn about current practices and policies of school districts in their use of alternatively educated teachers. The companion report, entitled *Alternative Teacher Education: A Review of Selected Literature*, uses existing literature and other sources to summarize existing knowledge about the practice of alternative education.



Introduction and Background

The system that trains and certifies teachers in the United States is under scrutiny. Called into question are both the role of teacher education and its effectiveness. Some political and research organizations argue that the current system is not associated with improving the quality of the teacher workforce (see, e.g., Abell Foundation, 2001); others suggest that the current system be eliminated (see, e.g., Hess, 2001).

The teacher preparation system is made up of three loosely coupled sets of institutions, as shown in Figure 1. Since each state sets its own rules and regulations for the teacher preparation system, any one description cannot capture all of the variations between the systems within the 50 states. The state role is that of regulator of the system. Through program accreditation and teacher certification rules and regulations, states approve and regulate the teacher preparation system. Institutions of higher education, particularly schools of education, provide prospective teachers with state-approved educational services, that is, classes and internships that allow a trainee to become certified as a teacher. Districts and schools hire teachers and are the end users in the system.

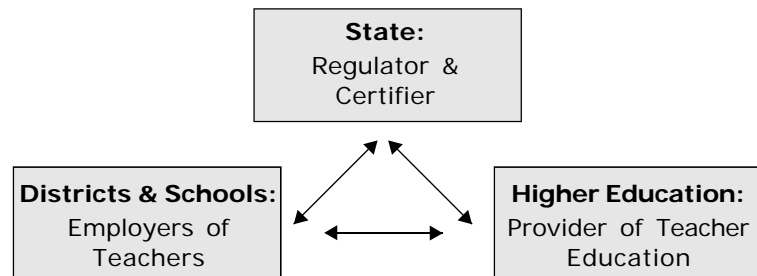


Figure 1. Institutions involved in traditional teacher preparation

The traditional teacher preparation system has two key attributes relative to this analysis. First, the linkages between these three institutions are loose. No one institution has much control over another, and little information flows among the components of the system (Weick, 1976). Thus, how a teacher is prepared, what is required for certification, and what is needed on the job are not always well connected. A second attribute of the system is that districts and schools often treat new teachers as commodities. That is, any teacher with the appropriate certification is assumed to be prepared and able to fill any slot in the system. This assumption ignores the influence of place and community on a teacher's ability and willingness to work in a school. In other words, the communities within and around a school are important factors in a school's attractiveness to any given teacher and to the effectiveness of that teacher, but these factors are not formally taken into account in the system that hires and places new teachers.

Two central issues facing the current teacher education and certification system are quantity and quality. Policymakers and educators question whether the current teacher preparation system can prepare enough quality teachers to meet the demands created by the concurrent retirement of baby-boom generation teachers and the increased enrollment of the children of baby-boomers. At the same time, schools and districts are facing increased pressure to improve student performance, while research is showing that teacher quality is very important to student achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Manifestations of this pressure include testing and accountability systems for schools and districts, such as those mandated under the new authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

These two pressures often come together in schools with large populations of poor, limited English proficient, and/or minority children. These schools are most likely to have both teacher shortages and poor student performance. The most extreme example is occurring in California, where the proportion of uncertified teachers can be taken as an indicator of teacher shortages. The most extreme shortages in California occur in elementary schools with large proportions of poor students, where 22.7 percent of teachers are not fully certified. Conversely, in schools with few poor students, just two percent of teachers are uncertified. At the same time, in schools with many poor students, the average number of students scoring above the national median is 23 percent, compared to 68 percent in schools with low proportions of poor students (Betts, Rueben, & Danenberg, 2000).

Teacher shortages are not universal. They manifest themselves in particular places and in particular subject areas. The above example describes one place where these shortages occur: in schools with certain types of students, that is, poor, minority, and limited English proficient. Teacher shortages are more likely in urban schools that have high concentrations of poor, minority, and limited English proficient students (Betts, Rueben, & Danenberg, 2000). At the same time, rural areas also experience shortages. Finally, math, science, special education, bilingual, and foreign language are the subject areas that appear to be experiencing shortages (Reichardt, 2002).

Faced with the pressure to increase quantity and quality teachers, the current system for educating and preparing teachers is changing. Some states have created new organizations for regulating teacher certification; many states have changed their rules and regulations for certifying teachers; and in some states, additional higher education institutions are providing teacher education. Often these additional teacher education providers are proprietary, for-profit institutions. Universities have altered their education programs, and in some cases districts have entered the business of training teachers. Central to these changes has been the emergence of alternate methods of providing teacher education.

Most of the nation's alternative teacher education programs began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the exception of a few programs that began earlier in states such as California, Georgia, and New York. States do not appear to be finished with the work of creating and defining these programs. Since 1997, 18 states have proposed or implemented legislative or regulatory changes to their alternative certification systems. There appears to be slightly less activity in the western part of the nation (as defined by membership in WICHE), with 20 percent of western states visiting or revisiting their alternative education structure, compared to 30 percent of non-western states (Feistritzer & Chester, 2001).

Methods and Organization

This report draws upon the ideas and knowledge available in existing research on alternative certification and education systems. Linda Brannan has synthesized much of that knowledge in the companion report, *Alternative Teacher Education: A Review of Selected Literature*. This report also draws upon the knowledge, perspectives, and practices of administrators in five districts. Data were gathered through 30-minute, semi-structured telephone interviews of officials knowledgeable of their districts' practices in the use of alternatively educated teachers. The officials interviewed for this project came from the following districts:

- Denver Public Schools, Colorado
- Douglas County Public Schools, Colorado
- Chicago Public Schools, Illinois
- Clark County Public Schools, Nevada
- Salt Lake City Public Schools, Utah

Participants were selected to reflect the experiences of larger districts in the western portion of the country. Enrollment in these districts during the 1999-2000 school year ranged from 25,000 in Salt Lake City to 432,000 in Chicago. District growth rates over the past 10 years vary, from a high of 147 percent for Douglas County to a low of two percent in Salt Lake City. The districts in the sample had slightly higher student-teacher ratios than the national average of 16.2, ranging from 17.4 in Denver to 21.1 in Salt Lake City (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

This focus on district practices produced detailed information about teacher education practices in programs that are run by the districts, often in cooperation with institutions of higher education. Perspectives were provided by program managers, not by policymakers or participants. At the same time, this district focus produced less information about programs led by universities or programs managed jointly by universities and other institutions.

Because of the limited sample of experts and practitioners that this study draws upon, universal findings about the current U.S. system of teacher education should not be drawn. However, this study does suggest important and interesting practices in teacher education that warrant further research and investigation. These practices have important implications for the nation's teacher preparation system, particularly for those institutions providing educational services to teacher trainees.

This report is organized around three areas in which alternative teacher education systems differ from traditional education systems:

- Inputs: Who Enters Alternative Education?
- Processes Used in Alternative Education
- Outputs: How Are Products of Alternative Education Used?

The remainder of this report addresses observations related to each area. These observations address both commonalities and variations in the policies and practices of districts in this sample. Each section ends with a discussion of the implications.

Inputs: Who Enters Alternative Education?

Selection into Programs Focuses on Subject-Matter Expertise

All of the programs examined for this study all operated by accepting people with subject-matter expertise and work experience and strived to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach within that subject area. All of the interview respondents indicated that alternative teacher education programs were driven by subjects, grade levels, and schools that are experiencing shortages of qualified applicants. All reported using alternative education programs to produce math or science teachers. Most of the respondents reported that their districts use these programs to create special education, foreign language, and bilingual education teachers. A minority of the respondents reported that their districts had programs for technology and elementary grade teachers.

Selection factors for the programs focused on subject-matter expertise. A few programs accepted teachers who brought exemplary knowledge, such as a Ph.D., in subject areas in which the district was not experiencing shortages. Interviewees did not have data on the professional backgrounds of program participants, but perceived that participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds. Respondents from two districts reported operating programs targeted towards people from certain backgrounds. Target populations for these programs included homemakers and teachers in foreign countries.

Although the literature is clear that alternative certification programs can be good sources of teachers from underrepresented groups within the teacher workforce, none of the districts reported explicitly

using alternative teacher education as a tool to change the racial and ethnic profile of the teacher workforce. Only one district reported explicitly targeting recruitment towards minorities. This targeting was not described in terms of meeting diversity goals, but in terms of recruitment. This district wanted to make sure that all potential sources of new teachers were tapped, so they included Asian and Hispanic Chambers of Commerce in their recruitment efforts.

Although alternative education programs help fill shortages, they are clearly not the main source of new teachers for districts. The largest program examined for this study provided no more than 10 percent of new district recruits. Some districts reported that alternative education programs provided the majority of their new recruits in certain shortage areas, such as bilingual education and special education.

High Demand for Entry into Programs

Although the districts examined for this study used alternatively educated teachers sparingly, demand for entry into these programs appears to be high. One district reported more than 1,300 applicants for a well-advertised program that had 72 openings.

As reported in a Ford Foundation-sponsored study of math and science teachers, alternative certification programs essentially lower the cost of switching careers to program participants (Darling-Hammond, Hudson, & Kirby, 1989). In all of the districts examined for this study, program participants held full-time, paid teaching positions while receiving their alternative education. This approach greatly reduces or eliminates the period of time trainees go without wages compared to traditional programs, where students are often not paid while they do their teaching internships and may be required to take full-time coursework. The ability to receive a salary while being trained makes these programs more attractive to mid-career participants who often have financial and family obligations that require steady sources of income. In the programs examined here, some districts paid some or all of the costs of coursework. The end result is that participants have few out-of-pocket costs associated with switching careers and no lapse in income.

Although none of the programs that participated in this research explicitly guarantees employment for participants, all of the programs provide participants with a high probability of employment after they have completed training. Successful applicants to these programs get low-cost professional retraining, have limited or no periods without income, and are likely to be employed after they complete their retraining. Compared to other careers requiring specialized training, alternative teacher education provides a low-cost opportunity for people to change careers.

Entrants into these programs were reported to be motivated by two factors. First, many people reportedly had always wanted to teach but were dissuaded or “counseled out” of the profession. District officials said that many applicants stated during interviews that teaching was their first career choice, but because of perceived low pay or poor working conditions they had chosen to enter other professions. The second motivator, especially noticeable during economic downturns, is financial. Many alternative education applicants are unemployed or are working in an unstable economic sector and, as a result, become interested in a career in education. For example, one district in a city that is a major airline hub reported an increase in flight attendants applying for their program. This was regarded as positive in that flight attendants were seen as possessing strong interpersonal and group management skills.

Implications

Implications for Policymakers. Recent research out of the Harvard Graduate School of Education suggests that the teacher workforce of the 21st century will include more people who view teaching as a short-term career rather than a lifetime career (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). Alternative teacher education offers a low-cost method of entering teaching and thus is attractive to those who view teaching as a short-term career.

This suggests that the current high demand for entry into alternative education programs will continue and may even grow and that alternative education programs can continue to help districts and states respond to teacher shortages. Policymakers may want to consider reducing other barriers to mid-career entrants to teaching or those who view teaching as a short-term career. These barriers can include retirement systems that require lengthy commitments to receive benefits or laws that do not allow teachers to be paid during internships.

Implications for Research. Selecting appropriate program participants is important given the high demand for entry into these programs and the fact that most program participants are offered employment in their new careers. Haberman (1995) has made extensive recommendations about selecting teachers for certain places, that is, urban, high-poverty, and diverse schools. Little or no research has been conducted on the important factors to weigh when selecting teachers for certain subjects or for work in places other than urban schools. Research conducted by McREL (Reichardt, 2002) has shown that rural and small schools are experiencing teacher shortages, but there is little research on what factors to use to select the best suited mid-career applicants for rural schools. Another question is whether certain professions produce applicants with skills that are useful in certain types of subjects. For example, are flight attendants’ people skills useful in elementary grade classrooms?

Processes Used in Alternative Teacher Education

Types of Alternative Education Programs

Districts that participated in this research described two types of alternative education programs: alternative routes to certification and alternative certification systems. Alternative routes to certification use existing state certification training requirements, which are employed by traditional teacher training programs, and schedule the coursework to meet the needs of teacher trainees who are working in classrooms. These programs often require a change in certification regulations but do not always require a change in certification laws. Alternative certification programs create new training requirements for teachers to become certified – requirements that are significantly different from traditional teacher training programs in that state. These often require that both regulatory and statutory modifications be implemented.

Districts in this sample appeared more likely to use alternative routes than alternative certification. This may be because the regulatory changes required for alternative routes are easier to accomplish than the legislative changes required for alternative certification. Several interviewees suggested that once alternative routes have been shown to produce teachers of acceptable quality, legislatures may become more willing to change the certification legislation. This suggests that alternative certification may grow in the future.

Both alternative certification and alternative routes require colleges to adjust their course offerings and/or structure. If these programs are run in collaboration with districts, colleges must consult with districts to determine the kinds of adjustments that should be made. For example, most programs offer courses at times and places convenient to the program participants. This might involve offering night classes and/or offering courses at schools or other district facilities in order to make it easier for students to participate. Many districts use propriety institutions of higher education as education service providers.

State governments played a key role in structuring the processes used by districts. All of the programs examined for this study required new state regulations or laws to allow creation these programs. These regulations included new program process or output standards. Some districts reported that these new laws and regulations were influenced by their input to state regulatory bodies.

Alternative Education Program Coursework

In each of the participating districts, courses are sequenced to meet program participants' needs. Since most program participants immediately began teaching, the initial coursework was organized to meet the most immediate needs of first-time teachers:

- Classroom Management
- Planning & Curriculum
- Assessments
- Parental Involvement

In terms of the training provided to program participants, classroom management was the course most often mentioned by districts, followed by planning and curriculum. Parental involvement was the subject least often mentioned by district personnel.

Emergency Certification and Alternative Education

One district reported using alternative education very sparingly. This district appeared to treat alternative education as a type of emergency certification, to be used only in special or very difficult situations. Emergency certification allows uncertified teachers to work in classrooms as they take prescribed coursework towards certification. The central difference between emergency certification and alternative education is the additional structure found in alternative education programs. Alternative education programs provide participants with educational activities, while teachers with emergency certificates can choose which of the prescribed courses to take and when.

Districts with larger alternative education programs reported using alternative education instead of emergency certification. Having their own alternative education programs has given them more control over the training of teachers who would otherwise come to their districts as emergency certified teachers. By running their own alternative education programs, the districts have had much greater control over the content, sequence, and amount of training for new teachers who have not attended traditional teacher education programs. These districts appear to operate from the belief that they can make better choices about the content and sequencing of new teacher training than can universities or teachers themselves.

Higher Education Partners

There are many different institutional arrangements that support alternative education. Of the 17 states that report data, western states more often report programs that are collaboratively controlled by districts and institutions of higher education (Feistritzer & Chester, 2001). The interviewees viewed the roles of and relationships with higher education in many different ways. One theme that emerged across most interviews was a view of higher education institutions as providers of educational services, that is, coursework.

The districts examined for this study varied in how they selected higher education partners to provide the coursework portion of their alternative education programs. Some selected partners based on convenience— convenience for districts in negotiating services and

convenience to their program participants in receiving those services. Convenience for districts in negotiating services means that colleges treated the districts like customers and provided educational services in direct response to district requests. For example, one college hired the district's master teachers as adjunct professors to teach program courses. In this case the district has significant influence over the content, timing, and staffing of the courses. Convenience to program participants means providing courses at the easiest time and in places that are convenient for program participants.

Other districts appear to select university partners based on measures of program strength. One district reported that the large state university was a first choice as a partner. If that partner was unwilling or unable to collaborate, then the district would work with a newer, for-profit university. Another district interviewee commented on the importance of collaborating with a "strong" department within a college. Contextually, "strong" appeared to mean that the department was academically rigorous and able to organize itself around the collaboration. Finally, in at least one district, college faculty served as mentors to the teacher trainees, a service that the district valued.

One district did not make college coursework the center of the trainee education process. The education process for participants in this relatively small program was individualized and based on the recommendations of a support team. The support team included a mentor, the principal, and a university representative. The interviewee stated that the majority of the training received by participants has been self-study or one-on-one instruction with their mentors. Although college coursework was part of the training process, coursework was not a central component. Coursework was recommended by the support team, but the "where" and "when" of the courses was determined by the applicant.

K–12 Practitioner Observations on Alternative Education Issues for Higher Education

Several interviewees commented on the power that collaboration around alternative education programs has to reform traditional teacher training programs at partner universities. They suggested that participation in the programs provided the colleges with new and rich sources of information about the needs of new teachers and districts. Several of these interviewees also discussed how converting this information into action required structures that support reflection and learning. The structures were most often described as regular meetings of faculty or administrators where lessons learned from the collaboration were discussed and acted upon.

Several districts commented on the tension between the academic priorities of their university partners and their own priorities. All

districts see these programs as tools for staffing hard-to-fill positions and schools. Some university partners saw these programs, in part, as opportunities to do research and gain new knowledge about teacher training. Conducting this research required some ability to control or measure school-level influences on the teacher training. Schools that met these research priorities may or may not have been schools with hard-to-fill positions.

Research has described a tension between program components and university incentives to conduct research and publish. Faculty in a program that provided extensive faculty-based mentoring of new teachers did not have time to conduct and publish the research needed to advance within the university (Paccione, McWhorter, & Richburg, 2000).

Social Support for Teacher Trainees

Mentoring and general support to teacher trainee participants in alternative education was remarked upon as an essential issue in most districts. This support came in the form of mentoring and cohort groups. The amount of district resources committed to mentoring varied, as did state requirements for mentoring. Districts, in general, did not release mentor teachers from their teaching assignments, and mentors received token remuneration for their time as well as recognition of their expertise. Nonetheless, one interviewee commented on the powerful revitalization that recognition as a master teacher and mentor, combined with time to reflect on their own teaching techniques, provided to mentors. A few interviewees commented on a general increase over the past few years in the amount of mentoring all new teachers received. Several districts provided the same mentoring to participants in alternative education programs that they did to all new teachers in the district¹.

Implications

Implications for Policymakers. Alternative teacher education shifts the responsibility for providing training, for at least some of the state's teacher workforce, from institutions of higher education to school districts. A central question is, Who should bear the cost of this training? Under the traditional system, the cost is borne by teacher trainees through tuition, by the state through the support of state institutions of higher education, and, to a lesser extent, the federal government and private providers of grants to students and institutions. Under the alternative education system, districts are bearing a greater proportion of the cost of teacher training. States should consider whether it is appropriate to help districts defer the cost of training teachers, especially if these programs succeed in providing stable, high-quality staff in low-performing schools.

Implications for Higher Education and Research. The variation in the methods districts used to select partners to provide educational

services suggests that they do not have or use objective measures of the quality of the educational services provided by their college partners. In other words, districts do not appear to have quality standards for the services they receive from universities. Instead they use more subjective measures, such as convenience or reputation. In some cases, they do not rely on universities for educational services. This selection of partners has important implications for colleges participating in alternative education programs with districts. To the extent that colleges want to support high-quality coursework in alternative education, assisting districts in identifying quality education services may be a research priority.

The processes used in the alternative education programs discussed in this report sharply break with traditional models of teacher education. These programs separate teacher education from undergraduate college education. The programs examined here vary in roles played by institutions of higher education. The level of collaboration between districts and colleges varied greatly. At one end of the spectrum, districts and teacher trainees passively received a college's services; at the other, districts selected instructors, course sequences, content, locations, and times of instruction. Between these two extremes there is a dynamic negotiation process between districts institutions of higher education and teacher trainees. This dynamic raises important research questions:

- What type of relationship and program produces the best results in terms of new teachers who can quickly learn their craft?
- How do colleges and districts use knowledge to promote and support optimum alternative teacher education programs?
- How are the lessons learned from these programs shared and implemented in other alternative education programs?

The emergence of alternative education practices can have important implications for the role of institutions of higher education in teacher training. Clearly, the system for training teachers is in flux. Institutions of higher education may profit from a better understanding of the changing roles they may play in teacher training.

Outputs: How Are Products of Alternative Education Used?

Retention and Quality

All the districts examined for this study reported high retention rates of teachers hired from alternative education programs. Interviewees said they believed that these new teachers were motivated and valued having a career in education. Many reported that program participants were past their early 20s, an age at which high attrition rates typically occur because young adults are often quite mobile (Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1988).

Many interviewees had concerns about the quality of teachers produced by alternative education. Most expressly stated they preferred to hire certified teachers from other sources before they used teachers from their alternative certification programs. All of the interviewees described programs that placed people directly into classrooms with little or often no training in classroom management or instruction, thus there is little expectation that the program participants will be skillful in these important areas. A common perception of the interviewees appeared to be that during the first months, teachers from these programs lacked the skills that teachers from traditional education programs possessed. That said, many also stated that as alternatively educated teachers gained experience, program participants' skills and quality increased to the point where they were on par with traditionally educated teachers. At the same time, all respondents valued the real life and content knowledge these new teachers brought to the classroom and district.

Implications

Implications for Policymakers. The reported high retention rates of alternatively educated teachers supports further use of this process to create more stable staffing for hard-to-staff schools. However, this method is only valuable if alternative education provides a source of teachers who remain in these schools. A majority of our respondents reported, not surprisingly, that during the first months to the first year on the job alternatively educated teachers have weak instructional skills and knowledge. Thus, if alternatively educated teachers leave these schools at the same rate as do traditional sources of teachers, this approach could actually increase the inequality of the instruction students receive.

A central issue in using alternative education as a tool for staffing hard-to-staff schools is changing the role of district administrators. Most of the interviewees saw their role as supporting a pool of qualified applicants, for a given subject, who could go to any school. They did not describe their role as meeting the staffing needs of a particular place. If districts are going to use alternative education as a tool to staff particular schools their role must include providing

services that are specific to these schools.

The quality of teachers produced by alternative education programs continues to be a question. Part of the problem in addressing this question is the great diversity in program processes. This diversity makes it difficult to find a combination of program components that are most likely to produce quality teachers.

There are also thorny issues around equity. Documenting the quality of alternatively certified teachers can be risky if these teachers are concentrated in schools that serve high-needs populations. This said, an ongoing focus on student learning will put pressure on districts to understand and control factors that improve student achievement. The alternative education programs examined in this report give districts more control over teacher training. It was not clear from these interviews that districts are trying to learn how to use this control to improve student learning.

Conclusions

District interviewees were unanimous in describing the primary purpose of alternative education programs as to help supply teachers in areas where there are shortages. However, interviewees also noted other pressures on and outcomes for these programs. In particular, there is constant pressure to do things less expensively. For example, although mentoring was acknowledged as a key component for these programs, financial support from districts often was not large. One district interviewee reported a significant cut in district support for mentoring when mentors had to resume their classroom duties. Another district used a portion of teacher trainees' salaries to pay mentor stipends.

Alternative education programs differ significantly in how teachers are trained. Although there is great innovation shown by districts and universities in these programs, there does not appear to be great efforts to learn from these programs. Part of this may be due to the fact that these programs distance teacher training from higher education, which could be a source of research on these programs. Districts have less of a mandate to create new knowledge and information.

At the same time, these partnerships do affect higher education. First, colleges and universities often learn from these partnerships and reform their teacher education programs. Often partnerships involve newer, for-profit universities and colleges. These institutions appear to have a customer service orientation toward meeting the districts' needs.

National interest in entering alternative teacher preparation programs is growing. Eighty percent of states report that, over the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of people

who want to become licensed through alternative certification systems (Feistritzer & Chester, 2001). This is true in most of the districts that participated in this research. Interviewees generally reported high numbers of applicants. However, it is not clear if alternative education will grow as a source of new teachers. These programs are currently limited to shortage areas. All of the interviewees concurred with conventional wisdom – that the nation will need to hire many new teachers in the future – but they also all reported shortages limited to certain subjects and places. Increasing shortages may increase the attraction of these programs.

It is possible that the move toward greater accountability could fuel growth in alternative education. Alternative education provides an opportunity for districts to learn about what it takes to produce effective new teachers. If districts are held accountable for teacher effectiveness, this may serve as pressure for districts to assume more control over teacher preparation. At this point, not all districts appear to view products of these programs as high quality, at least in their first few years in the classroom. Alternative education also appears to hold the promise of an effective tool to staff hard-to-staff schools. But none of the interviewed districts was explicitly using alternative education to accomplish this goal. Success in producing high-quality teachers or staffing hard-to-staff schools will increase the attractiveness of alternative education programs to districts.

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¹ New teachers in this context means teachers who are currently in or have recently completed teacher training and does not include experienced teachers who are new to the district