



## **SRI International Study Addresses Merits of Alternative Teacher Certification**

*Research Reveals Common Assumptions for and against*

*Certification Program Effectiveness Are Unfounded*

**MENLO PARK, Calif.– October 24, 2005** – According to a study recently released by SRI International<sup>1</sup>, the debate over the merits of alternative teacher certification programs has fueled incorrect assumptions. According to the SRI study, these assumptions fail to capture the diversity among participants' characteristics, or their experience in these alternative programs. Alternative certification refers to many different types of programs that enable people to enter the teacher profession and earn a license without completing a traditional four- or five-year university-based program.

Alternative teacher certification has proliferated during the past two decades as a favored state and federal policy lever to improve teacher quality and increase the supply of qualified teachers. To understand who participates and how these programs train teachers, SRI's Center for Education Policy (<http://www.sri.com/policy/cep>) examined seven alternative certification programs in a three-year national study. The research tested proponents' and opponents' assumptions about alternative certification against national data and data from the seven programs. The study was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a grant-making foundation.

"There has been limited agreement about what constitutes alternative teacher certification," said Daniel C. Humphrey, associate director of SRI's Center for Education Policy. "As such, programs across the country have varied in method and effectiveness. Programs should have consistent standards and commitment to creating highly skilled teachers. This study can help serve as a framework to assess how to provide them with the most valuable training possible."

The wide-ranging study determined that little evidence exists about what constitutes a good alternative certification program, despite the proliferation of such programs. In contrast to common assumptions, the study found no data to support a common belief that the majority of alternative certification teachers are talented career-changers, or that alternative certification attracts more males and minorities to teaching. Moreover, the study found that many alternative certification participants have a wealth of previous experience in classrooms, information which challenges the assumption that participants are unprepared individuals who do not necessarily have long-term commitments to the profession.

The study concludes that teacher development in alternative certification is a function of the interaction between the program as implemented, the school context in which participants are placed, and the participants' backgrounds and previous teaching experiences. The interaction influences career trajectory. As a result, the study questions the usefulness of comparing different alternative certification programs. To understand the proper mix of factors that produce effective teachers, the study suggests that a better unit of analysis would be a subgroup of individuals with similar backgrounds who receive similar support and teach in similar school contexts.

The study looked at the Teacher Education Institute in Elk Grove (CA) Unified School District; Milwaukee's Metropolitan Multicultural Teacher Education Program; North Carolina's NC TEACH; the New Jersey Provisional Teacher Program; the New York City Teaching Fellows Program; Teach for America; and the Texas Region XIII Education Service Center's Educator Certification Program. SRI researchers employed multiple data collection activities that included multiple interviews with key personnel and document reviews. Researchers also surveyed program participants, observed a sample of them participants teaching and interviewed them both at the beginning and end of their first year of teaching.

### **Characteristics of Alternative Certification Teachers**

The study identified several key demographic and background characteristics of alternative certification participants. They are best described as a diverse group of both young and older individuals, are more likely to be men than women and tend to reflect the racial composition of local labor markets. Some are highly educated individuals while others have significant experience working in schools and in their communities. Participants are likely to have recently been full-time students or employed in some education-related field, with only a small fraction of participants being mid-career switchers from the fields of mathematics and science.

### **Characteristics of Alternative Certification Programs**

The common description of alternative certification as a "fast track" into the classroom is misleading and unsupported by data, according to the study's authors. They found that although alternative certification programs often place participants into classrooms more quickly than traditional teacher preparation programs, the participants do not earn full certification any faster than participants in traditional programs. Researchers also found that there is as much variation in program design as in program implementation. For this reason, the program is experienced by every participant in a different way. The study also revealed that participants trained in rich, supportive environments have more opportunity to develop into strong professionals, while those in dysfunctional environments have few opportunities to learn on-the-job and are prone to develop negative attitudes about teaching.

### **Future Reports**

SRI researchers are preparing a second publication that delineates the characteristics of effective alternative certification programs. It will examine the characteristics of

alternative certification participants and program components, and describe the contributions of each.

**About SRI International**

Silicon Valley-based [SRI International](#) is one of the world's leading independent research and technology development organizations. Founded as Stanford Research Institute in 1946, SRI has been meeting the strategic needs of clients for almost 60 years. The nonprofit research institute performs contract research and development for government agencies, commercial businesses and private foundations. In addition to conducting contract R&D, SRI licenses its technologies, forms strategic partnerships and creates spin-off companies.

<sup>1</sup> Humphrey, D.C. & Wechsler, M.E. (2005, September). Insights into alternative certification: Initial findings from a national study. *Teachers College Record*, 9/2/05. Available at <http://www.tcrecord.org> (ID Number 12145).