

Fast-Track Alternative Certification Programs: Opportunities and Challenges for Participants and State Officials

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As regulators of public education in the U.S., state legislatures and departments of education control access to teaching licenses. For decades, state officials have controlled entry by setting standards for new teachers and granting licenses either to individuals who completed coursework meeting those standards or approved programs that embodied them (Cronin, 1983). Typically, a prospective teacher completed at least one full year of teacher education before attaining certification and assuming full responsibility for a classroom of students. Beginning in the mid-1980's, however, states introduced "alternative certification," another means of attaining licensure that required far less pre-service preparation.

State officials began to introduce alternative certification programs for two, sometimes related, reasons. First, they were responding to a projected teacher shortage that would require an estimated 2.2 million teachers to staff the nation's classrooms between 2000 and 2010 (Hussar, 1999), far more individuals than were preparing to teach in traditional teacher education programs. States sought to meet this anticipated staffing demand by recruiting large numbers of teaching candidates and licensing them quickly. Second, some state officials and members of the public were dissatisfied with the quality and extended length of teacher education programs sponsored by colleges and universities. Those critics contended that a streamlined pre-service program might better meet the needs of prospective teachers. Some officials linked these two reasons by arguing that a shorter, more efficient preparation program might serve to attract a larger pool of strong candidates for teaching.

Alternative routes to certification proved to be very attractive. By 2003, 46 states and the District of Columbia had instituted or approved at least one such program

(Feistritzer & Chester, 2003). Today, many states authorize local school districts, consortia of school districts, or non-profit organizations to sponsor those programs and award teaching licenses. There is tremendous variation among the alternative certification programs that operate today. Programs exist within a range of settings, and have diverse goals, requirements, and available resources. Feistritzer (1994) observes that the term “alternative certification” has been used to describe a range of programs, and every method of becoming licensed to teach, from emergency certification to “very sophisticated and well-designed programs” (p. 132). All of these programs, however, move prospective teachers into full-time paid teaching positions before they have completed the requirements for professional, or permanent, licensure (Hawley, 1990). Alternative certification, once seen as a “last resort” strategy to fill gaps in the teaching force and replace emergency certification, has evolved into a widely accepted model of recruiting, training, and certifying qualified new teachers (Feistritzer, 2003).

One of the most common of these approaches is the “fast-track” program, which delivers all pre-service preparation within one summer. Often these programs are intended to accommodate individuals from other careers who want to become teachers. The summer program includes abbreviated coursework (5-8 weeks) and a field experience that involves either student teaching or classroom observations. On completion, participants are provisionally licensed to assume full-time teaching positions. Candidates in fast-track programs, who typically begin their training in late June or early July, assume full responsibility for their own classes in September.

THE TENSION BETWEEN INCENTIVES AND QUALITY

The prospect of rapidly preparing many new teachers in fast-track programs presents a challenge for state education officials, who seek to maintain, or even enhance, the quality of the state's teaching force. First, they must develop a means to assure that these programs recruit and select strong candidates, and that those candidates match the fields of shortage. Arguably, the public interest would be well served by a coherent approach to identifying the state's staffing needs, recruiting a deep pool of strong candidates, and selecting the best of those candidates who intend to teach in the fields of shortage.

Second, these programs must offer teaching candidates the pre-service preparation and on-the-job support they need in order to succeed in the classroom. However, it is not readily apparent what would constitute sufficient preparation and support for fast-track candidates, many of whom are mid-career entrants to teaching, who bring valuable experience and expertise with them as they prepare to enter the classroom. There is little research to draw upon in making such decisions.

Much of the research and writing about alternative certification programs has been used to advance one side or the other of a combative debate about the policy's value. Often analysts have sought to assess and compare the effectiveness of sub-groups of teachers who have completed either alternative or traditional programs. In such comparisons, one (or more) of four measures is used to judge the quality of a teacher's work: ratings by observers; teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy; and student test scores; and measures of teachers' subject matter knowledge (Humphrey, Wechsler, Bosetti, Wayne, & Adelman, 2002). However, for a variety of methodological and ideological

reasons, this research has been inconclusive, and controversy persists about which group of teachers are more effective.

Another line of research has focused on the programs, themselves—evaluating their success in reaching recruitment goals (Bliss, 1990; Fowler, 2003; Rice & Brent, 2002; Stoddart, 1990) examining the contexts in which those programs operate (Bliss, 1990; Natriello & Zumwalt, 1993; Stoddart, 1990; Zumwalt, 1991); and elucidating differences and similarities among various program designs (Dill, 1994; Stafford & Barrow, 1994).

For the most part, researchers have studied alternative certification programs from the outside (by examining state policies or program documents) or from a distance (by analyzing large data sets that include information about teachers' preparation and their students' standardized tests scores). In fact, with the exception of one recent study of the New York City Teaching Fellows Program (Buice, 2003), research about alternative certification has paid little systematic attention to participants' views of the programs.

We began this research convinced that there is much to be learned from studying alternative certification programs at close range. By examining and comparing the participants' responses to the incentives and components offered by a variety of pre-service programs, it is possible to learn a great deal about the nature and the potential advantages and disadvantages of fast-track programs. It is also informative to consider these programs within their state context, for there are notable differences in how states manage their fast-track programs, some being much more centrally controlled than others. The three states in this study—Connecticut, Louisiana, and Massachusetts—constitute an informative group, because each exercises a different degree of control over its programs.

Therefore, we have grounded this paper in the perspectives of participants from 11 alternative certification programs located in 3 states. We have addressed the following questions:

- What are the incentives for participants to enroll in fast-track programs?
- What are the components of these programs and how are they organized?
- What expectations do the participants have of the programs and how well, in their view, do the programs meet those expectations?
- What role does the state play in offering, developing, or monitoring these programs?

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

Site Sample

So that we could consider participants' responses to a range of fast-track programs, we chose to study 11 sites in 3 states. Three sites are located in Connecticut, including the original site of the state's Alternative Route to Certification (ARC) and two expansion sites opened in 2002. We studied three sites in Louisiana that were part of Louisiana's Practitioner Teacher Program—one run by a university, one by a local district, and one by a partnership between a local district and a non-profit organization. We also include five sites from the Massachusetts Institute for New Teachers (MINT); two are university-run and three are managed by a non-profit organization. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Alternative Certification Program Sites in the Sample

State	Sites (Names are pseudonyms)	Sponsor	Areas of Certification Offered	Number of Participants
Connecticut	Hansbury	State Department of Higher Education	English (MS and HS); Math (MS and HS); Social Studies (MS and HS); Science (MS); Biology (HS); Chemistry (HS); Physics (HS); Art, Music, K-12 Language	168
	Blainesville		English (MS and HS); Math (MS); Science (HS); Art (K-12)	72
	Northborough		K-12 Language; K-12 Bilingual Ed; Biology (HS); Math (HS)	55
Massachusetts	Bay City	National non - profit organization	English; Math; Science; Social Studies; Business; Foreign Language; ESL; (all certification in grades 5-12) *Special education in addition to content certification	70
	Huntsville		Same as Bay City	15
	Westview		Same as Bay City	26
	Lyceum	State University	Science; Math; Social Studies (all certification in grades 5-12)	20
	Greyson	Private College	English; Math; Science; Social Studies; Foreign Language (all certification in grades 5-12)	29
Louisiana	Ogletree	Private University	Math (HS); Science (HS); Special Education	8
	Red River	National non-profit organization	Elem (4-8); Elem Special Education; English (HS); Math (HS); Science (HS); Foreign Language (HS); Social Studies (HS)	38
	Plumville	Rural parish (district)	Special Education	6

Respondent sample

The respondent sample includes program directors, selected faculty members, and 4-8 participants at each site, depending on the size of the programs. At some program sites, we selected program participants from a list of volunteers. At others, respondents were solicited for interviews by program directors. Where possible, we sought variation in respondents' certification area, gender, race/ethnicity, and career level at entry (first-career or mid-career). We also included representatives of program partnerships, such as

school district officials or non-profit administrators, where applicable. We assured participants confidentiality.

Data Collection

Interviews

In summer 2002, we conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews ranging from one to two hours with administrators, faculty, and participants at each site. We used semi-structured interview protocols to gather comparable data across sites, but tailored the protocols to the particular program. In all, we conducted interviews with 11 program administrators (many of whom served as primary faculty members), 7 additional faculty members, and 71 participants across the 11 programs. In the spring and summer of 2003, we conducted 65 thirty to forty-minute follow-up interviews with participants.¹ These follow-up interviews—some conducted in person and some by telephone—focused on the candidates' views of the programs from the perspective of their experience teaching. How did they assess the programs some months later? In what ways did they feel most and least prepared to teach? All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Document Analysis

For each of the sites in the sample, we reviewed the relevant state legislation to learn about the program's origins, the state's goals, and the regulations for program design. We studied other documents such as program descriptions, selection criteria and processes, and federal grant applications in order to further understand how each program works. We read course syllabi and state teaching standards in order to understand the

¹ We attempted to interview all of the participants we had originally interviewed, but some of them did not respond to our requests for follow-up interviews. In several instances, the contact information was incorrect.

design of program components such as coursework, clinical experiences, and follow-up support. Where available, we reviewed program evaluation documents.

Data Analysis

After each interview, we completed narrative summaries for each respondent, and from those, we identified themes that emerged across interviews, seeking to identify patterns of responses across individuals, sites, and states. We also created matrices to summarize data and facilitate cross-case comparisons. We completed case analyses to describe each site's program elements in design and implementation.

OVERVIEW OF THREE STATES' PROGRAMS

In deciding how to exercise their responsibilities for ensuring teacher quality in the context of fast-track programs, state officials must decide how much control they should retain and how much they should delegate to program sites and local districts. Which decisions are best made by state officials, and what level of decentralization is both warranted and wise in sponsoring fast-track programs? We chose the three states in this study not only because they sponsor a number of fast-track programs, but also because each exercises a different level of control and regulation in the design and delivery of its program.

These states fall at three points on a continuum ranging from centralized to decentralized management. For example, Connecticut is highly centralized in its approach to recruiting and selecting participants in the ARC program, developing and delivering the training programs, and conducting final licensing assessments. In 2002, when Connecticut expanded beyond its original site and opened two new urban programs, state officials relied on a franchise model of expansion, closely controlling the

new programs to ensure that they would replicate the strengths of the original. Louisiana, on the other hand, takes a decentralized approach to its fast-track programs, setting broad parameters and authorizing all vendors whose proposals meet the regulations. Louisiana program sites are responsible for all aspects of their program: recruiting and selecting candidates, designing and conducting training, and assessing those who complete the program. Massachusetts stands between these two, retaining central control over recruitment and selection, while delegating many aspects of program design and delivery to satellite sites and vendors.

In general, organizations deliberately centralize program implementation in order to maintain consistent standards; to achieve predictable outcomes across program sites; to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale; and to draw upon a greater pool of knowledge, expertise, and resources. Program implementation is deliberately decentralized in order to respond to local needs, priorities, and circumstances; to move authority closer to the work to be done so that appropriate adjustments can be made; and to encourage local initiative and draw upon multiple sources of capacity and expertise. Mintzberg (1979) observes that, in reality, very few programs are fully centralized or fully decentralized: “[C]entralization and decentralization should not be treated as absolutes, but rather as two ends of a continuum” (p. 185). He presents a third management option, “selective decentralization,” an arrangement in which “power over different kinds of decisions rests in different places in the organization” (p. 187). Thus a state might retain control over some aspects of its fast-track alternative certification program while delegating others.

Interviews with participants, faculty members, and directors of these programs provide insight into what the states can and cannot regulate, the tradeoffs they face in

deciding whether to delegate particular elements to the control of local institutions, and most importantly, the ways in which the centralized and decentralized elements of the programs worked, according to participants, in preparing them to teach.

A Preview of Findings

The alternative certification programs we studied included a series of elements from recruitment and selection of candidates to job placement, summer coursework and a field-based practicum, fall follow-up support, and assessment. In this paper, we draw primarily on data from the first round of interviews and focus on the three components that mattered most to participants during their participation in the abbreviated summer programs: job placement, coursework, and field-based practica.

We found that the participants in fast-track programs were attracted by the fact that training was brief and inexpensive, and by the incentive of rapid entry to a paid teaching position. Despite their focus on efficiency, these candidates still expected programs to provide them with focused preparation in pedagogy, including generic teaching strategies, subject-specific methods of instruction, and a useful experience practice teaching in the field. Accounts from participants suggested that some sites had achieved greater success than others in providing what candidates needed. The extent to which a state centralized or decentralized its approach to managing particular components of these programs influenced the capacity of sites to deliver various program elements and to serve candidates' needs well.

The following discussion first considers the incentives that fast-track programs offer candidates. It then moves on to explain the importance of timely job placement as a prerequisite to meaningful preparation. Next we examine the programs, themselves, focusing on coursework (both generic and subject-specific) and on field-based practica.

We return then to the role of the states in sponsoring fast-track programs, examining the tensions and tradeoffs of centralized and decentralized program management. Finally, we consider the ongoing challenge of providing sustained support to fast-track teachers in their schools.

SIMILAR INCENTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS

There is remarkable consistency across the responses of candidates from programs in the three states about the appeal of these fast-track programs. Participants said that they were attracted, first and foremost, by the prospect of rapid training and entry to a paid teaching position—what one MINT respondent called the “quick launch.” For all candidates, but especially for those entering teaching at mid-career, any time required for training meant lost income. From this perspective, the faster the transition from a prior workplace to a new classroom, the better. A Louisiana participant explained that alternative certification was attractive because “I’d immediately get a salary....I wanted to be a teacher, and there’s no way that I could leave a job, and go to making nothing while I obtained credentials.” Another Louisiana respondent said that he did not have the “luxury” of being able to take a year for full-time coursework. “I wouldn’t [be in a position] to do that, and I don’t think a lot of people are.” Some said that even the unpaid summer stint, necessary to complete the program, was a financial burden that they carefully weighed before enrolling. One participant in Connecticut’s ARC program explained that although the \$3,000 tuition sounds inexpensive, “the cost on paper doesn’t reflect the actual cost. The cost was far greater than my household was able to economically sustain for three months. And I’m still feeling the repercussions of having made the sacrifice. We’re about three months behind in bills and living expenses.”

Also, many respondents had doubts about the value of traditional teacher education courses, which more than one called “Mickey Mouse.” Some mid-career participants said they had been reluctant to participate in traditional teacher certification programs with other students who had no prior professional experience. A former financial analyst said she chose Connecticut’s program over a more traditional path in part because she felt that she would be “surrounded by a level of maturity” that would not exist if her classmates were “college age kids, [with] maybe a couple of years' experience,” who would not have “the perspective that mature professionals can have.” A mid-career entrant in Louisiana said she chose her program because she was impressed by the polished presentation given at the informational event she attended: “I felt respect for [the presenter], and I knew that I could learn from these people. I didn’t feel like it was some kind of a wishy-washy operation.” She, like other participants we interviewed, was attracted by the chance to sidestep what she thought might be a costly, frustrating waste of her time.

Table 2: Tuition Comparisons in the Three States' Traditional and Fast-track Programs

State	Public University Tuition	Private University Tuition	Range of Cost of Alternative Certification Programs (in sample)	Range of Tuition Saved (Costs of Tuition at University Minus Costs of Alternative Certification Program Tuition)
MA	\$7,000 (resident graduate student tuition for one year of study at University of Massachusetts)	\$26,700 (graduate student tuition for one year of study at Clark University) ²	\$2500 (fully subsidized by state)	\$4,500 - \$25,200 (without state subsidy) \$7,000-\$26,700 (with state \$2500 tuition subsidy)
CT	\$3,840 (resident graduate student tuition, fall 2003 semester at UConn) \$7,680 (tuition for one year) ³	\$20,268 (resident graduate student tuition for one year of study at Sacred Heart University) ⁴	\$3,000 (tuition subsidies available at two urban districts for \$1,000) \$3,000 - \$2,000	\$2,968 - \$17,268 (without tuition subsidy, based on Central CT tuition) \$3,968 - \$18,268 (with \$1,000 tuition subsidy)
LA	\$1,776 (resident graduate student tuition, full time, spring semester 2003 at LSU) \$3,552 (tuition, 2 semesters) ⁵	\$30,690 (graduate student tuition for one year of attendance at Tulane University) ⁶	\$500-\$1700	\$1,852 - \$28,990

² This figure is based on one year of tuition, 2003-2004 at Clark University, Worcester, available: www.clarku.edu/offices/business/tuition.shtml

³ These figures are based on one year of resident (in-state) graduate tuition at the University of Connecticut, reported for fall 2003, available: <http://www.grad.uconn.edu/fees.html>

⁴ This figure is based on one year of resident graduate tuition at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, available: <http://www.sacredheart.edu/admissions/financialaid/cost/>

⁵ These figures are based on one year of resident graduate level-tuition at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, reported for spring 2003, available: www.bgtplan.lsu.edu/fees/02-03/grad

⁶ These figures are based on one year of tuition for graduate students at Tulane University, New Orleans, 2003-2004, available: www.tulane.edu/~finaid/2004gradcoa.shtml

In addition to avoiding the opportunity costs of a year-long teacher education program—lost income, wasted time—there were solid financial incentives for candidates to choose fast-track programs. As Table 2 shows, candidates’ tuition costs in fast-track programs were substantially lower than in traditional, year-long programs at public or private universities. For example, in Massachusetts, tuition costs for one year of study ranged from approximately \$7,000 at a public university to approximately \$26,700 at a private university. Massachusetts fully subsidized MINT candidates’ tuition costs of \$2500. Thus, MINT participants could expect to save approximately \$7,000 to \$26,000 in tuition costs. Participants in Connecticut’s ARC program paid \$3000, although those who enrolled at one of ARC’s two urban sites could receive a \$1,000 tuition reduction by committing to teach in that urban district for two years. Connecticut’s fast-track candidates who received the subsidy could expect to pay approximately \$3000 to \$17,000 less for their license than they would pay at a university. Louisiana candidates, who might pay approximately \$3,500 for public and \$30,600 for private university tuition, would spend between \$500 and \$1700 for fast-track preparation, thus saving approximately \$3,000 to \$29,000. In each case, therefore, candidates could expect to save both substantial time (6-10 months) and money over what a traditional program would require, as well as avoiding the opportunity costs of lost income.

Although respondents occasionally said that they had enrolled in their fast-track program simply because it provided “a ticket” to the classroom, most had hoped for much more. Briefly, they wanted targeted coursework in generic and subject-specific pedagogy, a well-supervised practicum, and follow-up support once they began teaching. But first, they hoped for assistance in finding a job so that they could prepare for the fall with a

particular subject, grade level, district and school setting, and community context in mind.

JOB PLACEMENT

For candidates to get as much value as possible from fast-track preparation programs, job placement is critical. In fact, many participants we interviewed had chosen their program primarily because it promised rapid transition to new employment.⁷ If candidates know what jobs they will have before they begin the program, their preparation can be deliberate and focused on their new assignment. However, as experiences at these sites demonstrate, hiring is a local matter often following a timetable that is out of sync with these candidates' needs.

In 2002, Connecticut offered all ARC candidates assistance in finding jobs, although what the state meant by "assistance" was loosely defined. As mentioned above, at the two urban sites, candidates who committed to teach in one of those districts would enjoy a tuition reduction of \$1000. However, the promised jobs did not materialize and very late in the summer the state had to release the candidates who did not yet have jobs in the district as "free agents" to go find their own positions. One participant expressed frustration at the lack of jobs in the urban district where he had expected to teach:

So here I am. I've got all this [experience]. Use me.... I don't know how much money they've put into each one of us. It must be an extraordinary amount of money. All the commitment they made of personnel, time, resources.... Here I am. There's got to be a school out there that needs people. I know there are kids that need guidance and need mentors. Here we are.... I don't want to just wait around and do nothing. I'm ready to go now. I don't want to be waiting for months and months and say, "Oh, well, we don't have any jobs for you." Because it seems ridiculous to me after all this time and effort. They say, "We need you. There's a shortage." Well, here I am.

⁷ A few participants in these fast track programs were already teaching, uncertified, when they enrolled in the program. They enrolled not for access to teaching positions, but to obtain certification and ensure their continued employment after the certification regulations specified in No Child Left Behind go into effect.

Although this participant felt committed to the urban district and wanted to teach there, he could not afford to wait for the district hiring process: “If something comes up nearby, I’ll just -- I’ll go for that, and tell [the district], this has come up. If you don’t have anything, I need to take this, because I do have to make a living. I can be as altruistic as I want, as idealistic, but I do have to make an income doing this.”

One explanation for the lack of jobs was that deep budget cuts in 2002 led to an unexpected teacher surplus rather than the anticipated teacher shortage. However, there are more fundamental problems with a state’s assurance of job placement, particularly in urban districts where hiring typically happens in July and August because of financial uncertainties, unresponsive and inefficient personnel offices, and seniority-based transfer language in union contracts that delays announced openings (Levin, 2003). In 1998, the first year of the MINT program, Massachusetts had promised all candidates jobs, but in the end, local districts would not guarantee jobs (although some offered interviews) and candidates had to find their own positions. This caused considerable dissatisfaction with the program (Liu, Johnson, & Peske, 2003). By 2002, Massachusetts was making no offers of formal assistance. Even though the program was ostensibly geared to staffing urban classrooms, many candidates who had wanted jobs in urban districts were not able to secure positions in a timely way, and decided to accept earlier offers from suburban districts. One candidate said she received mixed messages from the Department of Education about what kind of job she should be looking for. Though she knew that the MINT program targeted inner-city schools, she wanted to apply for a job in a relatively affluent community, and called a program official to consult.

I said, ‘What do I do? There’s a job posting, I want to apply for it, but it’s not in [an urban district].’ And they basically said, ‘We can’t guarantee you in a position. Your job is to go get a job. And, if [the urban district] hasn’t posted their job postings yet, but another school has, and you want to apply for a job, we can’t stop you from doing that. It’s a public school. We’re very concerned that you stay with a public school. We would prefer that you work for [the urban district], but the job postings aren’t there so, do what you’ve got to do.’

Another MINT candidate explained that he had entered the program with the sincere hope of securing a job in an urban school, but was frustrated in his attempts to find one: “I mean, I applied to a lot of high need areas, anything that advertised.” He also applied for jobs in suburban districts near his home. When the summer was nearly over, and he still had not heard from the urban district where he most wanted to teach, he took a job in a more affluent suburb. “I wasn’t about to say, ‘Thanks anyway... This is a perfect opportunity for me, but probably I’ll be able to get something from (the urban district) in a month, so thanks anyway.’ I wasn’t ready to do that.” The experiences of candidates in Connecticut and Massachusetts made it clear that, whatever assurances state officials might want to make, hiring is ultimately a local matter.

Rather than offering any state-level promises of job placement, Louisiana called for individual programs to form partnerships with school districts and to place participants in jobs. Although the state cleared the way for districts to hire yet uncertified teachers during the spring hiring cycle, the responsibility for identifying areas of need and recruiting prospective teachers for positions lay solely with the program providers and the cooperating school districts. A state document describing the alternative certification program concedes, “Employment decisions remain a local control issue.”

The degree of assistance in job placement offered by Louisiana programs varied greatly from site to site. One small Louisiana program, sponsored by a local district and dedicated to preparing special education teachers, guaranteed jobs for its 6 candidates.

The director carefully vetted district schools before choosing two that she thought would provide supportive environments for participants. Summer preparation in that program was grounded in local district initiatives, such as technology training and literacy, and in the local school cultures. Candidates appreciated the opportunity to prepare for work in a specific school and classroom with their future colleagues. One participant in that program said, “Unlike some teachers that maybe just get a key at the beginning of the year and get thrown into a class, I had a lot of practical experience this summer dealing with the kids. I actually got to do some student teaching in the school during summer school, so I knew all the teachers I was going to work with before the first day.” Another participant in the same program highlighted the importance of the connection between summer school and her full-time assignment in the same district and school: “I think coming here [for the clinical part], doing observations, and knowing the kids that you’re going to deal with, and knowing the population you’re going to deal with is really very good preparation.”

A second Louisiana program managed by a non-profit organization found jobs for all 38 of its candidates in a large urban district with which it partnered, but this did not occur until the end of the summer, and only after lengthy negotiations with local district administrators and principals. The program director commented, “Placement was sort of a struggle this year in terms of finding people spots.” Finding math and science slots went “pretty fast,” but the district had very few openings in English or Social Studies.

A third Louisiana program, located at a university site, maintains a nominal partnership with a local district, but the partnership meant little in terms of substantive collaboration. While candidates were guaranteed jobs, the university did not participate in their placement. In reality, candidates were left to fend for themselves in the local district.

As one participant put it, there's "the way it's supposed to work versus the way it actually is." When she realized that the program was not going to help her find a job, she took it upon herself to look for one. "I basically went every day and I, you know, flooded the principals with my resume. And I interviewed at a couple of different schools....And I was hired for biology, but (the principal) actually needed a social studies teacher, so that's how I ended up teaching biology and social studies." While teaching two different subjects was not what she had hoped for, by the time she was hired in late August, she felt lucky to have found a job at all. Looking back she says, "I wish that the program would have placed me in a place that I could have learned in the beginning."

It is important to understand the practical implications of these late job assignments for the candidates, given the uncertainty about what they will teach. In Massachusetts, for example, candidates who had passed licensing tests in two fields might eventually take a job in either. But if they had no job by July—and few candidates did—they had to participate in their courses and field placements in a far more generic manner than they might otherwise, not knowing what they were preparing to do. Would they eventually find a position in an urban, suburban, or rural district? a high school or junior high school? teaching math or science? Consider, for example, one MINT participant who was training for certification in French, but realized that finding a job might require a more open-minded approach. "So I passed the test for French, but I may end up—I'm also looking at possibly business, accounting. And I could also teach math, or some sciences." As he participated in the summer training, he had to keep all of those options in mind. Ironically, his summer student teaching placement was in Health, one subject he knew he would not be teaching.

By contrast, candidates who entered the programs knowing what, where, and who they would teach could dedicate their attention and limited training time preparing for their fall placement. They could spend the summer undistracted by the demands of job hunting. Candidates still unemployed by early August—and there were many—described the stress of simultaneous coursework and job hunting, and they reported becoming increasingly willing to take any job that they were offered. Therefore, although timely job placement establishes conditions that enhance the value of summer training for participants, none of the three states and only one of the local programs was able to provide it. According to respondents, this compromised the value of the other components of the program. As participants' experience at these sites demonstrate, hiring is a local matter and the state cannot assure jobs for program candidates.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMS

The fast-track programs that we studied were much alike in structure, which is not surprising, given the similarities in the policies (RFPs and state regulations) that established the program guidelines. The programs' central components involved participants in both coursework and a field-based experience, which was either student teaching or observing in summer school classrooms. The field placement typically occurred in the morning, the coursework and workshops in the afternoon. Each program had a site director, who ran the training day to day, and often served as the primary faculty member. Most programs had additional faculty members who took responsibility for particular classes or workshops.

It must be emphasized that, overall, respondents reported great satisfaction with the programs, often commenting that the compressed schedule necessarily limited what

might be offered. Repeatedly, respondents explained that they had come to the program with realistic expectations, never thinking that every activity would directly relate to their work, that all their questions would be answered or all their needs met. One participant said that he had been “looking to hit 60%” in terms of his expectations, and was satisfied with what he experienced. Another participant explained, “I don’t know that you can provide a perfect situation in the summer, but I would rather have had this than nothing.....At least I’ll get the accelerated, condensed version.” These individuals, like the large majority of respondents in this study, were entering teaching at mid-career, bringing with them work and life experience that they expected would compensate for whatever gaps might exist in their condensed training.

Many participants believed that much of their learning would come on-the-job while they were teaching, rather than during the course of the program. A participant in a Louisiana program said, “And I think teaching’s like fishing. You can read about fishing all you want, but until you fish, you’re not going to be very good at it.” Nonetheless, they were far from indifferent about the substance of the programs, particularly as they realized what it might mean to become responsible for a classroom within weeks.

Coursework

Much of the debate about alternative certification centers on the number and kind of courses that prospective teachers are required to take. In the last twenty years, various organizations have recommended more rigorous standards for teacher preparation, and many states have expanded the number of pre-service courses required for a teaching license (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1999). However, with the rise of alternative certification, some critics of traditional teacher education have called into question the need, not only for expanded pedagogical training, but for special teacher training of any

kind. (<http://www.abcte.org/about.html#vision>). Whatever the ideal might be, state officials who authorize or sponsor alternative certification programs today must decide what coursework is minimally required to ensure that a new teacher can succeed in September.

Coursework in generic pedagogy

Each program site in our study offered regular sessions (4-5 afternoons each week) dealing with a range of generic pedagogical issues, e.g., how to maintain order in the classroom, how to use instructional time effectively, how to develop and use assessments, how to write lesson plans, how to develop an instructional unit, or how to conduct group work. At each site, the cohort group of candidates, which ranged in size from 6 to 168, met for these sessions together or in small groups.

For example, Connecticut sponsored a lecture series for all ARC participants dealing with general issues of pedagogy, covering topics specified by the state regulations for the ARC program. The state program director had chosen a cadre of consultants to deliver those lectures, and the same consultants presented the same material at all three program sites. Consultants delivered lectures on topics such as “brain research and how students think,” “cooperative learning,” and “lesson and unit design.” ARC also offered sessions that focused on broader issues, such as sociological foundations of education, multicultural education, and gender equality in education.

Coursework in generic pedagogy differed much more from site to site in Massachusetts and Louisiana, usually in response to variation among program administrators and faculty members’ expertise and beliefs about what was important. For example, the director of one university-based program in Massachusetts, a former principal with considerable experience in teacher supervision, built this part of the

curriculum around *The Skillful Teacher*, by Jonathan Saphier and Robert Gower (1997), an analysis of instructional skills that teachers in all settings must develop and refine. Candidates repeatedly said that this approach was worthwhile, and they anticipated being able to use what they learned in that component of the program in any job that they might take. At another university-based program in Massachusetts, the director specialized in strategies for teaching to different learning styles, with particular attention to the needs of special education students. Candidates at this site also valued what they learned about generic instructional issues in this component, although the content and approach differed markedly from what was presented at any other MINT site.

Except for one site in our sample, which focused exclusively on special education, the programs offered preparation in several content areas, yet most sites had fewer faculty members than certification areas offered. Consequently, most of the coursework addressed generic issues of pedagogy (e.g., how to maintain discipline or organize group work among students) rather than subject-specific pedagogy (e.g., how to conduct experiments in chemistry or how to teach ratios in mathematics). Participants praised these sessions on generic issues of pedagogy when they were presented by knowledgeable and experienced faculty or provided the prospective teachers with concrete tools and resources.

Coursework in content-specific pedagogy

In addition to learning generic teaching skills, program participants also said that they needed to learn how to teach in their content areas. Since 1987 when Lee Shulman (Shulman, 1987) first laid out the case for “pedagogical content knowledge,” most education scholars and teacher educators have thought that a new teacher must not only know a subject—such as mathematics—but also understand how to teach topics in that

subject—such as ratios—to a wide array of students. Scholarship about pedagogical content knowledge has advanced considerably [for example, see (Lampert, 2001) (Ball, Lubienski, & Mewborn, 2001)]. Critics of this work have dismissed the need for any such training, contending that prospective teachers need only have a solid grounding in a content area, for example, by having majored in it as undergraduates or having extensive professional experience relevant to the content area (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999).

In fact, many of the teaching candidates interviewed for this study had majored in the subject they planned to teach and often their previous careers had required them to regularly use the content (e.g., mathematics majors in the software industry or research biologists in the pharmaceutical industry). Despite such knowledge and experience, these candidates recognized the need to develop additional skills in teaching their subject. Knowing a great deal about cell biology did not lead automatically to understanding how to organize and teach a lab for students. Experience as a journalist did not translate neatly into developing a writing program for middle school students.

Despite the value that candidates saw in it, the programs we studied devoted far less time and attention to subject-specific pedagogy than to generic teaching strategies. There were, however, notable differences from state to state. The Massachusetts MINT sites offered, at most, one session in content-specific pedagogy per week, often addressing two or more content areas in one session, e.g., biology, chemistry, and physics; history and English. In the extreme, participants in the MINT sites that were operated by a non-profit organization had only one full day of subject-specific workshops and occasional lessons on subject-specific pedagogy during afternoon sessions; many respondents saw this as inadequate and minimally useful. One MINT candidate

commented that the lack of subject matter preparation was the biggest hole in the summer program:

I think that might be what is lacking for this program. There wasn't like, 'You are going to be an eighth grade science teacher. Let's get you ready to be an eighth grade science teacher. How can we get you ready to be an eighth grade science teacher?' And this was very general. This is what all teachers should know. This is what, this is good ways to manage your classrooms. Which is all good information, especially for people who are wary about that, but I wanted to know how I could be the best eighth grade science teacher, and I don't think that this program specifically helped me be that. Especially not addressing science at all, really, except for a few days on the content days.

She, like many others in programs that trained candidates for many subjects, expressed a wish that the training had been more specialized.

By contrast, Connecticut offered regular daily afternoon classes about how to teach in the content areas, which were taught by master teachers in each subject area for which the program offered a teaching license. For example, the largest site offered preparation in how to teach English, math, social studies, middle school science, biology, chemistry, physics, art, music, and K-12 language, with separate methods classes for each licensure area. Candidates offered high praise for the expertise of the master teachers and the content provided in these courses. One ARC participant said that, while he enjoyed the core lectures, he most valued the methods classes in English.

I thought that both of the methods instructors we had were excellent. They were very knowledgeable, very skillful people.... That was what seemed like the real preparation to me. While useful, much of the stuff in the general course, in the core courses, was ratified common sense. There wasn't a whole lot there that was surprising, to me anyway. The methods classes were an opportunity to really examine in detail what it is you're going to be teaching. It was really starting to be about teaching English, rather than teaching. And as useful as pedagogy might be, it was that much more useful to really start dealing with it as English.

In Louisiana, the three sites we studied had very different offerings in subject-specific pedagogy. The program that focused exclusively on preparing special education

teachers was organized entirely around the needs of teachers in this field. The national non-profit organization, responsible for the largest of the three Louisiana programs, offered prospective teachers no separate training in the content areas. The third Louisiana site offered content-specific training to candidates in special education, and combined the training for the one candidate in science certification with training for the math teachers. The candidate found that very frustrating: “I love Science. I’ve always loved Science, but I’m not comfortable with Math. And it’s a totally different entity.”

There were several explanations for these programs’ general lack of attention to subject-specific pedagogy. As noted above, opinions differ about whether such training is necessary, or even worthwhile, particularly if effective teaching is seen to depend more on innate ability than skills that are learned and practiced. However, even program providers who thought that additional preparation in the content areas would have been valuable often were unable to provide it because of the relatively small size of the cohorts at each site and the limited number of faculty each program could support financially. Program sites in Massachusetts served cohorts of 15-70 participants in 4-6 content areas. Program directors simply did not have the resources to staff regular classes in content-based pedagogy for each subject.

Field-based practica

Each of the states required some form of field-based experience—student teaching in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and student teaching or classroom observations in Louisiana. All who were involved in these programs—state officials, program directors, faculty, and participants—recognized the value of providing a practice teaching experience that would offer the prospective teacher a realistic experience in a setting resembling a regular school.

For several reasons this was rarely possible to ensure. First, the only public school classes in session while fast-track programs were underway were conducted in summer school, which typically offered small classes in a limited number of subjects for a short period of time each day. Sometimes the curriculum consisted of enrichment courses not even taught during the regular school year. In other instances, the summer schools offered remedial classes in state-tested subject areas. Also, the summer school setting rarely reflected the intensity and demands of the regular school year—a tight schedule, a crowded lunchroom, competing demands for computer space. Moreover, summer school classes were often taught by individuals seeking extra income, not master teachers who were expert mentors. Sometimes they were taught by teachers working outside their field (e.g., a home economics teacher assigned to teach an English class).

Massachusetts spells out the requirements for a “classroom teaching experience” for MINT candidates. It is to allow candidates to have “significant responsibility for student achievement in a classroom that replicates, as much as possible, the full-time teaching responsibilities the candidates will have in the fall.” However, participants in our sample reported that student teaching placements often did not match the subject areas and grade levels of their content area. Sometimes this occurred because program directors chose to assign a participant to a strong teacher and experienced mentor, even if she taught in a different content area. It was not unusual for a prospective high school history teacher to fulfill her student teaching requirement in a middle school language arts class. For example, of the seven candidates we interviewed at one MINT site, only three were student teaching in their subject areas (two in English, one in Math). Four of the seven were placed in summer school classrooms that did not match their certification areas: two French certification candidates taught English and health, respectively; a

business and elementary education candidate taught high school American history, and a candidate for middle school certification taught high school English.

In commenting on these out-of-field assignments, candidates frequently said they valued advice and feedback from any expert teacher, whatever his or her content area. Some sanguinely accepted mismatched assignments, although others were openly frustrated. One MINT candidate commented:

They should be placing people in areas that they want to teach in for the summer. And if they can't do that, then they should be completely up front with that. Because you get the letter saying you're going to teach summer school. Well, you're assuming, I'm going to be teaching what I'm teaching... But there are some people who are high school science teachers teaching fifth grade math.

Developing a workable student teaching experience for each program participant required close initial planning and ongoing tending by program directors. Connecticut participants completed four weeks of student teaching under the supervision of a “cooperating teacher” in a public school. At the original ARC site, the state administrators had built strong relationships over sixteen years with local districts and the cooperating teachers. Thus, for the most part, ARC participants at the original site taught classes that matched their fields of certification. However, at the new sites, the directors scrambled to establish new relationships with summer schools and to arrange appropriate student teaching placements with cooperating teachers. One director explained, “[W]e'd like it to be close to the classroom experience. It's not always that easy to do in summer school.” One ARC participant in a new site characterized the student teaching placements that he and his peers had as “an embarrassing situation;” some mentors, themselves, were not even licensed.

In Louisiana, the state with the least centralized approach to the development and regulation of programs, there was the greatest variation from site to site in how the field-

based component was implemented. The state specified only that “all teachers will participate in field-based experiences in school settings” while completing the summer courses. At one site, participants did student teaching, much like their counterparts in Connecticut and Massachusetts. At a second site, participants completed structured observations in the schools where they would be teaching in the fall. At a third site, participants independently arranged and completed observations in whatever summer school classrooms that they could get access to, which often meant observing outside of their area of license.

Within the context of a summer program, it is difficult to provide sufficient practical experience for fast-track participants. The Massachusetts and Connecticut requirements for appropriate and relevant placements were difficult for program providers to meet, but not because they were reluctant to comply. Rather, the realities of summer school worked against them—the small number of course offerings and classes, the half-day sessions and informal atmosphere, as well as the likelihood that summer school teachers tended to be uninterested in and unprepared for mentoring new teachers. From the participants’ perspectives, the programs that best met their needs were those that had well-established relationships with local school districts and their summer schools, where cooperating teachers anticipated their arrival and the schools were set up to receive them. In Connecticut’s centralized ARC program, directors at the new sites found it difficult to achieve the quality of placements and relationships that had been established over time between the original site and local school districts. Even in decentralized arrangements, in which local program sponsors and school officials are supposed to work together to coordinate student teaching placements, developing strong partnerships takes time and sustained effort.

Massachusetts delegated responsibility for identifying and nurturing field-based practicum sites to site directors, who in three cases were collaborating with local school officials and individual mentor teachers to provide student teaching placements. However, this was a complicated enterprise, yielding uneven results. As with job placements, appropriate field placements could be encouraged and supported, but not delivered, by state officials.

Louisiana fully delegated responsibility for defining the requirements of field-based experiences and establishing practicum sites to program vendors. Participants at the three sites offered mixed reviews of the field-based experiences. Having the autonomy to build ongoing, productive relationships with local schools offered no guarantee that such relationships would develop or that candidates could be assured of meaningful field-based experiences. For example, although the university-run site in our sample had a long-standing, nominal partnership with the district in which it was located, the program director was new and she did not know whom to call to arrange field experiences for her participants, so she arranged nothing. Participants at that site reported great frustration with an assignment to observe classes, which came without guidance about what to look for in their observations and no assistance in identifying or getting access to teachers worth observing. Overall, candidates found this component of their preparation of little or no use.

TENSIONS AND TRADEOFFS OF CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

Participants' experiences in these three program components across 11 programs in 3 states yield some general insights about developing a fast-track program that not only offers attractive incentives for candidates, but also ensures that they will have the best possible preparation. We found that participants in all three states were attracted by fast-

track programs because they offer quick, low-cost entry to a teaching career. However, the large majority of candidates we interviewed were not seeking a mail-order license to teach. They wanted programs to provide intensive preparation and support in a short time so that they could succeed in the classroom in September. They sought assistance in job placement, generic and subject-specific pedagogy, and realistic and productive student teaching experiences. These expectations—tempered as they were by realistic views about what was possible—placed large demands on both the state officials and program providers, neither of which had the capacity to deliver all that was needed. The programs with which participants reported the most satisfaction involved ongoing partnerships among several parties—state officials, site directors, and local school officials.

Achieving partnerships between site directors and local school officials appears to be easier in decentralized arrangements. The small, district-run Louisiana program makes use of a productive partnership to find candidates jobs in selected schools that can better support them, to create a relevant field experience, and to tailor coursework to district needs. However, it only trains candidates in one subject area, and even then only a handful at a time. Meanwhile, another Louisiana program—this one run by a university—has not formed a useful partnership with the local district, leaving candidates to fend for themselves in setting up field experiences and finding jobs. Methods classes for that program are combined for math and science candidates, which frustrates the candidates themselves.

Decentralized arrangements like those in Louisiana foster opportunities for site directors to engage in careful job placement, create locally-relevant coursework, and deliver well-organized field experiences. However, simply decentralizing program control does not guarantee such experiences for candidates. The degree to which

programs can form productive partnerships and deliver satisfactory programs depends greatly on local capacity. Meanwhile, the state can do little to ensure quality or consistency across sites.

More centralized programs, like those in Connecticut and Massachusetts, face greater challenges in forming the kinds of district partnerships that lead to relevant student teaching experiences and early job placement. Program longevity does seem to make a difference. Connecticut's program is relatively large, (the flagship site, opened in 1986, served 168 candidates in 2002), but the program's longstanding relationship with local districts led to student teaching placements that participants generally found satisfactory. Although Connecticut does not offer coursework tailored for local district contexts, the state does closely monitor the quality of the coursework that is delivered at its three sites. Candidates in the Connecticut programs consistently spoke highly of the sessions on general pedagogy and commended the quality of the faculty and the level of specificity in the subject-based classes that they attended. The centralized arrangement offers the state more control over consistency and quality, and because resources are pooled statewide, the state has the capacity to serve candidates in more certification areas at single sites. However, Connecticut has only recently expanded beyond its original site, and there was evidence that replicating the flagship program is not easy. The challenge of arranging job placements and appropriate student teaching calls for district partnerships, which take time to build. It seems unlikely that Connecticut could effectively expand to additional sites without either enlarging the state's capacity and involvement in those sites, or decentralizing their approach

Massachusetts, which represents a moderately centralized program, succeeded in attracting almost 1000 applicants and eventually selecting and serving 215 in the various

programs across the state, many of whom were mid-career candidates. The state's centralized approach to recruitment and selection appeared successful, and there was generally wide agreement that the participants in the MINT program were able and motivated. However, decentralization in program development had led to great variety in the content, and possibly the quality, of the participants' training and experience. Because MINT programs were held at 7 sites, which state officials dispersed geographically for the convenience of candidates, program providers faced the challenge of meeting the training needs of candidates in multiple certification areas with limited resources and capacity at each site. Candidates consistently reported that they wanted more subject-specific preparation and student teaching experiences that matched their certification area.

At two sites, the local MINT programs featured the special experience and expertise of local site directors. Many participants praised that focus, but others reported feeling shortchanged. Where local site directors had established relationships with district administrators and teachers, these program administrators increased the possibility of good matches between summer school and participants' certification areas; further, they could match participants to experienced mentor teachers who had worked with other MINT teachers in previous years. However, where program vendors had tenuous connections to the districts and schools—e.g., the national non-profit organization that ran three of the sites in our study—participants' experiences in student teaching were less satisfying to them. Finally, because MINT was moderately centralized, program vendors were only responsible for designing and delivering the summer program, and had no obligation to find participants job placements in any of the sites.

Who is responsible for teachers' preparation?

The reports of participants in these fast-track programs suggest that, even those who are confident that they know their content area still think they need focused preparation in pedagogy before they enter the classroom. They realize that there are limits to what a 5-8 week program can provide, but they are dismayed when precious time is wasted, when they receive little or no preparation in content-based pedagogy (or when the training that they receive does not match their field); or when their field practicum—student teaching or classroom observations—is poorly conceived or haphazardly implemented. There is much to suggest here that the demands for focused preparation are even greater for prospective teachers in fast-track programs than for candidates in traditional programs.

However, even if fast-track program sites were to have sufficient capacity to provide the best possible preparation in a condensed summer program, this would only give candidates a running start in September. While a good summer program may be enough to carry them through the first months, it will not likely be enough to sustain them through their first years of teaching. Like other new teachers, they will need on-the-job support as they begin their new career. Most of the fast-track programs we studied provided minimal follow-up with candidates, typically seminars for the whole cohort held periodically through the fall. Although many of the new teachers welcomed those sessions because they allowed them to share stories about their experiences, these were no substitute for sustained induction programs that would reach into their classrooms, and offer them feedback, advice, and alternative models of instruction. Connecticut and Louisiana offered all its new teachers—including alternative certification program participants—the support of state-funded induction programs. Fast-

track candidates entering schools in Massachusetts had to depend on whatever their districts and schools might offer. For the most part, local districts and schools—particularly those in large urban areas—are unprepared to meet even the needs of new teachers who have completed longer pre-service programs (Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). They certainly are not organized to attend to the particular needs of fast-track candidates, who may require additional supervision and support.

Therefore, fast-track programs provide the possibility of attracting strong candidates—including many mid-career entrants—and rapidly filling teaching positions in shortage areas. If well organized, they can equip new teachers with the just-in-time preparation they will need to succeed during their first months in the classroom. But, in itself, this preparation is not enough and must be supplemented with ongoing support in the schools. The introduction of fast-track alternative certification programs has not resolved the question of who is responsible for the effective preparation and induction of teachers.

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