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WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT ALTERNATIVE TEACHER CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

At a Glance

The shortage of qualified teachers across the U.S. has contributed to the popularity of alternative certification programs. These programs are designed to attract individuals into the teaching profession by allowing candidates to become certified without having to complete a traditional teacher education program. This Information Capsule reviewed research related to the following seven questions:

- 1. Have alternative certification programs increased the diversity of the teaching workforce?*
- 2. How do the retention rates of teachers certified through alternative routes compare to those of traditionally prepared teachers?*
- 3. Do the achievement levels of students assigned to teachers certified through alternative routes differ from the achievement levels of students assigned to traditionally trained teachers?*
- 4. Do teachers who enter the classroom through alternative certification programs report more student attendance and behavioral problems than teachers who were traditionally trained?*
- 5. Do alternative certification programs adequately prepare teachers for the classroom?*
- 6. How do principals rate the teachers at their school who were certified through alternative programs?*
- 7. What are the characteristics of effective alternative certification programs?*

Research indicates that most alternative certification programs provide a viable source of high-quality teachers and even increase the diversity of the teaching workforce. Many studies have found that alternatively certified teachers can produce student achievement gains comparable to teachers certified in traditional programs. In fact, evidence suggests that teachers' years of experience, rather than the manner in which they obtained their certification, is a more reliable indicator of their future ability to positively impact student achievement. Similarly, the school at which a teacher is placed has also been found to play a larger role in their effectiveness than the route through which certification is obtained.

There is great variation in the quality of alternative certification programs and comparisons across programs are difficult. In addition, participants tend to experience the same program in dramatically different ways, depending upon their educational backgrounds, past experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. In other words, many factors contribute to a teacher's effectiveness, including the school to which they are assigned, their years of teaching experience, and their content area knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. The route through which certification is obtained is just one of these factors.

Examples of noteworthy alternative certification programs operating across the U.S. are provided at the conclusion of this report.

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Alternative certification programs were designed to attract individuals who have already earned a bachelor's degree into the teaching profession. These programs offer a non-traditional way to become certified without having to go back to college and complete a teacher education program. The goal of alternative certification programs is to lower the barriers for entry into the teaching profession to attract strong candidates who might not otherwise enter teaching. The programs have become an important source of teachers for many schools, especially those that are difficult to staff (Feistritzer, 2011; National Center for Alternative Certification, 2010; Boyd et al., 2007; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007; Glazerman et al., 2006).

The requirements of alternative certification programs vary widely, but most programs are shorter, less expensive, and more practically oriented than traditional university-based programs. Pre-service preparation typically ranges from four to 12 weeks during the summer before new teachers enter the classroom. The programs usually include coursework in pedagogy and subject area knowledge, practice teaching, and continuing support for teachers once they enter the classroom in the form of mentoring and professional development. Most programs provide participants with access to full-time, paid teaching positions once they complete the requirements for certification (Boyd et al., 2007; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Birkeland & Peske, 2004).

The shortage of qualified teachers across the U.S. has contributed to the popularity of alternative certification programs. This shortage has been driven by legislated class size limits, an increase in the number of teachers retiring and leaving the profession, and an inadequate number of individuals prepared to teach certain subjects, such as mathematics, science, and special education. Difficulties attracting minority candidates to the profession and under representation of qualified teachers at low-income schools have also led to increased interest in alternative certification routes (Reese, 2010; Tuttle et al., 2009; Glazerman et al., 2006; Birkeland & Peske, 2004).

Over the years, the number of teachers issued certificates through alternative routes has increased dramatically. In 1985, for example, less than 300 teachers in the U.S. obtained teaching certificates through alternative programs. By 2008, it was estimated that 59,000 (or about one-third) of all new teachers entered the profession through an alternative certification program (Evans, 2011; Feistritzer, 2011; National Center for Alternative Education, 2010; Reese, 2010; Tuttle et al., 2009; Sass, 2008).

Few innovations in American education have generated more controversy and debate than the alternative certification movement. Critics of alternative certification programs argue for higher certification standards and increased regulation. They claim that teachers certified through alternative routes have received little training in child development, pedagogy, and classroom management and have typically engaged in only a minimal amount of practice teaching. Furthermore, detractors argue that graduates of alternative certification programs are usually placed in the hardest-to-staff schools, resulting in the neediest students being assigned to the least prepared teachers (Evans, 2011; Xu et al., 2007; Glazerman et al., 2006; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2006; Feistritzer, 2005; Seftor & Mayer, 2003; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).

Supporters of alternative certification programs, on the other hand, argue that traditional certification programs have erected barriers to entry into the teaching field and have failed to provide U.S. schools with a sufficient number of qualified teachers. They maintain that alternative certification programs are a creative response to the current teacher shortage. In addition, they believe that alternative certification programs boost the quality of the teaching force by recruiting highly skilled individuals who would otherwise not enter the teaching profession. This pool of potential teachers includes mid-career changers, retired military personnel, individuals who graduated with degrees in areas other than education, and those who received education degrees years ago and now want to teach (Reese, 2010; Gatlin, 2009; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Legler, 2002; Raymond & Fletcher, 2002).

A review of the research on alternative certification programs was conducted for this Information Capsule. The following questions are addressed:

1. Have alternative certification programs increased the diversity of the teaching workforce?
2. How do the retention rates of teachers certified through alternative routes compare to those of traditionally prepared teachers?
3. Do the achievement levels of students assigned to teachers certified through alternative routes differ from the achievement levels of students assigned to traditionally trained teachers?
4. Do teachers who enter the classroom through alternative certification programs report more student attendance and behavioral problems than teachers who were traditionally trained?
5. Do alternative certification programs adequately prepare teachers for the classroom?
6. How do principals rate the teachers at their school who were certified through alternative programs?
7. What are the characteristics of effective alternative certification programs?

1. Have alternative certification programs increased the diversity of the teaching workforce?

Studies have found that alternative certification programs recruit minorities, men, older candidates, and experienced professionals from other fields in greater proportion than do traditional certification programs. Researchers suggest that the flexibility and accelerated schedules offered by alternative certification programs attract individuals who would not have considered teaching if alternative routes had not been available. Alternative certification programs have also been found to attract teachers in shortage areas such as mathematics, science, foreign languages, and special education (Feistritzer, 2011; Gatlin, 2009; Barclay et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2005; Birkeland & Peske, 2004; Education Commission of the States, 2003; Legler, 2002; Clewell & Villegas, 2001).

2. How do the retention rates of teachers certified through alternative routes compare to those of traditionally prepared teachers?

Overall, studies suggest that the retention rates of teachers certified through alternative routes are comparable to, and often exceed, those of traditional route graduates (Kane et al., 2008; Owings et al., 2005; Education Commission of the States, 2003; Clewell & Villegas, 2001). One exception is the Teach for America (TFA) program. Research indicates that TFA graduates' retention rates are lower than those of both traditionally trained teachers and graduates of other alternative certification programs (Boyd et al., 2009; Noell & Gansle, 2009; Kane et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005).

Researchers point out that TFA teachers' higher attrition rate is predictable because the program asks candidates to make only a two-year commitment to teaching (Heilig & Jez, 2010). Mac Iver and Vaughn's (2007) study of teacher attrition in Baltimore provided support for this theory. The researchers found that TFA teachers were less likely than traditionally and conditionally certified teachers to leave their school in the first two years, but more likely to leave thereafter.

Donaldson and Johnson (2011) surveyed over 2,000 TFA teachers assigned to low-income schools throughout the U.S. They found that 61 percent of TFA teachers taught longer than two years and 36 percent taught for more than four years. After five years, 28 percent of TFA teachers were still teaching. The authors suggested that this retention rate is lower than the 50 percent estimate for new teachers across all types of schools, but comparable to the turnover rates at high-poverty schools. The most

influential factor in TFA teachers' decisions to leave teaching was to pursue a non-teaching position (35 percent), but almost 18 percent of TFA teachers cited school-based factors, such as poor administrative leadership and lack of collaboration, as the primary reason for their departure from the field of teaching.

Of greater concern to Donaldson and Johnson (2011) was the fact that only 44 percent of TFA teachers remained in their initial, low-income placement school beyond their two-year obligation. Less than one-quarter of TFA teachers continued to teach at their initial school for more than three years and less than 15 percent of TFA teachers remained at their original school after the fourth year. The TFA teachers who stayed in teaching but changed schools reported that their decisions were significantly influenced by the working conditions at their original school, such as the principal's leadership, their teaching assignment, student disciplinary policies, and the school's educational philosophy.

3. Do the achievement levels of students assigned to teachers certified through alternative routes differ from the achievement levels of students assigned to traditionally trained teachers?

Research examining the effect of route of certification on student achievement levels has produced contradictory findings. Some studies have found that the students of teachers certified through traditional programs post greater achievement gains than the students of alternatively certified teachers (Tuttle et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Others have concluded that students assigned to teachers certified through alternative routes post greater achievement gains, although usually only in mathematics (Nunnery et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2007; Glazerman et al., 2006; Decker et al., 2004; Raymond & Fletcher, 2002).

When analyzing differences in student achievement by certification route, some studies have also factored in years of teaching experience. These studies have found that most teachers do not have a positive impact on student achievement until their second and later years in the classroom, regardless of how they obtained their certification. Students assigned to teachers with more years of experience tend to post greater achievement gains whether their teachers are certified through alternative or traditional routes (Dobbie, 2011; Evans, 2011; Gatlin, 2009; Kane et al., 2008; Boyd et al., 2006; Decker et al., 2004; Raymond et al., 2001).

In conclusion, teacher experience appears to be more important than the program through which certification is obtained. Most studies have concluded that both alternatively certified and traditionally certified teachers grow more effective with experience, with a major increment in effectiveness occurring after the second year of teaching.

4. Do teachers who enter the classroom through alternative certification programs report more student attendance and behavioral problems than teachers who were traditionally trained?

Most researchers have concluded that certification route has little or no impact on students' rates of absenteeism or disciplinary incidents. However, two studies bear mentioning because they found discrepancies between teachers' perceptions of student behavior and the objective data they collected. Glazerman and colleagues (2006) and Decker and colleagues (2004) compared teachers certified through Teach for America (TFA) and traditional programs. In both studies, the researchers administered teacher surveys and reviewed student attendance and disciplinary records. Although no significant differences were found in the rates of absenteeism or behavior infractions between students of TFA teachers and students of traditionally certified teachers, TFA teachers reported higher rates of absenteeism, more classroom disruptions, and more physical conflicts among their students. In both studies, the researchers speculated that TFA teachers were more likely to describe students' behavior as problematic because they had higher expectations regarding student behavior.

Owens and colleagues (2005) surveyed school principals from 49 states and the District of Columbia who had Troops to Teachers (TTT) graduates teaching in their schools. Interestingly, over 90 percent of the 875 respondents stated that TTT teachers were more effective in classroom management and student discipline than were traditionally prepared teachers with similar years of teaching experience. It should be noted that these findings do not generalize to other alternative certification programs since the TTT program deals exclusively with ex-military personnel.

5. Do alternative certification programs adequately prepare teachers for the classroom?

Several studies have concluded that alternatively and traditionally certified teachers enter the classroom with similar levels of content area knowledge and engage in similar teaching practices (Sass, 2008; Davis et al., 2006; Birkeland & Peske, 2004). For example, Evans (2011) found that prior to entering the classroom, New York City Teaching Fellows had higher scores on tests administered to measure mathematical content knowledge than traditionally trained teachers. Miller and colleagues (1998) compared the teaching practices of traditionally certified and alternatively certified teachers over three years and found no significant differences between the teaching behaviors of the two groups.

However, a few studies have found that alternatively certified teachers have lower levels of self-confidence and feelings of efficacy than those prepared in traditional programs. Specifically, traditionally certified teachers report that they feel better prepared to plan instruction, meet the needs of diverse learners, create a positive learning environment, manage their classrooms, motivate students, and conduct assessments (Davis et al., 2006; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). A survey conducted by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality compared responses of new teachers from three alternative certification programs (Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, and Troops for Teachers) with those of new traditionally certified teachers. Only 50 percent of the alternatively certified teachers reported that they were prepared for their first year of teaching, compared to 80 percent of traditionally certified teachers. The vast majority of the traditionally certified teachers (94 percent) also said they were confident that their students were learning and responding to their teaching, compared to 74 percent of alternatively certified teachers (Immerwahr et al., 2007).

Researchers have found that there is great variation in how different individuals respond to the same certification program. Humphrey and Wechsler (2006) studied seven alternative certification programs and determined that participants experienced each program in dramatically different ways, depending upon their educational backgrounds, past experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. The researchers concluded that these additional factors had a greater influence on teachers' future effectiveness in the classroom than the route through which they obtained certification.

Some researchers have pointed out that new teachers' school assignments play a larger role in determining their effectiveness than the certification program they completed. For example, all new teachers tend to be more effective when they are placed in schools with strong leadership, given sufficient materials and resources, and provided with opportunities for professional collaboration (Humphrey et al., 2008; Walsh & Jacobs, 2007; Burstein et al., 2006; Johnson & Kardos, 2002).

In conclusion, many alternative certification programs adequately prepare teachers for the classroom. However, teachers' effectiveness may be determined as much by their academic ability, subject matter knowledge, and school placement as it is by the manner in which they obtain certification (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2005; Dickar, 2003).

6. How do principals rate the teachers at their school who were certified through alternative programs?

Research on principals' ratings of alternatively and traditionally certified teachers has yielded mixed results. Some studies have found that graduates of alternative certification programs are rated by

principals as excelling in certain areas, such as creating an environment conducive to student learning; communicating learning expectations; exhibiting research-based instructional behaviors; encouraging students to extend their thinking; maintaining rapport with students; building professional relationships; and communicating with parents (Barclay et al., 2008; Owings et al., 2005; Clewell & Villegas, 2001).

On the other hand, several studies have found that traditionally certified teachers receive higher ratings from principals on their instructional skills, instructional planning, and classroom management. These studies reported that principals perceive graduates of alternative certification programs as having more difficulties with curriculum development, teaching methods, student motivation, organizing and sequencing lessons, responding to students' learning needs, and encouraging higher level thinking. Some studies have also found that principals report providing more guidance to alternatively certified teachers in the form of professional development, mentoring, and feedback (Barclay et al., 2008; Owings et al., 2005; Birkeland & Peske, 2004; Jelmberg, 1996).

Feistritzer (2008) noted that preconceived notions may play a role in principals' reservations about hiring alternatively certified teachers. Her evaluation of Mississippi's Alternate Route Teacher Preparation Program found that 90 percent of principals said they would prefer to hire a traditionally trained teacher. When asked for evidence to support this preference, interviewees responded: "It's just logical that the more education courses people have the better equipped they are to teach."

7. What are the characteristics of effective alternative certification programs?

Although no one alternative certification program has been found to be most effective in preparing candidates and guiding them into the teaching force, experts have reached a consensus regarding essential characteristics of high-quality programs. When deciding which alternative certification programs to consider as a source for potential new teachers, researchers agree that school districts should look for programs with the following components:

- **High standards and rigorous screening of candidates.** Alternative certification programs should seek and select candidates who have above-average academic records, strong content knowledge and skills, and attitudes that will facilitate quick entry into the classroom (Humphrey et al., 2008; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Legler, 2002; Hess, 2001). Walsh and Jacobs (2007) noted that most alternative route programs are non-selective. They reported that many of the 49 programs they surveyed accepted 90 to 100 percent of applicants and only 16 percent of the programs accepted fewer than half of their applicants. In contrast, the researchers found that Teach for America accepted less than 17 percent of its applicants.
- **Strong academic coursework component.** The curriculum in alternative certification programs should be rigorous, innovative, culturally sensitive, and tailored to participants' backgrounds and the challenges they will face in their schools. Candidates should receive training in pedagogy, classroom management, lesson planning, and child development, as well as subject-specific teaching methods. In addition to ensuring that graduates possess a firm grasp of the subject matter in the field they expect to teach, coursework should prepare participants to teach children from diverse backgrounds effectively (National Research Council, 2010; Feistritzer, 2008; Humphrey et al., 2008; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007; Walsh & Jacobs, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Legler, 2002; Clewell & Villegas, 2001).
- **Opportunities for practice teaching before candidates enter the classroom.** Practice teaching experiences should be supervised on a daily basis by an expert teacher who provides feedback on teaching performance and offers suggestions for improvement. Experts note that practice teaching helps candidates make a clear connection between theory and practice (Feistritzer, 2008; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007; Walsh & Jacobs, 2007; Owings et al., 2005; Clewell & Villegas, 2001).

- **A comprehensive system of support provided to teachers after they enter the classroom.** Alternative certification programs should continue to take responsibility for candidates once they begin teaching. Teachers should be provided with sustained and classroom-focused professional development and trained mentors. Mentors should work with new teachers to share curriculum ideas and demonstrate lessons and provide close supervision, guidance, and regular feedback about teaching performance (Humphrey et al., 2008; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007; Walsh & Jacobs, 2007; Burstein et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2005; Education Week, 2004; Legler, 2002).
- **Community partnerships.** Partnerships with school districts, universities, and non-profit organizations have been found to increase alternative certification programs' capacity to provide candidates with effective pre-service training (Johnson et al., 2005). Clewell and Villegas (2001) evaluated 40 Pathways to Teaching Careers Programs across the U.S. They found that strong partnerships between alternative certification programs and local school districts contributed to program success.

Summary

Research indicates that most alternative certification programs provide a viable source of high-quality teachers and even increase the diversity of the teaching workforce. Retention rates of teachers certified through alternative routes are comparable to, and often exceed, those of traditional route graduates. One exception is the Teach for America program, whose graduates are more likely to leave the teaching profession once their two-year commitment to the program is completed.

Many studies have found that alternatively certified teachers can produce student achievement gains comparable to teachers certified in traditional programs. In fact, evidence suggests that teachers' years of experience, rather than the manner in which they obtained their certification, is a more reliable indicator of their future ability to positively impact student achievement. Additionally, certification route appears to have little or no impact on students' rates of absenteeism or disciplinary incidents.

There is no firm empirical evidence that any one pathway into teaching is the best way to attract and prepare desirable candidates for the classroom. Researchers do agree that effective alternative certification programs include high standards and rigorous screening of candidates; a strong academic coursework component; opportunities for practice teaching; a comprehensive system of support provided to teachers after they enter the classroom; and community partnerships.

Most researchers have found that effective teachers come from both traditional and alternative certification routes. However, there is great variation in the quality of alternative certification programs and comparisons across programs are difficult. In addition, participants tend to experience the same program in dramatically different ways, depending upon their educational backgrounds, past experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. School placement has also been found to play a larger role in teachers' effectiveness than the certification program they attended. Studies have found that all new teachers tend to be more effective when they are assigned to schools with strong leadership, sufficient materials and resources, and a culture of professional collaboration.

In conclusion, it appears that many factors contribute to teachers' effectiveness, including their content area knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, years of teaching experience, and the school to which they are assigned. The route through which certification is obtained is just one of these factors.

The reader is referred to *Teach for America: An Analysis of Placement and Impact*, an Evaluation Matters report published by Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis. The report found that the number of M-DCPS Teach for America (TFA) teachers increased from 89 in 2008-09 to 141 in 2010-11, but that the District's TFA teachers were concentrated in fewer M-DCPS schools in 2010-11. No significant differences were found when learning gains made by students of M-DCPS TFA teachers were compared to those made by students of M-DCPS non-TFA teachers who taught similar courses. However, in mathematics once a larger portion of TFA teachers' senior high school assignments were devoted to advanced coursework, their students posted somewhat higher learning gains from 2009-10 to 2010-11. The full report is available on Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis' Web site (<http://oda.dadeschools.net>).

Following are some examples of noteworthy alternative certification programs operating across the U.S.

Examples of Noteworthy Alternative Certification Programs

Teach for America (TFA) is the largest alternative certification program in the U.S. and was founded to eliminate educational inequities facing children in low-income communities. In order to expand the pool of available teachers in struggling schools, TFA recruits seniors and recent graduates of the nation's top colleges. Only those who are willing to commit at least two years to teaching in impoverished communities are considered for the program. TFA provides candidates with five weeks of intensive training, including coursework and practice teaching during the summer between graduating from college and beginning their teaching assignment. The summer training includes courses on teaching practice, classroom management, diversity, learning theory, literacy development, and leadership. TFA members receive ongoing faculty support and attend professional development workshops after they begin teaching. The program began in 1990 with 500 teachers. Today, there are over 8,000 TFA corps members teaching in high-need school districts throughout the U.S. (Dobbie, 2011; Heilig & Jez, 2010; Wang, 2009; Kane et al., 2008; Glazerman et al., 2006; Decker et al., 2004).

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) was founded in 1997 by former TFA alumna Michelle Rhee in order to provide high-need students with high quality teachers. TNTP recruits individuals with strong content knowledge in math and science to teach in high-poverty and high-minority schools and attempts to increase teacher diversity in these schools. The program offers an intensive summer training institute and coordinates with school districts to determine appropriate summer placements for participants. A series of professional development seminars focuses on candidates' ability to translate their existing content knowledge into effective classroom practice. Since its inception, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 43,000 teachers (The New Teacher Project, 2011).

The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) alternative route to certification was founded by the U.S. Department of Education in 2001 to help the nation's schools meet the No Child Left Behind requirement that every classroom have a "highly qualified" teacher. The program does not require formal coursework, a portfolio, or student teaching as a condition of certification. Instead, the ABCTE relies heavily on examinations to ensure that applicants are qualified. Candidates must pass a subject area exam and a professional teaching and knowledge exam, both administered by the ABCTE. The program leaves exam preparation up to the individual, but does provide candidates with mentors and preparation materials. The ABCTE certificate is accepted in 11 states, including Florida. It affords relatively low-cost access to the teaching

profession. Over 9,000 aspiring teachers have enrolled in the program (American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, 2011; Tuttle et al., 2009; Boyd et al., 2007).

New York City's Teaching Fellows Program was founded in 2000 as a collaboration between The New Teaching Project and the New York City Department of Education. The program was established to address a severe teacher shortage in New York City's public schools. The program targets mid-career professionals, recent college graduates, and retirees to teach in New York City's hardest-to-staff schools. Key elements of the program include intensive pre-service training, a subsidized master's degree in Education, and ongoing professional support. Upon acceptance into the program, Teaching Fellows begin graduate coursework at one of several New York universities. Prior to independent teaching, Fellows must pass the Liberal Arts and Sciences Test and the Mathematics Content Specialty Test that are required by the New York State Education Department for teaching certification. Over the next several years, Teaching Fellows continue taking graduate courses while teaching. As of 2008, over 8,800 Fellows were teaching in New York City's public schools, comprising 11 percent of all teachers in the New York City public school system (Evans, 2011; Heilig & Jez, 2010; Sass, 2008; NYC Teaching Fellows, 2007).

The U.S. Department of Defense established **Troops to Teachers** (TTT) in 1994 to help eligible military personnel make successful transitions to second careers as public school teachers in high-need schools. TTT was also created to relieve teacher shortages, especially in math, science, special education, and other high-need subject areas, at low-income schools throughout the U.S. Although the Department of Defense continues to operate the program, TTT oversight and funding were transferred to the U.S. Department of Education in 2000. A network of state offices has been established to provide participants with counseling and assistance regarding certification requirements and employment leads. As of 2008, the program had placed more than 11,000 former troops into public schools nationwide. Stipends are available to eligible individuals but participants who accept financial assistance must agree to teach in schools serving low-income students for three years (Troops to Teachers, 2011; Owings et al., 2010; Nunnery et al., 2008; Education Week, 2004).

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