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Selecting Career Changers with Real Potential for Teaching and Designing a Program to Meet Their Needs

The COVID-19 crisis is certain to have significant and enduring consequences for all sectors of public education. Although most of these consequences are negative and dire, at least two offer hope. First, appreciation for the work teachers do has grown; second, for the recently unemployed, teaching may become a more desirable occupational option.

Most states offer alternative route preparation programs to attract career changers into teaching. Such programs now offer real promise as a means of addressing teacher shortages, and programs may now need to be more selective than ever before. As more career changers seek careers in teaching, the pool is larger and programs may be able to recruit more capable candidates.



Selection Guidelines to Help Identify Candidates with Strong Potential

Because not all career changers have the same potential for teaching, and because programs know very little about candidates' potential, we offer these guidelines to help with candidate selection. These guidelines are based largely on an economic analysis of candidate selection (Dai et al., 2007).

- **SCREEN FOR POTENTIAL.** Programs need to learn as much as possible about candidates' potential for teaching, the match between teaching and their previous jobs, and the amount of human capital (intangible assets, such as emotional intelligence, experience, and dispositions) they bring to the profession, school, and community.
- **PRIORITIZE PARAPROFESSIONALS.** Strong alternative route candidates understand the teaching profession, have experience with children, and/or live in the community served by the school. These candidates often live in communities served by the schools where they are employed, and they have extensive experience with children.
- **LOOK FOR COMPLEMENTARY SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE.** People leaving careers in which they interacted with children or worked in education settings are more likely to be successful teachers than candidates who have not. For example, all other things equal, a camp counselor is better suited than a plumber. Social workers and counselors are good choices because of the similarity between their previous jobs and teaching.

- **CONSIDER CAREER STAGE.** Early career changers are better options than late career changers. The difference between what early career changers will make as teachers and what they made in their previous position is less. Early career changers have less experience and commitment built up in their original careers, making them more likely to try a new career.



Program Design Guidelines for Alternative Routes to Teaching Programs for Career Changers

Training for career changers must be tightly focused to ensure program length (and time away from income) is not a deterrent to program completion. Conversely, to promote success and retention in teaching, training must not be truncated. Whereas Rosenberg and Sindelar (Rosenberg, Sindelar, Connelly, & Keller, 2004) called for “substantial, rigorous, and programmatic content,” Dai et al. (2007) cautioned against lengthening training to avoid discouraging able participants. Wasburn-Moses and Rosenberg (2008) offered these additional design guidelines:

- **EMPHASIZE CLASSROOM SURVIVAL IN INITIAL PREPARATION.** Because participants will have early entry into the classroom:
 - Focus on practical and usable products and strategies.
 - Prioritize significant support for the teacher candidate for the first couple of weeks of the school year through enhanced mentoring and induction.
 - Provide mentorship and active coaching early on.
 - Focus on district procedures, curriculum, and assessments.
- **GIVE CANDIDATES OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP A COMMUNITY.** Candidates benefit from connections with faculty and other first-year teachers. For example, cohort models have shown promise (Hagar & Fiechtl, 2019).
- **OFFER SHARED SUPERVISION AND MENTORSHIP.** The district and teacher preparation program share responsibility for supervision and mentorship so that candidates have support on both procedural elements and evidence-based and high-leverage practices.
- **OPTIMIZE TECHNOLOGY IN ALL ELEMENTS OF PROGRAM DESIGN.** Technology can allow and enhance frequent exchanges between the instructor and candidates as well as among students. Programs must ensure that the quality and rigor of the coursework is not sacrificed when adjusting to virtual instruction. Technology can enable teacher candidates to connect online with experts and access high-quality resources on lesson plans, IEPs, and curriculum.

References

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