

# **Alternative Certification Teacher and Candidate Retention: Measures of Educator Preparation, Certification, and School Staffing Effectiveness**

**Michelle Haj-Broussard**

University of Louisiana at Lafayette  
hajbroussard@louisiana.edu

**Tom Hall**

Georgia Gwinnett College

**Sheila Allen**

Harford Community College

**Cyndy Stephens**

LEEG, Inc.

**Vickie Person**

Governors State University

**Tina Johnson**

High Point University

## *Abstract*

*The teacher turnover issue impacts education on national, state, and local levels. On a national level, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 50% of teachers left the profession within the first five years, creating the need for districts to fill vacancies (Gonzalez, Brown, & Slate, 2008; Greiner & Smith, 2006; Heller, 2004; Ingersoll, 2002, 2003; Kaff, 2004; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine the percentage of alternative certification candidates who become fully certified and are hired into teaching positions beyond the induction period, the retention rates of alternatively certified teachers who stay in and complete a preparation program, the reasons alternatively certified teachers leave the profession, and the one and three year retention rates of alternative certification teachers once fully certified and hired into school systems. The authors found that three year retention rates ranged from 74% to 92% for the programs in this study.*

*Keywords: teacher retention, teacher attrition, alternative certification*

Please contact the first author for all correspondence regarding the content of this article.

The teacher turnover issue impacts education on national, state, and local levels. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on a national level, 50% of teachers left the profession within five years creating the need for districts to fill vacancies (Gonzalez, Brown & Slate, 2008; Greiner & Smith, 2006; Heller, 2004; Ingersoll, 2002, 2003; Kaff, 2004; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). Ingersoll (2001) found a third of teachers leave within the first three years and nearly half leave after five years. The fields of science, mathematics, and special education have the highest attrition rates of 20% a year.

Darling-Hammond (2003) found new teacher turnover to be even higher with 40% leaving in the first three years of teaching in Texas. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2008) estimated that nationwide, districts pay \$7.34 billion to recruit, hire, and train replacement teachers. Yet, a recent longitudinal study by Gray and Taie (2015), which takes into account teachers who stay, move, leave, and return, found that only 17% of beginning teachers have left the profession after five years. The purpose of this study was to examine the percentage of alternative certification candidates who become fully certified and are hired into teaching positions beyond the induction period, the retention rates of alternatively certified teachers who stay in and complete a preparation program, the reasons alternatively certified teachers leave the profession, and the one and three year retention rates of alternative certification teachers once fully certified and hired into school systems.

### **Review of Literature**

Research on retention in schools has focused on a number of factors such as age of the candidates, whether they teach in their field of certification or not, ethnicities of the teachers/students, and on-the-job support among other factors.

Allen (2005) said that approximately 50% of teachers leave their initial assignment in the first five years of teaching, although they do not necessarily leave the profession. Allen (2005) examined factors that predict teacher attrition or retention and found that there was limited evidence that younger beginning teachers were more likely to leave than those who were slightly older, that teachers teaching in a field in which they have subject expertise or certification are less likely to leave than teachers placed outside their field of expertise, and that minority teachers are more likely than white teachers to remain in schools with higher proportions of minority students. Furthermore, Allen (2005) found moderate evidence that white teachers have greater rates of attrition than either African American or Hispanic teachers.

While Allen examined predictors for teacher attrition and retention, Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2009) looked at teacher retention factors in various states. In California, the factors predicting teacher attrition included the racial composition and the proportion of low-income students as well as the salaries and working conditions of teachers, which were all strong factors in predicting turnover. In Chicago, low student test scores correlated with low retention of teachers from year to year. Finally, in North Carolina, teacher perceptions of school leadership are predictive of intention to remain in the school. Overall, Boyd et al. (2009) found that high turnover schools serve large populations of low-performing, non-White, and low-income students and that principals have preferences for schools with higher achieving students and low proportions of poverty, just as teachers do.

Johnson (2006) examined the reasons teachers stay rather than why they leave. She discussed how there is considerable evidence that teachers stay and are successful if they have a number of supports. These supports include having teaching assignments that match the teacher's field of expertise and are not unreasonably demanding; collaborative colleagues at all levels of experience; assistance from parents, experts, and support providers in working with students; a comprehensive but flexible curriculum that allows for meaningful accountability; job-embedded professional development; career opportunities for growth and influence beyond their classroom; and finally, facilities that are safe and well equipped.

Within this larger dialogue of teacher attrition and retention is the smaller field of alternative certification. Different studies concerning alternative certification have produced conflicting results concerning retention and attrition (Suell & Piotrowski, 2007). Early studies on alternative certification found that traditionally trained teachers have a higher retention rate overall (Andrew & Schwab, 1995; Lutz & Hutton, 1989; Stoddart, 1992). Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2012) conducted a national study in which they compared the retention rates of traditional versus alternative certification programs. They found that the "preparation route had little bearing on teachers' likelihood of leaving" (p. 32). Rather, they found that it was pedagogical preparation such as practice teaching, feedback on teaching, and observations of teachers, that affected attrition. They found that this preparation was particularly important for mathematics and science teachers.

There were a number of researchers who compared traditional versus alternative preparation retention in specific areas. Gerson (2002) compared the retention and mentoring of alternative certification programs to traditional teacher training in an urban school system in Georgia. The results indicated there was little difference in retention rates and the quality of mentoring. Likewise, Mac Iver and Vaughn (2007) examined teacher retention in Baltimore, which is an urban school district. They found alternatively certified teachers stayed at notably higher rates in the urban setting than traditionally or provisionally certified teachers. Furthermore, at the end of the third year, when Teach for America teachers were found to typically leave their positions, the other alternatively certified teachers were retained through the fourth and fifth years at higher rates than the traditionally certified teachers.

Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) focused specifically on retention within alternative certification programs. Their study of seven alternative certification programs representing different areas of the country provided information about various topics in teaching. Their case study included interviews with participants at the beginning of the program and then again at the end of their first year of teaching. Although the number of years of teaching could not be discerned, the researchers found that in five of the seven programs, at least 50% of the participants planned to be teaching in 10 years. Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) also found that it is the combination of the teacher education program, school context, and individual candidate characteristics, all working together, that affects the success of the candidates as teachers. Programs may be excellent, yet they are only one variable in alternatively certified teachers' paths to success.

The current study focuses on retention within a number of alternative certification programs to examine programmatic differences and similarities, the places in which completers are placed,

and the reasons some of those completers leave.

### Methodology

The sample for the study was drawn from the *Center for Career Changers to the Classroom* national database (<http://www.ccteach.org/teaching-certification>). Alternative certification program directors were contacted via email to determine interest in participating in the study. In addition, members of the National Association for Alternative Certification (NAAC) were queried as well to determine their interest in participating in this study. Two sample groups were used. Cohort 1 was surveyed in the 2013-2014 school year and Cohort 2 was surveyed in the 2014-2015 school year. Below are the demographics for each cohort (see Table 1).

The Cohort 1 sample was drawn from 15 states. These 15 states produce 60% of all alternative certification program completers (17,548 of 29,306 based on Title II data). It is important to note that based on Title II data (United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013) five states were responsible for half of the alternative certification program completers in the United States (California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, Texas). The sample included four of those five states with only New Jersey not represented. After the initial contact, 70 programs responded that there was interest in the study. Of these 70 programs, 55 began the survey, and 32 programs completed the survey.

For the Cohort 2 sample, 94 programs initially responded to the call for participants and 25 completed the survey. Again these programs were located in 15 different states and again those four states responsible for producing nearly half of the alternative certification program completers were included. The average size of each program was 34 for Cohort 1 and 28 for Cohort 2, once the largest and smallest programs were removed.

Table 1  
*Cohort and Program Sizes*

	No. of Completers	Largest/smallest Programs	Average w/ no outliers (highest/lowest)	SD
Cohort 1 2013-2014	1329	314/0	34	27
Cohort 2 2014-2015	634	100/0	28	27

Surveys were created by the Board of Directors from the National Association for Alternative Certification (NAAC), of which all of the authors of this paper are current or past members, based on input from program administrators. The initial survey was revised for Cohort 2 to address data gathering issues that Cohort 1 reported in a post-survey questionnaire, which asked what information was difficult to obtain. Responses from both cohorts were analyzed using frequency analysis and descriptive statistics.

## **Results**

### **Findings: Employment**

The survey examines the number of completers that had been employed as “teachers of record” (TOR) while they were working towards certification. In Cohort 1, over 87% of completers were employed as TOR while they worked towards certification. In 19 of the 32 programs all of their completers were employed as TOR while in their programs. In nine others, some of their completers were employed as TOR. Approximately two-thirds of the programs have a clinical practice that includes candidates being TORs. In Cohort 2, over 74% of the completers were employed as TOR while in their programs. In 13 of the 25 reported programs, all of their completers were employed as TOR while in their programs. In 10 others, some of their completers were employed as teachers of record. Over 56% of alternative certification programs in this study have a clinical practice experience that includes being TOR.

After completion of their certification programs, both cohorts demonstrated high initial employment rates. Cohort 1 had 85% (1125 of 1329) of completers initially employed by either continuing their employment from their clinical experiences or by becoming employed after completion. Of the 32 programs, 19 had all completers employed at the completion of their programs. Cohort 2 had 79% (504 of 634) completers initially employed. Like Cohort 1, they either kept their employment from their clinical experiences, or they were employed after completion of their program. Nine of the 23 programs had all of their completers initially employed. Initial employment rates of near or above 80% of alternative certification completers could be due to the fact that many of the programs had employment as TOR as a routine part of the program. This leads naturally to high rates of employment.

Initial employment was high, but the survey requested employment numbers of the two cohorts three years after completion. These numbers can be interpreted in two ways. The first is looking simply at the employment rate as the number of completers employed by year 3, regardless of whether they were initially employed as TOR their first year after completing their programs. For Cohort 1, 1036 of the 1329 completing the program (78%) were employed three years later. For Cohort 2, 466 of the 634 completing the program (74%) were employed three years later. However, this interpretation does not take into account whether candidates were actually hired as TOR their first year after completing their programs and determining if those initial hires had a job three years later. To determine that number, the authors used what they called a three year retention rate. In Cohort 1, of the 1125 teachers that were reported as initially employed, 188 did not have jobs in 2014. This is a loss of 17% and a retention rate of 83%. Likewise, in Cohort 2, of the 504 completers that initially found employment in 2011, 38 did not have jobs three years after completion. This represents a loss of 8% and a retention rate of 92%.

### **Findings: School and Completer Type**

Another element of the survey included the types of schools into which completers were initially placed and whether the strong, average, or weak candidates were placed in the various schools. Table 2 shows how the total number of completers was distributed in terms of school type and completer strength for both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2.

Table 2

*Initial Employment Placement*

	Completer Strength	Low Performing School	Average Performing School	High Performing School
Cohort 1	Strong	18%	21%	16%
	Average	17%	16%	7%
	Weak	3%	1%	0.2%
Cohort 2	Strong	19%	28%	14%
	Average	13%	19%	2%
	Weak	3%	1%	0.1%

As seen in Table 2, the majority of candidates, 61% in Cohort 1 and 64% of Cohort 2, were initially placed at average and high performing schools. This is contrary to the findings in the literature, which states that alternative certification completers tend to work in the highest-needs schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Of the completers that did work at low performing schools, they tended to be strong or average completers as rated by their programs.

As Table 3 below indicates, data did not substantially change when three years of data were aggregated for Cohort 1 (Years 1 to 3) and indicated that 75% of teachers were hired at average to high performing schools and only 2% of completers were considered as weak and working in low performing schools over those three years. Three year placement data were not available for Cohort 2 due to a later start date.

Table 3

*Cohort 1 Aggregated Three Year Placement*

	Completer Strength	Low Performing School	Average Performing School	High Performing School
Cohort 1	Strong	15%	25%	25%
	Average	8%	18%	6%
	Weak	2%	1%	0.3%

**Findings: Reasons for Not Continuing Employment**

The survey delved into not only how many completers left and stayed in the profession, but also why they left. Overall, there were three reasons that completers left employment after their initial year: performance issues, personal/undisclosed reasons, and reduction of teacher force. In Cohort 1, programs provided reasons for 129 of their completers leaving while Cohort 2 provided reasons for 89 of their completers leaving. Table 4 provides detail on their reasons for leaving after their initial year.

Table 4  
*Leaving After the Initial Year*

	Performance Issues	Personal or undisclosed reasons	Reduction in teaching force
Cohort 1 ( <i>N</i> = 129)	12	63	54
Cohort 2 ( <i>N</i> = 89)	10	66	13

Most of the completers left for undisclosed reasons. However, reduction of the teacher force was another reason for leaving employment, which was likely due to state budgets and teacher student ratio requirements. Performance issues were not often cited as reasons for completers to leave the profession.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Clinical practice is a major component of alternative certification programs, as evidenced by the large percentage of programs in which candidates serve as Teacher of Record (TOR). Once the program completers finish their training, their first-year placement rate is high for candidates of alternative certification programs (highest = 91%; lowest = 75%). Likewise, the three-year retention rate for completers of alternative certification programs is good (78% in 2013 and 74% in 2014). If the rate is computed as the percentage of those initially employed who are still teaching three years later, the retention rate is even higher (92% in 2014). Thus, the majority of alternative certification candidates trained as TOR are easily placed in the schools on their first year, and those that are placed tend to stay teaching. It appears that training TOR candidates is a mainstay of many alternative certification programs as these programs respond to schools' needs for teachers by training the non-credentialed TORs that schools have hired. These findings seem to correlate more closely to Gray and Taie's (2015) findings that only 17% of teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years.

The completers of alternative certification programs teach in a wide range of school quality levels. A commonly held belief is that alternatively certified teachers work in low-performing schools in great numbers. However, according to the findings in this study, this is not the case. Approximately 36% of Cohort 1 and 35% of Cohort 2 taught in low-performing schools. Nearly half of all candidates taught at what are considered average schools. Among completers of alternative certification programs who do teach in low-performing schools, a much higher proportion is considered "strong" candidates rather than "weak" candidates.

### Implications

Data collection was difficult for this study because programs often are not given information as to where their candidates have gone, particularly after completers' initial placements. Some states do follow completers and report that information back to the programs. The Louisiana Board of Regents maintains a data dashboard for their teacher preparation program candidates in

order to monitor their progress and determine how well they score in terms of effectiveness (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2014/2015). However, few programs examine if their candidates stay in high-needs schools or if they migrate to lower-needs schools. Data such as teacher retention, teacher effectiveness, and teacher migration need to be collected and analyzed to help programs better serve their area schools. Ideally, it would be beneficial if Title II/Higher Education Act data collection could require states to provide this information to their programs so that programs could use it for self-evaluation and so it could be compared nationally.



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