

# Alternative Certification in Higher Education: New Initiatives in South Carolina

SEPTEMBER 2019 WORKING PAPER SERIES I

The 2019-2020 school year began as have previous years with classrooms nationwide without certified teachers. In 2018, South Carolina had approximately 621 vacancies at the beginning of the school year compared to 500 at the beginning of the 2017-18 school year. Additionally, enrollment in teacher education programs across the nation has declined significantly over the past two decades (CERRA, 2018). The decline in enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs, the attrition of certified teachers, and growing student enrollment have left states including South Carolina in a teacher shortage crisis (Aragon, 2016) and looking to alternative pathways to bring educators into classrooms.

While various alternative certification models outside of higher education continue to exist, in March of 2019, the State Department of Education took the first step to allow IHEs to apply to become alternative certification providers. The Alternative Route and Program Approval Process and Standards (Section 59-43-51 of the current Code of Laws in South Carolina) grant the State Board of Education the rights of approval for educator preparation programs regarding recruitment, application/admittance, and preparation of candidates through alternative route preparation.

Despite this first step in providing more options for alternative certification programs, state policymakers should consider additional ways to increase the pipeline of qualified teachers by reviewing all regulations surrounding teacher certification and focusing continued attention on both recruitment and retention. This paper discusses the teacher shortage in South Carolina and new initiatives to improve alternative certification and the retention of high-quality teachers.

## + SOUTH CAROLINA

- The 2019 Annual Report from CERRA indicates that the number of teachers leaving their positions had grown each year. The 2017-2018 school year saw 7,339 teachers leaving their positions for various reasons, an almost 60% increase from 2010. The 2019 Report also highlights “a growing disparity between the rate at which teachers are entering the profession and the rate at which they are leaving it” (CERRA, 2019, p. 7) and notes that this gap will not be filled solely with teachers from traditional preparation programs. The SC Commission on Higher Education indicates that approximately 6.9% of the bachelor’s degrees awarded in 2015-2016 were in the field of education, and the number of teacher education program completers in SC has declined by more than 30% since 2012. Consequently, because of attrition, declining education graduation rates, and K-12 enrollment growth, school districts are “compelled to rely on alternative programs” (CERRA, 2019, p. 7).
- While the 2018-2019 school year had been marked as the year of education in South Carolina (Schechter, 2019), concerns with retention still exist and few promising practices emerged with potential to significantly impact recruitment. Alternative certification programs like the Alternative Pathways to Educator Certification (APEC) Center at Columbia College can be positioned to lead SC out of the teacher shortage by combining the research-based pedagogy and content of traditional teacher preparation programs with flexibility afforded by alternative programs. To ensure quality outcomes for candidates enrolled in alternative programs, our state and others should continue to look to institutions of higher education as partners and leaders in alternative certification efforts.

## + RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase the candidate pool with additional, high quality, alternative certification programs offered in partnerships with IHEs.**

State funds that are allocated to school districts could be used to support partnerships with IHEs and the preparation of alternatively certified teachers (i.e. funds could be used to support tuition reimbursement and professional conferences for alternatively certified teachers). The Alternative Route and Program Approval Process and Standards of Section 59-43-51 provide the framework for such collaboration as preparation providers must have established partnerships with at least one school district.

- **Financial support through the continued focus on teacher salaries and initiatives such as the expansion of loan forgiveness programs should be considered for alternative certifiers and career changers.**

These initiatives may also include loan forgiveness from previous degree coursework. Initial APEC applicant survey results suggest that instructional assistants have invested great time and financial resources to obtain certification and degrees through various for-profit and non-profit institutions. Such efforts have left these applicants with student loan debt and advanced degrees without South Carolina teacher certification.

- **A thorough and systematic evaluation of all alternative certification programs should be mandated.**

The current assessment and evaluation process required of education preparation providers (EPPs) should be expanded to include all certifying programs in our state, traditional and alternative. In addition, the state should begin tracking the performance and retention rates of teachers who complete the various alternative programs offered in the state. Until clear data tracking systems are in place for all certifiers, researchers will be unable to compare alternative and traditional certifiers using statistically reliable procedures. The outcome of this evaluation will be identifying the factors that are most likely to lead to alternative program completion success and provide the framework for future programs.

- **Education policymakers should conduct a thorough review of all regulations and statutes surrounding certification.**

Policy studies to determine the impact of certification requirements, particularly entrance exams, would provide insights on how these requirements effect recruitment of quality candidates. Policymakers should consider optional entrance requirements for traditional teacher programs, particularly for candidates who are unable to pass initial entrance examinations. A review of recent regulations to include the Alternative Route and Program Approval Process and Standards and Section 59-43-51 of the current Code of Laws in South Carolina is also recommended.

- **Continue retention efforts to fully impact the growing teacher shortage.**

While financial incentives to increase teacher pay have received broad support and much discussion from various groups, teachers who have chosen to leave their positions identify job related factors such as support and working conditions as reasons for their decisions (CERRA, 2019). Further research regarding the reasons South Carolina teachers leave their positions is needed. The findings of these studies may lead to intentional professional development programming for administrators and mentor teachers to better support alternatively and traditionally certified teachers. Districts should maximize resources at local public and private institutions for professional development opportunities for school leaders and teacher training of district employees. IHEs possess talent and resources that can support the efforts of professional development in our local districts.

## + ABOUT SC TEACHER

SC TEACHER provides comprehensive research, visualized data profiles, and compelling stories to communicate impact of educator pipeline policies and promote transformative practices that inform policymakers, educators, and communities who care about education scaling economic opportunity.

SC-TEACHER.ORG