

Acclimating to alternative pathways in teacher education: The more we do, the more we need to do

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Abstract

Due to widespread teacher shortages, a desire for teacher diversity, and the need for specific expertise in PreK-12th grade classrooms, individual state-level departments of education have instituted alternative pathways toward teacher certification. These pathways blend traditional educator preparation practices with Earn While You Learn opportunities as paid classroom teachers with the hope that they complete formal teaching certification requirements. This is a summary of how one university bridged their state department of education initiatives with local schools to support teacher candidates where they were and where they needed to be. The aim continues to be to develop life-long educators who not only survive but thrive at the frontlines of PreK-12 education. This article reflects upon the developments of a small private university over the past 8 years. By reflecting on these experiences, we aim to provide recommendations for implementing and supporting alternative approaches. Authors provide benefits, ongoing concerns, and recommendations for educator preparation programs and others who seek to bridge state-university-school partnerships to fully engage emerging educators who chose alternative pathways.

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Introduction

All of the United States departments of education now have alternative pathways to teacher certification. Due to a lack of traditionally prepared and qualified teachers, a lack of diverse teachers, and a lack of teachers with much-needed expertise, state departments have provided alternative pipelines to teaching certification that broaden candidate pools and help support state-wide local educational agencies (LEAs) and other PreK-12 schools (Wilson & Kelley, 2022). This paper seeks to share the lessons learned from eight years of using the alternative instructional intern certification in Pennsylvania.

Even before the pandemic, one out of every five new U.S. public school teachers were already using alternative certification pathways toward state teaching licensure (McFarland et al., 2018). This increased post-Pandemic. In Pennsylvania, for the 2022-2023 school year, 25% of teachers were hired using alternative and temporary credentialing. This phenomenon was highest in urban settings followed by rural areas (American Association of Employment in Education, 2023).

The recent number of teaching certifications issued in Pennsylvania, traditionally or alternatively earned, is at a ten-year low point from almost 26,000 (8,000 by the IHE sector) in 2012-2013 down to approximately 8,000 (2,000 by the IHE sector) in 2022. These low numbers support mounting concerns as teacher shortages grow, impacting all areas of PreK-12 teaching. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on issuing temporary teaching emergency permits and instructional intern certifications (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023).

Emergency Permits

School districts, public and private, career tech institutions, intermediate units, and for-profits can request an Emergency Permit for an individual who is not qualified to fill a vacancy. In prior years, a position had to be posted for ten days, and then the LEA could request an emergency permit for an individual. These permits are valid from the day of issuance to the final day of the academic school year, including summer school or extended school year (ESY) programs.

There are conditions in which PDE may reissue the

emergency permit for up to three years for a specific position. This issuance of emergency permits has quadrupled since the 2015-2016 school year and continues to rise (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). During the 2021-2022 school year, over 6,000 emergency permits were issued, and these did not include the 16,000 additional emergency permits granted to day-to-day substitute teachers (PDE, 2023). The current alternative to an emergency permit is the intern certification.

Instructional Intern Certification

While intern is a term that can mean a great variety of things, an intern certification as an alternative pathway to formal teaching credentials is said to have its roots in California in the 1980s. The California Teacher Internship Program (CTIP) allowed individuals with a Baccalaureate degree to teach preK-12 and gain experience while completing coursework (Gold, 1986). Many intern programs at the state level are readily available and share similarities, such as aligning with respective state requirements, including competencies, modifying program course requirements, including field parameters, offering online and virtual options, and providing year-round accessibility to coursework. Differences include admission requirements (GPA, SAT, prior degree work); education course specifics and number of courses for program completion; sequence of coursework (i.e., methods, theoretical, historical); expectations for certifying exam completion; field requirements, including expectations for student teaching and classroom visitations; and how long an alternative certification may last (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007).

While the emergency permit and intern certification allow an individual to be the classroom teacher-of-record, several differences exist. Unlike the emergency permit that a school district provisionally approves, which is valid for up to three years and renewed annually, the EPP provisionally approves the intern certificate, valid for three years as long as the student is continually enrolled in coursework (9 credits a year). In order to initially qualify for the intern certificate, the candidate must have a cumulative GPA of 3.0 and pass examinations within the certification area. In both types of temporary certification, an individual is qualified to accept a paid full-time long-term teaching position in which the teacher candidate can complete

required clinical field hours (minimum of 150 hours) and subsequently, student teaching (64 days). This can be advertised as an Earn While You Learn opportunity for those interested in entering the teaching profession that want more than a job and rather, a career in teaching.

Context

The following lessons learned come from experiences at a small, private institution in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania.

This School of Education was among the first to embrace and become an approved provider of instructional intern certifications in Pennsylvania and now offers alternative pathways in elementary education, special education, and secondary education. The institute's Teacher-Intern-Program (TIP) began in 2016 with a program in secondary education (7-12th) in response to the critical teacher shortage in science, mathematics, and foreign language. The program offered career changers with expertise in high-needs content areas with an accelerated route to the classroom while ensuring preparation in pedagogy, assessment, and ability to meet the needs of diverse learners. When the state adopted a new Special Education PreK-12 certification band, the School of Education was well-positioned to be the first in the state to offer this instructional intern certification.

In 2016, the program began with 7 graduate-level students seeking certification in the following content areas: biology, chemistry, English, and Spanish. Since its inception, the program has grown and expanded in certification areas. For example, the 2023 cohort included 32 students in biology, communications, English, mathematics, social studies, special education, and early childhood elementary PreK-4. As the popularity of the intern certification program grew, an increase in the number of career changers as well as those who were not financially able to afford traditional pathways to teacher certification was noted by many.

Implementing the Intern Certification

According to the Framework for the Teacher Intern Certification Program (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012), intern certification programs:

must provide flexible and accelerated pedagogical

training to teacher interns who have demonstrated competency in a subject area, provided that the first year of teaching includes a minimum of one classroom observation each month by an approved college/university in this Commonwealth (22 Pa. Code 49.91(c)).

Alternative pathways were designed to provide faster routes to certification and have been proven to do so (Matsko et al., 2022). While comparing traditional and alternative pathways in some 800 preservice teachers (PSTs), Matsko and colleagues found that in addition to reducing program length, the amount of coursework and length of student teaching were also shortened (2022). With these findings in mind, the faculty aimed to design an accelerated pathway to the classroom without compromising the quality of the coursework or impact of the clinical field experiences.

The faculty innovated identified areas of need. The education faculty began improving our TIP program by examining our coursework. We updated our courses by improving our content and ensuring it aligned with recent and substantiated research. Conversations about teaching philosophies, core tenets, and local PreK-12 landscape were part of the iterative process. Initial changes to the program included removing dated information from syllabi, updating content and instructional strategies, and sequencing of coursework and course availability.

In accordance with IHE trends for graduate-level students, course format evolved from traditional and seemingly restrictive in-person classes to online, synchronous and asynchronous ones, offered outside of typical teaching workdays and throughout the year. For this reason, it was critical that faculty undergo training to ensure online courses were learner-friendly, rich in content, and resourceful for students.

For the field, it was vital to the program that students were not limited to a one-and-only classroom while completing all field and student teaching requirements for a certification that covered a range of grades or incidence types. Without ensuring that field experiences are varied during their preparation, certified teachers may be significantly limited. Teachers who are hired through alternative certifications and have only one classroom experience may demonstrate limited

classroom abilities while their certification indicates otherwise; grade levels or incidence types, for example. Certified but limited in field exposures challenge school administrators who must assign teachers based on abilities (certification ranges) and annually reassign teachers to various grade levels.

For several related reasons, communication between IHE and LEAs needed to grow stronger if alternative pathways were to work for our graduate students seeking employment. To support teacher candidates who chose Earn While You Learn paid field experiences, and to help human resource departments and school administrators understand these opportunities and differences, department members became involved in marketing, advertising, and counseling, selling the alternative pathways to help fill the growing teaching vacancies and to invite those with emergency permits to develop pedagogical skill sets. Additionally, we were “on call” to assist those leaders when questions arose and negotiate placements to vary student (teacher) experiences while remaining within certification area while also addressing classroom shortages.

In the next section, we discuss our lessons learned from several years of supporting students in choosing alternative pathways and report on the benefits, concerns, and solutions that arose as the program evolved.

Lessons Learned

Unlike previous years, more graduate-level students applied to the EPP with working experience in schools as aides, paraprofessionals, or as uncertified teachers in private/parochial/charter schools as well as with a completed undergraduate degree in education (but without certification), a completed undergraduate degree in another subject area, or prior teaching certification and seeking another teaching certification. Some students came with newly issued emergency permits as recent classroom teacher hires; some came with expiring emergency permits that may or may not be renewed, while some were career changers. According to the graduate advisor, most students who enter the program are interested in the most accelerated model of teacher certification, completing the route as soon as possible.

In contrast, other graduate-level students were conscientiously choosing traditional routes and were not

in a rush to enter classrooms as paid teachers, creating multiple tracks and pools of students. This resulted in identifying and communicating multiple tracks for completing coursework, working with students wherever they were on their pathway, and where they wanted to be in order to ensure they were able to work in the setting of their choice.

Alternative Pathways: Intern Certification over Emergency Permits

For those with emergency permits who entered the educator preparation program at our institute of higher education, it was an indication that these individuals were choosing the teaching profession over merely a temporary job. Students without emergency permits and most traditional students wanted to pursue the intern certification via our Teacher Intern Program (TIP). They hoped to begin teaching once the intern certification was earned. Some students wanted a traditional program, one course at a time, and wanted to wait to enter the field, due to financial reasons.

Over the past eight years, we have realized the following benefits:

- 1. Increased communication between the institute of higher education and local education agencies in addressing teacher shortages and hiring of teacher candidates in our local area:** Alternative certificates allowed our students to fill teaching vacancies before completing a traditional program. With some but not all coursework completed, students were able to complete on-the-job training while teaching, which allowed them to support themselves as well as their families.
- 2. Students living the life of a teacher:** As with typical field and student teaching, assuming the role of a classroom teacher affirms career choice and teaching journey. Students with alternative certifications who worked full teaching days throughout the academic year had more classroom ownership, including more administrative responsibilities, more student engagement, and more involvement with student families. The program also encouraged diversity in the teaching workforce by attracting individuals from various backgrounds and experiences, who may have been previously excluded from such opportuni-

ties due to the time and financial burden of traditional EPP models (PDE, 2023c).

3. Individuality through greater support and ongoing development: Student tracks were individualized during faculty advisement. Each student had the opportunity for on-going support with their graduate program advisor. Individual students brought unique experiences, different work conditions, varying motivations, and individualized professional goals in becoming teachers. Understanding individual context was crucial, and the process revealed that support for professionalism, pedagogy, content knowledge, classroom management, and/or student engagement above and beyond the coursework was needed. This also led to incorporating a dispositions rubric that was discussed during individual teacher-candidate meetings. These one-on-one meetings aided in the guidance that students requested surrounding job opportunities, handling challenging classrooms, and preparing university supervisors to work with the teacher candidates in the field. This whole-person approach fostered greater awareness for faculty and enriched their perspectives of the diversity and experiences of our student learners.

4. Increased course enrollment and program retention: By amending the flexibility and accessibility of our program offerings, we retained more students along their educational journey, regardless of whether they were on the accelerated, traditional, or part-time program track. Virtual learning became more pronounced during these past eight years, and we experimented with hybrid, flexible, synchronous, and asynchronous formats and discovered our new best practices. This also led to increased expectations for students and faculty about virtual class participation and incorporating virtual etiquette when participating professionally online.

5. Collective Professional Development: Unlike those who teach with emergency permits but do not engage in an EPP, the intern certification and participation in an EPP allowed students to grow exponentially while they were learning on the job. Meetings and seminars allowed cohorts to come

together and discuss relevant educational topics such as culturally relevant pedagogies, trauma and wellness, school climate, or their day-to-day challenges and successes. Students shared comparisons and contrasts of real-life examples and applications in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Some students reported feeling increased self-efficacy because they could then discuss relevant hot topics with coworkers who may or may not have learned much about emerging issues, understanding, or best practices.

Challenges and evolving solutions

While benefits were noted, there were also challenges during the initiation, implementation, and continual innovation of an EPP that aimed to meet learners where they were and where they needed to be. We addressed some concerns early on, and some challenges still inspire our ongoing attempts to find solutions if we are to support the greatest number of teacher candidates. The following is based on anecdotal experiences from advising sessions and departmental conversations.

While charter, private, and parochial schools were all early adopters of the teacher candidates with alternative credentials, our local LEA partners embraced the Intern certification once they became more informed. Many of our graduate students chose charter schools over private and parochial positions and even public urban and suburban schools due to opportunity and for higher pay. This practice often led to greater concerns and challenges as provided below. Upon reflection of the alternative pathways and teacher candidates over the past eight years, highlights of concern include:

1. Teacher Workload. Reports came in about uncommon teaching schedules, for example, lacking standardized preparation and planning periods, contracts that included extended days, expectations of additional responsibilities, and, in Special Education, an unexpected and overwhelming caseload. While interviewing and accepting contracted positions, many students would call the IHE with a sense of urgency, requesting meetings with faculty and staff about whether to accept a teaching position and if placement and teaching load would satisfy the requirements for continuing their EPP plans. Faculty participated in mul-

multiple meetings with principals, human resource personnel, and others to help ensure that the candidate and positions were a good fit for all stakeholders while supporting both candidate and school needs. Most students heeded the advice while others chose situations advised against. This had an impact on in-person supervision when students chose jobs far from the school and/or midterm during a field semester.

- 2. Teacher Burnout.** Unqualified teachers experience higher stress levels and burnout without proper preparation (Mijakoski et al., 2022). Throughout literature and from our own experiences, we found that new teachers felt the least prepared for classroom management. Classroom management can be difficult for newer teachers and teacher candidates to create a positive learning environment, address behavioral issues effectively, and maintain discipline. Burnout negatively impacts student well-being and job satisfaction. Some students expressed interest in leaving classroom teaching immediately after receiving their teaching certificate, regardless of whether they continued their studies in the program. Our group wondered how many potential teachers leave the industry before even receiving teaching certification and how the attrition statistics account for those who leave before even entering the teaching profession.
- 3. Lack of administrative and coworker support.** Many candidates felt siloed to their own individual classrooms, and others felt unsupported by the teams they were on. We heard concerns with professional relationships, such as with coworkers who did not recognize alternative teacher candidates as real teachers, and concerns that they were trying to advocate for help from administrators and not receiving it. According to State Rep. Joseph D’Orsie, it is a lack of support from school administrators, and not salary, that leads to the attrition in his legislative district (Scicchitano, 2023). We found that asking our university supervisors to conduct more school visits and student meetings weekly instead of monthly was the best way to develop individual professional disposition, strengthen relationships, and feel

supported in their roles. This required restructuring the university supervisor role, such as recruiting more practitioners, expecting more than the mainstream expectations, requiring multiple and on-going training opportunities for supervisors to meet and discuss trends and solutions with EPP faculty and staff members. With new communication and documentation requirements, a new database system was created for supervisors and others.

- 4. Low teacher candidate motivation, self-efficacy and self-esteem.** Over the years, emerging educators reported an increase in a sense of despair. Teachers that were not fully prepared to teach struggled to maintain proper lesson planning and preparation, student engagement, and classroom management. Self-efficacy is a person’s particular set of beliefs that determine how well one can execute a plan of action in prospective situations (Lopez-Garrido, 2023, π 4). Self-efficacy, self-esteem, and motivation are all closely linked. Additionally, a feeling of ineffectiveness leading to low teacher self-efficacy is linked to attrition (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Supporting candidates through additional efforts by university supervision, advising and peer groups helped to support these candidates to complete their semesters successfully. An ongoing concern is whether the teacher’s decreased motivation impacts their students’ interest in learning (Keane et al., 2018).

Our efforts included discussions about perseverance, in group and one-on-one settings, calling attention to feelings of disillusionment, and encouraging students to improve various skills so they could be more effective for themselves and their students.

- 5. Community Impact and Equity.** The lack of fully qualified teachers can adversely affect the school’s reputation. Parents and the community lose confidence in the education system when they believe that unqualified individuals are responsible for a lack of student learning, the safety of the children attending those schools, and begin to raise legal and ethical concerns (Ingersoll, 1999). Educational standards and regulations are

in place to ensure that students receive a quality education, and assigning unqualified individuals to teaching roles violates these standards and causes concern throughout communities. We observed that placing unqualified teachers in classrooms can contribute to educational inequity. Those PreK-12th grade students with the lowest achievement were in schools that were the most willing to hire provisionally or alternatively certified teachers, often leaving us feeling that inequities were exacerbated. Reports from field supervisors led to efforts to advocate on our students' behalf with their administrators while protecting partnership agreements and relationships.

- 6. Overloaded professional development.** Over eight years, there have been teacher candidates that felt they could not attend weekly and individual in-person evening seminar meetings. The concern was heard that there were too many school commitments as well as family obligations. One concern voiced was a feeling of being overwhelmed by district-mandated professional development.

First-year employees are required to complete the state-mandated induction program (PDE, CSPG 20). This two-year long program commitment requires PD components that often take place during out-of-class time and after-school; candidates have claimed that they are overbooked. Students reported that topics were sometimes redundant between LEA and EPP, topics at the school level that were above their understanding since they could not relate to the “experiences” just yet, and that mandates of both programs was a burden. Despite overloaded schedules, students reported an appreciation that the required in-person or cohort meetings with supportive faculty and classmates were well worth the inconvenience first perceived as reported during exit interviews.

Emergency-permitted students were more likely to fail to acclimate or reach expectations reserved for formally trained experts. With little understanding of the educative process nor of their own influence and impact on the entire school community and its stakeholders, it intrigued us to wonder, how many emergency-permitted educators left teaching before learning how to succeed in their teaching capacity and gain instructional

certification? We believe the effectiveness of alternative teaching credentials depends on the type of alternative credential as well as the quality of the IHE program in order to realistically support candidates during their transition into teaching.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on lessons learned from eight years of offering alternative pathways to teacher certification in Pennsylvania at one small university. IHE administrators and those interested in providing solutions for institutional recruitment and local qualified teacher shortage concerns can consider these recommendations when reflecting on their own experiences:

- 1. Reflect.** Reflect on the core tenets of your specific EPP program and align it with institute mission, vision, and values. Determine which resources are available or can be developed to support changes to program offerings, formats, and personnel needed to design, prepare, implement, and support ongoing changes that address students with alternative certifications.
- 2. Dedicate time.** Dedicate time and expertise to reviewing and further developing courses that need to be efficient and effective, in content, format, and accessibility while aligning with adult-learning principles. Provide ample advisement and clearly communicated roadmaps for the journey into teaching and more permanent teacher certification.
- 3. Ensure alignment.** Align program to state department competencies and parameters surrounding alternative pathways, including field and student teaching guidelines. Dedicate time and resources to maintaining this alignment on a regular basis. Decide as a department or institution if additional parameters and the logic or philosophy to support those additions are needed. With an accelerated program, teaching within the certification and grade-level area becomes vital. Decide how your program will ensure that proper field experiences and supervision is conducted.
- 4. Collaborate.** Establish new and strengthened school partnerships with a variety of local

schools. PreK-12 schools benefit from access to teacher candidates, reduced recruitment costs, a workforce, and improved teacher stability (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). Together, we interpret, support, and ensure the integration of teacher candidates into local classrooms. This requires more check-ins with changing personnel and working together to solve mutual concerns about teacher shortages. Create and conduct opportunities to collaborate regularly and represent thought leadership in your area.

5. Communicate. It is critical that programs communicate

a. with teacher candidates. With growing amounts of information to ingest, digest, and practice to be successful, IHE EPPs should define clear program goals and structure, articulate the various approaches to traditional and alternative teaching certification pathways, individualize students, and provide roadmaps to help support their journey. We found notifications, announcements, and reminders pushed out through learning systems supported student success as just-in-time information for those with weaker or overwhelmed time management skills. A new emphasis emerged on the importance of course sequence to ensure students mastered core competencies before completing certifying examinations. Advising, coaching, and increasing support for exam preparations became necessary as more candidates needed to retake certifying examinations.

b. with local LEAs. EPPs and schools should share data and evaluation results to assess partnership effectiveness, celebrate success, and identify improvement areas. This data-driven approach can help ensure that the program meets the needs of teacher interns and the schools where they are placed. The LEA and IHE should use data to assess the retention of teachers trained via alternative pathway certification programs.

c. with PDE. The multitude of state certifying requirements changes regularly; funding op-

portunities are available to assist students and EPP innovations. Communicating involves keeping abreast of communications and participating in information-sharing groups.

6. Provide quality mentorship. Provide strong mentorship for teacher candidates by pairing them with experienced and effective coworking educators. We require contact information for a fellow teacher's name and administrator for those that are classroom teachers of record in an alternative pathway program. The fellow teachers are invited to meet and observe their coworkers during their field and student teaching experiences. This provides an additional lens to the teacher candidate's development and contributes to the work overseen by the university supervisor. In addition to faculty who work directly with education students in coursework, consider recently retired practitioners, for those with the most recent and most relevant PreK-12 experiences.

7. Require weekly cohort meetings and/or seminars with supervisors. Offer support services to help teacher candidates navigate the challenges of the program and their new role. This could include academic advising, counseling, and clearly communicated resources to address specific needs. Be sure to allow students to share their experiences in small groups with each other and create safe spaces. Topics may range and can be shared towards collective knowledge gains. Faculty can prompt discussion and should avoid lecturing. Some students, for example, teach in schools that have incorporated daily socio-emotional learning curricula with instructional practices. Provide opportunities to hear from each other and share knowledge. Many use different hardware and software for students and family communications, grading portals, applications, and practices, and small community discussions are beneficial to understanding changing and best practices.

8. Provide high-quality and relevant learning. Ensure that instruction aligns with what students need to know about success, such as communication when working with their families and class management. This involves conversations

surrounding diversity, inclusion, trauma, positive psychology, and solutions-based approaches to working one-on-one with students to solve classroom challenges. While many colleges offer interesting topics, focus on the important skill-building development that empowers early educators to be effective and efficient. While costly, consider that subject matter experts deliver these for the most impact on student learning.

9. **Networking Opportunities.** Facilitate networking opportunities for teacher candidates to connect with each other, coworkers, experts in the field, and potential employers. Networking creates a sense of community and can involve anyone in their higher ed institution, PreK-12 teaching position, families of students, and speakers at meetings, among a few. Teacher candidates who develop strong connections with the school community are more likely to remain with the district and in teaching after completing their certification, contributing to teacher stability (PDE, 2023c).
10. **Continuous Program Evaluation.** Implement a continuous evaluation process of program components to gather feedback from all stakeholders, including the new teachers, mentors, and school administrators. Interview your candidates upon certification about their experiences and consider the feedback for trends and patterns that inform improvement. Use this feedback to make internal improvements and adjustments as needed. Regular feedback, assessments, and evaluations contribute to continuously improving an EPP. Furthermore, allow faculty and university supervisors the opportunity to share their observations and experiences. Build an overarching evaluation plan for the program and monitor the specific changes.

Conclusion

A consensus among our team was that alternative and temporary certification programs required more IHE intervention and involvement by faculty and staff with students, school administrators, and PDE. We found it important to have staff dedicated to embracing challenges as they emerged, working with students

that wanted and needed more advisement sessions and customized pathways, researching and navigating problem-solving solutions with multiple stakeholders, and basically, providing more as more was needed. This is an integral and ongoing component of our mission and responsibility being an EPP.

Now, with more awareness about the needs of our incoming students and future teacher candidates, individualization and support from entry through exit and into their early years of teaching is necessary if we are going to help those entering teaching to not only survive but thrive at the frontlines of PreK-12 education.

The American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE): Educator Supply and Demand in the United States Report for 2023 stated that enrollment in alternative teacher certification programs would likely increase and traditional programming would decrease. The reporting and recommendations provided herein claim that as an EPP, the more we do, the more we need to do. With support from federal and state departments of education as well as institutional leadership, through data-driven research and collective knowledge gain, Educator Preparation Programs can remain the keystone that bridges the future of teacher pathways in our schools.

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