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## TEACHER CERTIFICATION

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Teacher certification is a regulatory measure to ensure a minimal skill level for teachers. Implicit in the definition is the nuance that the certifying agency warrants that the teacher is qualified. Current certification practices focus on ensuring competence in subject matter and pedagogy, often by means of testing. In addition, the certification process allows the certifying agencies to examine certification applications

for individuals with prior criminal records. The certifying agency may require periodic reapplication, continued professional development, and an established level of acceptable behavior for the teacher to maintain certification. This entry looks at the development of traditional teacher certification programs and briefly describes recent alternative strategies.

### **Traditional Certification**

The first school designed for the training of teachers, the normal school, began operation in Massachusetts in 1839. The practice of teacher preparation was slow to spread, and the system did not become commonplace until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lacking a national teacher certification requirement, the responsibility for teacher certification was left to each state.

There is substantial variation in the specific rules and procedures among the states, but traditional state certification schemes are similar. First, state certification agencies establish certification standards, or minimum guidelines, for teacher education colleges within the states. In most instances, the certifying agency is the state's board of education or a professional practices board comprised of elected or appointed certified teachers and administrators. Second, the teacher education colleges establish programs to meet the minimum criteria established by the state. Finally, when the prospective teachers complete the college program, the college recommends the students to the state certification agency, who then "licenses" or certifies the teachers. Prior to obtaining the certificate, states generally require that the prospective teacher be a resident of the United States and of good moral character. Additionally, states usually require that the applicant have at least a bachelor's degree and a minimum number of hours in pedagogy and the subject to be taught.

The awarding of a teacher certificate based upon the completion of a state-approved program was the predominant means of certification during the early twentieth century, and by the early 1950s, most states issued certificates on this model. Citing studies showing the importance of the teacher in student learning outcomes, policy makers in the 1980s began to focus on teacher quality. Shifting from the process-oriented

emphasis of teacher preparation, states moved to a standards-based emphasis. Influenced greatly by standards developed by the National State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, most state standards are similar in nature. Because of the similarity of standards, mobility of teacher certification across state lines is facilitated.

Concomitant with the standards-based movement, certification testing was implemented to make certain that the certified teachers had met the minimum standards. Teacher testing serves two primary purposes. First, testing provides for a systematic method of determining teacher competence. Second, testing enables the certifying agency to focus on standards-related performance as opposed to process-oriented regulations. But because of the pressure to help prospective teachers excel on the state-administered tests, teacher testing also had the effect of altering the teacher preparation curriculum. Many programs adjusted the curriculum to (a) align the content of the course work with the standards, and (b) adjust course assessment to mimic the state assessment. There have been legal challenges to the system of certification tied to testing. But as long as the test maintains content validity (tests what is taught), the courts have upheld the use of testing as a prerequisite to certification.

Empirical studies supporting the effectiveness of teacher certification are scant, at best. There is some evidence that student performance in mathematics is positively associated with teacher certification. However, studies that explore relationships between teacher certification and student success in other subject areas are inconclusive.

*National Board Certification.* Based upon a recommendation from a Carnegie Foundation task force, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established by the foundation in 1987. The NBPTS is a nonregulatory, nongovernmental organization designed to provide a voluntary system of national teacher certification. The NBPTS allows for certification in fourteen additional areas, including a generalist certificate. Although each certification is based upon a unique set of standards, national board certification is predicated upon five core propositions: (1) Teachers are committed to students and learning,

(2) teachers know the subjects they teach and know how to teach those subjects to students, (3) teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning, (4) teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience, and (5) teachers are members of learning communities. In 2006, about 50,000 teachers had obtained national board certification. A few studies have examined the relationship between nationally board certified teachers and student achievement, and the results have been mixed.

*Adverse Certification Actions.* Each state has a mechanism for taking adverse actions against teachers holding teacher certificates. These adverse actions include noninscribed (private) reprimands, inscribed (public) reprimands, suspension of certificates for specified periods of time, and certificate revocation. Using an administrative hearing process, the certificate granting agency takes the adverse certification actions because of a wide range of improper actions on the part of the certified teacher. The improper actions include the violation of the code of ethics, contract abandonment, and the violation of state or federal laws.

### Alternative Strategies

Traditional teacher certification programs are often criticized as operating under a set of cumbersome, highly structured rules that serve as roadblocks to innovation and creativity. Therefore, during the teacher certification reform of the 1980s and due, in part, to a shortage of certified teachers willing to teach in the public schools, some states began to allow for alternative means of certifying teachers. Many saw the new strategies as an attack on the traditional, university-based system of preparing teachers, and many prominent teacher educators viewed alternative certification as professionally irresponsible.

Alternative certification rules provide for a different system of teacher preparation, often allowing for teacher preparation to occur in locations other than a university setting. Alternative certification programs are based either in a specific school district, in a governmental institution, or as an entrepreneurial venture. School district-based programs are typically housed in large school districts that have the resources available to deliver the training in pedagogy and classroom

management. Generally, it is these same districts that have the greatest shortages of qualified teachers.

Using the flexibility allowed by alternative teacher certification statutes, states have seen the growth of nontraditional programs in universities and intermediate education agencies (i.e., regionally located education service organizations). In states where there are two sets of program regulations, one for traditional university-based programs and one for alternative certification programs, some universities have opted to develop teacher certification programs under alternative rules. Others have chosen to develop two distinct programs, traditional programs for the traditional university students and alternative programs for mid-career-changing individuals or nontraditional students.

Intermediate education agencies use the flexible alternative certification rules to design programs that enable individuals who hold bachelor's degrees to bypass the structured university environment. They begin teaching after completing various program modules. Consequently, unless an arrangement has been made with a university, the content of the modules does not result in university credit.

A few states have opened teacher certification programs to entrepreneurial groups. Prominent among these are national programs such as Troops to Teachers and Teach for America that are touted as viable alternatives to traditional, university-based programs.

*Mark Littleton*

*See also* Alternative Accreditation for Teachers; Educational Reform; Standards; Teacher Preparation; Teachers, Professional Status of

*See Visual History* Chapter 20, Printed Records and Photographs of School Activities and Personnel

### Further Readings

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