Alternative Pathways for Special Educators: A Comparative Analysis Before and During COVID-19

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Agenda

- Definitions
- Background
- Research questions
- Methods
- Findings
- Implications
- Next Steps
- Questions

Definitions

- Alternative Route Pathway – established and governed by state's educational policies, which outline specific program requirements that individuals must meet to be credentialed
- Alternative Route Program (AR) – nontraditional and accelerated preparation routes to obtain a teaching license (Day et al., 2023) housed within pathways
  - Ex: Louisiana has 27 alternate route programs and three alternate route pathways

Teacher Shortages

- Teacher shortage is defined (USDOE, 2017) whether teaching positions
  - Go unfilled
  - Are filled with teachers who lack credentials
  - Are filled by teachers who have credentials but are teaching outside of their specific credential (Nguyen et al., 2022)
- Based on this definition, there are shortages of special educators in 48 states (NCES, 2022)
  - Vacant special educator positions were nearly 4x higher than that of elementary teacher positions (Goldhaber, Brown, et al., 2022)

Literature Review/Overview

- Chronic shortage of special education teachers and have been pervasive and consistent since 1975
- Policy solution: Alternative route (AR) programs – nontraditional and accelerated preparation routes to obtain a teaching license (Day et al., 2023)
  - AR programs started in the 1980s
- The onset of COVID-19 exacerbated special education teacher shortages (NCES, 2023)

Declining teacher enrollment

- Harper et al., (2022)
  - Findings reveal consistent downward trend in special education program completers over time
- Day et al., 2023
  - Fewer people completed special education programs via traditional preparation programs in 2019 – 2020 vs 2012 – 2013
  - However, more people completed special education programs via AR programs in 2019 – 2020 vs 2012 – 2013 reflecting general rise in popularity of AR programs

Purpose

- While AR pathways are not a new policy solution, this is an opportunity to raise the question of how states are responding to these increased shortages in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps by authorizing more AR pathways or less demanding AR pathways.

Hypothesis

- We hypothesize that the influence of factors like COVID-19 and the declining stature of the teaching profession have shaped AR pathways, rendering AR programs more accessible for individuals to enter.

Research Questions

- What are the key differences in the landscape of alternate route pathways for special education teacher certification in 2023 compared to 2018?
  - What are the differences in eligibility criteria for entering a specific pathway?
  - What are the differences in training requirements for pathways to alternative licensure?
  - What are the differences in state exam requirements?

Method

- Used previous research and 2018 database to identify variables/categories of interest.
- Reviewed every state department of education website or other websites with information on alternative route pathways to determine eligibility & training requirements
- Contacted state department of education licensure offices to corroborate information gathered
- Coded information gathered based upon variables of interest
- Calculated totals of each variable and then determined percentage of each variable
- Visually compared 2018 to 2023 numbers and %ages

Pathway Features

- Commonalities in terms of general requirements of entry into a specific pathway (Day et al., 2023)

Eligibility requirements	Training requirements
Bachelor's Degree	Coursework
	Clinical experience
	Mentoring

Findings: Eligibility Requirements

Eligibility requirements		
# of pathways	111	100
# of pathways that require a BA	95 (86%)	93 (93%)
minimum GPA	29 (26%)	31 (31%)
# of pathways that require minimum course requirements to be completed before entry into pathway	14 (13%)	4 (4%)
# of pathways that require previous work experience	13 (12%)	6 (6%)
# of pathways that require a test to be taken before entry into pathway	68 (61%)	38 (38%)
# of pathways that require individuals to be employed in a district before entry into pathway	33 (30%)	19 (19%)

Program Requirements

Pathway Requirements	2018	2023
# of Total Pathways	111	100
# of pathways that require minimum number of hours or coursework? [is coursework required?	98 (88%)	86 (86%)
# of pathways with state exam requirements? (y/n)	105 (96%)	90 (90%)
# of pathways that lead to full licensure	N/A	16 (16%)
# of pathways that require mentorship	14 (13%)	23 (23%)

Qualitative findings

- Language used in pathway policies – not very clear nor explicit
  - Virginia – an exemplar
    - First state to adopt an AR pathway specifically for special educators
    - Explicitly names special education endorsement may not be obtained through testing

- For example, only 16 pathways only 16 pathways clearly indicated that obtaining special education certification would ultimately result in full licensure

Implications

- Unclear language and complicated state websites creates an information barrier
- There's research showing that alternatively prepared teachers are more likely to turnover than traditionally prepared teachers (Redding & Smith, 2016)

Limitations

- Don’t know when policies necessarily emerged because of lack of clarity
- This is true for information collected as well – data reflects the availability of information provided by states rathe than the complete picture of AR pathways

Next Steps

- Continue to refine our quantitative analysis
  - Identify the new pathways in 2023
  - Compare them to pathways in 2018
- Qualitatively capture differences between 2018 and 2023, within and across

Questions?

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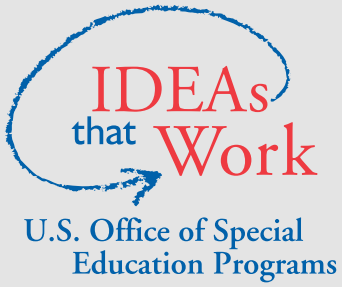

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