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
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eligibility requirements</th>
<th>Training requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clinical experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Findings: Eligibility Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eligibility requirements</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of pathways</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require a BA</td>
<td>95 (86%)</td>
<td>93 (93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minimum GPA</td>
<td>29 (26%)</td>
<td>31 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require minimum course requirements to be completed before entry into pathway</td>
<td>14 (13%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require previous work experience</td>
<td>13 (12%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require a test to be taken before entry into pathway</td>
<td>68 (61%)</td>
<td>38 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require individuals to be employed in a district before entry into pathway</td>
<td>33 (30%)</td>
<td>19 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathway Requirements</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Total Pathways</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require minimum number of hours or coursework? (is coursework required?)</td>
<td>98 (88%)</td>
<td>86 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways with state exam requirements? (y/n)</td>
<td>105 (96%)</td>
<td>90 (90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that lead to full licensure</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of pathways that require mentorship</td>
<td>14 (13%)</td>
<td>23 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 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 rather 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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