

Alternative certification reform can ease teacher shortage in math and science

By Brooke Dollens Terry

According to the Texas Education Code, the mission of public education in Texas is to “ensure that all Texas children have access to a quality education.” The code also states a goal of public education is for students to demonstrate exemplary performance in the understanding of mathematics and science.

How is it possible for a child to receive a quality education and demonstrate exemplary performance if many students are taught by teachers outside of their field of study and expertise?

The Texas Education Agency reports that more than 25 percent of teachers in Texas public schools between 2001 and 2004 taught classes outside of their field of study. Texas also faces a teacher shortage in math and science fields.

In a perfect world, a child’s education would be the primary concern and finding qualified teachers would be of utmost importance. Unfortunately, this is not the case. For individuals looking to make a career change to teaching, the lengthy and costly alternative certification process can be a roadblock to getting into the classroom. Alternative certification requirements for those with a college degree include a year of training on how to be a teacher, several thousand dollars in fees, and passing a state certification test.

A quick search on the Internet for alternative certification options revealed the high cost of the programs in Texas. For example, Texas Teachers, a private company offering alternative certification, and iteachtexas, an online distance learning alternative certification program, cost about \$4,000 each.

The current alternative certification process does not allow easy access to the classroom for “outsiders” to the education field, and favors teachers with little experience outside the classroom over experts in their field. Many professionals would love to teach in the classroom, part-or full-time, but are hindered by the many roadblocks and cost of teacher certification.

If changing careers to teaching is not very easy for individuals with college degrees and significant work experience in their field, how do we expect to fill our classrooms with qualified teachers? And how do we expect our students to “demonstrate exemplary performance” in math and science?

Of course, the powerful teacher unions do not support reforming alternative certification. Regardless of their reasons, ultimately, what does Texas care more about: Protecting teachers or educating children?

Texas could cut the bureaucratic red-tape by granting professionals, with college or advanced degrees and years of work experience in their fields, the ability to teach in the classroom by filling out an application, attending an intensive six-week course, passing a short test, and interviewing with a principal. The intensive class could include teaching fundamentals on

interacting with special needs students, information on pertinent state and federal laws, ideas on handling discipline problems, and student teaching opportunities.

According to the National Science Foundation, half of the current degreed engineering and science workforce are over the age of 40. And with the impending retirement of millions of baby boomers, a large amount of knowledge and talent will disappear from our nation's labor market. Many retirees may be looking for a way to give back to the community with their time and knowledge. A flexible part-time teaching arrangement may be the perfect fit. And Texas has almost 180,000 military retirees who may be looking for a second career.

Private sector experts are too often kept out of the classroom because of antiquated state certification requirements. If our primary concern really is our children, the Texas Legislature will act this session to start removing those barriers.

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