
Special education continues to suffer from chronic and persistent teacher shortages. For example, in 2000-2001, nearly 53,000 special education teachers, 12% of the teaching force, were less than fully certified, affecting more than 800,000 students with disabilities. In addition, many school districts lose special education teachers as the school year progresses, particularly in urban and rural areas. Since traditional sources of teacher supply, college and university preparation programs, have been unable to meet the growing demand for special education teachers, alternative routes to certification (ARC) have proliferated.

Recognizing that there is a need for highly qualified special education teachers, it is essential that we develop innovative and creative alternatives to get interested individuals prepared, licensed, and into classrooms serving students with learning disabilities. As noted in the following statement, the Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD) agrees that strategies for recruiting and developing highly qualified professionals are necessary. Still, we must ensure that ARC programs deliver research-based teacher preparation and that graduates of such programs meet agreed-upon professional standards.

CLD POSITION STATEMENT: ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO CERTIFICATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the proposed Individuals with Disabilities with Education Act (IDEA) have encouraged the development of alternative routes to certification (ARC) in special education. Even prior to these legislative efforts, ARC in special education had become a growth industry. In 1995, Buck, Polloway, and Mortorff-Robb found that 24 states offered ARC programs in special education, an increase of 19 states since 1991. Recently, it was found that 34 states offer more than 175 different ARC options, with California and Texas accounting for the largest number (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2003). Analyses of the *School and Staffing Survey* (Connelly, 2003) indicate that over 15% of those who hold certification in special education earned it through an ARC; among those who are uncredentialed and seeking certification, 24% report being in an ARC program.

Factors contributing to the proliferation of ARC in special education include (a) the persistent and growing shortage of special education teachers affecting over 800,000 students with disabilities, (b) the acute need for personnel from underrepresented groups, and (c) criticism from political action groups outside the profession and professionals within the profession (e.g., Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999) that traditional approaches to teacher preparation are self-serving, bloated, and over-regulatory.

Unfortunately, our collective knowledge base of ARC programs in special education does not match either the growth or current levels of interest in and advocacy for such programs. Rosenberg and Sindelar (2001), in a comprehensive review of the literature, found very little on the nature and efficacy of specific programs in the professional literature. They asserted that the avail-

able literature represented merely *the tip of the ARC iceberg* and that a large underground economy for teaching credentials is in place in many areas of the nation.

CLD recognizes the need for highly qualified general and special education teachers. For those responsible for the recruitment and retention of qualified special education professionals, in particular, there is a most troubling trend: As the number of children with special education needs increase, it is increasingly difficult to find highly qualified personnel who want to pursue a career in special education. A traditional source of supply for special education classrooms – freshly minted graduates of college or university degree programs – has not been able to meet the current and growing demand for special education teachers. Given these conditions, it seems only fitting that we would seek to develop innovative and creative alternatives to get interested individuals trained, licensed, and into special education classrooms. In spite of the demands brought on by chronic shortages, CLD urges caution and restraint in the endorsement of training alternatives that do not meet professional standards or have not proven to produce high quality special education professionals. CLD also recognizes because states have limited training resources, new programs must be designed to supplement supply and not merely to compete for the existing pools of students.

CLD also urges restraint in the wholesale generalization of general education research findings to our field. Special education teaching is not like subject-matter instruction, and training models based on the subject matter model do not fit special education well. Special education teachers require extensive training in pedagogy, instructional accommodations, behavior support, and communication skills that complement

verbal ability and subject knowledge expertise. Regardless of type of program, the content of teacher preparation programs must be grounded in research and directly related to positive student outcomes. CLD recommends that teacher candidates participating in recruitment programs supporting alternative routes to certification must be held to the same high level of results and measurable qualifications as other teacher certification/licensure programs.

Finally, CLD also urges that **strong evaluative designs** be used to assess how effective various programs – both traditional and ARC – are in developing a highly qualified workforce that meets agreed upon profession standards.

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