



BIRMINGHAM EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Raising The Bar Without Barring The Door: The Limits Of Alabama Teacher Certification Policy

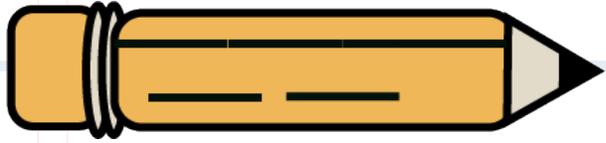
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Summary

Every parent wants a qualified teacher for his or her child. Ideally, Alabama's teacher certification process provides a means of ensuring that individuals who enter state classrooms possess the knowledge and skills to perform their jobs effectively. Certification checklists typically share the following minimum requirements: a bachelor's degree (with a minimum GPA), acceptable scores on both aptitude and content knowledge exams, and the successful completion (or concurrent completion) of an approved educator preparation program. Alabama's basic teacher certification standards closely resemble those established in other states, but the particulars of our state's teacher certification policies and procedures often make the official entry point into Alabama classrooms uniquely difficult to decipher and especially burdensome to pursue. By failing to design clear licensure pathways, by maintaining burdensome licensure processes, and by restricting certification routes exclusively to traditional educator preparation programs, Alabama teacher certification policy often serves as more of a gauntlet than a pathway.

The importance of transforming that process is particularly important now because Alabama is in the midst of a deep and chronic teacher labor shortage.¹ While the state's public educator staffing struggles certainly cannot be attributed to teacher certification policy alone, the complexity and limitations of these processes are exacerbating an already severe teacher workforce crisis. Simply put, Alabama certification policies are hampering the successful development of the strong and stable labor force that state education leaders seek to create.

The fundamental question for Alabamians is this: **How do we maintain standards that ensure our educators are prepared to perform their jobs without erecting obstacles that discourage or prevent strong teacher candidates from entering and pursuing the profession?**



The Challenges

1. Finding information about Alabama's teacher licensure pathways and understanding the state's various licensure procedures is a cumbersome and complicated process.

What do I need to do to become a public educator in Alabama? Trying to find a clear and concise answer to that question remains exceedingly difficult in our state. At the most basic level, information regarding Alabama teacher certification is simply difficult to locate. The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) home page has no prominently displayed link to teacher certification material. Individual school district websites do not directly link visitors with certification information. In fact, no local education or community organization websites connected users to further information about the process of becoming an educator in Alabama.

Even when teacher certification information is ultimately located, the specifics are complicated and difficult to understand. According to a recent Alabama State Department of Education board session, the office fields upwards of 2600 calls per month regarding teacher certification.² Assuming the maximum possible number of business days in a month, that figure translates into 123 calls *every* day. If those conversations averaged 15 minutes each, agency employees would spend 650 hours each month responding to inquiries. The sheer volume of time spent on the issue suggests that the information is unclear to most people interacting with the material.

2. Alabama's alternative certification pathways are ill-suited to the needs of the critically-important, non-traditional teacher candidate pool.

Building a robust public educator workforce is intimately tied to issues of teacher certification. Over the last decade, enrollment in traditional educator preparation programs (EPPs) has fallen dramatically.

- From 2010 to 2018, Alabama undergraduates enrolling in education programs dropped by over 45%, with program completers falling by some 42%.³
- Nationwide, approximately 20% of all teachers are now certified through alternative certification pathways.⁴

Yet despite the increasingly important role alternative pathways play in the nation's educational landscape, Alabama teacher certification processes have not evolved to effectively accommodate the needs of this substantial and growing group of teacher candidates. Non-traditional teacher candidates -- recent graduates, career changers, and veterans -- rarely have the luxury of time or money to invest in a standard preparation

program. By making the certification requirements hew so closely to traditional educator preparation programs, Alabama alternative certification standards do little to facilitate or ease the transition of non-traditional candidates into the classroom.

Currently, there are no Alabama alternative educator preparation programs available to those interested in a time-efficient, cost-efficient path into the classroom. For non-traditional candidates, the burden can be onerous on multiple levels.

- Candidates pursuing this option must shoulder the workload of a novice full-time classroom teacher, while squeezing in time for weekend and summer academic coursework -- all on their own dime.
- Unlike other costly post-baccalaureate professional preparation paths (e.g., medical school), the future earnings potential of teachers often makes pursuing a teacher preparation program financially untenable.
- For those geographically distant from a college or university campus or for those without access to significant disposable income, pursuing alternative certification is simply not a logistically or financially feasible option.

State certification rules and structures erect further barriers.

- In Alabama, the only valid alternative certification pathway for Early Childhood Education, K-3, K-6 (self-contained), and Special Education teachers *requires enrollment in a state-approved Master's Degree EPP*⁵ Essentially, for non-traditional candidates in our state, there is no such thing as an alternative certification pathway in these focus areas. Compelling participation in a full-scale Master's Degree option -- a program that typically involves 42-45 credit hours -- places a tremendous time and financial burden on prospective candidates and can serve as an active deterrent to entering the profession.
- *Unlike other states, Alabama maintains an almost exclusive reliance on institutions of higher education (IHEs) as the authorized providers of teacher preparation.*⁶ The state's unwillingness to develop or approve high-quality, non-IHE-based alternatives has placed the state at a distinct disadvantage in terms of capturing non-traditional talent. According to a recent Center for American Progress report, even as national enrollment in traditional EPPs fell (down 35%) and candidate completion of those programs continued to decline (down 27%), ***enrollment in non-IHE based alternative certification grew by more than 40%.***⁷

In order for Alabama to build a strong 21st century teacher workforce pipeline, building genuine alternative EPP routes should be central to the state's efforts. As research has repeatedly demonstrated, alternative certification is neither an inherent good nor an inferior substitute to 'real' teacher prep. Ultimately, the merits of any educator preparation program should be determined by how effectively the program prepares candidates to successfully teach students, rather than by how closely it resembles the traditional training model.

Policy Recommendations

Alabama's current teacher certification policies and procedures require a comprehensive overhaul. Components of the overhaul should include:

1) Commissioning a study/audit to thoroughly review Alabama's teacher licensure system. Effective reform begins with fully understanding the issues. Study findings would provide much-needed transparency on the state's current process and motivate policymakers to address needed change. To some degree, this work is already underway. In January 2020, consultants from Lean Frog conducted a presentation to the ALSDE State Board of Education on improving efficiencies within the state's teacher certification process.⁸ Further, as part of the 2019-2020 budget, the Alabama Legislature approved an outside study examining issues of capacity within ALSDE. Results from this research should inform reform efforts.⁹

2) Dramatically simplifying Alabama's teacher certification terminology, procedures and information. Rather than being merely revised, the system needs to be fundamentally reset. ALSDE's State Board of Education should:

- *Develop clear, accessible language and terminology for identifying and explaining Alabama's teacher licensure requirements.* For an example of what a comprehensive transformation looks like, see Minnesota's revamped tiered licensure system.¹⁰
- *Create and widely distribute state teacher certification information in an easy-to-find, user-friendly online format.* ALSDE should dedicate funds to create a website specifically dedicated to teacher recruitment and certification. The website could include brief videos explaining certification pathways and provide a much-needed informational resource for non-traditional candidates.

3) Developing and authorizing a spectrum of high-quality, genuinely alternative teacher certification pathways (particularly for teacher shortage area fields).

- *Establish affordable, effective, locally-focused educator preparation programs that prepare non-traditional candidates to join the profession in all certification areas.* Programs might include a local teacher residency, a Grow-Your-Own effort, or a STEM-specific educator training model (e.g., UAB Teach).¹¹
- *Ease the transition of skilled career changers into teaching by developing a viable "licensure via portfolio" option for teacher candidates.*¹²
- *Lay the groundwork for Relay Graduate School of Education (GSE), Teach For America (TFA) or other well-established non-IHE educator prep organizations to become officially-authorized EPP providers within the state. In rural or remote areas, the state might consider designing pathways and partnerships for Districts themselves to become EPP providers.*

SOURCES

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