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Preface: Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification

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PREFACE

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The pressing needs of many school districts—more than one million veteran teachers are nearing retirement and more than two million new teachers will be needed by the end of the next decade—make innovation in teacher preparation inevitable. This demand, combined with the high costs of many traditional certification programs and the desire for a more diversified workforce, has already led to a broad range of efforts to attract highly qualified candidates to a profession which loses close to 50% of its new members in their first five years. We must draw large number of people into the field AND provide them with good reasons to stay. Whether we approve or not, alternative routes to teacher preparation are clearly here to stay.

A growing research literature on non-traditional pathways suggests the complexity of the task ahead. *Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification* is our report from the front lines. We wanted to offer new teachers the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words. Jon Snyder sets the scene with an insightful and provocative essay that identifies the key issues from a public policy perspective. While he has serious reservations about many alternative programs, he also has been instrumental in developing the Partnership for Quality, a collaboration between schools in the South Bronx and Bank Street College. This alternative program only allows candidates to become teachers of record after establishing the capacity to work successfully with children. In addition, candidates participate in on-going mentoring with experienced teachers in schools where they and the entire staff receive support from the College.

The essays which follow Snyder—three by first-time authors—document the experiences of four novice teachers. Allen Ellenzweig and Miranda Barry are both career changers who entered the New York City Teaching Fellows Program (NYCTF) in their early 50s. Sarah Samuels and Ariel Sacks, two younger women, went directly from undergraduate work into the classroom. Samuels joined Teach for America; Ariel Sacks began teaching without any formal supports, left, and

eventually came to Bank Street and the Partnership for Quality. In their compelling first person narratives all of these authors confirm Snyder's emphasis on programs that provide effective initial preparation and offer sustained mentoring. Both Samuels and Sacks demonstrate the powerful outcomes possible when a strong commitment to social justice combines with conscientious mentoring, an understanding of the importance of collaboration, and the skills that can transform an educational vision into a daily reality. Not surprisingly, Samuels and Sacks remain in the classroom today. After leaving the NYCTF Barry completed a traditional certification program and works in educational television, while Ellenzweig has left the field.

Five themes weave their way through these personal essays and remind us of the spectrum of fundamental issues that frame life in schools.

Collaboration and Isolation. Samuels shows how collaboration with families, colleagues, and funders helped her to survive and thrive as a new teacher. She knew from the start that she could not go it alone and sought opportunities at every turn to work with others. By contrast, Barry, Ellenzweig and Sacks vividly portray the isolation that so many teachers experience and the toll that it takes on them and their students.

Educational Vision and Pedagogical Skills. All of the authors began with a strong commitment to social justice and to offering others the benefits of their own educations. Such commitments sustained Barry, Sacks and Samuels through the process of certification even when this meant changing programs and increased expense. The essays emphasize that a vision while necessary to becoming an engaged teacher must be supported by the knowledge and skills that can translate it into smaller daily practices that make for vibrant, democratic communities.

Theory and Practice. Barry, Sacks and Samuels eventually found programs that offered a match between the theories they were being taught and the practices needed to survive in difficult settings. Peer support and wise mentoring form the critical bridge for these three authors. For Barry and Ellenzweig the NYCTF summer and fall courses had little bearing on the realities they faced in their classrooms and schools.

Leadership and Silence. These essays demonstrate the importance of strong, positive leadership through its absence rather than presence. The authors had few experiences of the consistent, reliable structure that teachers and students need to learn and grow. These essays are filled with silences, miscommunications and sudden actions that often leave new teachers at sea and sometimes without jobs

Resources and Barren Landscapes. All of our authors give voice to the frustrations of working in schools that lack basic material resources—books, paper, copy machines—let alone the human resources to support teachers and learners. At the same time they also provide inspiring examples of creative professionals determined to make their classrooms places where children feel safe and can learn.

While offering distressing pictures of some alternative route programs, these essays also shed light on the elements that make schools work and allow new teachers to learn their craft: collaboration among peers and between professionals and families; vision informed by appropriate practices; theory offering insight into the lived realities of students and teachers; leadership that creates reliable, safe environments; rich resources. If, as Snyder suggests, becoming a great educator is a career-long process, then we must work to insure that in their first years new teachers have the kinds of educative experiences they will want to replicate for students in their own classrooms.

Jonathan Silin, Editor
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