



**THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES IN  
SUPPORTING ALTERNATIVE TEACHER CERTIFICATION  
PROGRAMS**

**PHASE II – INTERVIEWS WITH SELECTED ESAS  
NOVEMBER 2008**

**A RESEARCH PROJECT OF  
THE ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES  
ARLINGTON, VA**

**BY  
JEAN M. WILLIAMS AND ROBYN J. ALSOP  
MID-CONTINENT RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING (MCREL)  
DENVER, CO**

**FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THIS STUDY PROVIDED BY:**

The Richard W. Riley  
College of Education and Leadership

**WALDEN UNIVERSITY**

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## Acknowledgements

This study is a follow-up to the April 2008 “The Role of Educational Service Agencies in Supporting Alternative Education Programs – Phase I” published by the Association of Educational Service Agencies. This Phase II study follows it with qualitative data about how selected ESAs that participated in the Phase I study operate alternative certification programs. As with Phase I, this Phase II study was conducted by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

AESA thanks our corporate partner Laureate Education, Inc., for coordinating with Walden University, a member of the Laureate Universities Network, for their ongoing support and for funding this research study. Laureate Education, Inc., has expanded the opportunities for Educational Service Agencies and the school districts they serve through its leading international network of accredited campus-based and online universities. Walden University, based and accredited in the United States, is the flagship online university in the Laureate International Universities network. The program currently serves over 270,000 students.

**Brian L. Talbott, Ph.D.**  
**Executive Director**  
**Association of Educational Service Districts**

### Research funding provided by:

The Richard W. Riley  
College of Education and Leadership

**WALDEN UNIVERSITY**

*Walden University, a member of the Laureate Universities Network*  
Laureate Education, Inc.  
650 South Exeter Street  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
866-4-LAUREATE  
[www.laureate-inc.com](http://www.laureate-inc.com)

### Research conducted by:



Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning  
4601 DTC Boulevard, Suite 500  
Denver, CO 80237  
303-337-0990 ♦ 303-337-3005 (Fax)  
[www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org)

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# **The Role of Educational Service Agencies in Supporting Alternative Teacher Certification Programs Phase II**

## **Introduction**

To receive a teaching certificate in most states, prospective teachers must not only have a college degree, they must also take a set of core education courses designed to prepare them for the experiences they will face in the classroom. In many cases, these education-specific courses comprise 30 credit hours or more of college coursework. Because specific course requirements vary from state to state, prospective teachers are well-advised to attend college in the state in which they intend to teach because the required courses may only be offered within that state. Such certification requirements are generally considered to be a disincentive to obtaining a teaching certificate because they can extend a student's stay in college and concurrently limit job options to in-state openings.

These traditional certification requirements are juxtaposed with an ever-decreasing pool of eligible certification applicants, and teacher shortages that seem to get larger each year. Alternative teacher certification programs began in the 1980s as a way to provide enough teachers to teach the nation's children. Feistritzer (2005) estimated that there were, "... 115 different routes to teacher certification being implemented by 485 providers in 43 states and the District of Columbia." More recently, Peterson and Nadler (2008) estimated that, "Forty-seven states have adopted a pathway to teaching, alternative to the standard state certification otherwise required."

Although no state has abandoned its traditional certification programs in response to calls for broader recruitment paths into education, all but three states have set up some kind of alternative certification pathway, and the number of alternatively certified teachers has steadily grown. In 2001, just 20,000 alternative teaching certificates were issued. By 2006, nearly 60,000 alternatively certified teachers were entering the teaching force each year, roughly one-fifth of new entrants.

Peterson & Nadler, 2008

Alternative teacher certification programs are important to the quality of the nation's education system because they not only significantly increase the pool of qualified applicants for teaching certificates, they also provide easier access to a more diverse applicant pool and make it easier for well-qualified applicants with experiences in a broad variety of fields other than education to enter the teaching force. Cross (2008) described some of the alternative certification applicants who attended the program at Pikes Peak (CO) BOCES:

The variety of careers represented in the program was amazing. A surgeon believed she was really supposed to be an elementary school teacher. Applicants from the military academies wanted to teach math and social studies; a furniture builder wanted to teach poetry. A concert master wanted to help elementary school students learn music.

A rancher hoped to teach science. A former nun wanted to teach computers. . . . A retired military officer, who served in the current Iraq war, investigated ancient sites in the Fertile Crescent near Baghdad, taking pictures and dreaming of teaching a high school world history class. He spoke of how sad he was that so much of the area's ancient history had been destroyed by war. When he joined our program, he achieved his goal of becoming a social studies teacher. (pp. 32-33)

These applicants “brought a myriad of life experiences that could be applied in the classroom.” They exude confidence, command respect and are quick learners. (Cross, 2008, p. 33)

Much has been written about the quality of alternative teacher certification programs, and there has been much speculation about what makes a good program. In fact, “There’s a battle going on between people who think we should have high entrance requirements before people get into the classroom versus free-market people who think we should let anyone into the classroom and then look at their students’ achievement and decide whether to keep them.” (Unmuth, 2008, p. 1) Much of the speculation has as its focus the quality of applicants who complete these programs and are licensed to teach. Proponents of stricter entrance regulations point to enhanced teacher quality and improved public school student performance, while the free-market group wants to expand the applicant pool in order to attract more talented and diverse teachers to school districts that need them most.

Education Service Agencies that provide alternative certification programs find themselves squarely in the middle of this debate. On the one hand, they need to provide assurances that their students, prospective teachers who attend their programs in order to obtain a teaching credential, will have the skills and knowledge necessary to provide high quality instruction to their students. On the other hand, they need an applicant pool that is diverse and of sufficient size to provide districts in their region the number of teachers necessary to adequately staff their schools.

### **Focus and Design of the Study**

In February 2008, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) submitted to the Association of Education Service Agencies (AESA) Phase I of a study of alternative certification activities in place at education service agencies (ESAs) across the nation. That report presented basic information about the number of educators who received certification through the responding ESAs and the nature and content of their certification programs.

As a follow-up to the Phase I report, McREL selected the following four responding agencies to participate in telephone interviews during the summer of 2008 in order to gather targeted information about their alternative certification programs: Region IV

Education Service Center (ESC), Texas; Middle Georgia Regional Education Service Agency (RESA), Georgia; Hampshire Educational Collaborative, Massachusetts, and Mountain Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES), Colorado.

Of particular interest to McREL researchers and AESA was a determination of entrance and exit requirements for alternative certification programs as well as the length and cost of such programs. Appendix A contains the interview protocol used during the phone interviews. In addition to the questions contained in the interview protocol, interviewees were asked if there was additional information about their programs that they wished to provide in order to help the researcher understand the specific ways their alternative certification program operates. All four of the interviewees took advantage of this opportunity to further describe their programs, including specific issues facing them and concerns about the continued success of their programs.

### **Responses to Interview Questions**

#### **Question 1: What are the requirements for acceptance into your Alternative Certification program?**

- Is there a previous education requirement?
- Is there a minimum GPA requirement?
- Are there tests required of the applicant before acceptance into the program?

As summarized in Table 1, each ESA has a different set of requirements for applicants who apply to their program. For example, Middle Georgia RESA and Region IV ESC require a 2.5 grade point average (GPA) for all college coursework prior to enrollment in the alternative certification program. Region IV ESC also requires a 2.5 GPA, but limits the requirement to courses related to the applicant's area of specialization. However, neither Mountain BOCES nor Hampshire Educational Collaborative (HEC) requires a minimum GPA. HEC's rationale for not having a minimum GPA requirement is that the applicant may have been out of college for more than 20 years, so those grades would no longer be relevant.

At Region IV ESC, the applicant must pass a Basic Skills screening test, and meet the "B" rule: have a grade of B or higher in the content area in which they are pursuing certification. Further, candidates who apply for a bilingual or foreign language certification must go through an interview in the language they wish to teach in order to demonstrate their proficiency. Candidates who did not graduate from a college or university within the United States must pass a credentialing evaluation prior to enrollment in the alternative certification program.

At HEC, the applicant must pass the appropriate statewide tests in the candidate's area of specialization (e.g., math, special education, etc.). In addition, three letters of reference, a goal statement that serves as a writing sample, official college transcripts, and any

licenses currently held in the education field must be provided prior to admission to the program.

At Middle Georgia RESA’s program, applicants must pass the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE) Basic Skills test or have SAT, ACT or GRE scores that are high enough to exempt them from taking the test. Candidates may also be required to pass the GACE in the content area in which they plan to specialize. Candidates must pass a criminal background check and not have had any prior formal preparation in teaching or any state certification at all.

Candidates to Mountain BOCES’ program must pass the Program for Licensing Assessments for Colorado Educators (PLACE) test and have a statement of eligibility before application.

**Table 1. Requirements for Applicants to Teacher Certification Programs**

ESA	Bachelor’s degree	Minimum GPA	Minimum GPA in specialization	Tests to Be Passed	Criminal Background Check	Offer of full-time teaching position	Letters of Reference	Writing Sample
Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)	Yes	No min.	N/A	Statewide tests in areas of specialization	N/A		3	Goal statement
Mountain BOCES (CO)	Yes	None	None	PLACE test	N/A		Must have statement of eligibility before applying	
Middle Georgia RESA (GA)	Yes	2.5 GPA	N/A	GACE Basic Skills Assessment (or SAT, ACT, GRE scores high enough to be exempt for taking the test. May take GACE test in subject area also.	Yes	Must have offer of full-time teaching position in one of the region’s 7 school districts		
Region 4 ESC (TX)	Yes	2.5 GPA	2.5 GPA	Basic Skills Screening test; also have higher ed test “B” rule; must have a B or higher in their content area	N/A			

*N/A = Not addressed*

**Question 2: Are applicants to your program given college credit for work experience?**

As shown in Table 2, none of the four ESAs interviewed indicated that they had provisions within their programs for providing college credit for prior work experience.

**Table 2: College Credit for Work Experience**

Do applicants receive college credit for previous work experience?	Yes/No
Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)	No
Mountain BOCES (CO)	No
Middle Georgia RESA (GA)	No
Region 4 ESC (TX)	No

**Question 3: Does your Alternative Certification program require a field-based experience such as a practicum, student teaching, or internship?**

- If yes, how many hours are required?
- How are students supervised and/or evaluated?
- How is the field-based experience coordinated with the local school districts?
- How do students in the program demonstrate proficiency before receiving their teaching certificate?

As shown in Table 3, the format, time commitment, and supervision/evaluation requirements for a field-based experience vary for the four ESAs. The Region IV ESC program consists of either 12-week clinical teaching experience or a paid, 10-month internship (i.e., a standard school year). For the clinical teaching placement, the candidate is assigned a cooperative teacher from the school as well as a supervisor from the ESC. Four observations are conducted during the 12-week period; one for orientation and three for observations.

For the internship component, the school principal assigns a mentor, who is paid a stipend, to the intern. A peer/coaching arrangement is established, with six site visits conducted; one for orientation and five for observation. Both the clinical teaching and internship program use evaluation protocols, divided into domains, which are state-approved. For the internship component, both the school principal and assistant principal are asked to provide feedback as to the candidate’s proficiency.

Middle Georgia RESA’s program requires the candidate have a contract in place with the school district at which they will conduct the internship prior to their acceptance to the program. Eighty hours of instruction must be completed prior to the candidate beginning the internship. Teacher candidates are paid while they go through the program as if they were a regular teacher. The one-year supervised internship includes a coach/mentor who monitors and evaluates the candidate’s work. Teacher candidates are asked to make a two-year commitment to the school system in which they are hired. Middle Georgia also provides screening services for the school district in the region.

Hampshire Educational Collaborative requires a practicum of 300 hours for candidates pursuing certification at the elementary level; 150 hours for the secondary level. HEC encourages the practicum experience to last at least the length of a semester. The candidate is assigned two supervisors. One is a school-assigned mentor, who meets with the candidate weekly and conducts three observations during the practicum. The second is a program supervisor from HEC who conducts two observations of the candidate's onsite work. Both supervisors must sign off on a required form that measures proficiency in 23 separate areas. This form must be completed in order for the candidate to receive his or her licensure.

Candidates in the Mountain BOCES program must have a contract in place with the district where they will conduct their internship. The internship consists of an individualized plan of 225 hours that addresses teaching the state standards. In addition, the candidate must complete a portfolio of his or her work. During the internship, the candidate is supervised by a school staff member, most likely the principal, as well as someone who can mentor the candidate in his/her chosen content area. The candidate goes through Adams State College in order to demonstrate proficiency and obtain certification.

**Table 3. Program Field-based Requirements**

<b>ESA</b>	<b># of Hours Required</b>	<b>Contract with district required</b>	<b>Supervision &amp; Evaluation</b>	<b>Paid internship</b>	<b>ESAs screen applicants for district</b>
<b>Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)</b>	300 hours for elementary; 150 hours for secondary. Encourages the practicum to last the length of a semester.		1 from school who meets weekly with participant; school supervisor conducts 3 observations 1 from the ESA who conducts 2 observations.		
<b>Mountain BOCES (CO)</b>	225 hours/individual plan	Must have a contract with district prior to coming to ESA	Must have a supervisor, most likely the principal, and a mentor in the content area. Portfolio required.	N/A	
<b>Middle Georgia RESA (GA)</b>	80 hours of instruction before	Must be employed as a	One-year supervised internship.	Paid as a full-time teacher	Coordinates with school system in

	entering classroom	teacher to enter program	Coach/mentor who monitors & evaluates work		helping screen candidates for program prior to hire.
<b>Region 4 ESC (TX)</b>	Clinical teaching – 12 consecutive weeks; Internship – a regular school year (10 months)			Paid for internship for 10 months.	

*N/A = Not addressed*

#### **Question 4: How long does it take to complete your Alternative Certification Program?**

Each ESA shared information on the length of their programs and the requirements for completion within that time frame. Table 4 provides a brief look at the time frames. Programs range from seven months to two years in length.

**Table 4: Time Frame for Program Completion**

<b>ESA</b>	<b>Time Frame for Completion of Project</b>
<b>Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)</b>	Six courses plus the practicum. Can be completed in one year, but have 5 years to finish.
<b>Mountain BOCES (CO)</b>	One full school year is recommended (mid-year to mid-year)
<b>Middle Georgia RESA (GA)</b>	2-year program that must be completed within that time frame.
<b>Region IV ESC (TX)</b>	Shortest is 7 months (15 weeks preservice plus 12 weeks in clinical teaching). The length varies by type of program.

At Hampshire Educational Collaborative, participants are allowed to take five years to finish the program. Their program offers six courses that must be completed prior to their participation in a practicum. According to officials at HEC, most participants complete the program within one year, and no applicant has ever taken longer than five years to complete the program.

Middle Georgia RESA’s participants are encouraged to complete their program within a two-year time frame, but the ESA does make accommodations for extenuating circumstances (e.g., illness, military deployment, etc.). Participants in such situations can be afforded an extension. The candidate must obtain an internship certification which is only valid for the two-year time limit. Middle Georgia also offers a one-year program,

and candidates must obtain a provisional teaching certification prior to entering the program. This certificate is valid for five years.

At Region IV ESC in Texas, time limits on their programs vary, depending on the type of program being pursued. The shortest can be completed in seven months, which includes 15 weeks of pre-service training and 12 weeks of clinical teaching. Those that have gone through the pre-service courses must obtain an internship or clinical teaching placement within two years of completion of the pre-service training.

Mountain BOCES in Colorado recommends that participants complete the program in one full school year.

**Question 5: What is the total cost of the Alternative Certification program for participants?**

The cost of the ESA Alternative Certification programs varies significantly. Some are all inclusive and others have levels of fees. The Region IV ESC’s program has an extensive list of costs and fees which affect the overall cost of the program, ranging from a low of \$2,940 to a high of \$5,276, depending on the type of certification pursued by the candidate. Additional costs are added for taking certain skills and/or proficiency tests. Table 5 provides an overview

**Table 5: Alternative Certification Program Costs**

Cost Components	Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)	Mountain BOCES (CO)	Middle Georgia RESA (GA)	Region IV ESC (TX)
<i>Application Fee</i>				\$50
<i>Program Cost</i>	\$5,000 No additional cost for certification in special area (e.g. special education)	\$3,500 for district members or \$3,200 flat fee	\$3,000 Year 1: \$2,500 Year 2: \$ 500 (Includes all classes and coaching component)	\$850 - \$975 *
<i>Internship Cost</i>				\$3,200 - \$3,600 **
<i>Clinical Teaching Cost</i>				\$1,500 - \$1,900 **
<i>Additional Fees (i.e. testing, etc.)</i>			Costs of taking additional certification tests are extra. Costs vary by test.	Basic Skills Testing, Probationary Certification, National Criminal History Background Check, etc.
<i>Stipends Offered</i>		Depends upon the school	Currently, there is no extra	The program is approved by the

		district as to what is available.	charge from certification in specialty areas (e.g. special education).  State's Professional Standards Commission provides a stipend per candidate.  \$900 stipend from hiring school district for each participant.	Veterans Administration also preservice fees waived for the Spouses to Teachers program for spouses of those in the military.
<i>Scholarships/Grants Provided</i>	Federal grant that provides tuition support to some program participants – must agree to teach for 3 years in district.			Provides 5 scholarships per year (small amount).

\*Depends on type of certification sought. \*\* Depends on geographical area of the state.

There is also a charge for the criminal background check to be conducted on each candidate. The program provides five scholarships each year, but this is not a significant amount.

The program at HEC offers a flat rate of \$5,000 and there is no additional cost for certification in specific areas such as special education. Additionally, participants of HEC's program can pursue graduate courses at Fitchburg State College, with whom HEC has a relationship. Those costs are additional for the participant and are not part of HEC's program. The degree offered is a Masters of Education in Curricula and Teaching.

The Colorado program at Mountain BOCES offers a flat rate of \$3,500 for district members, but this program does not certify candidates in special education. Mountain BOCES also has a principal certification program. They are currently exploring providing other certification programs in speech pathology, occupational therapy, and psychology.

Middle Georgia RESA offers its two-year program for \$3,000 (\$2,500 the first year; \$500 the second year). Payments for the program can be made through payroll deductions from the school system in which the candidate is teaching. The cost of certain certification tests are extra, but there are no additional costs associated with obtaining certification in specialty areas (e.g., special education) at this time, but that may change in the future.

## **Additional Findings**

In addition to the answers given for the questions, three other topics emerged from the data collected in the interviews: Funding from other entities, Number of candidates for certification, and Current challenges for ESAs. Those findings are presented in this section.

### **Funding from other entities**

Each of the ESAs receives some level of funding from outside entities. At HEC, there is a federal grant that provides tuition support for certain participants in the program who are new to the profession or are career changers. In order to receive this funding, they must agree to teach for a minimum of three years in a high-needs urban or rural district.

In Georgia, the state's Professional Standards Commission provides a stipend for each candidate in the Middle Georgia RESA program. In addition, individual school districts that hire the candidates prior to the beginning of coursework provide a \$900 stipend; however, that will decrease next year to \$500 per candidate.

At Mountain BOCES, there is additional funding available but it depends on the school districts in which the candidate is hired. There is also a state workforce initiative program that assists with funding.

### **Number of candidates for certification**

As of September 2008, Region IV ESC in Texas had 1,838 teacher candidates in training and 137 candidates for principal certification. Last year, Region IV ESC certified 980 teachers. A new pre-service cycle begins each month, and an average of 125-150 teacher candidates are ready to begin their internships each month.

Mountain BOCES' completion rate is 20-30 teachers per year.

### **Current challenges for ESAs**

The Region IV ESC program has been in existence since 1990 and was the first program to provide alternative certification within the state of Texas. It has a program in Mexico and Puerto Rico and provides alternative certification programs to both locations. Region IV ESC also has an international program for candidates who are in the United States on Visas. It currently has 300 international program candidates in training. The program provides Board-certified immigration attorney services to those applicants applying from other countries to assist with their status. Region IV ESC would like to be able to provide certification in English as a Second Language (ESL) for elementary teachers. Region IV ESC would also like to provide additional pedagogy and reading in the content areas for candidates who wish to teach in high school.

Middle Georgia RESA is housed at Macon State College in Macon. The RESAs in Georgia are helping to address the current teacher shortages by training people who want to enter the teaching profession after having gained experience in other fields. The Middle Georgia RESA expressed a need for all of Georgia's RESAs and to work collaboratively with the higher education system to fill hard to staff positions such as those in specialized content areas and special education

HEC is an approved agency for licensure in Massachusetts. The state allows ESAs to offer licensure but they must partner with a higher education entity, and both their syllabi and instructors must be approved by the state.

### **Conclusions**

The four ESAs interviewed for this report are similar in that all of them have specific entrance requirements, although such requirements vary among the programs. All candidates are required to possess a Bachelors Degree. Two of the four require at least 2.5 GPA on their college coursework. Two of the programs require candidates to pass a standardized test prior to enrollment. One program requires a language proficiency test for teachers who plan to teach foreign languages. One program requires a writing sample. All of the programs may be completed within one school year, and two of the programs offer longer periods if that is necessary for some students.

The cost of these alternative certification programs ranges from a low of \$3,000 to a high of about \$6,500. Three of the programs charge a flat fee. One program charges for each component the student takes.

All of these programs would meet the stringent requirements currently being discussed by many states. Such requirements include but are not limited to:

- A GPA of at least 2.5 in the coursework completed in the process of earning a Bachelor's Degree
- A basic skills test
- Training requirements up to the amount obtained through the completion of core education courses in a traditional certification program (30 credit hours)
- Field-based experiences that are monitored by education professionals including supervising teachers, mentoring teachers, and school principals. It should be noted that some of the programs cited in this study require a full school year of field-based experiences compared to about 12 weeks in traditional programs

The results of this exploratory study indicate that the participating ESA programs have established rigorous entrance requirements for their alternative certification programs, provide a variety of field-based and classroom experiences for prospective teachers, and in some cases require applicants to pass standardized tests prior to being recommended for certification.

There are still a number of questions about alternative certification programs that need to be answered. For example, there is no scientifically credible information available to determine whether traditionally trained teachers are better classroom instructors than those who are certified through alternative channels. Some exploratory studies seem to point to the opposite conclusion: teachers from alternative certification programs obtain greater student learning gains than their traditionally trained counterparts. The answer to this question, as well as a determination of the circumstances under which such gains are experienced, will provide much needed guidance to creators of alternative certification programs as well as the states that are struggling to determine the requirements for allowing such programs to operate.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

The representatives from the four ESAs who were interviewed were asked the following set of questions.

- 1) *What are the requirements for acceptance into your Alternative Certification program?*
  - a. Is there a previous education requirement?
  - b. Is there a minimum GPA requirement?
  - c. Are there tests required of the applicant before acceptance into the program?
  
- 2) *Are applicants given college credit for work experience?*
  - If, yes, how is previous work experience evaluated for credit?
  
- 3) *Does your Alternative Certification program require a field-based experience such as a practicum, student teaching, or internship?*
  - If yes, how many hours are required?
  - How are students supervised and evaluated?
  - a. How is the field-based experience coordinated with local school districts?
  - b. How do students in the program demonstrate proficiency before receiving their teaching certificate?
  
- 4) *How long does it take to complete your Alternative Certification program?*
  
- 5) *Must the program be completed within a specific time frame?*
  
- 6) *What is the total cost of the Alternative Certification program for participants?*
  - a. Are there any differences in cost because of program certification requirements?
  - b. Are there any other entities involved in the program that required funding, or that provide funding support for persons in the program? Please specify.