Characteristics of Public School Teachers Who Completed Alternative Route to Certification Programs

Approximately 18 percent of public school teachers in 2015–16 had entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program. Compared to those who entered through a traditional route, a higher percentage of alternative route teachers were Black (13 vs. 5 percent), Hispanic (15 vs. 8 percent), of Two or more races (2 vs. 1 percent), and male (32 vs. 22 percent).

Of the 3.8 million public school teachers working in school year 2015–16, approximately 676,000 (18 percent) had entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program. While the traditional route to certification typically requires the completion of a postsecondary degree in education, many alternative route programs are designed for individuals who have already completed a degree in a different field without teacher education courses. These alternative pathways into the teaching profession may have important implications for the supply of teachers in the labor market, especially in the context of the declining number of bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded in education and persistent teacher shortages in certain subjects and categories of schools.

The National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) from the National Center for Education Statistics provides new insights about alternative route teachers in public elementary and secondary schools. This spotlight indicator uses NTPS data to examine the characteristics of teachers who entered teaching through alternative route to certification programs and compares them to those who entered through traditional routes. The indicator also describes the percentage of teachers in various academic subjects and categories of schools who entered teaching through an alternative route.
In 2015–16, the percentage of public school teachers who were members of racial/ethnic minority groups was generally higher among those who had entered teaching through an alternative route to certification than among those who entered through a traditional route. The percentages of alternative route teachers who were Hispanic (15 percent), Black (13 percent), of Two or more races (2 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native (1 percent) were higher than the percentages for traditional route teachers (8 percent, 5 percent, 1 percent, and less than one-half of 1 percent, respectively). In contrast, the percentage of teachers who were White was lower among alternative route teachers (66 percent) than among traditional route teachers (83 percent). The percentage of alternative route teachers who were Asian (3 percent) was not measurably different from the percentage of traditional route teachers who were Asian (2 percent). The percentages of teachers who were Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native were 1 percent or less among both alternative and traditional route teachers.
The distribution of teachers by sex also differed between alternative and traditional route teachers in 2015–16. The percentage of teachers who were male was higher among alternative route teachers (32 percent) than among traditional route teachers (22 percent).
Public school teachers’ prior work experiences also differed between those who entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program and those who entered through a traditional route. For teachers whose first year of teaching was between school years 2011–12 and 2015–16, NTPS collected data on their main activity the year before they started teaching. Over half (57 percent) of traditional route teachers were students at a college or university the year before they began teaching, compared to 24 percent of alternative route teachers. A greater percentage of traditional route teachers also reported that they were substitute teachers prior to their first year of teaching (15 percent) than did alternative route teachers (13 percent). In contrast, the following activities were more commonly reported among alternative route teachers than among traditional route teachers: working in a field outside of education (30 vs. 9 percent), working in education but not as a teacher (23 vs. 13 percent), and teaching at a college or university (3 vs. 1 percent). There was no measurable difference between alternative and traditional route teachers in the percentage who reported teaching in a preschool the year before they began teaching at the K–12 level (2 and 3 percent, respectively). Two percent of traditional route teachers and 5 percent of alternative route teachers reported that their main activity the year before teaching was caring for family members, serving in the military, seeking work while unemployed, or being retired from another job (these four activities are combined as “other” in figure 2).
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Spotlights

Characteristics of Public School Teachers Who Completed Alternative Route to Certification Programs

Data from NTPS can also be used to examine how the percentage of alternative route teachers varies by subject taught and school characteristics. On average, 18 percent of all public school teachers in 2015–16 reported that they had entered the teaching profession through an alternative route to certification program. The percentage of teachers who entered through an alternative route was higher than average for teachers whose main teaching assignment was career or technical education (37 percent), natural sciences (28 percent), foreign languages (26 percent),

English as a second language (24 percent), mathematics and computer science (22 percent), and special education (20 percent). The percentage of teachers who entered through an alternative route was lower than average for teachers whose main teaching assignment was arts and music (13 percent), elementary education (11 percent), and health education (11 percent). The percentages of English/language arts and social sciences teachers (both 18 percent) who entered through an alternative route were not measurably different from the average.
In 2015–16, the prevalence of alternative route teachers also varied between charter schools and traditional public schools and among elementary, middle, secondary, and combined schools. The percentage of public school teachers who entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program was higher for charter schools (25 percent) than for traditional public schools (17 percent). By school level, the percentage of teachers who entered through an alternative route was highest for high schools (25 percent). Lower percentages of teachers at combined elementary and secondary schools (20 percent), middle schools (19 percent), and elementary schools (13 percent) entered through an alternative route to certification program.
In 2015–16, public schools in which at least three-quarters of students were racial/ethnic minorities had percentages of alternative route teachers that were higher than the national average of 18 percent. Among schools with 75 to 89 percent minority enrollment, 23 percent of teachers had entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program. Among schools with 90 percent or more minority enrollment, 27 percent of teachers had entered teaching through an alternative route. In contrast, the percentages of alternative route teachers were lower than average in schools where less than half of students were minorities, including schools with less than 10 percent minority enrollment (9 percent alternative route teachers), schools with 10 to 24 percent minority enrollment (12 percent alternative route teachers), and schools with 25 to 49 percent minority enrollment (16 percent alternative route teachers).
The percentage of alternative route teachers also varied by school poverty level, as measured using the percentage of students in the school who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) under the National School Lunch Program. While the FRPL data have a number of limitations, they are a widely used proxy for student poverty.\(^5\) In this indicator, high-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 76 percent or more of the students are eligible for FRPL, and low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25 percent or less of the students are eligible for FRPL. In 2015–16, high-poverty schools had a higher than average percentage of alternative route teachers (21 percent), and low-poverty schools had a lower than average percentage of alternative route teachers (14 percent). Schools that did not participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program also had a higher than average percentage of alternative route teachers (24 percent).

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**Endnotes:**


3. For more information on the number of degrees awarded in the field of education, see indicators Undergraduate Degree Fields and Graduate Degree Fields.


5. For more information on eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch and its relationship to poverty, see the Forum Guide to Alternative Measures of Socioeconomic Status in Education Data Systems.

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**Reference tables:** Digest of Education Statistics 2017, table 209.24

**Related indicators and resources:** Characteristics of Public School Teachers; Teacher Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers [web-only]

**Glossary:** Combined school, Elementary school, Free or reduced-price lunch, National School Lunch Program, Public school or institution, Racial/ethnic group, Secondary school.