

Alternative Teachers: "I'll

PROFESSIONAL educators today are faced with what appears to be a sellers' market. Jobs are scarce. There is a surplus of teachers from kindergarten through college. Teacher preparation institutions are graduating certified classroom teachers in far greater numbers than can be absorbed into the public and private schools. School districts are being buffeted by declining enrollments and cutbacks in federally supported programs.

All this adds up to one unstartling fact: school officials are hiring only the best—or what they perceive to be the best. Granted that teachers in certain skill areas, such as industrial education, are still in demand, the fact remains that school administrators, whether they know it or not, are now able to select teacher candidates who reflect a wide variety of teaching styles and learning theories. It is now possible to more nearly fulfill the unique needs of the local educational environment insofar as particular teaching/learning styles are concerned. Across the country, the need for matching teaching and learning styles has resulted in the emergence of a wide variety of alternative learning environments within the public

schools. Schools of choice have been created for parents, teachers, and students to better match learning environments with teaching, learning, and parenting styles.

The notion that school administrators are seeking teachers who can not only function in these optional environments, but create them as well, was recently supported in findings by a research team at Murray State University.

In support of a proposal for an alternative teacher education program, school superintendents in 700 school districts in Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana were surveyed, in one sense, "to assess the market" for graduates of such a program. The primary goals of the proposed program, based essentially on an open classroom model, were to allow teacher candidates to experience an informal learning environment and through self-direction develop the skills, competencies, and understandings to create viable open alternatives for youngsters in their schools and/or classrooms. These goals and purposes and a description of the model were provided the 700 superintendents, and a questionnaire was utilized to elicit responses to a number of questions

Take All You Can Send Me!"

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related to open alternative learning environments.

A return rate of 68 percent was established, as nearly 500 superintendents responded to the questionnaire.

Twenty-nine percent of the superintendents indicated that alternative programs were in existence in their systems. An additional forty percent indicated that there was a clear and definite need for such programs in their schools and the primary reason for their nonexistence was the lack of staff members who were capable of providing alternative environments. Thus, nearly 70 percent of the respondents recognized and accepted the need for alternative programs within their schools. In response to a series of questions related to the employment of classroom teachers, 94 percent of the total

group indicated that, all other factors being equal, they would employ teachers who possessed the skills and understandings to create alternative learning environments.

Clearly, the majority of superintendents responding to the questionnaire perceived their communities, schools, and themselves as being open to the concept of alternatives in public education. What is not so clear, however, is whether the superintendents in this sample were making the needed distinction between open alternatives, alternatives, and options. It was apparent from responses to open-ended questions in the survey, that the element of choice was not present in a number of the programs being cited as alternative in nature—that is, programs for unwed mothers, education for the homebound, juvenile court established programs. The ambiguity here is certainly not unique to these administrators, for, as Fantini points

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out in *Public Schools of Choice*, such ambiguity exists even among many who propose to be in the forefront of the alternative education movement.

Need To Match Candidates to Programs

As alternative teacher education programs continue to emerge, and as the nature and scope of alternatives in public education begin to expand, a rather unique set of needs is created in regard to the matching of teacher candidates with alternative programs existing at the local level. Superintendents responded with support for alternative programs and open alternative programs, and with requests for assistance in staffing or training people to work in them. There is clear evidence that concentrated efforts must be made to facilitate the identification and selection of teachers to create requested op-

tions and alternatives within local public schools.

The findings of this research have indicated specific needs, and have led to the following recommendations:

1. Teachers emerging from alternative teacher preparation programs should be made more visible to potential employers. Universities should provide clear and accurate statements of programmatic goals and should take steps to ensure that potential employers are aware of these goals.

2. More precise descriptions of each emerging teacher's skills, understandings, learning and motivational theories should be produced jointly by the candidate and university and made available to potential employers.


3. Employing school systems seeking teachers for alternatives and option-based curricula should provide clear and accurate environmental descriptions or clearly articulate a willingness for alternatives to emerge within the school system.

4. Universities should move to increase dialogue with school systems that wish to become involved in developing alternative teacher education programs exclusively for their own future teachers, and to seek more information about what kind of teachers various systems might want to hire.

5. Alternative teacher education programs should continue to expand at the college or university level, offering a wider identifiable variety of optional programs for students.

The need for teachers who can produce and create options, who can function effectively in alternative environments, and who can achieve a high level of satisfaction and comfort in choice-based curricula—this need is evident. Perhaps it is best summarized in the handwritten comment at the bottom of one superintendent's returned questionnaire: "Why in the hell haven't you university people gotten with it before this? We've been looking for people like this for five years. . . . I'll take all you can send me."

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