

Attending to Challenges, Supplying a Teacher Workforce: How South Carolina Can Support Alternative Certification Pathways

Dr. Remona Jenkins, Director of Teacher Quality and Staff Development, Kershaw County School District

That teacher over there. Yes, that's the one.

The one demonstrating strong relationships with her students. The one with 12 years in the profession. She understands the skills needed for the workforce.

She's also the one whose mother is in the hospital. The one who showed up every day during the pandemic.

Her? Yes, her. She's not certified. She's facing a barrier. She needs to pass Praxis, a national educator assessment for certification.

Alternative certification works, but how do we attend to challenges to the alternative certification process?

I am an alternatively certified teacher.

I know and understand the challenges to certification in South Carolina for people who would like to enter the profession and actualize their dream of becoming a teacher. These include limited access to entrance into educational programs, insufficient funds to complete a degree program, student teaching full time without a source of income, a low college GPA, and passing Praxis. Passing **Praxis stands as a hurdle** for many. Specifically, **licensing exams have a disproportionate impact on minority teacher candidates: 62% of Black and 43% of Hispanic candidates fail the elementary Praxis test even after multiple attempts.**



**Remona Jenkins, Ed.D., SHRM-CP
Kershaw County School District**

Dr. Remona Jenkins is the Director of Teacher Quality and Staff Development for the Kershaw County School District. In that role, she guides staff development, alternative certification, the onboarding process for first year teachers, and recruitment efforts in the Kershaw County School District (KCSD). Prior to her work in KCSD, Jenkins served as a district administrator overseeing new hire orientation, teacher induction, international teachers, and the National Board program. She also provided intensive instructional coaching to traditionally and alternatively certified K-12 educators. Her educational background includes a doctorate in education and a master's in educational leadership from American College of Education, a master's in elementary education from the University of Phoenix, and a master's in community and occupational programs in education from the University of South Carolina. Jenkins completed her bachelor's degree in human development and family studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is married with two children.

Some time ago, states **tightened up requirements** for teacher licensing. Instead of **removing challenges**, they contend that tighter regulation of teacher training programs and additional requirements on the pathway to certification are the only solutions. Although well-meaning, such submissions are not based on sound research or factual data.

Now, faced with a **national teacher shortage** as states report their **supply and demand data**, the impact those efforts are having on teacher diversity, coupled with evidence that **Black and Latinx** students benefit from having teachers who look like them, some states are moving to loosen or even dispense with some requirements. For example, Arkansas rallied to raise its teacher certification test cut score, but considering the shortage, has left the cut score as is.

Too often energy, time, and money are put into “hoop jumping” by candidates with nothing to show for their efforts. South Carolina policymakers have a responsibility and duty to increase, diversify, and qualify South Carolina’s educator workforce for our children. The shortage is even more acute than currently estimated. Qualifications for certification **should align with proof of meaningful research-based practices** for improving the educational welfare of all students, **considering state requirements and state assessment proficiency scores** are not the same.

Teachers are planners.

Teachers are proactive.

Teachers are problem solvers.

Teachers are professionals.

But teachers’ spirits, their tenacity, their drive, their ability to overcome all things can be stifled, muffled, dimmed, altered, and diminished by consistent challenges.

Today’s college graduates have numerous career options and opportunities. If the path into teaching is too burdensome or costly, graduates will abandon it for other professional pathways (Finn, 2001). As with traditional certification, we must streamline the process to alternative certification so that even more future educators can begin making a difference for students, parents, the community, and the profession.



As with traditional certification, we must streamline the process to alternative certification so that even more future educators can begin making a difference for students, parents, the community, and the profession.



New Jersey, Massachusetts, Florida, Washington, and Colorado rank as the top states for education. These states provide professional preparation and education for would-be teachers by allowing them to work and learn simultaneously, putting into daily application what they are learning in theory (Department of Education, n.d.). For example, in the state of New Jersey, in order to obtain a standard certificate, all novice teachers must complete the Provisional Teacher Process (PTP), during which they are evaluated, mentored, and supervised by their district or school while working under a provisional certificate. A candidate must obtain a **Certificate of Eligibility with Advanced Standing (CEAS)** or **Certificate of Eligibility (CE)**. These certificates allow the candidate to seek and accept offers of employment as teachers while completing coursework toward a standard license. The support of mentors, apprenticeships, and instructional coaching helps alternative certification-seeking candidates to be successful, ensuring program quality and constructs which align with student outcomes.

The single approach of teaching while earning certification helps to mitigate economic barriers for many.

South Carolina also has strong examples of alternative certification pathways that work. Carolina Collaborative for Alternative Preparation, also known as **CarolinaCAP**, is a collaborative effort among South Carolina school districts, the **University of South Carolina**, and the **Center for Teaching Quality**. CarolinaCAP provides the opportunity for paraprofessionals and industry-knowledgeable candidates to become certified through graduate-level coursework, micro-credentials, coaching, and collaborative inquiry. Applicants must possess a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited college and have a minimum 2.5 cumulative grade point average. Applicants applying for certification in Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, and Special Education: Multi-Categorical (PK–Grade 12) need a minimum 2.75 undergraduate grade point average. Having these qualifying requirements and after passing Praxis, applicants move to candidates and may become the Teacher of Record, taking the lead in their own classrooms through Eligibility of Employment.

The single approach of teaching while earning certification helps to mitigate economic barriers for many.

CarolinaCAP attracts diverse candidates who mirror the student populations they serve. Representation is critical for students (our state's future teacher pipeline). Eighty-one percent of candidates who participated in CarolinaCAP identify as Black, ranging in age from 20 to 60 years old. Eighteen percent of candidates are male (CarolinaCrED, 2021). CarolinaCAP candidates bring a wealth of both life

and professional experiences to their classrooms. The program's structure addresses the economic barrier as well. Along with the aforementioned requirements, candidates who pass Praxis and become eligible for employment may begin receiving a teachers salary.

How does this translate to the person? The educators trained under alternatively certified programs such as CarolinaCAP might provide some insight. Anisha is a second-year teacher working in a rural district. She's producing students who will leave second-grade reading and writing with confidence. She's also a teacher who is having challenges passing the Praxis certification exam.

This is Anisha's challenge.

She has attempted the exam. She has noticed the longer she teaches, the more she feels Praxis is assessing her instructional classroom practices. Her score has increased each time. But her initial journey was very stressful. She knows a test "doesn't make you who you are," but for a person like Anisha, whose heart is in teaching, it "messes with your mind. It makes you say, 'Gosh, I went to school, and I can't even pass a certification test.'" Anisha has taught for two years, serving in the roles of interventionist and teacher. She has strong relationships with her students and works with all of them, regardless of how many she has, to ensure they are performing at or above grade level in reading comprehension and math.

**I see myself in Anisha,
once a new teacher facing
a hurdle to becoming fully
certified. How do I
support her by removing
obstacles which do not
align with student
outcomes?**

Anisha has also taken the Praxis test five times. She notes, "When I saw my score go up, it made me feel a little better. But having to keep dishing out that money, I know something has to go lacking because of the test. But I have to do it because my job requires me to be certified." Anisha is a single mom and among many who have to tackle the financial hurdle associated with repeated testing.

The path to certification will give Anisha the opportunity to be able to live out a dream and weave a connection with students and families for years to come. Certification will give her the final piece of being confident in herself and in growing the educational development of students.

I see myself in Anisha, once a new teacher facing a hurdle to becoming fully certified. How do I support her by removing obstacles which do not align with student outcomes? Obstacles that initially decreased the number of teachers in the profession? Obstacles that marginalize people who have limited economic, social, or educational resources?

A South Carolina Solution

South Carolina has made strides in opening the door to alternative certification.

But it's not enough.

Statewide programs like Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (**PACE**) and Centers for the Re-Education and Advancement of Teachers in Special Education and Related Services Personnel (**SC CREATE**) allow candidates from anywhere in the state to seek certification. Locally based programs, such as Alternative Pathways to Educator Certification (**APEC**), Carolina Collaborative for Alternative Preparation (**CarolinaCAP**), and Educator Preparation and Innovation Pathways (**EPI**), focus their efforts in certain geographical areas of the state. Additionally, some programs such as Teach for America (**TFA**) seek to bring top candidates to rural areas in South Carolina.

Despite these efforts, there are still challenges to certification.

Some programs only serve secondary candidates, those looking to pursue special education, those who live in the Midlands, or those residing in rural counties.

South Carolina can do even better. What if we add to these options and create a solution that works in every district, hometown, and classroom, whether candidates are in the upstate region seeking to become certified in elementary or residing in rural Jasper County seeking to teach chemistry? What if this model pulled together resources versus requiring school districts to compete for them? What if this model could be adapted to fit the needs of individual districts without feeling “cookie-cutter” while promoting quality, research, rigor, and best practices? What if this model incorporated local ownership or even allowed smaller districts to collaborate to ensure candidates were exposed to full-scale opportunities? What if we grew our own?



**South Carolina has made
strides in opening the
door to alternative
certification.**



The Tennessee Department of Education has developed a **Grow Your Own** teacher pipeline program as a partnership between the Clarksville-Montgomery school system and the Austin Peay State University's **Teacher Residency program**. The program paves the way for teaching and educator workforce development nationwide. The state-approved Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship programs between school districts and educator preparation programs (EPPs) are now among many Grow Your Own programs in the state of Tennessee offering free opportunities to become a teacher, thus clearing the path for any other state or territory to launch similar programs with **federal approval**.

The program allows participants to earn a wage while learning to become teachers. Applicants have the opportunity to participate in an alternative route to certification by working directly under the guidance of a skilled, certified teacher. The partnership model includes both two- and four-year colleges and has developed three different pathways for educational assistants to earn their degrees or certifications in teaching.

The model provides other states the opportunity to structure programming to their specific needs. States can target high school seniors, paraprofessionals, or those who already have degrees and need a pathway to strengthen their knowledge in pedagogy and research-based practices.

Policymakers, will you advocate for this solution? Concerned citizens, will you support the policymakers who pledge to adopt this? Parents, will you hold our Department of Education and its stakeholders responsible for making this a reality? School board members, will you advocate for a statewide approach requiring federal approval and involve the state's educational entities? It must be an approach that can serve every school in every district and every student in every classroom and aligns local resources with community support and community ownership.



Will you ensure South Carolina has numerous educators with diversified backgrounds who represent the landscape of our future workforce?



You!

Yes, YOU, racing your eyes across the page, coming to grips with your responsibility as a reader of this story, will you ensure South Carolina has numerous educators with diversified backgrounds who represent the landscape of our future workforce? South Carolina has made progress, but there is more to be done.

South Carolina is ready. Are you?

Support inclusive pathways which will capture the exquisite talent of our state. Encourage your senator to further explore Tennessee's national model for a teacher residency program. This same Grow Your Own approach can be successful in South Carolina.

According to the [February 2022 Supply and Demand Update report](#), there were a total of 7,870 teacher departures (resignations) and a total of 2,154 teacher vacancies/positions in South Carolina schools up to February 2022 during the 2021–2022 school year. If I do nothing else, if we do nothing else, we are certain those numbers will increase. If you and I take up this call to action, we will begin investigating additional alternative pathways that support building South Carolina's workforce, increasing future teachers' capacities, and filling South Carolina's classrooms. We further awaken the senses and the abilities of others to demand a solution for our children, families, homes, communities, and our state.

And we successfully dismantle obstacles and challenges—for you, for me, and for the numerous Anishas in the State of South Carolina.

References

CarolinaCrED. (2021). CarolinaCAP Year Two Annual Report.

<https://carolinacred.org/carolinacap-year-two-annual-report/>

Department of Education. (n.d.). Recruitment, Preparation and Induction.

<https://www.nj.gov/education/rpi/induction/>

Finn, C. (2001). Removing the barriers for teacher candidates.

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/removing-the-barriers-for-teacher-candidates>

This story is published as part of a storytelling retreat hosted by the *Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP)* housed in the *University of South Carolina's College of Education*. CEP partners nominated practicing educators, administrators, and system leaders to share their stories. The *Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ)*, a CEP partner, facilitated the retreat and provided editorial and publication support. Learn more about this work and read additional stories by following [@CEP_UofSC](#) and [@teachingquality](#).