

Hire Education

This summer, the first graduates of a new alternative teacher certification program enter the job market. What does this mean for St. Louis schools?

BY MARGARET BAUER

Variants of the following story appear on an almost daily basis: A layoff announcement from Boeing or Chrysler strips hundreds of engineers of their jobs. An Illinois state budget shortfall closes historical sites, leaving dozens without a source of income.

Previously, many facing such situations would seek substitute-teaching positions. In Missouri, anyone who's completed 60 college credit hours can

apply for a substitute certificate of license. Subbing certainly isn't a way to wealth—those most in demand end up working only an average of three days a week, usually without health insurance or benefits—but it's a lifeline.

Unfortunately, so many have flocked to subbing recently that hundreds are on waiting lists; most will see little to no time in the classroom. Those already on districts' regular call lists are seeing their hours cut back. To work as a substitute in these trying times is to face a tremendous amount of uncertainty.

And it's tougher still to turn it into a full-time position, especially as a career-changer. An unpredictable subbing schedule means any daytime class with set hours is out; the prospect of attending night school is similarly daunting, even for those who feel education is their calling. The cost alone is prohibitive: Take a three-credit-hour course at the University of Missouri–St. Louis per semester, and you'll spend about \$6,000 per year, while making minimal progress toward a degree. Take two, and you'll progress faster—but at double the cost.

Enter the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. Founded in 2001 by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, ABCTE's Passport to Certification program seeks to provide an alternate path to teacher certification in seven areas, from biology to English language arts. At the same time, it gives schools a pool of new teachers



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with backgrounds in industry, especially in math and science; a 2006 Missouri METS (Math, Engineering, Technology, and Science) report found each of those areas needed at least 300 new teachers to meet demand. Last August, after vigorous debate among program leaders, state legislators, and Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) representatives, ABCTE enrolled its first certification candidates.

Unlike Teach for America, another certification pathway for non-education majors, ABCTE doesn't require a full-time commitment—or relocation. Through the program, would-be teachers who've passed an Intelius background check and completed at least a bachelor's degree, with a minimum 2.5 GPA, are given one year to pass two exams (similar to the Educational Testing Service's Praxis tests, these include one subject-area test and one teaching-methods test) and to spend at least 60 hours teaching en route to certification. The cost? Roughly \$1,000, depending on the subject area. Another \$525 adds an additional certification area. Participants earn the same initial four-year teaching certificate any traditional education grad receives.

Sounds easy, right? Many think so; since ABCTE was approved in Missouri last year, 1,097 people have enrolled statewide, more than in any of the other eight states where it's offered. But completing the program takes diligence. Program president Dave Saba says certification-seekers take an average of eight to 10 months to prepare for the tests, which have a pass rate of only about 38 percent. When *SLM* spoke to Saba in June, the program's 100th Missouri teacher had just been certified.

Because so few have completed the program and so many have yet to come before school-district hiring managers, ABCTE representatives regularly field worried questions from possible applicants and current participants on the program's forums (abcte.org/forums). "Will districts even accept this path to certification?" they wonder.

According to program representative Mike Holden, the answer is yes—at least in this region. "The only one I've ever heard [otherwise] with was St. Louis city," he says—and in that case, Saba personally spoke with district human-resources rep Sharonica Harden to clarify whether ABCTE-certified teachers

meet No Child Left Behind's "highly qualified" standard. (Short answer: yes.) ABCTE's list of local districts willing to consider program grads includes Pattonville, Ritenour, Ferguson-Florissant, Clayton, Northwest R-I, and St. Louis Public Schools.

So far, 35 teachers in St. Louis have completed the program. Of that group, *SLM* spoke to four, and all agreed: The program is convenient, but it's *not* easy, and it isn't for those requiring a lot of hand-holding.

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This month, former Lucent Technologies engineer Cynthia Kerkemeyer plans to begin teaching math full time at Wentzville's St. Patrick Catholic School. When she got her bachelor's degree from Washington University in 1990, she knew engineering wasn't her passion. "I had subbed a little bit in college," she recalls, "and I really, really enjoyed it." But switching majors didn't seem practical.

After 10 years in engineering and six years as a stay-at-home mom, however, Kerkemeyer decided to give teaching another shot. She resumed subbing and, within two months of ABCTE's approval last year, was able to whiz through the math subject test. The education test took longer, but by spring she'd passed it, completed a six-week stint subbing at Rosati-Kain High School, and scored an interview—then a job—with St. Patrick.

Kerkemeyer is just over the average age of participants, which Saba puts at 39 years old. Most are career-changers; a few, though, like Katie Aichholz, who graduated from Stephens College in 2004 with a BFA in fashion design, are taking a different path from the get-go.

As an artist (her textiles appeared in *SLM*'s July 2006 issue) and the daughter of a teacher, Aichholz says alternative certification seemed logical. Last year, she began teaching while taking UMSL education classes online

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to gain certification. Then her principal told her about ABCTE—and highly encouraged her to enroll. She ultimately passed ABCTE's history and education exams, then the Praxis art education exam, to become certified.

"I've always thought the real training comes from actual work experience," she wrote by email from Peru, where she was on a field trip with her New Haven High School class. "I have friends with marketing degrees that work in management and with backgrounds in film that work in sales, so it seems that in almost any other profession, it's OK for people to move freely from one career to the next without a specific degree that 'prepares' them for the job they currently have."

Denise Bogard, a 54-year-old writing veteran who'd already been teaching at St. Louis charter school Lift for Life Academy for the past nine years, says her principal also encouraged her to pursue ABCTE certification: "They had been wonderful about not pressuring me to go back and try to get the required classes to become certified, but as soon as they saw that there was an opportunity to do this, they offered to sponsor the course for me." After saying yes, she found that despite having worked as a professional writer for 30 years, the English language arts material was still hard, with a pass rate of just 33 percent. After about nine months of study, she passed on the first try—some participants she knows, however, initially failed the test's essay portion and are now waiting for retest results.

But for those without existent jobs, the hardest part seems to be gauging demand.

"For a lot of schools, with the uncertainty in the economy and the large number of private schools in the St. Louis area, it has left a big question mark on enrollments," says math and history grad Erik Corley, a former United Methodist pastor and Princeton Review tutor who's Praxis-certified in social studies—and who was still interviewing for jobs as of mid-June. "If private schools are uncertain because of the economy, that means public schools don't know. Are we going to need 10 math teachers, or 12? If we need more, we'll hire."

"We're in that waiting game." ■

In college, associate editor MARGARET BAUER came within two classes of completing a third minor in education, but ultimately decided to quit while she was ahead.