Successful Career Transitions: Lessons from Urban Alternate Route Teachers Who Stayed

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Mindful of the current difficulty and challenge in retaining new teachers, particularly in urban schools, this study examines data from a 1997 qualitative investigation of 6 Black sixth-year teachers in 2 Midwestern urban school districts regarding their views of their alternate route preparation program. The findings indicate that the program assisted them in successfully making a transition from other careers into teaching. Program structures and relationships that enabled the teachers to develop competence and identity included effective instruction in content and pedagogy and the development of close professional relationships with their mentors and with other members of their cohort. The findings imply the importance of addressing the developmental needs of individuals undertaking career transitions into teaching.

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Developing and retaining a strong teaching force is a critical issue receiving increasing attention by policy makers across the country. Among the many related issues surrounding this topic are those of recruiting, training, and retaining teachers in urban schools. Historically, urban schools have experienced a persistent shortage of professionally educated teachers, no matter how many teachers were being prepared nationally. This problem manifests in the small number of new teacher education graduates who seek positions in urban schools, the large number of teachers who transfer out of the most difficult urban schools within districts, as well as in the number of teachers who leave urban schools to seek employment in suburban schools or in other occupations (Haberman, 1988; Ingersoll, 1999).

One widespread response to this problem has been alternate route certification programs. The proliferation of alternate route certification programs in urban areas attests to the presumed viability of such programs to staff schools that are plagued by high turnover rates. According to Zumwalt,

> Alternative certification is viewed as an answer to endemic shortages of qualified urban teachers. Certified teachers generally prefer or find it easier to get hired in suburban or urban middle-class schools, leaving many urban schools staffed by emergency licensed teachers who have high attrition rates. Alternative certification attracts more diverse, mature, academically able teachers, it is argued, who want to teach in urban schools, are more likely to be successful, and are more likely to stay there, breaking the cycles of high turnover. (1996, p. 41)

Staying there, as well as providing quality education for urban students, are primary expectations of teachers prepared in alternate route programs. Yet, some studies on the retention of teachers prepared in alternate route programs indicate that even these teachers do not remain in urban schools. As reported by Zumwalt:

> Although initially more likely to teach in urban schools either because of personal choice or necessity, there is little evidence indicating that alternative certification teachers are less likely to flee urban schools or are generally more responsive to the needs of urban students. Much depends on their personal histories and the nature of their abbreviated preparation programs (1996, p. 42).

The nature of the preparation of alternate route teachers is, therefore, of central concern to teacher educators, school personnel, and policy makers invested in this approach to staffing schools.

The concern has heightened with the release of the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001, in which alternate route and traditionally licensed educators alike, who can demonstrate competency in the subjects they teach, meet the definition of "highly qualified." This, despite the fact that there is substantial variation in requirements of the programs that 44 states and the District of Columbia now offer (Blair, 2003). At one end of the spectrum are programs that provide only two weeks of training prior to assigning teachers to classrooms. At the other end are two-year post-baccalaureate programs with integrated coursework and up to three years of mentoring during the induction period.

Designing programs that will ensure the longevity of alternatively prepared teachers becomes, then, an important consideration for those advocates of this strategy for increasing the teaching force, especially for urban schools. Investing scarce resources in alternate route programs is futile, if the newly prepared teachers abandon teaching. For policy makers and teacher educators, increasing the probability that effective alternate route teachers will remain in the schools that hired them is a primary goal.

In this article, I will explore a portion of a larger study that examined multiple factors in the retention of urban teachers prepared in a long-term alternate route program. Specifically, I report a qualitative study of alternate route teachers who were still working in urban schools a full six years after they received their initial licenses. My purpose was to investigate the perceptions these teachers held of their preparation program, in order to identify features of effective alternate route models that might improve teacher retention. I report findings to the following questions: (1) What preparation program experiences did the teachers recall as most beneficial in preparing them for their urban classrooms? (2) What were the features of key relationships during this period?

Theoretical Framework

Examining career transition from the perspective of career development theory provides a useful way of examining the processes and relationships that comprise the preparation of alternate route teachers. As research has indicated, many of these teachers are older, mid-career changers (Beach., Littleton, Larmer, & Calahan, 1991; Graham, 1989; Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001; Southern Regional Educational Board, 1988; Stoddart, 1993). A theoretical framework that acknowledges the work environment as a social context in which growth occurs is therefore appropriate in studying teacher development. As Kram explains,

> A relational approach to career development explores the ways in which individuals learn and grow in their work-related experiences through connections with

> others, taking a holistic view of individuals and the nature of their interactions with assignments, people, organizations, and the social context in which they work. (1996, p. 133)

Career theorists tell us that development of competence and the restructuring of identity are critical tasks for individuals engaged in a career transition. Developing competence involves incorporating a complex set of new knowledge and skills. As one incorporates perceptions of more skills, knowledge, abilities, values, experiences, and motivations, career development becomes the creation of new aspects of the self (Hall and Mirvis, 1996, p. 25).

Just as a career transition requires the acquisition of new behaviors and attitudes, it also involves a change in identity. A person's identity undergoes a dramatic shift when a status passage such as a career transition takes place, according to Barley:

> As a role shift, a status passage invokes a change in how one presents oneself to others, a change in how one is treated by others, and in many instances, a change in one's interactional partners. (1989, p. 50)

New relationships become critical, then, during a career transition, in terms of identity development.

The relevance of this theory for examining teacher retention is that individuals who make successful transitions are likely to remain in their new positions. According to Hall and Mirvis,

> Career development occurs in a self-reinforcing spiral of success experiences (Hall and Foster, 1975; Hall 1976, 1986a). . . . The result of achieving psychological success on a career task is that one experiences increased self-esteem and a more competent career subidentity. Because these are such rewarding experiences, one's career involvement is increased. (1996, p. 26)

Although the theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the career development literature, it is important to highlight other studies that have contributed to the understanding of teacher career development and retention. In their research on high-quality urban teaching, Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rogers conceptualize teacher education as a "process of learning" within "communities of practice" (2002, p. 229). Further, they have found that urban teachers prepared in such communities tend to remain in teaching. Over the past five years, 90% of 326 graduates of their program have remained in teaching, and most are teaching in urban schools (p. 232).

That teachers' sense of efficacy and preparedness influences their decisions to stay or leave was identified by Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002). These researchers examined data from a 1998 survey of nearly 3,000 beginning teachers in New York City regarding their views of their preparation for teaching. Two percent of their sample was alternate route teachers. They found that teachers' "sense of preparedness is by far the strongest predictor of teaching efficacy" and that teachers who felt poorly prepared are "significantly less likely to say they plan to remain in teaching" (p. 294).

Previous Research on Preparation and Retention of Alternate Route Teachers

Comparisons of the retention rates of alternate route and traditionally prepared teachers have yielded mixed conclusions. Although some show higher turnover rates among alternatively credentialed teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Erekson & Barr, 1985; McKibbin, 1991; Shen, 1997), many have found higher retention of alternate route teachers (Southern Regional Education Board, 1988; Tullis, Dial, & Sanchez, 1991; U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Length of preparation program seems to be a key variable of retention. Alternate route teachers prepared in short-term programs have been found to leave at higher rates than those prepared in extended programs that include intensive field experiences (McKibbin, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 2001). Darling-Hammond says, "Studies have found that recruits from short-term alternative certification programs tend to have difficulty with curriculum development, teaching methods, classroom management, and student motivation (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1990; Grossman, 1989; Lenk, 1989; Mitchell, 1987)" (2001, p. 14).

An emerging body of research has identified the characteristics of exemplary preparation programs. Such programs last from 9 to 15 months, provide an intensive extended field experience of at least 30 weeks in the classrooms of expert teachers, and integrate these internships with corresponding strong academic and pedagogical coursework (Berry, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001). Furthermore, school based programs in which college faculty and teachers collaborate in delivering the programs are most successful (Blair, 2003, p. 38). Ultimately, these factors work together to prepare teachers who remain in teaching. According to Darling-Hammond,

> The success of extended programs in recruiting teachers who stay in teaching may be partly due to the year long student teaching experience connected to coursework on teaching and learning. Teachers feel better prepared because of the longer, more integrated approach to clinical training. (2001, p. 16)

Why do these programs with a "longer, more integrated approach" produce teachers who stay? What features of such programs make the greatest difference for the participants? These were the questions I set out to answer in this study.

Method

Setting

The study was conducted in two Midwestern urban school districts in which school district staff and faculty from an urban university collaboratively designed and delivered all aspects of the alternate route program, including intern selection, instruction, and supervision. The state specified the requirements for entry into the program. To qualify for admission, candidates must have completed a bachelor's degree, passed Pre-Professional Skills Tests in reading, writing and mathematics, provided evidence of experience in a field related to the subject to be taught, and documented successful experiences working with children. (Feistritzer & Chester, 1991, p. 127). Candidates who were selected were subsequently hired by one of the school districts as interns.

Participants

I selected a sample that would allow insight into the recollections of teachers who had all participated in the same preparation program. Participants were sixth year elementary teachers who had completed their preparation together in the alternate route program. Twelve individuals were selected to be in the program in its initial year. All completed the program during the 1991-92 school year, received tenure in 1994 or 1995, and were still working in urban schools during the 1997-98 school year, when the data were gathered. I sent all of the teachers a letter inviting them to participate in the study. Four women and two men, all Black, volunteered to participate. Their ages ranged from 28 to 45, with a mean age of 35.8. All had been employed in other occupations prior to entering the program. Their prior occupations included account analyst, social worker, business owner, college academic advisor, government contract manager, and public school paraprofessional.

Data Collection

Instrumentation

This was a qualitative study which used focused, in-depth interviews for data collection. A series of three separate 90-minute interviews was conducted with each participant, approximately 3 days to one week apart, using an interview guide. Generally, the guide was organized to elicit stories related to antecedent factors, teacher education or process factors, and in-service factors of the participants' career development. The first interview established the context of the participant's experience. The second allowed participants to reconstruct the details of their experience. The third encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were extracted from a larger data set collected in 1997 to examine three phases of teacher preparation: antecedent, process or teacher preparation, and in-service. For purposes of this study, only the teacher preparation program data were analyzed. Using the verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews, I used inductive data analysis proce-

dures. The objective was to determine the processes and relationships that informed the participants' views of how they came to be urban educators and made decisions to remain in teaching. Initially, within-case analysis assisted in identifying processes and relationships. Cross-case analysis was then completed to identify common themes.

Findings

Integrated Program Components

The program, referred to by the pseudonym PAL for this study, engaged the cohort of prospective teachers in an integrated preparation program. The program featured pre-internship course work and a year-long supervised internship in urban schools enrolling from 33% to 55% minority students. Weekly evening meetings during the internship year provided the cohort members opportunities to reflect on their practice, discuss concerns and observations, and complete additional coursework. Experienced teacher mentors supervised the interns; four of interns were assigned to work with mentors in the mentors' classrooms, while two were assigned to their own classrooms, under the indirect supervision of their mentors. Giving them a longer, more closely supervised practicum than the traditional student teaching experience, the internship more closely resembled those described in the literature on internships in teaching and in other professions (Johnson, Ratsoy, Holdaway, & Friesen, 1993). In addition to being observed and assisted by their mentors, all interns were also observed by their district's PAL coordinator and school principals. The longer practicum required of the participants in this study (one year versus one or two quarters), provided a range of experiences that they felt were beneficial and had transfer into their own classrooms the following year.

Developing Competence

In the context of their cohort learning community the participants completed five semester credits in content and pedagogy during the summer prior to beginning their internship. Additional course work was completed as part of the internship requirement in weekly seminars. Words like "challenging," "exciting," "awesome," "helpful," and "valuable" were used by these participants to describe their education classes. Why did they view their classes this way?

An analysis of their reflections on their learning indicates that their learning was a process involving observation, practice, and application with feedback from their mentors. Typical of their comments about their formal courses were:

- *A lot of guest speakers would come in and bring materials, especially in reading and math. We received the most recent ideas.*
- *When we got to class specific--like social studies and science--for science we went to a school, and there was a science teacher there that taught us science methods.*
- *Basically, you modeled best practices for teaching students.*
- *The instructor taught us the way he/she wanted us to interact with our students.*
- *The professors seemed to be modeling what they expected us to do. In addition to teaching us what was in the curriculum, they tended to model. Like when they wanted to teach you about students constructing their own knowledge, they put things out there, and, instead of telling us what was up, they tried to pry it out of us.*

It is clear from these statements that the future teachers in this study respected and learned from teachers who modeled best practices in teaching. In some cases, they watched master teachers work with students and systematically observed the strategies they used. In other cases, they were taught by teachers who employed best practice strategies in their own teaching. Whether college instructors or practitioners taught the classes, practice of new techniques in the supportive environment of their cohort was also part of their learning:

- *Throughout the entire program we would do different lessons.*
- *It wasn't getting up saying, "When you teach fractions, it is best to use a hands-on approach." No, they brought out the cuisenaire rods and said, "This is the way you cre-*

ate a lesson" and had us create lessons and come back in and model them for the whole class.

- *She would bring manipulatives to every math class. She'd always have a different way. She'd have a particular strand--maybe it was teaching something in geometry. And so she'd always have enough manipulatives for all of us, and we'd do a particular problem in geometry. She had a lot of great strategies.*
- *We were not only lectured to, we were able to participate. And we had to do projects in classes.*
- *Everything we got from that year that was hands-on was very valuable.*

Opportunities to practice new skills enabled the interns to develop the confidence required to apply those skills in classrooms. Actually teaching, they said, was one of the most valuable parts of the program:

- *What was really valuable was doing it, you know, when you had to face it every day.*
- *The information that you received one day or two days or the week before, then you go in and apply it.*
- *The units, the writing of lesson plans, applying the theory you get into the classroom to the real life situations. I mean, the chance to practice that every day.*

That the participants in this study were teaching while attending classes made transferring their learning into practice an almost immediate occurrence. Immediately being able to put into practice what they learned in their evening classes not only reinforced the relevance of these courses, but enabled them to develop a repertoire of experiences as a basis for further learning and reflection.

Developing Professional Relationships

Relationships with Mentors

Their learning in class was further facilitated by their mentors, who assisted them with curriculum development and modeled effective planning. One intern commented that one of the things she learned from her mentor was "the planning, the thinking through of curriculum where there's no curriculum established. You know, like our reading program that we have in our school. I really learned a lot from how she thought through things." What the participants in this study remembered most about their mentors was that their mentors were approachable, knowledgeable about educational theory and practice, respected by parents, energetic, concerned about diversity, innovative, organized, and, most importantly, skilled and caring in working with students.

An analysis of the interviews revealed that mentoring served multiple purposes for the interns. The support of expert mentors mediated the development of competence and identity through improvement of teaching performance, the facilitation of transfer of knowledge from teacher education, the promotion of personal and professional well-being, and socialization to the institutional culture. The interns described their relationships with their mentors in these words:

- *My mentor helped just by being there to let me share things with him.*
- *We talked it out. We really planned a lot together. I remember we spent a full day at the multicultural lab together. But we talked through things all the time.*
- *It gave me a feeling of security that I knew there was someone I could plug into, should I need some help. I saw my mentor as someone I could count on to give me information when I was not sure what to do or how to do it.*
- *I loved her. We would sit down and talk about things--what we thought about different ways of teaching kids. And in some cases we didn't agree. We could share. We learned from each other. I liked the fact that she thought she could learn from me. She thought I helped her grow, and I know she helped me grow.*
- *She gave me the freedom to make mistakes. Worked with me as a partner. Valued the experience I brought, even though I didn't really have any except for my age and being a parent and being in corporate America. We had a really good relationship.*

In addition to practicing the role of teacher, interns observed their mentors, which assisted in acquiring a new identity. One intern explained that he learned "Mechanics. Movement. There is a way a teacher walks around a classroom. There are things that teachers do, a way a teacher stands, speaks and listens. I've been around teachers and been around a classroom, but I still needed to know those things."

The qualities the mentors possessed made them particularly effective teachers, coaches, and mediators into the school and community culture for the potential urban teachers. Possessing an experiential knowledge base as well as a theoretical one, these mentors were capable of assisting the interns transition effectively into urban classrooms.

Relationships with Cohort Members

In addition to professors and mentors who served key roles in mediating the development of new identities, members of the cohort supported each other. In fact, the support of the cohort was described by all of the participants as the most important, as far as developing a sense of collegiality:

- *There was another PAL person in the building. And she was teaching fifth grade, so we helped each other a lot.*
- *It basically was about sharing and caring and learning together and tossing around ideas, trying new things and using them as my students. They were using me as their students. And as tutors. We became each other's tutors, paper readers.*
- *It encouraged collaboration, which I'm sure a lot of us had done on our jobs, but you didn't necessarily see in undergrad programs or high school. In this program it was okay to share your answers or just talk about things you had done in your classroom.*
- *Sharing some of the funny, silly, stupid things we were experiencing, either through our own mistakes or just observations we were making with the atmosphere in the buildings, the classroom, the papers we had to do.*

Among the functions served by the cohort, many members indicated that the cohort provided the context of a "shared ordeal" (Lortie, 1975). According to one participant,

> To be able to be in a cohort with a group of people that had all basically done the same thing--taken a risk and left their lives behind them to do something that they felt so completely committed to--and to have that commonality amongst us, and to have the commonality of struggle amongst us--said a lot.

For the members of this alternate route program, a cohort model that brought the members of the cohort together on a weekly basis became a powerful aspect of their teacher preparation program, reducing their isolation. They also developed trusting, collegial and personal relationships with each other, respecting individual differences and taking pride in their identity as a group. In addition to socializing the interns to teaching, the cohort model also served as a source of strength for its members in difficult times, and, thus, as a factor in the persistence of its members in completing the program. The teachers remembered,

- *The greatest support were the people in the cohort. We were all supporting one another. We would call each other every night.*
- *The person in the group who gave me a lot of support I would call all the time. When I considered quitting, I would call up my friend and tell her, "Look, I'm quitting."*
- *My cohort was very important. I would not have made it through without them. We were going through the same thing together. We gave each other support, spiritually and emotionally, to not give up.*

Becoming an Urban Teacher

In reflecting on their entry-level and exit concerns, the teachers revealed that a transformation took place during their preparation period. At the beginning of the program, their concerns focused primarily on themselves and tasks:

- *How do you arrange the desks?*

- *I was stressed out a little bit, because it seemed like I couldn't get everything I wanted to do done within the time frame.*
- *The complexity of the job--I was just floored.*
- *One of my biggest challenges was staying ahead of my kids, especially in regards to content knowledge.*
- *The biggest challenge for me was to plan for a week.*
- *I was perspiring and one of the kids said, "Mr. Johnson, you are sweating." I said, "Thanks for pointing that out." But, yeah, real nervous. When you first start teaching you want to do so well that you want to overdo it. I probably overdid it. I learned. It is somewhere between here and here. You know, between Robin Williams and catatonic.*

While the interns started out with high levels of self and task concerns, they completed their internships with the major focus of their concerns on their students and the teaching/learning process:

- *I had a sense of working with children who were difficult.*
- *I saw myself as more of a thematic, whole language, hands-on kind of teacher.*
- *I felt confident when the parents of those bright kids came into my classroom. They liked the fact that I was giving their child more challenging material to read.*
- *It was Godawful in the time it took. I think it was for the best. I wouldn't have felt like I was doing what I could for the kids in my classroom if I hadn't. It was hard, but good teaching is.*
- *At the end I did a unit that I called "Journeys"--an interdisciplinary unit. It was an in-depth piece. We did a lot of field trips and that kind of thing. The kids really gained a lot from it. I can picture the kids still outside doing the finishing project of the whole unit. The kids were painting their own journey stories. All those murals. That is the picture I have in my mind. The kids painting on the sidewalk. The students were so engaged. I thought that was how things were supposed to be. They were really engaged with that, more so than with anything we did that year.*

Over the course of the year, the interns moved from self concerns to student concerns. They completed their internships confident in their own management, planning and survival skills and focusing clearly on student outcomes. This transformation indicates a level of competence and teacher identity above the norm for entry level teachers.

Discussion

The data indicate that alternate route teacher preparation that provides the structures and relationships to negotiate the major tasks of career transition contributes to teacher retention. Teachers in this study considered the integrated program model an effective bridge between their prior academic and vocational experience and the real world of the classroom. The success of such collaborative programs in retaining teachers has been documented in earlier research (Colbert & Wolff, 1992; Johnson, Ratsoy, Holdaway, & Friesen, 1993; Oakes, Franke, Quartz, and Rogers, 2002; Wepner & Mobley, 1998). Findings of this study suggest that the effectiveness of such collaborative models relate to their strength in addressing the developmental needs of individuals navigating a career transition.

Addressing those needs requires careful attention to the relationships between prospective teachers and others with whom they learn and work. The importance of supportive relationships in providing psychological and instructional support in teacher preparation has been discussed in the teacher preparation literature (Gold, 1996). It is also important from a career development perspective. As Hall states, "The relational environment of the present and future work world is a primary influence on career development" (1996, p. 3). In this study, relationships with mentors and with other members of the cohort were most critical. As interns, the participants in this study forged strong relationships with their on-site mentors and with each other. These relationships were central in their development of professional skill and identity.

Daily contact with an experienced teacher mentor provided the emotional and technical support essential for the development of competence and professional identity, as the teachers applied their operational knowledge in a realistic setting. Unlike the subjects of previous studies (Evertson, Hawley, & Zlotnik, 1985; Hood & Parker, 1994; Lortie, 1975; Rashid, 1990), who indicated that transfer of training into practice was minimal or non-existent, the participants in this study immediately applied what they had learned, with support and feedback from their mentors. That a strong mentoring relationship may increase teacher retention has been reported consistently in the literature (Blank & Sindelar, 1992; Guyton, Fox, & Sisk, 1991; Heller & Sindelar, 1991; Kennedy, 1991; Knauth & Kamin, 1994; Littleton, Tally-Foos, & Wolaver, 1992; Odell & Ferraro, 1992). The results of this study suggest that, because mentoring supports the needs of those engaged in a career passage into teaching, it may be particularly important in alternate route programs.

The cohort model exerted another powerful impact on the teacher candidates, providing a community in which each drew personal and professional support. Confirming the findings of other research studies (Fox & Singletary, 1986; Hawk & Schmidt, 1989; Knauth & Kamin, 1994; Lortie, 1975; Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler, 1990), the participants in this study revealed the impact of the cohort in minimizing feelings of isolation, fostering trust, and developing collegial patterns of behavior and occupational identity through the "shared ordeal." The cohort also reinforced the persistence of its members, an important feature in a program designed to promote teacher retention.

Implications and Conclusion

The reflections and observations of six alternate route teachers who continued working in urban schools and plan to stay there provide evidence that preparation programs can be structured to promote the development of the level of competence and identity essential for a long-term commitment to a career in education. Such programs, however, require that participants experience a pattern of reinforcing successful experiences within a supportive professional learning environment. That this is particularly important for teachers coming into the profession through alternate routes should be clear to program planners seeking to alleviate teacher shortages.

One implication of this study is the necessity of ensuring that program components include appropriate structures for successful career transition into teaching. This is particularly important for advocates of "streamlined systems," as described in Secretary of Education Rod Paige's report to Congress on the status of teacher quality in the nation, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge.* The time successful programs require to foster the development of competence and identity may be longer than some believe necessary for an individual who possesses subject matter competence. However, regardless of how knowledgeable an individual is, developing the competence to facilitate others' learning is a complex process. Acknowledging that complexity necessitates respecting the developmental needs of prospective teachers for supportive structures and relationships as they negotiate the path into their new career.

Another implication of this study is for strengthening current traditional models of teacher education. Secretary Paige promotes the development of new models, stating, "a model for tomorrow would be based on the best alternate route programs of today" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 19). Many teacher preparation institutions are beginning to adapt features of alternate route programs, such as lengthening field experiences and employing K-12 teachers as college course instructors (Blair, 2003). This study implies the positive potential of models that intentionally incorporate structures to address the developmental needs of adults making career transitions.

Preparing highly qualified teachers who feel competent and who have a commitment to remain in teaching is an imperative that teacher educators and policy makers must continue to address. The challenge will be to build effective models that respond to market needs while not compromising quality. One step toward meeting the challenge is to listen to the voices of the alternate route teachers who have stayed.

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