



**Testimony of Vicki Bernstein before the
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Good morning Chairman Regula, Ranking Member Obey, Representative Lowey and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss the NYC Teaching Fellows program and its positive impact on the schools and students of New York City.

As part of the *Children First* reform agenda for New York City's public schools, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein have made significant improvements to the school system. A focus of their efforts has been ensuring that all classrooms are staffed with highly qualified teachers. The NYC Teaching Fellows, an alternative certification program designed to attract and prepare talented recent graduates and career changers to become teachers for hard-to-staff schools, has played a critical role in this effort. In the process, the program has expanded to become the largest local alternative certification program in the country.

The NYC Teaching Fellows program started in 2000, when the New York City school system faced a severe shortage of qualified teachers available and willing to take positions in its high-need schools. At the time, approximately 16 percent of the nearly 80,000 teachers in New York City were not certified, and neither were 60 percent of the 9,000 individuals hired each school year. It was clear that new strategies and special effort would be necessary for New York City to meet New York State's requirement that it employ only fully certified teachers as of September 2003.¹

¹ While similar to No Child Left Behind regulations on teacher quality, this requirement was created and implemented prior to those regulations.

The NYC Teaching Fellows program was created in direct response to these pressures and in recognition of the fact that New York City students could not succeed without high-quality teachers. To develop and implement the program, the New York City Department of Education engaged in a collaborative partnership with The New Teacher Project, a national non-profit organization with expertise in the recruitment, selection and training of teachers for alternative certification programs.

Through this partnership, which continues today, the New York City Department of Education established the program's identity and structure. To ensure that the new Fellows have the best possible potential to succeed in challenging classroom environments, the program relies on several basic components, including aggressive recruitment strategies, a rigorous selection process, intensive pre-service training, Master's degree coursework in education, and mentoring and support. The following is an overview of these components as they currently function.

First, to attract a large and diverse applicant pool, the NYC Teaching Fellows' recruitment strategy utilizes both professional marketing techniques (such as internet marketing and print advertising), as well as advanced grassroots outreach efforts. Because the program's focus is not limited to the traditional teacher market or any one type of applicant, maintaining a high public profile and using different avenues to reach potential candidates are critical to the program's success. Throughout the recruitment campaign, we appeal to the public's interest in doing something meaningful with their lives, employing advertisements such as, "You remember your first grade teacher's name. Who will remember yours?" We couple our appeals with advanced data tracking tools and customer-focused service to ensure not only that we are informed about our applicants, but that applicants' interactions with the program are professional and efficient. The effectiveness of our strategies is evident in the response we have had from interested candidates; last year alone, nearly 20,000 people applied for the program.

The NYC Teaching Fellows program recognizes that individuals without prior training in education face unique challenges in the process of becoming teachers. For this reason, we employ a rigorous application and selection process designed to find applicants with the competencies and skills to be excellent teachers. As I have mentioned, applicants to the program come from a broad spectrum of careers and backgrounds, so the program's assessment model is based not on teaching experience, but on teaching potential. Individuals who apply to the program must submit a written application (including a resume, personal statement and transcripts) and verify that they meet a minimum 3.0 GPA requirement. After an initial pre-screening, candidates with potential are invited to participate in a day-long interview process in which trained program selectors (who are district teachers and administrators) have an opportunity to assess each candidate more thoroughly while

applicants can demonstrate their teaching potential and exhibit strengths that may not be evident on paper. Ultimately, we make offers to only one in five applicants.

In preparation for their classroom assignments, all Fellows complete an intensive pre-service training session. Typically held in the summer, the session lasts seven weeks, during which Fellows begin their university coursework in education, orient themselves to the schools through “student teaching” assignments, and establish peer networks and discuss the practical aspects of teaching through Fellow Advisory sessions. The program strives to make this pre-service training period affordable to Fellows (who participate full-time, five days a week) by providing them with \$2,500 living stipends. Before beginning teaching, Fellows must pass two New York State Certification Exams: the Liberal Arts and Sciences Test and a Content Specialty Test. (Ultimately, the State also requires Fellows to pass a pedagogical test for the next level of certification.)

New York State requires all participants of alternative certification programs to be enrolled in a university education program and that all candidates for permanent teaching certification possess a Master’s degree.² As a result, all Fellows are enrolled in Master’s degree education coursework at local universities. Currently, the program has partnerships with a dozen different area institutions of higher education. The Master’s program takes two to three years to complete, with Fellows taking classes beginning during the pre-service training and throughout their first few years teaching. Once they have completed the Master’s and three years of teaching, Fellows are eligible for the State’s Professional Teacher Certification. The New York City Department of Education helps offset the costs of the Master’s degree by paying approximately two-thirds of it, while Fellows contribute \$4,000 over two years through payroll deductions.

A teacher’s first year is always hard, even for candidates who come to teaching through traditional routes. However, the NYC Teaching Fellows program strives to ease the inevitable challenges through strong mentoring and support from both within the schools where Fellows are teaching and from the universities where they are studying. The program provides an additional avenue of support through regular communications and meetings and perhaps most importantly as a community of colleagues. We find that there is a high level of bonding that occurs between Fellows during the intensive pre-service training, which unites individuals with diverse backgrounds but common experiences and goals. Fellows consistently rate the support of their peers as being the most valuable to them in making a successful transition into the teaching profession.

² It is important to note that alternative certification programs in other districts and States may use different models that do not necessarily involve substantive university coursework or a Master’s degree.

Over the last several years, the Department has worked hard to hone and improve each of these basic elements of the program, and its scale and success have increased as a result. The first group of Teaching Fellows, which started the program in the summer of 2000, consisted of about 300 people. Since then, the program has grown each year, with 1,100 Fellows in 2001, 1,800 in 2002, and over 2,400 in 2003.

As I mentioned previously, the NYC Teaching Fellows program is currently the largest local alternative certification program in the country. There are more than 5,000 active Fellows—representing approximately 1 of every 15 New York City teachers—currently teaching in 875 schools across the city. All Fellows meet State certification requirements and are considered “highly qualified” by No Child Left Behind standards. In large part because of the expansion of the Fellows program, New York City was able to meet the State’s mandate this past September and hire only certified teachers.³ Fellows represented almost 30 percent of our 8,500 hires for this past September and all of our alternate route programs combined accounted for 35 percent of our new hires. While the program is still relatively new, our retention numbers are promising and continue to improve. Of the 1,800 Fellows who started teaching in September 2002, 85 percent returned for a second year – a retention rate which is comparable to the overall national average and above the average for large urban districts.

The Fellows themselves come from all walks of life; about 20 percent are recent college graduates, while the remaining 80 percent span a variety of professional backgrounds, including finance, business, advertising, journalism, government and non-profits, arts, law, healthcare and technology. They are also a diverse group; of the 2003 Fellows, 40 percent are people of color, 40 percent are men, and they range in age from 21 to 69 (the average age is 31). The average undergraduate GPA of the Fellows is 3.3.

At the NYC Teaching Fellows program, we are particularly proud of our track record in meeting the shortage area needs of New York City’s schools. Alternative routes to certification are often seen as a way to make up for staffing shortages of traditionally prepared teachers, and for us these needs are both geographic- and subject-specific. In 2003, almost 80 percent of our Fellows were placed in what we consider hard-to-staff schools, and we have been cultivating an increasing number of teachers for shortage subject areas such as math, science, and special education. Of last year’s Fellows, 54 percent were eligible to teach shortage area subjects; we anticipate that nearly 75 percent of the Fellows for our 2004 program will be assigned to shortage area subjects.

³ Today, only 1% of New York City’s teachers do not have certification and work under a Modified Temporary License.

Last September, 600 of our new Fellows took positions in special education classrooms, 100 in science, 150 in bilingual/ESL, and 400 in math. The extraordinary number of Fellows eligible to teach math (these math Fellows represent almost 10 percent of all New York City math teachers) is due to a specialized “math immersion” program we have instituted for people who lack a major in mathematics (typically required for certification) but who are interested in teaching math and have a related major (such as engineering) and/or significant quantitative professional experience. These individuals get extra training—the “math immersion”—in addition to the regular pre-service training they undertake in the summer. Despite not having a major in math, these new teachers have proven that they have strong content knowledge (after completing the math immersion program, 97 percent passed the Content Specialty Test in mathematics, which is required by New York State for certification) and are capable of becoming exceptional teachers. Perhaps most importantly, the math immersion program has allowed us to expand from fewer than 50 Fellows teaching math to 400.

By any measure, the NYC Teaching Fellows program is an outstanding example of how alternative certification programs can meet two crucial objectives: increasing the quantity of individuals becoming new teachers—including teachers for shortage areas—and also increasing the quality of those candidates.

Today, national shortages of traditional teacher candidates persist in areas such as math, science and special education. At the same time, geography poses an additional recruitment challenge, as teachers stay local (a recent study in New York State indicated that 85 percent of teachers entering the profession take jobs within 40 miles of where they went to high school) and often do not want to teach in the most challenged schools. Recent research also shows that the nation’s cities face the greatest difficulties in staffing their schools. In urban areas the teacher “late-fill rate” (a proxy for shortages) was more than 50 percent higher than that for suburban school districts and twice as high as the figure for rural schools.⁴

Alternative certification programs like the NYC Teaching Fellows address the quantity problem by tapping into new pools of potential teachers and drawing on people who are specifically motivated to work in high-need schools. Though far from missionaries, applicants to alternative certification programs are often driven to go into education to do socially meaningful work with their careers, which means that they are not seeking out relatively plush suburban jobs where their potential impact on students is more limited. Instead, these candidates want to teach where dedicated new teachers are needed most—in high-need and under-performing schools.

⁴ Statistics from Murphy, DeArmond, Guin, *A National Crisis or Localized Problems? Getting perspective on the Scope of the Teacher Shortage* (July 2003). An analysis using the 1999-2000 School and Staffing Survey.

Of course, alternative certification is not just about putting “warm bodies” in front of our classrooms; it is also about increasing the quality of the teachers we bring into our schools. Everything we know shows that teacher quality is the only factor that can have a significant impact on student achievement. Even if they accomplish nothing else, alternative certification programs like the NYC Teaching Fellows increase the size and diversity of the applicant pool, which allows districts and schools to be more selective in who they hire, thereby increasing the quality of their hires.

But alternative certification programs address the quality issue in other ways as well. At a time when teaching no longer draws the high-caliber of candidates that it once did (especially as women have other career options), school districts simply cannot fill their staffing needs by relying solely on the traditional pool of people who decided to become teachers when they were in college. While many of these individuals are excellent, dedicated teachers, the allure of other, more attractive and remunerative careers draws away many of the best and brightest candidates.

Our work in New York City has shown, however, that there are significant numbers of talented individuals who do want to become teachers but have (until recently) been discouraged by the barriers to entry to the profession. In addition to the time and expense a career change to teaching entails, becoming a teacher has typically also meant meeting strict coursework requirements and confronting bureaucratic difficulties in the hiring process. Alternative certification programs address these barriers and take advantage of changing cultural norms (in which career switches are becoming increasingly common and frequent) by creating clear, efficient pathways into the teaching profession that are feasible for people to follow in terms of both time and expense. When coupled with innovative recruitment tactics, high selection standards, and focused training and support models, such programs will attract and retain high-quality teachers for our schools.

For schools and school districts, alternative certification programs can function as an important tool to use in the complicated challenge of raising student achievement. When thoughtfully designed and implemented, these initiatives can also become much more than mere boutique programs and address staffing shortage needs in pragmatic, substantive ways, as the NYC Teaching Fellows has done in New York. Furthermore, the goal of effective alternative certification programs should be to maintain their flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the schools, the labor market, and new teachers alike, and this capacity for adaptation and change makes them particularly valuable for school systems struggling to react to new priorities and demands.

Ultimately, alternative certification programs such as the NYC Teaching Fellows should be viewed as a valuable complement to traditional teacher education

pathways, with their own a unique identity and purpose. It is important to emphasize that successful programs demand rigor as well as a commitment of time and money, but there are many different models that states and school districts have developed that are worth supporting and expanding. Once consistent theme across all of these programs is the provision of quality pre-service and in-service training along with new teacher support, and all of that costs money. Since most of the people coming through such programs are already taking a salary reduction, it is important that there be adequate budgetary supports for the alternative certification costs so that participants do not have a significant additional financial burden. In New York City, local tax levy funds support the vast share of the Teaching Fellows program costs - which average \$13,000 per person. This past year we were able to use Title II funds to help support the program expansion, but additional resources would be invaluable to help us and other districts to further expand such teacher recruitment programs and put professional development in place to improve retention and teacher effectiveness. That is why we support full funding of Title II of No Child Left Behind which would enable districts to more effectively recruit, train and retain highly qualified teachers.

Thank you once again for inviting me to speak to you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have in regard to my testimony.