

March 30, 2004

CREATING PATHWAYS FOR TEACHERS BEGAN WITH MOST RECOMMENDATIONS

By Jim Hammond

Over my 20-year career as an elementary school principal, I found the greatest indicator of a child's success was having a quality teacher and the support of active and involved parents.

Because teachers are so critical to the education of our children, Idaho teachers, parents, businessmen, college staff, and State Board of Education and Department of Education officials joined together to review teaching standards in our state. Funded by the J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation and federal grants, the MOST (Maximizing Opportunities for Students and Teachers) advisory committee traveled the state taking input from education stakeholders on the issues of teacher quality, performance and pay. Following four years of research, the advisory committee completed and received State Board approval for revised standards for teacher education, improved standards for certification and several alternate routes to certification.

A critical issue for the committee was improving standards for teacher certification. The goal of the MOST committee was to place a competent, caring, qualified teacher in every classroom. We recognized that a qualified, enthusiastic teacher could breathe life into a classroom and inspire students to new heights. We wanted to remove barriers so that individuals with extensive professional knowledge and a passion for teaching could become certified to teach and thus, broaden the pool of prospective teachers.

It became clear to the MOST committee that the standard route to certification did not fit all of the needs of potential teachers, nor the needs of all the school districts. Many of our school districts, especially in rural areas, are experiencing teacher shortages. Often districts are unable to find certified teachers to fill classroom vacancies. These districts often come before the State Board of Education to receive waivers to hire uncertified teachers. Last year, the State Board granted 313 waivers to school districts. However, under No Child Left Behind, the State Board will no longer be able to grant waivers and a certified teacher must be in every classroom.

To increase the pool of qualified teachers, MOST suggested several alternative routes to certification that were later approved by the State Board. One route focused on individuals with an associate's degree, who currently work as teacher's aides, but aren't certified teachers. This route allows these Para-professionals to receive credit for their classroom experience and receive further education to become certified. The next route offered an accelerated process for certified teachers to become certified in a different subject area.

The third route is for individuals who have a bachelor's degree or higher, and extensive work experience, but lack formalized teacher training. Many of our non-certified teachers who receive waivers fall into this category. MOST proposed an alternate route for these individuals where they could continue to teach, but must return to college to complete the education credits they lacked. Unfortunately, it is often difficult, especially in our rural areas, to get adequate access to higher education. This concern led the Board to consider computer certification programs that could be accessible to rural communities, thus allowing these teachers to remain in the classroom.

The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence is an example of one of these programs. This program allows individuals with a bachelors degree or higher to use their work experience in their field to become specialized as a certified teacher. Through mentoring programs and after extensive testing on content knowledge and classroom management, many of these individuals may become certified to teach.

Teachers applying for certification in Idaho will follow either the conventional or alternative routes described in the final MOST report to the State Board of Education. I'm proud of the work of the MOST Committee accomplished to raise the standards for teacher education and certification and to offer additional paths to teaching. Our goal was to create routes for certification that will maximize the opportunities for the success of Idaho's children and its teachers.