



Douglas County's Home-Grown Teachers: The Learning Center Waiver Program



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Executive Summary

The Douglas County Learning Center has completed its first year of licensing and endorsing teachers to help fill the instructional needs of the fast-growing, wealthy suburban school district south of Denver. As student population has increased, the district's innovative leadership moved forward on a plan to alleviate teaching shortages in hard-to-fill areas and to expand the range of coursework available to secondary students.

In order to create its alternative licensure and endorsement program, Douglas County sought and received waivers from the Colorado State Board of Education in 2006. The program was constructed to meet the district's specific local needs, with the waivers contingent on proof of high academic performance. The waivers enable the Douglas County Learning Center to train three types of teaching candidates:

- **Alternative licensure** for non-licensed applicants with content expertise in high-needs areas – especially math, science, foreign language, and technical trades
- **Teachers-in-Residence (TIR)** primarily for licensed applicants with non-special education teaching endorsements to become special education instructors
- **Professionals-in-Residence (PIR)** for non-licensed professional applicants who “are not interested in seeking licensure” but want to teach a course on a specialized topic

After attracting a great deal of early attention and publicity, the Learning Center began training its first cohort of 30 waiver candidates in the summer of 2007. All but two candidates started with the rigorous seven-day “boot camp” of classroom basics. During the

2007-08 school year, candidates received additional training and also performed paid teaching duties in Douglas County classrooms. Specific coursework was individually tailored to the needs of each waiver candidate, based on a “blueprint” created by the district's senior faculty. Moreover, waiver candidates received intense support from an assigned mentor, their principal, their building resource teacher, and the Learning Center itself.

Douglas County leaders share credit for the waiver program's development with the local Douglas County Federation. The local organization is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, which has taken a more innovative and open approach to alternative teacher licensure opportunities than has the National Education Association.

The Learning Center waiver program already has achieved success in greatly reducing the number of qualified teaching gaps in hard-to-fill areas. Feedback about the quality of the first year's candidates, most of whom are returning to teach, was largely positive. Hard data measuring the program's effects on student performance have yet to be released.

Based on a 2007 National Council on Teacher Quality report, the Douglas County Learning Center meets two (and nearly three) of the four major criteria for a successful alternative licensure program. The case to reduce barriers of entry into the teaching profession continues to grow stronger. Douglas County's program should serve as a model of innovation for other Colorado school districts to follow and even surpass.

Introduction

The Douglas County School District, located south of Denver, Colorado, serves one of the nation's fastest-growing populations. It recently surpassed Cherry Creek to become the state's third-largest school district. Between 1997 and 2007, the district's student enrollment nearly doubled – from 27,275 to 52,983. To meet the growing demand, the number of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) teachers employed has grown from fewer than 1,500 to more than 3,000, at a rate slightly greater than the student population. More than 85

percent of students are white, and fewer than 5 percent are eligible for federal lunch programs. In fact, Douglas County has both the lowest poverty rate and highest median income of any county in Colorado.¹

Two basic problems have confronted Douglas County in its attempts to match instructional personnel with classroom needs. Together these challenges provoked the district to find an innovative solution to meet its human resource demand for qualified teachers.

First, despite a vast surplus in the number of teaching applicants, Douglas County has faced shortages in hard-to-fill areas, including special education, math, science, and technical trades. The district was significantly shorthanded of qualified special education teachers entering both the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years. But in each case the district received more than 5,000 applications for approximately 500 licensed instructional openings. District leaders sought to divert skilled elementary and language arts applicants in excess of the district's demand to fill the understaffed special education program. Yet existing routes to the special education

endorsement were too slow, too inconvenient, and inadequate for the district's needs.

Second, as new schools emerge and open enrollment thrives, Douglas County also has been expanding the breadth of programs and course offerings available to students. Some high school pupils and their families have sought more courses in various technologies, career trades, and foreign languages. However, the state has no established licensure endorsements in such subject areas as mechanical engineering or Chinese. Further, many competent candidates are professionals who work outside education but want to teach a course without enduring the bureaucratic hassle required to get in the classroom. The district sought a more efficient way to get non-traditional professionals into the classroom than was available under the state's licensure programs.

According to district officials, the existing "Colorado Higher Education archetype," wherein education courses are offered in the university setting, is too rigid to meet the full demand for teachers – especially in the crucial areas of special education, foreign language, math, science, and technical trades.² As a major tool to address these shortages, Douglas County worked to create its own more flexible and responsive Teacher Endorsement and Alternative Licensure Program. Having obtained waivers from the state, the district now both licenses teachers in hard-to-fill endorsement areas and equips non-traditional professionals with basic instructional skills, providing customized and effective paths to fill its teaching shortages.

The Quest for Freedom

Compliance with prescriptive state statutes and rules previously kept Douglas County from meeting its full instructional needs. District leaders desired a change in state policy

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to free their hands for action. In February 2006, superintendent Jim Christensen testified before the Colorado Senate Education Committee in favor of Senate Bill 151, a proposal that would have made it easier to receive waivers from state guidelines.³ A lobbyist for the Colorado Education Association provided the only opposition testimony. The Democratic-controlled committee voted to defeat SB 151, but some legislators advised Christensen to take the district's case directly to the Colorado State Board of Education.⁴

In May 2006, Douglas County officials publicly presented their plan before the State Board to license and endorse teachers in hard-to-fill areas, as well as to prepare non-traditional professionals for the basics of classroom instruction. The district filed a formal request in September with the State Board to waive nine statutes and a series of Board rules governing teacher licensure, employment contracts, and dismissal. On November 9, 2006, a 7-1 Board majority granted the full slate of waivers for the duration of a two-year pilot. Douglas County's program is subject for re-authorization as of September 30, 2008.⁵

The Learning Center

Douglas County administers its special licensure and training program through an internal district academy called The Learning Center (TLC).⁶ With the broader mission "to develop all human capital within the district," TLC is structured to respond to school site needs, rather than to dictate them.⁷ TLC is Christensen's brainchild.⁸

Created during the 2006-07 school year, the Learning Center is governed by an 11-member Board. Current board members include eight representatives of district administrative offices and three officials of the Douglas County Federation – the collective

bargaining agent for the district's licensed employees. In January 2007 Mike Lynch was hired to serve as executive director. Lynch's prior experience within the district included service as a high school principal and a stint as director of schools. Additionally, he taught social studies and Spanish in Aurora Public Schools, and has instructed university-level education classes.⁹ TLC began occupying its current district facilities in Highlands Ranch in August 2007.

The waivers¹⁰ have granted the Learning Center Board the following discretionary powers, typically reserved for state authority or not permitted under state statute and rule:

- TLC's Board supersedes the Colorado Department of Education (CDE)'s authority as "the sole agency...to issue...teacher licenses," including alternative licenses.¹¹
- TLC's Board can hire non-licensed persons to serve as teachers, following successful completion of the Board's prescribed training.¹²
- TLC's Board can endorse teaching licenses for hard-to-fill subjects and other areas not covered by CDE.¹³
- TLC's Board does not need an active Administrator or Principal License to evaluate instructional performance.¹⁴
- TLC's Board does not have to abide by guidelines governing probationary teacher contracts for its waiver candidates.¹⁵
- TLC's Board is not subject to the established grounds and procedures for teacher dismissal for its waiver candidates.¹⁶
- TLC's Board does not have to grant a share of unpaid salary to waiver candidates terminated before the end of an employment contract but is allowed to offer remuneration to an unlicensed waiver candidate.¹⁷

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The role of the Learning Center Board has evolved from hands-on management of daily administrative tasks to more traditional oversight and policy governance.¹⁸ The waiver program is one key part of TLC, but not the entirety of its work. TLC also provides specialized training for the district's regularly-licensed teaching and administrative workforce.

It should be noted that Douglas County did not seek and receive waivers because of a broad weakness in Colorado's professional teaching standards. In fact, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) rated

Colorado standards for licensure the highest among 27 components of state teacher policy. NCTQ cited Colorado as one of only three states with the "best practice" of standards for other states to follow.¹⁹

Nevertheless, Douglas County's need to remedy its teacher shortages and to expand academic opportunities could not reasonably be satisfied within the bounds of existing laws and procedures. To demonstrate accountability in conjunction with the greater latitude, the district publicly stated its goal of

increasing the number of students achieving proficiency or higher on various Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) tests. In particular, Douglas County aims to raise 3rd grade reading proficiency from 83 percent to 100 percent in five years. Over the same time period, the district seeks to increase proficiency in 3rd through 6th grade writing, as well as in 4th, 7th, and 9th grade math, by at least 5 percentage points from 2006 levels.²⁰

Three Types of Waiver Candidates

The Learning Center is designed to serve three basic types of waiver candidates:

- **Alternative licensure** for non-licensed applicants who have a Statement of Eligibility²¹ either from CDE or Douglas County and wish to seek training and supervision through the Learning Center's "site-based program"²²
- **Teachers-in-Residence (TIR)** for: 1) Licensed applicants with an endorsement outside the special education field or 2) Non-licensed applicants with a Statement of Eligibility as a Special Education Generalist from CDE²³
- **Professionals-in-Residence (PIR)** for non-licensed professional applicants who "are not interested in seeking licensure" but want to teach a course on a specialized topic²⁴

Alternative Licensure

A prospective educator who lacks a recognized teaching license can apply through Douglas County to become both licensed and employed. In order to do so, she must have a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution, credit for at least 30 hours of coursework (or a recognized equivalent) in the relevant area, and must pass a criminal background check. The Learning Center offers eligible candidates alternative teaching licensure in any of the following areas: World Language, Math, Science, or Vocational/Technical.²⁵

Having completed an application and received a Statement of Eligibility (SOE), the candidate may seek one of the district's regularly posted job positions. A successful interview with the school principal, and approval from the Learning Center board, are required for entry into the joint teaching-training program. Like regular teachers licensed through CDE, waiver candidates must pass the appropriate content assessments to be designated "highly qualified" under the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*.²⁶

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Teachers-in-Residence

The **Teachers-in-Residence** (TIR) portion of Douglas County's waiver program is geared almost exclusively toward filling instructional shortages in special education. Candidates who are already licensed and qualified and who unsuccessfully applied for positions in areas with a surplus of qualified applicants (e.g., elementary, high school English) are given the option to pursue a special education endorsement through the Learning Center. A successful interview with the building principal and approval by the Learning Center board are prerequisites to entering the TIR joint teaching-training program.

Professionals-in-Residence

The **Professionals-in-Residence** (PIR) portion of the waiver program is designed to ease the way for outside professionals to teach specialized subjects in high school classrooms. The PIR idea was generated by **Castle View High School** in Castle Rock, which opened in 2006-07 with 9th and 10th grade students only. The school is scheduled to graduate its first class in 2009. About one-fourth of CVHS students have enrolled from outside the school's attendance area. After seeking community input, district and school leaders developed CVHS around the 3 R's of a 21st-century learning community: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. In particular, the idea of career relevance informed the design of CVHS into four academies:

- Math, Science, and Engineering
- Humanities, World Languages, and Social Sciences
- Visual and Performing Arts
- e-Media / Business

Even before CVHS opened its doors, at least two engineers from the Lockheed Martin Corporation offices in northwest Douglas

County expressed interest in part-time classroom teaching. District officials also said they had been contacted by other engineers, as well as by certified public accountants and a local bank president.²⁷

Individual Douglas County schools may identify the need for a PIR, provided the request is "innovative" and fits within the district's "key ends statement."²⁸ Evidence of support must be demonstrated from both the relevant faculty department and the parents and teachers on the school's site council. The district further has stipulated that a "PIR position must not exceed .2 FTE" (Full-Time Equivalents).²⁹ These outside professionals typically would be expected to teach one specialized class for a quarter or semester in a given school year. The Learning Center board's approval is required to post a PIR position and to accept a PIR candidate. Douglas County's PIR teachers are at-will employees. Colorado statutes that provide job protections to teachers with three or more years of service do not apply to PIRs.³⁰

Despite the early attention received by the new Castle View High School, no PIRs were employed at the school in 2007-08. The district hired only two PIRs: an advanced calculus instructor who also teaches at the Air Force Academy, and a middle school German teacher. The Learning Center has received no requests for additional PIR slots in 2008-09.³¹ Lynch said the difficulties of meshing school schedules with the schedules of busy professionals has prevented the PIR program from expanding. The district is exploring late afternoon time slots for classroom instruction and online course implementation as possible ways to bring additional skilled outside professionals into classrooms.³²

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The Learning Center's Waiver Program

Executive director Mike Lynch says Douglas County's Learning Center has "captured the universal traits" of successful teacher preparation programs. Lynch identified the "ongoing challenge" as persuading CDE that Douglas County's program provides rigor comparable to accredited programs. Because of the "political overtones" created in opposition to the waiver request, TLC is especially committed to ensuring high-quality candidates.³³

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The waivers have enabled the district to design a program based on local needs and issues, a customized alternative that can adapt with agility. Some of the district's most talented teachers have played a key role in the design, making the program "organic." District leaders also are committed to tying the program's direction to available performance data.³⁴

Specific strengths identified in Douglas County's local waiver program include the following:³⁵

- The ability to recruit its own candidates
- The ability to tailor the program to be convenient to individual candidates
- The ability to provide quality teacher preparation at a highly competitive – or even reduced – cost

The early publicity surrounding the district's uncommon and innovative approach helped to fuel a larger response than officials anticipated. By the beginning of the 2007-08 school year, the Learning Center had received more than 1,000 unsolicited contacts expressing interest in the waiver program or seeking more information on alternative paths to teacher licensure. Lynch said that he and

some of his staff "suddenly became career coaches," including for many people "who didn't really understand the program."³⁶

The Learning Center works to match "pre-qualified" waiver candidates (i.e., those with a Statement of Eligibility) to suitable openings in specific Douglas County schools. At one spring 2007 district-run job fair event, TLC staff helped to make such connections for nine candidates.³⁷

In July 2007, the Learning Center moved forward under the State Board-approved waivers. The initial phase of training, a seven-day intensive session familiarly referred to as a "boot camp," was conducted for 28 teaching candidates. In addition to an overview of the waiver program and general school district policies, the "boot camp" introduced candidates to the essentials of classroom management and lesson planning and delivery. Two more candidates joined the program after the "boot camp," for a total of 30 candidates.³⁸

The Learning Center director and its other instructors worked with waiver candidates before the school year to develop specialized Individual Teacher Plans (ITP) based on the candidate's background, as well as her strengths and weaknesses.³⁹ A one-size-fits-all approach would not work for the range of candidates served by TLC. For example, licensed candidates seeking a special education endorsement or education paraprofessionals transitioning to an instructional role likely need less help with classroom management or lesson planning and more intensive focus on content. A woman with an education degree returning to a full-time classroom position after spending years as a stay-at-home mother may have different needs than an outside expert preparing to teach two courses in Mandarin or Arabic.

Following the seven-day “boot camp,” the teachers-in-training met two evenings per month at the Learning Center for full training and coursework. TLC offers scheduled courses in a variety of areas, significantly focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In addition, waiver candidates can earn credit for various seminars in the areas of leadership, organization, technology, health and safety, student intervention, and assorted skills (e.g., communication skills, library skills, sign language).⁴⁰

The total hours and balance of classes taken in the areas of content, educational practice, and educational theory vary according to the needs of the candidate. Special Education TIRs receive more emphasis on content in their 460 hours of required training, including 100 hours with their mentors. Alternative licensure candidates typically must complete a total of 375 hours, with greater weight given to classes focusing on research-based areas for best educational practices. Educational theory is a minor part of the program for all waiver candidates.⁴¹

The model developed to provide the customized slate of courses to waiver candidates was inspired by Douglas County’s “Building Leadership Blueprint” program of professional development and procedural training for principals. The “Blueprint” of courses for Teachers-in-Residence was designed by a team of the district’s veteran special education teachers to align with the curriculum, as well as local needs and resources. A featured part of the training model is a series of topical “eLearning” video podcasts, first and mainly used for building leaders but also providing supplementary options for waiver candidates.⁴²

Further training and assistance is provided at the job site. No student teaching is required

to be undertaken before entering the classroom. But like all other new Douglas County teachers, waiver candidates receive support in professional development and instructional “best practice” through principal evaluations and a building resource teacher. In addition, waiver candidates receive a minimum of 100 hours of one-on-one tutelage from a professional mentor teacher and quarterly site visits from a Learning Center instructor.⁴³ According to Lynch, the waiver candidates receive twice as much support as an average first-year teacher. “We tell them they can’t fail to perform, but if they do, it’s not for a lack of support,” he said.⁴⁴

Coursework and the fairly intense job-site training are designed to work in concert with one another. The Learning Center helps waiver candidates to establish goals, but the candidates set their own pace in completing them. Lynch said the first year showed that some candidates tried to overdo it, but that others quickly “learned to strike a balance.”⁴⁵

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Partnerships and Collaboration

Douglas County is one of 45 Colorado school districts with a collective bargaining agreement governing teacher policy, and one of only two districts in which teachers are formally represented by an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).⁴⁶ District leaders uniformly laud the important collaborative role of the Douglas County Federation (DCF) in developing and building support for the licensure waiver program.

Former DCF president Pat McGraw, who serves as the district’s chief of staff, described the union as full partners.⁴⁷ The district and union have built a strong cooperative relationship, in part through the experience of

pioneering an alternative teacher pay program in the 1990s. Noting that the partnership is based on a shared primary focus on student welfare, Lynch said that the two parties “work collectively” to resolve their problems, including “sometimes big disagreements.”⁴⁸

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The local organization’s cooperative efforts have been bolstered by the national organization’s affirmative stance on alternative teacher licensure. In February 2004, AFT’s executive council approved a resolution supporting such programs, provided the following criteria are met:⁴⁹

- Candidates are specifically recruited as “talented individuals” with a bachelors degree
- Candidates are required to pass a “rigorous screening process” to

prove content mastery

- Programs are field-based, or require teachers to learn and observe in the classroom
- Candidates receive “coursework or equivalent experiences” in professional education practices “before and while teaching”
- Candidates “work closely with mentor teachers”
- Candidates achieve high performance standards

Douglas County’s program largely meets the criteria set forth in the national AFT resolution. Moreover, AFT-created “Education Research and Development” courses in numerous areas provide a significant component of the training available to waiver candidates.⁵⁰

The teachers union that represents most teachers in Colorado, the National Education Association (NEA), has a more proscriptive

position regarding licensure. NEA believes that all teacher preparation programs must be “evaluated and accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE),”⁵¹ which would exclude Douglas County’s program. DCF president Brenda Smith said NEA’s stance against alternative licensure “doesn’t help our kids or solve the immediate problem” of teaching shortages in various areas.⁵² The Colorado Education Association (CEA), NEA’s state affiliate, actively opposed the waiver request in 2006.⁵³

DCF does not see the PIR piece of the waiver program as a threat to its membership. “It’s not something that’s going to take away from current teachers, and it will strengthen our district,” said Smith.⁵⁴ Castle View High School principal Dr. Lisle Gates said in 2007 that his staff, including many DCFT members, were “excited” to bring in some outside professionals into the classroom.⁵⁵

As another partnership, in addition to the waiver program, TLC organizes cohorts of current district teachers to take advanced coursework together through five different postsecondary teacher education programs. Many of the courses are held at TLC’s facility and taught by some of the 60 adjunct college instructors who also serve on Douglas County’s faculty or staff. This approach encourages employee collaboration and infuses the curriculum with district initiatives.⁵⁶

First-Year Results of the Learning Center Waiver Program

Learning Center executive director Mike Lynch reported that special education teaching vacancies had declined from 23 and 26 in the previous two years, respectively, to only two at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year. In previous years the district had to hire emergency-licensed, unqualified persons

to fill the special education gaps. "Now we feel like we're more in control of our destiny," Lynch said. He anticipated no shortage in special education teaching positions for 2008-09.⁵⁷

State assessment results released in July 2008 show flat results as part of Douglas County's five-year CSAP improvement plan. The already high-achieving district gained ground on 12 reading, writing, and math tests, lost ground on 11 others, and showed no difference on one test.⁵⁸ However, for a fuller picture, the Learning Center leadership looks to cross-reference the student assessment data with feedback received from each waiver candidate's principal and mentor. Once available, the information should provide a richer picture of the waiver program's first-year impacts.⁵⁹

To help focus on goals rather than processes, the Learning Center has adopted the name "results room" for the on-site space where waiver candidates receive training.⁶⁰ The program's earliest available results are found in teacher retention. Of the 30 waiver candidates who worked with TLC in 2007-08, 28 made it through the entire term of their one-year contracts. Interestingly, the two candidates who left early were the same two who had been hired late and did not participate in the July 2007 "boot camp."⁶¹

Of the 28 remaining teachers, 20 had their contracts renewed to continue in their positions for 2008-09. Lynch said that three were cut by district downsizing from budget cutbacks, two left the district for personal reasons, and one planned to switch to a counseling position. Only two candidates had to be non-renewed for performance issues.⁶² Numerous principals and mentors were favorably "amazed by how much waiver candidates had gained in one year," Lynch said.⁶³

One of the waiver candidates received a nomination for Douglas County School District's 2007-08 Apple Awards, given annually to the district's best teachers. Only one nominee is chosen from each of Douglas County's 68 schools. Approximately one in 50 district teachers was nominated, while waiver candidates represent fewer than one in 100 of the total faculty. Eight waiver candidates received other building-level teaching awards.⁶⁴

Looking Forward

Due to the Douglas County Learning Center waiver program's first-year success and the school district facing the necessity of downsizing, only 16 waiver candidates started into the July 2008 "boot camp," slightly more than half the number who came through in 2007-08.⁶⁵

In addition to developing more of its own teachers, the Learning Center began training staff members of Hope Online Co-op Academy in September 2008. Hope Online is an online charter school that delivers instruction to more than 4,000 students at its 54 "learning centers" based along Colorado's Front Range. Hope Online was chartered by the tiny rural Vilas School District from its inception in 2005, but Douglas County officially assumed the role of authorizer in May 2008.⁶⁶

The Learning Center in the Bigger Picture of Teaching Credentials

A 2001 report by education analyst Kate Walsh criticized the credentialing monopoly that postsecondary schools of education hold over the profession. Walsh cited numerous studies showing the strong link between a teacher's verbal ability — a factor unaffected by the certification process — and classroom

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effectiveness. Teacher quality and teacher certification cannot be equated to one another, she argued.⁶⁷

Grading the Learning Center's Alternative Path to the Classroom

The current prevailing system that dictates entry into the teaching profession is based on a regulatory strategy that measures low-threshold "inputs" and places no focus on student growth "outputs." Meanwhile, many of the regulations bind graduates of teacher

preparation programs to pedagogy and methodology that lacks a research-based foundation.⁶⁸

A 2007 report from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) sought to rate various alternative paths to traditional teacher certification. The report assessed 49 programs across the nation—a mix of programs run by higher education institutions, school districts, or private entities—using four major criteria:

- Academic Selectivity (minimum GPA requirement for early-career applicants)
- Strong Subject-matter Knowledge (subject area major requirement)
- Streamlined and Practical Sequence (amount and type of coursework, program length)
- Intensive New Teacher Support (practice teaching and mentorship)⁶⁹

The report found no programs that succeeded in all four criteria, and only a few "met more than one of the four components of a model program."⁷⁰

Douglas County's Learning Center license (as opposed to the Teachers-in-Residence or

Professionals-in-Residence programs) can be rated according to the same criteria. The program succeeds in meeting the model program requirements in two areas:

- **Intensive New Teacher Support:** The well-documented focus on interaction with a personal mentor, Building Resource Teacher, school principal, and Learning Center leadership makes this the strongest suit of the program.
- **Streamlined and Practical Sequence:** The emphasis on educational practice over theory, the organic connection of the district-developed Blueprint to local standards and objectives, the flexibility of individually-tailored plans, and the one-year length of the program combine to give Douglas County high marks in this area.

The Learning Center license very nearly reaches the threshold for one of the model components:

- **Strong Subject-matter Knowledge:** Like the state of Colorado's alternative licensure program, Learning Center teaching candidates are required to have the 24 credit hours of approved coursework (but not necessarily a major) in the area of endorsement, per No Child Left Behind's "Highly Qualified" requirement. Most Douglas County candidates surpass the minimum mandate.

However, the Learning Center license comes up short in the following area:

- **Academic Selectivity:** TLC has no minimum GPA requirement for applicants.

In the Context of Research on Teacher Credentials
In a 2001 report for the Progressive Policy Institute, education professor and policy expert Frederick Hess called for a teacher certification process with fewer state controls. His

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vision for a competitive process suggested no more than three basic requirements for prospective educators: 1) A bachelors degree from a recognized college or university; 2) Successful completion of a relevant content competency assessment; and 3) Passing a thorough criminal background check.⁷¹

Hess stated: “In a world without certification as we know it, districts and schools would have more flexibility to make appropriate arrangements to ensure that their new teachers are prepared, inducted, and supervised in a manner appropriate to the challenges at hand.”⁷² Under these terms, the Douglas County program should be considered a small but significant experiment with such a new system. Learning Center executive director Mike Lynch says district leaders recognize the “golden opportunity” provided by their two-year waiver agreement. His hope is that other school districts and local education agencies “can replicate what we’ve done and learn from our mistakes.”⁷³

The academic debate over the value of teacher credentials continues. A 2006 study by a team of Ivy League economists found “little difference in the average academic achievement impacts of certified, uncertified and alternatively certified teachers” in New York City.⁷⁴ However, in 2007, researchers from Duke University gathered evidence from North Carolina public secondary schools and concluded that “teacher credentials are important policy levers that are clearly predictive of student achievement.”⁷⁵

But the case of Douglas County could provide a new angle to explore the credentials question. Analytical resources will be needed to quantify the results of the district’s decentralized training and licensure program. Understanding the relative effects of the waiver program’s quality and standards versus its

increased flexibility to allow greater professional entry for talented individuals may be a key finding for the ongoing debate.

Regardless, the district is bound by the terms of its agreement with the state to provide tangible improvements in student achievement. If successful, Douglas County’s experiment should clear the way for other local education agencies. Lynch says to follow suit a school district would need to be committed to academic excellence and guided by a “belief in continuous improvement.” The productive partnership with a recognized teacher organization is also “vital.”⁷⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

Douglas County’s licensure waiver program is a small but positive step toward improving the supply and diversity of talented teachers in public schools. If the district meets the stated goals for improved student achievement, a thorough analysis will be needed to discern the factors in the program that determine its success.

Douglas County has pioneered locally-specialized alternative teaching paths for Colorado. To continue the progress, more school districts and other local education agencies should be provided incentives to craft their own teacher licensure and endorsement programs to fill the gaps in their instructional workforces. Such programs should:

- Lower the barriers to the classroom by cutting down bureaucratic processes, while maintaining a threshold of content knowledge through rigorous assessment
- Wherever applicable, infuse instructional training with an emphasis on research-based curricula and best practices

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- Design training around the needs of students
- Recruit candidates both from inside and outside the teaching profession, seeking passionate candidates with strong intellectual aptitudes and communication skills
- Utilize technological and scheduling flexibility to make fullest use of non-traditional professionals in teaching specialized courses
- Encourage collaboration and participation from teachers organizations, but not limit input to union bargaining agents and not subject program guidelines to the union collective bargaining process
- Require program participants to undertake rigorous basic overview of course planning and classroom management
- Invest in distance learning and related online technologies to supplement the program and to provide additional flexibility for the reasonable convenience of candidates
- Incorporate mentorship and regular evaluation as part of an intense support system for new teachers

Reducing the restrictiveness of the credentialing process is a necessary, but not sufficient, means of getting the most from our teaching workforce. Aligning compensation systems more closely with performance and outcomes, and removing costly obstacles to dismissing poorly-performing instructors, are two other reforms needed to enhance instructional quality.

Even so, locally-run alternative licensure programs provide a potentially significant policy tool for reducing the quality teaching gaps in hard-to-fill subject areas. In addition to broader procedural reforms, creating customized new paths to the classroom that loosen the credentialing process while emphasizing standards of knowledge and performance should help alleviate overall weaknesses in instruction. Allowing programs similar to the one operated by Douglas County to multiply and flourish is an excellent way to expand quality teaching in Colorado.

Notes

¹ Colorado Department of Education (CDE) School / District Statistics, http://www.cde.state.co.us/index_stats.htm; U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE),

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/saipe/>

² Mike Lynch, "Douglas County Teacher Endorsement and Licensure Program: Waivers give consent to provide expert training and endorse qualified applicants in hard-to-fill and specialized areas," A White Paper,

http://www.dcsdk12.org/portal/page/portal/DCSD/The_Learning_Center/Waivers/WhitePaper_Waivers.pdf;

Open letter from Mike Lynch, Douglas County Learning Center Executive Director, May 23, 2007,

http://www.dcsdk12.org/portal/page/portal/DCSD/The_Learning_Center/TLC_May.pdf

³ Colorado General Assembly, Senate Education Committee Bill Summary for Senate Bill 06-151, February 16, 2006. Representatives of the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE) and Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) also provided favorable testimony.

⁴ Ben DeGrow, "Colo. District to License Teachers," *School Reform News*, Vol. 11 No. 2 (March 2007), p 10,

<http://www.heartland.org/ArticleProcessor.cfm?theId=artId20690>

⁵ Colorado State Board of Education, "Douglas County School District Waiver Request," November 9, 2006 (Motion made by Randy DeHoff, seconded by Jared Polis). In addition to DeHoff and Polis, board members Peggy Littleton, Bob Schaffer, Karen Middleton, Pamela Jo Suckla, and Rico Munn all voted Yes. The lone No vote was Evie Hudak.

⁶ http://www.dcsdk12.org/portal/page/portal/DCSD/The_Learning_Center

⁷ Pat McGraw, Douglas County School District Chief of Staff, interview with the author, January 9, 2007.

⁸ Author's interview with McGraw, January 9, 2007.

⁹ Douglas County School District *Newsline*, January 11, 2007; Mike Lynch, Learning Center Executive Director, telephone interview with author, January 11, 2007.

¹⁰ Application for Waivers, Douglas County Teacher Endorsement and Alternative Licensure Program, presented to Commissioner William J. Moloney and State Board of Education (SBE), November 9, 2006; State Board, "Douglas County School District Waiver Request."

¹¹ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-60.5-201; 1 Colo. Code of Regulations (CCR) 301-37, § 2260.5-R-2.00.

¹² Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-63-201; 1 CCR 301-37, § 2260.5-R-2.00, -7.00, -8.00, -9.00, and -11.00.

¹³ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-60.5-106.

¹⁴ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-9-106(4).

¹⁵ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-63-203.

¹⁶ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-63-301 and 22-63-302.

¹⁷ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-63-403.

¹⁸ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008.

¹⁹ National Council on Teacher Quality, *2007 State Teacher Policy Yearbook: Progress on Teacher Quality – Colorado State Summary*, pp 1-2, 23-25, http://www.nctq.org/stpy/reports/stpy_colorado.pdf

²⁰ Berny Morson, "Douglas seeks waiver on rules to hire teachers," *Rocky Mountain News*, May 11, 2006,

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2006/May/11/douglas-seeks-waiver-on-rules-to-hire-teachers/>;

Douglas County waiver application, November 9, 2006.

²¹ The Statement of Eligibility (SOE) is given by the respective agency to candidates who meet the appropriate criteria to enter the licensure program, but it does not denote that a candidate has met all the requirements to receive a license. In an August 14, 2007, interview with the author, Learning Center executive director Mike Lynch noted that Douglas County borrowed its SOE from CDE.

²² Douglas County School District, "DCSD Human Resources Recruitment and Application Center, Non-licensed Hiring Information (Waiver Program): Application Process."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Douglas County School District, The Learning Center, "Alternative Licensing, Teacher In Residence, and Douglas County School District (DCSD) Learning Center Teacher Licensure Program Comparison."

²⁶ Colorado Department of Education, Memorandum of Understanding with Douglas County Public Schools, October 1, 2007.

²⁷ Dr. Lisle Gates, Castle View High School principal, and Pat McGraw, interview with the author, January 9, 2007.

²⁸ Douglas County School District, The Learning Center, "Professional in Residence Hiring Process"; Board of Education Key Ends Statement, adopted April 18, 2006, focuses on developing "responsible citizens" who develop critical thinking, "embrace universal ethical principles," continue as lifelong learners who are "using their knowledge and skills productively," show leadership skills, and "take ownership and accept responsibility for their wellbeing."

²⁹ DCSD, "PIR Hiring Process."

³⁰ Author's interview with McGraw, January 9, 2007; Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-63-301 and 22-63-302. This set of job protections is commonly referred to as "tenure."

³¹ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008; electronic mail to the author from Lynch, June 28, 2008.

³² Author's telephone conversation with Lynch, August 6, 2008.

³³ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Author's interview with McGraw, January 9, 2007.

- ³⁶ Open letter from Lynch, May 23, 2007; author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007.
- ³⁷ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008.
- ³⁸ Douglas County School District brochure, "Waiver & Endorsement Program, 2007-2008." Common basic course material includes "The First Days of School" video series by Harry K. Wong Publications.
- ³⁹ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.; Douglas County School District, The Learning Center, Staff Development Online Learning Course Catalog, <http://www.solutionwhere.com/dcsdstaffdevelopment/cw/main.asp>
- ⁴¹ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008.
- ⁴² Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007; http://www.dcsdk12.org/portal/page/portal/DCSD/The_Learning_Center/eLearning
- ⁴³ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007; DCSD brochure, "Waiver & Endorsement Program, 2007-2008." Mentor teachers are eligible to earn a \$1,000 stipend.
- ⁴⁴ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ The other is Trinidad School District.
- ⁴⁷ Author's interview with McGraw, January 9, 2007.
- ⁴⁸ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007; electronic mail to the author from Lynch, August 5, 2008.
- ⁴⁹ http://www.aft.org/about/resolutions/2004/alt_certif.htm
- ⁵⁰ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007.
- ⁵¹ National Education Association Handbook, Resolution D-6, "Teacher Preparation Programs: Content and Evaluation," pp 260-262, <http://www.nea.org/handbook/images/resolutions.pdf>
- ⁵² Brenda Smith, president, Douglas County Federation, electronic mail to the author, August 6, 2008.
- ⁵³ *Denver Post*, "Innovative plan for teachers," May 15, 2006.
- ⁵⁴ Author's telephone interview with Smith, January 9, 2007.
- ⁵⁵ Author's interview with Gates, May 15, 2007.
- ⁵⁶ Douglas County Learning Center document, "Douglas County School District/University Cohorts," http://www.dcsdk12.org/portal/page/portal/DCSD/The_Learning_Center/DCSD_University_Cohorts/DCSDUniversityCohorts.pdf; author's telephone conversation with Lynch, August 6, 2008.
- ⁵⁷ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007; author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008; author's telephone interview with Lynch, September 25, 2008. Only one special education job opening remained 10 days into the school year, for a specialized speech pathologist position not covered by the Learning Center's training for Teachers-in-Residence.
- ⁵⁸ Colorado Department of Education, Unit of Student Assessment, 2008 CSAP School & District Summary Results, http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/csap/csap_summary.html – For more information on how Douglas County's results compared to 14 other Denver metropolitan area school districts, see *Rocky Mountain News*, CSAP District-by-District Breakdown, July 30, 2008, <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/jul/30/csap-district-by-district-breakdown/>
- ⁵⁹ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008.
- ⁶⁰ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007.
- ⁶¹ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Author's interview with Smith, May 15, 2008; Neisa O'Rourke, Douglas County Online Special Education Services Coordinator, electronic mail to the author, July 24, 2008.
- ⁶⁵ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008; electronic mail to the author from Lynch, July 31, 2008.
- ⁶⁶ Author's interview with Lynch, May 15, 2008; Katie Genereux, Hope Online Co-Op Learning Academy, electronic mail to the author, August 19, 2008; Face The State, "Ethical Conflict Alleged in Online Lawsuit," May 23, 2008, <http://facethestate.com/articles/ethical-conflict-alleged-online-school-lawsuit>
- ⁶⁷ Kate Walsh, *Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality* (Abell Foundation, 2001), http://www.abell.org/pubsitems/ed_cert_1101.pdf
- ⁶⁸ *The Teachers We Need and How to Get More of Them*, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (April 1999), pp 5-7, <http://edexcellence.net/doc/teachergrogg.pdf>
- ⁶⁹ Kate Walsh and Sandi Jacobs, *Alternative Certification Isn't Alternative*, National Council on Teacher Quality (September 2007), pp 19-20, http://www.nctq.org/nctq/images/Alternative_Certification_Isnt_Alternative.pdf
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., p 34.
- ⁷¹ Frederick M. Hess, *Tear Down This Wall: The Case for a Radical Overhaul of Teacher Certification*, Progressive Policy Institute 21st Century Schools Project (November 2001), p 21, http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?knlgAreaID=110&subsecID=135&contentID=3964
- ⁷² Ibid., p 22.
- ⁷³ Author's interview with Lynch, August 14, 2007.
- ⁷⁴ Thomas J. Kane, Jonah E. Rockoff, and Douglas O. Staiger, "What Does Certification Tell Us About Teacher Effectiveness? Evidence from New York City," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 12155 (Cambridge, MA: 2006). Quote from p 42.
- ⁷⁵ Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, "Teacher Credentials and Student Achievement in High School: A Cross-Subject Analysis With Student Fixed Effects," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 13617 (Cambridge, MA: 2007). Quote from p 36.
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