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*Tina Lester's art class  
photo by Chris Fritchie*



## A New Kind of Teacher

By Amanda VanCura

**HAS YOUR CHILD'S** teacher always been a teacher? Do they have a different background? Have they entered a second career, one that they consider their "calling?" Walk into any elementary, middle or high school in Frisco and you're bound to find teachers who were alternatively certified. Teaching is their second career, and often, the one they are more passionate about. In fact, according to the State Board for Educator Certification, 12,179 people in Texas received an alternative certification in the 2006-2007 school year.

I became alternatively certified after spending ten years in the copywriting and journalism fields. Although I continue to write, my desire to help children was something I couldn't ignore. I returned to school for one year, taking many of the same classes offered to undergraduate education majors. So, does that mean I'm as well prepared to teach? What about finding a job? Was it more difficult for me than those who earned their certification the traditional way? These are some of the questions I asked when I began researching the possibility of teaching.

### PROGRAM OPTIONS

When I made my decision to go back to school, one of the first things I discovered was there are numerous programs available. Most colleges today offer some sort of teacher certification program for adults wishing to switch careers or discover a new opportunity. Many of these programs offer evening and weekend classes geared toward the non-traditional student.

"Their average age is around 40 years and they have been in previous careers," explains Sabrina Belt, director for the Center for Teaching, Learning and Professional Development at Collin College (Collin). "Most of them have had successful business careers and are now at a point in their lives where they want to give back to their community. We also get a lot of stay-at-home moms who are now able to re-enter the workforce. Although, we are seeing more and more traditional-aged students who just graduated from universities and are seeking certification."

In addition to being close for Frisco residents, Collin's program offers a smaller, personalized program.

"We have small class sizes so the students bond with their cohorts and are very supportive of each other," explains Ms. Belt. "The instructors are current or retired teachers and principals. They bring a wealth of experience to share with our students. We offer a strong mentoring component that is beneficial for the students when they are on the frontline teaching. Depending on their situation, students can finish in one to two years."

Teachers from the Collin program are currently employed in more than 40 school districts across Texas and have a 99 percent success rate on the state certification exam.

Another successful local program is offered at Southern Methodist University (SMU). This full teacher preparation program includes 24 hours of courses, plus



Blake Owen with his students

photo by Chris Fritchie

student teaching. Students do extensive field experience in schools right from the start.

“If they are undergraduates, they must student teach. If they are post-baccalaureate students, or if they are in the M.Ed. with Certification degree program, they may do a full year of internship in lieu of student teaching if they are able to find a job,” says Gail Hartin, director of Undergraduate Programs, Department of Teaching and Learning at SMU. “If they choose the post-bac program, they can finish the courses in two semesters, if they go full-time. The M.Ed. with Certification program takes 14 months.”

Prior to joining the SMU faculty, Ms. Hartin was a teacher and principal in area schools. Full-time faculty members who are former teachers and/or administrators teach most of the SMU courses. This gives students a realistic view of what the classroom will be like and how they can prepare for their new careers.

### ONLINE OPPORTUNITIES

Dedicating evenings and weekends to going back to school may be difficult for some prospective students. After all, many

of these students are stay-at-home moms who take care of a family at night. Some may have full-time jobs and find it hard to commit to evening classes with the demands of their current career. For these types of students, an online program may be more fitting. Although most of the work is done through online discussions, reading and assignments, students still occasionally get together in a classroom setting to do presentations and further discuss the subjects. LeTourneau University, with its main campus in Longview, offers this online option as well as a training facility in Dallas.

“Adult learners desire educational opportunities that meet their unique needs created by personal and professional demands upon their time and resources,” explains Pam Johnson, educator certification officer, LeTourneau University. “Because the majority of the program is delivered online, students can schedule their school work into what may be already-packed schedules. We have developed a small component of the program that requires face-to-face classroom attendance. Within this traditional classroom component,

interpersonal skills are honed, which supports student/teacher success.”

As with the many other programs, LeTourneau also has seasoned, academic professionals as part of the faculty and staff. All instructors have at least a master’s degree and have classroom teaching experience. Many have served as administrators and some are still active in the education profession. The types of students entering online programs are also similar to those going the more traditional route. At LeTourneau, most students fall into the 21-40 age group.

“As their children became school age, teacher certification became of interest to them because they could enter the workplace and maintain the same work schedules as their children’s school schedules,” says Ms. Johnson. “Many of our students have chosen to become educators because they are motivated by internal factors...being a teacher requires giving of oneself for the betterment of others. Typically, the mid-career changers have spent time reflecting on their identities and purposes in life and they desire to satisfy a personal calling to serve others.”

Although the entire program isn’t

online, the University of Texas at Dallas offers certain courses online. In addition, Texas Women's University offers an online Masters of Arts in Teaching for those wishing to pursue initial certification at the graduate level.

### THE TEACHERS

Many teachers in Frisco have received their certification through alternative programs. Some were stay-at-home moms; others pursued teaching when they began their graduate work, while others have made it a second career. They offer a different outlook on learning and a fresh perspective for students.

"I worked for a furniture store as a floral designer prior to becoming a teacher," explains Tina Lester, who received her degree in fine art and returned to school to pursue a certification as an art teacher. "Having experienced life and another occupation prior to returning to school, I felt really confident and certain about my ability and desire to become a classroom teacher. I already knew where my strengths and weaknesses lay, which really helped me work through the challenges of student teaching."

Laura Kurak, formerly a stay-at-home mom, is pursuing her certification while working as an elementary computer aide. She believes her experience with children

will benefit her in her new career.

"I feel that I am now more knowledgeable and mature," she says. "I have three kids and feel that I have a wealth of knowledge based on my experiences in raising my own children, who range in age and different developmental levels. I am able to have a greater perspective on many issues that concern children and education."

Having experienced life and another occupation prior to returning to school, I felt confident and certain about my ability.

Blake Owen, an elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, didn't pursue teaching during his undergraduate work. However, during graduate school, he decided to begin the certification process. "As an undergrad, I had an opportunity to spend time in Brazil teaching English and I discovered that I really enjoyed teaching," Mr. Owen says. "As a non-education major you have a different perspective on any number of education issues, instructional methods or administrative procedures."

So, do alternatively certified teachers have a more difficult time finding a job? We do, after all, take the same courses and the same test as those who pursue their career as an undergrad. Some say it's more difficult, but others had no problem. Yet, it all comes down to the district, the school and who does the interview.

Tanya Hall, an elementary school principal in Frisco Independent School District (FISD), says she has hired alternatively certified teachers every year for the past three years. "The advantage to hiring an alternatively certified teacher is that this is often their second career," she comments. "They typically come to the profession for the love of teaching. Their maturity and experiences give them a different perspective and help in their appreciation for this wonderful profession."

Mr. Owen confesses he did have a difficult time when he began the interview-

ing process. "There were a number of districts that would not consider me for a job until they had already exhausted their list of traditionally certified candidates," he says. "My advice is to research the districts you think you would like to work in. I even emailed principals during my job search to see how they felt about alternatively certified applicants. This enabled me to avoid putting time into applications where I had a very slim chance of getting hired."

Tina Lester had heard that finding a job as an alternatively certified candidate would be more difficult. This helped to solidify her decision to student teach, something that not all certification programs offer. "I wanted to gain a solid foundation of classroom teaching experience. I only had a small amount of substitute teaching experience prior to entering the program."

In my own experience, just getting your foot in the door at a school can open up a world of opportunity. After becoming alternatively certified, I spent three months as a long-term substitute, helping me to get to know the school and the principal. As a result, I was offered a position for the following school year.

### THE REWARD

No matter where someone was certified or how they got their degree, one thing is consistent among all teachers – it is a career that touches your heart.

"I feel fortunate that a school has given me such an incredible opportunity to share my passion and talents," shares Ms. Lester. "The kids are amazing...so forgiving and accepting. We could all learn a thing or two from them. I know I have, and hopefully, will continue to."

Ms. Hall adds that many who choose this second career are just returning to their "calling." "Many of the students switch careers because they have teaching in their hearts," she says.

As for me, I have never once looked back at my decision to switch careers. I feel that I have the best of both worlds. I can continue to write when I want, while teaching my 4<sup>th</sup> graders to appreciate writing as well. Every day is a new opportunity, a new challenge, a new beginning and a new chance to make a difference in a child's life.

*Amanda VanCura is a freelance writer and teacher living in Plano.*

## Area colleges offering certification programs

Collin College  
www.ccccd.edu  
Fall application deadline – June 5, 2008

Southern Methodist University  
www.smu.edu

Texas Women's University  
www.twu.edu

Region 10 Education Service Center  
www.ednet10.net

LeTourneau University  
www.letu.edu

University of Texas at Dallas  
www.utdallas.edu/teach