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Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher's Challenge

By Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality
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Education Consumers Foundation

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209
www.education-consumers.org

Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge

The Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality

Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge is a U. S. Department of Education (USDOE) report on the quality of America's teacher training. Drawing upon the data compiled under Title II of the 1998 Higher Education Act, the report is a guide to the teacher certification changes that will be required for states to comply with the new No Child Left Behind Act (NLCB). The changes will entail stronger requirements for teacher subject-matter competence and a de-emphasis on formal coursework in pedagogy. Teacher training institutions have strongly criticized the report and are opposing its recommendations. Following are the report's highlights:

- Teacher certification requirements are time consuming but do little to ensure quality.
- Teacher training fails to attract the best students. Required courses lack academic rigor. Teacher tests have low cut-off scores. Standards permit teachers to be certified despite weak content knowledge.
- There is little evidence that certified teachers are more effective than uncertified ones in bringing about student achievement.
- Teacher education must become more rigorous and streamlined.
- Certification standards should focus on subject matter knowledge and verbal ability, not completion of coursework. Requirements for pedagogical training should be set by school systems as conditions for employment, not by states as conditions for certification.

This last recommendation is at the heart of the controversy.

Teacher Education's Complaints

Teacher education leaders such as Arthur Wise of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and Linda Darling-Hammond, formerly of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, have been emphatically critical of the report. They say it selectively cites research sponsored by known critics. Darling-Hammond calls the report political and misleading. Wise argues that it ignores improvements in teacher education that have occurred since data collection on teacher quality was initiated in 1998.

Other critics include Thomas Lashly and Gregory Bernhardt, both deans of education. While they agree that teacher education needs substantial improvement, they place most of the blame on factors outside of teacher education. As they see it, teacher education has been inadequately supported by university administrators, manipulated by academic special interests, hindered by schoolhouse politics and unprofessional working environments, and subjected to over-regulation.

Déjà Vu All Over Again?

If the controversy sounds familiar, there is a good reason. This is not the first time federal officials have examined teacher education and found it wanting. The teacher quality problem has been festering for at least 20 years.

Consider *Education Week's* reports from U.S. House of Representatives hearings on teacher training quality in 1981: They were headlined, “For the Teachers of Teachers: A Crisis of Quality,” and “A Search for Purpose and Identity.” Teacher education programs were being blamed for a public perception of “widespread incompetence” among teachers. “‘The bottom of the barrel is going into education,’ [said] Eva C. Galambos of the Southern Regional Education Board in a representative statement.”

And what was the teacher training community’s response? Generally the same as that of today-i.e., that the research critical of teacher education is biased and misleading, that universities do not support teacher-training programs, and that recent improvements are being ignored.

In the years following the 1981 hearings, a few education schools were closed, teachers were tested, and tighter standards were implemented. In addition, five-year teacher training programs were created and NCATE revitalized its accreditation standards--several times. David Imig-then and now the Executive Director of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education-promised that the schools of education would “continue to be dedicated to the principle of providing the highest quality teachers and administrators.”

Why NCLB Might Succeed

Critics of *Meeting the Qualified Teacher Challenge* want to quarrel about suspected biases and inaccuracy, but they are ignoring a far more salient fact: the Title II data cited by the report brings to light the same teacher quality problems that were evident to the researchers and policymakers of nearly a generation ago.

Clearly, the charge that the USDOE report is founded on bias and inaccuracies is outlandish. Teacher educators acknowledged these deficiencies in 1981 and purportedly have been working to correct them in the years since.

Given that self-reform has accomplished so little, states may decide to do away with the teacher education monopoly. If they “streamline” teacher certification requirements as recommended by the USDOE report, schools of education will either have to ensure that teachers are knowledgeable and trained in proven skills, or face declining demand for their courses.

Here’s why: If coursework in the schools of education were not required for certification, most teachers would seek training better suited to real students and real schools.

For years, teachers have complained that required courses in pedagogical theory and methods were out of touch with real classrooms—so much so that many states require education professors to spend time in the schools. Principals have voiced the same complaint, most recently in a California study of exceptionally good schools. In addition, these opinions are consistent with the research showing no clear link between teacher certification and the ability to improve student achievement.

Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge puts the facts of weak subject-matter preparation together with out-of-touch teaching methodologies and carries them to their logical conclusion: State certification requirements should ensure subject matter competence but let teachers and principals decide which teaching practices really work in the classroom.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com