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Putting Qualified Teachers In Every Classroom

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NOTE: At the time of publication, author Richard M. Ingersoll was affiliated with the University of Georgia. Currently, October 2007, he is a faculty member in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Putting Qualified Teachers In Every Classroom

Abstract

The failure to ensure that our nation's classrooms are all staffed with qualified teachers is one of the most discussed, but least understood, problems of our elementary and secondary schools. Over the past decade, literally dozens of studies and national commissions have bemoaned the qualifications and the quality of our teachers. In turn, a host of reforms have pushed tougher teacher-licensing standards and more rigorous academic-coursework requirements for teaching candidates.

Comments

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Putting Qualified Teachers In Every Classroom

By Richard M. Ingersoll

The failure to ensure that our nation's classrooms are all staffed with qualified teachers is one of the most discussed, but least understood, problems of our elementary and secondary schools. Over the past decade, literally dozens of studies and national commissions have bemoaned the qualifications and the quality of our teachers. In turn, a host of reforms have pushed tougher teacher-licensing standards and more rigorous academic-coursework requirements for teaching candidates. More recently, President Clinton has joined the debate: A key ingredient of his 10-point "Call to Action" unveiled earlier this year is to ensure that our nation's elementary and secondary students are all taught by qualified teachers. In addition, Mr. Clinton also proposes to provide funds for a new program of national teacher certification. This special license, designed to recognize and reward the best in teaching, is to be awarded to the most exemplary teachers in each state. Such recognition is long overdue and no doubt all of these efforts will help upgrade the quality of teachers. But like many similar reforms, they have not and will not solve the problem of underqualified teachers and poor teaching, because they do not address some of its leading causes.

One of the least recognized of these causes is the problem of out-of-field teaching—teachers teaching subjects which do not match their training. Rigorous training and advanced certification will help little if large numbers of such teachers continue to be assigned to teach subjects other than those for which they were trained and certified.

One of the reasons for the lack of awareness of this problem has been an absence of accurate statistics on the subject, a situation now remedied with the completion of a major new survey of elementary and secondary teachers by the U.S. Department of Education. Over the past several years, I have undertaken a research project funded by the department that has used this survey to determine how much out-of-field teaching

goes on and why. The findings have been shocking and, not unexpectedly, have been widely reported in the national media. But unfortunately, almost without exception, the host of news stories, commentaries, and columns on this issue have misunderstood it.

There is much controversy over how much and what kinds of training and preparation teachers ought to have to be considered

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"qualified." In our research, we decided to skirt this debate by adopting a minimal standard to define a qualified teacher. Rather than focusing on whether teachers have a teaching license or an academic college degree, we examined those who lack even a college minor in their teaching subjects. Our assumption was that adequately qualified teachers, especially at the secondary school level and especially in the core academic fields, ought to have, as a minimum prerequisite, at least a college minor in the fields they teach. In short, we assumed that few parents would expect their teenagers to be taught, for example, 11th grade trigonometry by a teacher who did not have a minor in math, no matter how bright the teacher. We found, however, that this is precisely the case.

For example, over one-quarter of all secondary school students enrolled in math classes are taught by teachers who do not have at least a college minor in mathematics. The situation is worse within broad fields, such as science and social studies, which include many disciplines. Teachers in these departments are routinely asked to teach any of a wide array of subjects within the field. For instance, even at the 12th grade level, 41 percent of all secondary school students enrolled in physical science classes (chemistry, physics, earth science, or space science) are taught by teachers without at least a minor in any of these physical sciences. Moreover, a stunning 54 percent of all history students in this country are taught by teachers without at least a minor in history. The actual num-

bers of students affected are not trivial. For example, over 4 million students per year are taught secondary school English by teachers without at least a college minor in English, literature, communications, speech, journalism, reading, or language arts.

No doubt some of these out-of-field teachers may actually be qualified, despite not having a minor or major in the subject. Some may have life experience or a few college courses in the field. In Georgia, for instance, because school accreditation regulations require teachers to have at least 20 hours of college credit (about 4 courses) in a field to teach it, many of those in the state assigned to teach out of their fields probably do have some background. The premise underlying our research, however, is that even a moderate number of teachers lacking the minimal prerequisite of a college minor signals the existence of serious problems in our schools.

The crucial question, and the source of great misunderstanding, is why so many teachers are teaching subjects for which they have little background.

Many people assume that out-of-field teaching is a problem of poorly trained teachers and can be remedied by more-rigorous teacher education and training standards. This is not true. Almost all U.S. teachers have completed a college education, and half have graduate degrees. The source of out-of-field teaching lies not in the amount of education teachers have, but in the lack of fit between teachers' fields of training and their teaching assignments. Many teachers are assigned by their principals to teach classes which do not match their education. So the solution is not more training. Reforms such as those pro-

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posed by President Clinton, which are designed to upgrade the training of teachers, while very worthwhile, will not eliminate out-of-field teaching and, hence, will not alone solve the problem of underqualified teaching in our classrooms.

Other commentators blame teachers' unions for the problem. In this view, school officials, often faced with the necessity of adjusting staff due to fiscal cutbacks or declining enrollments, are constrained by union seniority rules. Such rules usually require that more-experienced teachers be given priority, regardless of competence. As a result, so the argument goes, veteran teachers are often given out-of-field assignments, while junior staff are laid off. This explanation for out-of-field teaching is also not true. The newly hired are more prone than experienced teachers to be misas-

signed, and rampant student discipline problems all contribute to teacher turnover. Improving these conditions would decrease turnover, which would quickly eliminate the so-called shortages. It would also remove much of the need for out-of-field assignments in the first place.

This points to the real cause of out-of-field teaching. Unlike in many European and Asian nations, in this country teaching is largely treated as low-status work and teachers as semi-skilled workers. Out-of-field teaching is not simply an emergency condition, but a common practice in the majority of secondary schools in this country.

Except in an emergency, few of us would require cardiologists to deliver babies or real estate lawyers to defend criminal cases. The commonly held assumption is that these professions require far more skill and training than teaching does. And perhaps this is true. But those who have spent time in classrooms know that high-quality teaching requires a great deal of expertise and skill and that teachers are not interchangeable blocks that can be placed in any empty slot regardless of their type of training.

It is this lack of respect for the complexity and importance of the job of teaching that has produced, in my view, what the data tell us: Out-of-field teaching is not simply an emergency condition, but a common practice in the majority of secondary schools in this country.

The way to make sure there are qualified teachers in every classroom is clear. If teaching were treated as a highly valued profession, one requiring a great deal of knowledge and skill to do well, there would be no problem in attracting and retaining more than enough excellent teachers, and out-of-field teaching would neither be needed nor permitted. ■

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signed, and schools with unions have less, not more, out-of-field teaching.

The most popular explanation of this problem blames teacher shortages. This view holds that shortfalls in the number of available teachers due to increasing student enrollments and a "graying" teaching workforce have forced many school systems to lower standards to fill teaching openings. That includes hiring underqualified candidates, shifting existing staff members trained in one field to teach in another, or instituting alternative recruitment programs whereby college graduates can begin teaching immediately without obtaining a license.

This last view is only partly correct. It is true that student enrollments are increasing, but neither the demand for new teachers nor out-of-field assignments are primarily due to these increases. The demand for new teachers is primarily due to teachers' leaving their jobs, and high rates of teacher turnover are primarily due to teacher dissatisfaction with the job, not retirements. Low salaries, little faculty input into school

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