

Published: November 24, 2004

Analysts Worry NCLB Won't Solve Teacher Issues

By Lynn Olson
Washington

As the No Child Left Behind Act is being implemented, it is unlikely to solve the problems of inadequately prepared teachers or low-performing schools, panelists at a meeting here last week contended.

"The provisions dealing with teacher quality in No Child Left Behind have done a wonderful job of focusing attention on the issue of teacher quality in the United States," said Jack Jennings, the director of the Washington-based Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan advocacy group that sponsored the gathering. "The spotlight is wonderful; but what the spotlight has shown is a whole mess of problems that we're not seriously addressing in a systemic and sustained way."

One of the primary concerns raised at the Nov. 15 event was the weakness of many state plans in ensuring that veteran teachers are "highly qualified" by demonstrating knowledge of the subjects they teach.

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Under the law, new teachers must show subject-matter knowledge either by passing a test or having the equivalent of a major in the subjects they teach. But veteran teachers also have the option of meeting a "high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation," or HOUSSE, defined by each state to comply with broad federal guidelines.

"While the law appears unflinching on the academic preparation required of new teachers, the evidence suggests that the law will ultimately fail where veteran teachers are concerned," argued **Kate Walsh**, the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit group here that pushes for teacher-policy reforms.

Adding Value

In a report to be released next month, Ms. **Walsh** analyzes the HOUSSE provisions in the 50 states and assigns each a letter grade. Only five receive an A for implementing rigorous provisions that ensure practicing teachers have an adequate grasp of their subjects, she said. Twenty-four states have plans that "add no value."

Among the problems she identified are: too many options for teachers in meeting the requirements, some of which have nothing to do with subject-matter expertise; the setting of very low bars for showing competence, often based on existing licensure systems; and plans that award teachers points for activities that have little or nothing to do with mastery of their subjects.

"There's no reason to have a HOUSSE if this is the way it's going to play out," Ms. **Walsh** said.

She suggested that the federal Department of Education could choose to come down on two or three states with the most flagrant violations of the law's intent to signal that it is serious about enforcing the teacher-quality provisions.



Kate Walsh

In an interview, Carolyn Snowbarger, the director of the U.S. Department of Education's teacher-to-teacher initiative, said, "states really have some discretion" in determining how they carry out some of the provisions. "Obviously, it is the hope of everyone involved that these are rigorous," she said.

Although states' HOUSSE plans do not go through an approval process at the department similar to that for state accountability plans, she noted, through guidance, discussions, and feedback "we have pressed them again and again to make certain that states understand that they have real obligations as they are designing the HOUSSE to ensure that teachers do have content knowledge."

Antonia Cortese, the executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, defended the HOUSSE option.

"Those states that have given careful thought to creating the HOUSSE models have, in fact, developed viable options for veteran teachers," she

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said. "We believe the HOUSSE to be a credible process to demonstrate subject mastery and performance."

The bigger problem, Ms. Cortese asserted, is that the law fails to address some of the "fundamental aspects" of teacher quality, such as improving teacher preparation and pay. She and others also asked whether simply giving graduates a subject-matter test is enough to ensure they are really "high quality" teachers.

Underlying Problems

Panelists also said the law does not do enough to address the systemic problems that make it difficult to attract and keep teachers in hard-to-staff schools.

While many states have adopted an array of policies and practices to recruit new teachers, said Charles R. Coble, the vice president for policy studies and projects at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, "all these good general things do not appear to trickle down to hard-to-staff schools."

He suggested that states need more differentiated, focused interventions for such schools.



"Hard-to-staff solutions are hard to find," said Eric Hirsch, the vice president of policy and partnerships at the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, based in Chapel Hill, N.C. In addition to issues of compensation, he said, states need to address the working conditions in such schools.

Sue Bodilly

Panel members similarly questioned the capacity of states to turn around all the schools and districts identified as being in need of improvement under the 3-year-old federal law. Susan J. Bodilly, the associate director of education at the Santa Monica-based RAND Corp., said that whole-school reforms, designed to address every aspect of a school's operation, are insufficient by themselves to help low-performing schools.

States and districts also need to address some of the barriers such schools face, such as finding good teachers. "It is these barriers," Ms. Bodilly argued, "that threaten the nation's ability to improve our low-performing schools and that we must address."

Celine Toomey Coggins, the research director of the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, located in Boston, said the gap between schools and districts being identified as underperforming and states' ability to intervene was growing. The federal government could help, she said, by sharing successful assistance models, providing targeted funding, and reconsidering the calculations that result in the identification of such schools.