

No agreement on minimal requirements

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If groups continue to block the deal negotiated by the courts that allows competency testing for new Alabama teachers, their resistance will have grave consequences for the state's schoolchildren.

Currently in Alabama, there are no subject matter testing requirements for new teachers. The state requires only a basic skills test (known as the APTTP) to ensure that teachers know the basic skills that are commonly taught in middle school. And while other states require their basic-skills tests to be administered upon entry into a school of education, new teachers in Alabama need not pass a basic skills tests until they've completed nearly all of their college course work.

In addition, the state often grants a waiver to teachers who fail the test.

Clearly, Alabama imposes fewer demands on its prospective teachers than almost any other state in the nation.

With such a low bar for entering the profession, Alabama students are already at risk of having teachers who are unable to perform basic skills -- much less teach them -- which is what makes this 20-year debate on subject matter testing so critical.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act has forced Alabama's hand, mandating that all teachers be rated "highly qualified" in the subjects that they teach. The law states that if aspiring teachers have not majored in the subjects they teach, they will be required to pass a subject-matter test.

This expectation -- one that we share because of the benefits it will yield for children -- is not overly demanding or unfair. Passing a basic-skills test requires that teachers demonstrate the skills of a middle school student, skills such as the difference between a noun and a verb or the proper punctuation to use in a sentence.

Passing the subject-matter tests that Alabama is considering typically requires no more than 10th-grade-

level knowledge of a subject.

Most people will agree that Alabama students deserve teachers with at least this amount of training. The inability to reach consensus over these minimal requirements signals a resistance, however unintended, to putting the needs of children first.

Implementation of No Child Left Behind is certainly a hot-button issue. Many people argue that making teachers jump through the hoops required of them is taking up precious time that could be better spent in the classroom.

But No Child Left Behind highlights what is too often overlooked: the consensus research concluding that both a teacher's broad academic background and strong subject knowledge have a positive impact on the achievement of their students.

Because so many states have imposed such weak licensing standards for teachers' knowledge, Congress purposefully and boldly chose not to depend on state systems to remedy this problem. Congress had good reason to declare that all teachers must not only be certified but also must provide objective and rigorous evidence that they know the subject matter they teach.

Alabama's court fight is not an esoteric struggle over some obscure issue. This archaic lawsuit

dating back to 1981 has denied Alabama students from benefiting from what we know are essential qualities of an effective teacher.

Education leaders must work to ensure that classrooms are staffed by persons who have at least met some minimal standards. And if the tests were in fact discriminatory, they would not be used without controversy by 37 other states.

While Alabama is certainly not alone in struggling to establish and maintain teacher quality, it is the only state in the nation actively preventing subject-matter testing.

It's time to take steps in the right direction. For the sake of Alabama students and the long-term success of the more than 6,000 new teachers in Alabama in the next year alone, we encourage the court to put an end to this legal battle once and for all, and allow the state to begin raising the standards for our nation's teachers.

We hope that U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson opens the door to reform by insisting that teachers possess the knowledge and skills needed in order to be effective.

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