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Feds yield to Utah educators State standards don't come short, Education Department acknowledges

By Ronnie Lynn
The Salt Lake Tribune

Federal education officials say Utah's 8,500 veteran elementary school teachers are highly qualified after all. After weeks of discussions with state school leaders and the Governor's Office, the U.S. Department of Education on Wednesday agreed, in writing, that Utah's standards for teacher quality are stringent enough to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind law.

The action reverses preliminary findings the feds issued last year. During a monitoring visit in November, federal administrators reviewed Utah's definition of what makes a grade-school teacher "highly qualified." They determined - verbally - that the definition fell short of the standards specified in the law.

Utah leaders are calling the switch a promising first step toward greater cooperation between the state and Washington when it comes to education policy. "I see it as significant flexibility, and I see that the department is working hard to try and ensure that No Child Left Behind works for states," said Tim Bridgewater, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s education deputy. "One size doesn't necessarily fit all."

Earlier this month, the feds granted similar flexibility to North Dakota, whose elementary teacher quality standards also were originally deemed insufficient. Utah school leaders were pleased by Wednesday's news.

"Once they had sort of capitulated to North Dakota, we felt there would be a good chance to get a similar finding here," said Utah Education Association President Pat Rusk.

Said Associate State Superintendent Ray Timothy: "All along, we maintained that our teachers were highly qualified."

No Child Left Behind requires all core classes to be taught by teachers certified as highly qualified by the 2005-06 school year.

The law defines core classes as language arts, math, science, economics, history, geography, civics and government, foreign languages and fine arts.

The easiest way for teachers to meet the federal standard is to have an educator's license and a major or advanced degree in the core subject they teach.

Most grade-school teachers in Utah and nationwide hold degrees in early childhood education or elementary education, but not a core subject. Utah tried to get around that by declaring elementary teachers highly qualified if they had been teaching for three years and earned positive evaluations from their principals.

Federal officials could not be reached for comment Wednesday, but a news release from Huntsman's office quotes the department's deputy director, Robert Stonehill, as saying Utah's evaluation procedures satisfy the law.

"This acceptance is expected to give the 'highly qualified' status to almost 95 percent of Utah's teachers," he said in the statement.

Bridgewater hopes Wednesday's announcement is the first of many that detail wiggle room in No Child Left Behind.

The state also wants Washington to loosen up its standard for measuring school quality. The law requires public schools nationwide to reach annual standardized test-score benchmarks for all demographic groups, including students with disabilities, English learners, ethnic minorities and low-income students.

High-poverty schools that don't meet the federal benchmarks for two consecutive years must pay transportation costs for students to transfer to higher-performing schools. Extra tutoring and other services are mandated in each successive year of shortcoming.

Utah leaders want to measure school quality by the amount of academic growth its students make in a year, but squeezing that concession out of the feds may be more difficult.

State and federal officials have narrowed the discussion to a half dozen points still up for negotiation, but it is unclear whether they will be resolved, Bridgewater said.

"We hit a bit of an impasse on a couple of those issues today," he said.

He and state Superintendent Patti Harrington could be on their way to Washington as early as the weekend to hammer out those issues, he said.

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