

## Don't stop now in testing teachers

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The story of Wayne Brightly, the New York City schoolteacher who reportedly paid a formerly homeless man to take the teachers' certification exam for him, should strike fear in the heart of every citizen who cares about the public schools.

The fact that Rubin Leitner, who suffers from a developmental disorder, supposedly passed the exam with flying colors, whereas Brightly, who's been teaching for 13 years, had repeatedly flunked it, makes people wonder who are these people teaching our children.

Fortunately, Brightly appears to be an aberration, and he or people like him are no longer chronic actors in the school system.

For years, the city employed hordes of teachers who had been in the classrooms for years, even though they never had been able to pass the teacher certification exams. One exam tests the teacher's general knowledge of basic skills such as reading, writing and math, while the other tests the teacher's knowledge of the subject he or she teaches.

In 2000, the city had 10,000 uncertified teachers on its payroll. But that year State Education Commissioner Richard Mills decreed that every teacher in the state's underperforming schools must be certified. He later extended his order to include every school in the state.

Now every new teacher has five years to become certified, which includes passing the two written exams and fulfilling other professional requirements. Teachers also can get extensions from the state as long as they show they're making progress toward certification. These reforms flushed thousands of laggards out of the school system, including 3,000 the Department of Education fired in 2003. Thousands more finally got their acts together and passed the tests. I couldn't reach Department of Education officials for comment, but an elected official who follows the school system closely estimated that 95 percent of current teachers are certified.

Wayne Brightly was able to remain in the classroom for 13 years because he was hired before the new rules took effect and because he got several extensions of his temporary teacher's license. But he hadn't passed the exam in his subject area. His last extension was due to expire in August.

The educators I talked to said the certification reforms have improved the quality of teachers over all, aided by programs such as Teach for America and NYC Teaching Fellows, which have drawn new recruits by making teaching seem a cooler and more professional job. The written exams matter because research shows that students perform better when their teachers have high verbal skills and a mastery of the subjects they teach.

"Nowadays teachers have to perform tasks on so many levels that they have to be highly qualified," says Clarita Zeppie, who was principal of an elementary school in Washington Heights until last spring, before moving to a school in Westchester. "As a principal I don't want to hire somebody who can't pass the exam."

Michelle Rhee, head of The New Teacher Project, which helps run the NYC Teaching Fellows Program, says: "Just knowing that New York City has gone from having a tremendous amount of people who weren't able to pass the tests to where the majority, if not all, teachers pass them, suggests to me that the quality of teachers has gone up."

After last week's news broke, Wayne Brightly was removed from his school, which means there's one less unqualified teacher in the system. Getting rid of the bad apples is only a first step, however. Some say the certification standards are still too low - that the math questions given to fourth graders are harder than those given to the teachers. With most teachers now meeting the basic requirements, it may be time to raise the bar.

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