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Teacher Credentials Questioned

■ Group sues state agency, saying it gave 'highly qualified' labels to thousands of novice instructors who lacked adequate training.

By Duke Helfand, Times Staff Writer

A grass-roots group sued the California agency that hands out teacher credentials Tuesday, accusing it of wrongly classifying thousands of inexperienced instructors as "highly qualified" to circumvent a federal education law.

The group, Californians for Justice, said the state's Commission on Teacher Credentialing has mislabeled teachers with emergency credentials as highly qualified since 2003 to comply with the No Child Left Behind law — even though the new instructors lacked adequate training and supervision.

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The 2002 law requires states to ensure that all teachers in English, math and other core subjects are highly qualified by the end of the 2005-06 school year, meaning the teachers have enough training and knowledge in their subjects to earn state certification.

The group says mislabeled teachers have been found disproportionately in schools serving poor and minority children, according to its lawsuit filed in San Francisco Superior Court.

"It's really misleading parents and students about the quality of their schools," said Mike Chavez, a Californians for Justice spokesman. "And it takes away any pressure on the schools to make improvements ... to meet the standards of No Child Left Behind."

But officials from the state credentialing commission stood by its program, unveiled in March 2003, that enables teachers

without full credentials to obtain Individualized Internship Certificates, which allow the instructors to be deemed highly qualified.

"The internship certificate is consistent with the requirements of the federal legislation in No Child Left Behind, and we stand behind it," said Bonnie Parks, a spokeswoman for the credentialing agency.

The No Child Left Behind law introduced sweeping changes in the nation's public schools. It called for annual testing of students at most grade levels and required faltering campuses to offer their students free tutoring or transfers to better schools.

But the teacher credentialing aspects of the law have put significant pressures on schools, particularly large, crowded urban campuses that struggle with high teacher turnover rates.

The federal government left it up to the states to develop their own definitions of highly qualified teachers. Like California, other states have struggled to come up with definitions that meet the federal requirements without watering down their own demands on teacher preparation.

The California Board of Education decided to include as highly qualified those teachers who enroll in internship programs sponsored by school districts and universities. Such instructors receive significant training and supervision while they learn on the job. The Individualized Internship Certificate program is meant for those who do not have a formal district or university sponsor. Teachers in the program possess qualifications similar to those of other interns and receive supervision and mentoring, according to an overview of the program provided by the commission.

But critics from Californians for Justice and other groups contend that teachers in the individualized program get less training and oversight than other interns do, making them highly qualified in name only. The lawsuit said the commission issued more than 2,800 individualized certificates between 2002 and 2004, and perhaps as many as 2,000 since then.

"They have created a charade out of whole cloth," said John Affeldt, managing attorney for Public Advocates, the San Francisco law firm that filed the lawsuit. "They have created a 'highly qualified' label for people who are really emergency credentialed teachers."

The lawsuit also challenges whether the credentialing commission violated state law when it created the internship certificate program.

The plaintiffs contend that the commission did not properly solicit public input.

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