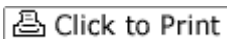




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## System snubs qualified teachers

By Patrick Welsh

One of the goals of President Bush's No Child Left Behind law is a "highly qualified" teacher in every classroom by the 2005-06 school year. The aim, while worthy, has about as much a chance of being realized as the goal championed by Bush's father and President Clinton to have every child in America receive a "world-class education" by the year 2000. Parents well beyond 2006 will be scrambling to have their kids avoid lousy teachers and get their share of the good ones.

Still, the Bush administration should be lauded for taking on the stagnant education establishment with its recently released study, "Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge." It essentially concluded that state education bureaucrats are keeping many of the best candidates out of teaching by making them take useless education courses.

"Requiring excessive numbers of pedagogy or education-theory courses," the report said, "acts as an unnecessary barrier for those wishing to pursue a teaching career."

During the 30 years I have taught at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., few things have been more frustrating than seeing my school system turn away extremely bright young teaching candidates simply because they did not have enough of the requisite education courses to be certified by the state. In their place, second-rate candidates who had jumped through enough hoops to gain certification were often hired.

To create the illusion of having "qualified teachers," states and individual school systems have tried to get the public to believe that "qualified" and "certified" are synonymous. Any parent who has seen some of the pathetic "certified" teachers, protected by tenure and the teacher unions, and allowed to draw taxpayers' dollars year after year, knows that state certification does not even rise to a minimum competency level.

In some states, the verbal pass rate on The Praxis Series test used to license teachers is set below the 25th percentile. In Kentucky, for instance, the verbal pass rate on the Praxis is set at the 20th percentile, even though a teacher's verbal ability is crucial to a child's learning.

Several years ago, I graded the essay section of the National Teachers Exam administered by the Educational Testing Service. For the most part, the writing was wretched, far below the quality of the papers of high school seniors I had read while grading the Advanced Placement English exam. Yet the standards were so minimal that even candidates who appeared to be semiliterate had to get passing scores. I couldn't help but think to myself that these horrible students would soon be in the classroom, stamped "state-certified" because they had taken the right education courses.

Virginia's reliance on mind-numbing but easily measurable criteria to judge who should be in the classroom often reaches the heights of absurdity. My former colleague, Scott Sidley, was told by the state that he had to take a basic composition course to keep teaching English. It didn't matter to the bureaucrats in Richmond that this was a low-level course that Sidley had been exempted from at the University of Virginia on the basis of his Advanced Placement score in high school, or that he had 48 graduate hours in creative writing. Sidley, the youngest member of the English department at 34, was loved by students and parents, but gave up teaching rather than take the course in writing and several other education courses the state insisted upon.

Or take the case of T.C. Williams social studies teacher Caitlin Stravino, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and the Harvard School of Education. Despite the fact that she was certified to teach in

Massachusetts through her Harvard program, the gatekeeping gurus in Richmond didn't think she knew enough to teach. They told her she needed to take 33 more hours of course work to gain certification. Stravino called the state education department more than a dozen times during the course of her first year at T.C. Williams — and got nowhere. She finally called James Gilmore, then the governor, telling him that if Virginia insisted on the 33 additional hours, she was going to teach in another state. Four days later, Stravino got a call from the state education department asking whether she would agree to take six hours of history courses that had little to do with anything that goes on in her classroom.

Stravino, one of the top teachers in the school, still feels wronged. "Virginia's certification system is totally blind and has nothing to do with good teaching," she says.

Jim DeCamp, an English teacher at Rush-Henrietta Senior High School in New York, says it's not just the education courses that are freezing out bright candidates. "There's a certain prejudice in the profession against smart people," DeCamp says. "The coach-turned-principal types are threatened by bright applicants. Intelligence is not valued by administrators."

I'm not saying that all we need to do is stick brighter people in our classrooms to improve learning. Who has not had teachers who were obviously brilliant and who loved their subject but could not communicate it clearly?

Nor am I saying that one can't learn how to get better at teaching. The problem is that education courses are so far removed from what really happens when one walks in a classroom to teach that the majority of them are useless. They make about as much sense as reading a book about how to play golf and not ever swinging a club.


"The process of getting the best has to be streamlined," says David Keener, the head of the T.C. Williams science department and the 1998 Virginia winner of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching. "Individual high schools should be given the power to advertise positions and do their own recruiting. Principals, with the advice of teachers, should be able to do all the hiring on the spot, without worrying about who is certified and who isn't. The education courses have to be de-emphasized. Once we get the kind of people we want, we can train them in the schools."

Keener is right. I know that if a school such as mine were able to recruit and hire the teachers it wanted without the niggling interference from state and local officials obsessed with a meaningless certification stamp, we would get the kind of teachers our kids deserve, and come a bit closer to the president's ideal of having "a qualified teacher in every classroom."

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