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A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom? Appraising Old Answers and New Ideas

Edited by Frederick M. Hess, Andrew J. Rotherham, and
Kate Walsh

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, states have to ensure that every public school classroom is staffed by a highly qualified teacher. In this volume, eleven contributors with rich experience in policy and teaching take a fresh look at key issues related to that mandate, including current systems for preparing and licensing teachers, and how they affect the quality and supply of teachers in the workforce; reform models for teacher preparation and licensure, and what they would mean for the profession; questions of rigor and ideology in the core curricula of education schools or programs; and the federal role in teacher preparation and licensure.

Frederick M. Hess, a former high school social studies teacher, is a resident scholar and the director of education policy studies at AEI. He is the author of Common Sense School Reform (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Revolution at the Margins: The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems (Brookings Institution Press, 2002). Andrew J. Rotherham is the director of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute. Kate Walsh is the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality.

In recent years, the debate over teacher quality and preparation has gained new urgency. During that time, competing groups of partisans have dominated this debate: one seemingly eager to assail the nation's education schools and to suggest that there is no clearly defined body of knowledge about teaching, and the other committed to advancing professionalism by ensuring that all teachers are prepared and licensed

through a prescribed and formal training program. The conflict is suffusing research, confusing policymakers, and stifling potentially promising reforms.

The new sense of urgency around teacher recruitment, preparation, and induction results from widespread teacher shortages in high-poverty schools and in key academic areas, as well as from impending mass retirements. These developments have rendered policy and practice ripe for rethinking.

Teachers are the key to making schools work. On this, there is agreement across the political spectrum and among educators, researchers, and public officials. Academically stronger students tend to shun the teaching profession. Undergraduate education majors typically have lower SAT and ACT scores than other students, and those who leave the profession in their first few years have higher scores than those who remain in teaching. In addition, research shows that the lower the quality of the undergraduate institution one attends, the more likely one is to wind up in the teaching profession.

The result is that 44 percent of middle school students take at least one class with a teacher who does not have even a minor in the subject being taught. Almost a quarter of secondary school students take at least one class with a teacher who did not have even a college minor in the class she teaches, a figure that climbs to 32 percent in high-poverty schools. The problem is compounded because we need to hire about two hundred thousand new teachers a year just

to fill the nation's classrooms, and new federal policies are raising the bar for teacher qualifications.

The practical challenges of school staffing were codified into a statutory challenge by the sweeping federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2002. NCLB requires states to close the teacher quality gaps between high- and low-poverty schools and ensure that all teachers are "highly qualified" by 2005–06. However, while qualified teachers have long been identified based upon whether they had completed a program at one of the nation's more than thirteen hundred teacher preparation programs, NCLB was intentionally vague on this point. Instead, the law requires subject matter expertise for middle and high school teachers and appropriate coursework for elementary school teachers but leaves it to states to decide what, beyond these core requirements, constitutes certification and who is a qualified teacher. This volume seeks to inform these state efforts by presenting fresh research on key elements of the teacher quality challenge and by posing "next generation" models of reform.

This volume was born of many conversations with frustrated state, local, and federal officials seeking effective strategies for addressing the teacher quality challenge. Amid the broader changes that have swept education in recent years, policymakers and practitioners have had their hands full trying to juggle practical and political challenges. They have had little time to reflect more deeply on the landscape and on new questions that need to be asked, or to consider broad models of structural reform.

The Teacher Quality Debate

From the early twentieth century until the 1980s, the teacher quality debate was largely shaped by two factors: a captive labor market for teachers and the lack of consensus about what constituted good teaching and what characteristics teachers should possess.

The teaching profession was able to draw heavily upon a captive labor force of talented women and African-Americans for whom there were few other professional avenues available. This situation ensured a reasonably steady supply of women and minorities enrolling in local teacher preparation programs and accepting jobs in schools reasonably proximate to where they were trained. In addition, these teachers tended to remain in those schools for the duration of their careers.

At the same time there was little agreement about what teachers were supposed to teach and no systematic evaluation of student performance. Given an absence of clear standards, teachers were often expected to use their judgment about what to teach. Teachers working in such an environment likely benefited from a training program that exposed them to professional norms. Yet so long as schools did not collect and study data on student performance, it was impossible to systematically evaluate teacher performance once teachers were in the schools or to infer what characteristics made some teachers more effective than others.

During the 1980s, the context of the teacher quality challenge changed. A series of high-profile state reform efforts was triggered by the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report calling attention to problems in America's schools. Governors seeking to upgrade the teaching force confronted a grave challenge: the captive labor pool of women and African-Americans had dissipated as college graduates found that neither race nor gender any longer prohibited them from entering medicine, law, engineering, or other professional fields. Meanwhile, rising enrollment and efforts to shrink class size had increased the size of the teacher workforce by about 25 percent between 1970 and the mid-1980s.

Other education reforms of the 1980s created opportunities to rethink the traditional approach to teacher quality. A "standards movement" took shape in which states worked to develop and implement clear guidelines regarding the content that students were expected to learn. In the early 1990s, an accompanying "accountability" movement grew, as states devised assessments intended to make sure that students were mastering the material in the standards.

Concerns about teacher quality and the changing environment gave birth to two distinct approaches to improving teacher quality. The teacher educators and schools of education viewed concerns about teacher quality as reflecting a need to "professionalize" teaching. The clearest statement of this philosophy was provided by the National Council on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) in its 1996 manifesto "What Matters Most? Teaching for America's Future." NCTAF called on states and schools of education to standardize their programs, extend the number of years teaching candidates studied, better integrate student teaching with coursework, and take steps to provide more money and support for the teaching profession.

A much smaller group of reformers worried that the time and cost of the preparation recommended in the NCTAF proposals would deter potentially effective teachers from entering the profession, particularly in urban communities, and would not appreciably improve the quality of teaching. Endorsing efforts to make it easier for nontraditional teachers to be considered for teaching positions, these reformers promoted “alternative certification” programs that would allow candidates to enter classrooms without completing the standard coursework and preparation programs.

During the 1990s, the scope of alternative certification programs grew, and the debate over their desirability intensified. By 2000, about one-sixth of Texas teachers, one-fifth of New Jersey teachers, and 10 percent of California teachers were entering the profession through alternate routes. Forty-five states had enacted alternative licensure routes, and the federal government had provided funds to develop, study, and support these efforts. Still, alternative routes often existed only on paper, and teachers trained in alternative settings still constituted only a small minority of teachers entering the profession each year.

The Aims of This Volume

This volume consists of three distinct sections: The first assesses the political, policy, and research landscape of teacher quality. The second poses new questions that can help to extend the research beyond the long-running debate over the qualifications of licensed teachers and to enable us to think more systematically about teacher preparation and teacher hiring. Finally, the third section proposes new models for how states might seek to ensure teacher quality.

The first set of chapters offers a careful assessment of where matters stand in the teacher quality debate. Authors assess the history and status of teacher quality efforts in the states and the politics of policymaking in this area, the evolving federal role in teacher quality, and the research on the benefits of teacher licensure and the track record of alternatively certified candidates.

The second set of chapters tries to move beyond the traditional debates about teacher licensure, pro or con, to ask more nuanced questions about whether licensure programs provide teachers with essential knowledge and skills, keep unsuitable individuals from entering the profession, and provide an effective pipeline for

getting teachers into schools. These chapters constitute the first systematic attempt to determine how effectively teacher preparation programs bar unsuitable candidates from training or weed them out in the course of preparation, the first systematic inquiry into the readings being used in teacher preparation, and an examination of how teacher preparation graduates actually wind up making their way into the schools.

In the final section, four influential education thinkers provide policymakers with four very different models for addressing the teacher quality challenge. Working from the presumption that states can choose to regulate teacher preparation programs with a lighter or heavier hand and can establish credentialing requirements that are more or less restrictive for individual teachers, the authors explain how states can use various combinations of candidate and program regulation to promote teacher quality.

Gary Sykes explains the merits of a “professionalism” model in which states aggressively regulate both which programs may train teachers and who may apply for a teaching position. Bryan Hassel explains the merits of a “portfolio of providers” strategy in which states are careful to cultivate and monitor a diverse portfolio of preparation programs but then trust these programs to monitor teacher quality and do not attempt to further regulate teacher candidates. Kate Walsh makes the case for a “candidate-centered” model in which the state regulates who may apply for a teaching position but no longer regulates teacher preparation programs or requires teaching candidates to complete such a program. Finally, Mike Podgursky explains the merits of a “deregulated” model in which the states permits schools and districts to hire as they see fit and does not regulate either teacher preparation programs or who may teach.

First Steps for Reform

The research and analysis in this volume illuminate some troubling realities, point to possible paths for reform, and sketch some clear lessons for policymakers. First, path-breaking research finds little evidence that teacher preparation programs are screening out unsuitable teachers or teaching essential knowledge and skills. However, the analyses presented here represent exploratory efforts and should therefore be interpreted with caution. As the authors themselves are careful to note, it is imperative that future research examine

these questions more systematically and across a more complete sample of institutions. In light of these limitations there is an obvious role for more extensive reporting on the practices and teaching in these schools.

What kinds of measures would be appropriate? First, the federal government ought to amend the Higher Education Act so that it calls for broader reporting on quality control and professional preparation. As a condition for federal aid, preparation programs should provide standardized information on program acceptance rates, student performance, the rate of program completion, required courses of study, and the syllabi for those courses of study. Such reporting would not be onerous to the programs. We can be confident that such information, once collected, would indeed be used. The information would be particularly helpful because it could now be combined with rich new data on student learning and teacher effectiveness generated by state accountability systems.

These systems also offer tremendous new opportunities to assess and regulate the quality of teachers and teacher preparation programs in new ways. Where we once had to rely upon formal training to gauge the quality of a teacher, we now have output data such as annual student assessments at most grade levels that can be used to determine just how well different students are progressing. If districts include a teacher's preparation institution as part of their routine data collection, it becomes possible to track the student performance of all the teachers who graduated from particular preparation programs. Information of this kind has the possibility to bring clarity to discussions of teacher quality and teacher preparation that were never previously possible.

Finally, there is a strong circumstantial case that teacher certification is dissuading potentially qualified teachers from considering the profession. Of particular concern is the evidence from alternative certification programs suggesting that traditional barriers may especially deter prospective teachers seeking to work in the inner cities, the places where the teacher quality challenge is greatest. However, there is little reliable evidence on any of these questions that stretches beyond the anecdotal or theoretical. It is time for systematic efforts on the parts of researchers, philanthropists, and education departments to understand more fully the ways in which certification requirements or state licensing processes are deterring potentially effective teachers from the schools. While we can study the benefit of an extra requirement, it is too easy to overlook the cost of an otherwise qualified teacher who turns away in the face of procedural barriers or red tape.

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