

## Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: The case against “comparability”

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Two items in the Miller-McKeon NCLB reauthorization bill seem to be shoe-ins for making their way into federal law. The impetus behind both is to ensure that districts spend as much on schools serving poor students as they do on schools serving more affluent children.

A no brainer, right? *New York Times* ([http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/07/opinion/07fri1.html?\\_r=1&hp&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/07/opinion/07fri1.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin)) thinks so; it endorsed these both provisions in a September 7th editorial.

The first one would tighten NCLB’s “comparability” requirements—rules that demand that school districts provide the same resources to poor, Title I schools as they do to their more affluent schools. Under a loophole in the current law, districts may pretend that resources are “comparable” so long as similarly-sized schools have the same number of teachers—regardless of those teachers’ actual salaries. The draft proposal would instead require that districts spend the same amount of money on poor schools, and account for differences in payroll from school to school.

This get-tough move stems from evidence showing that, because more-senior (hence pricier) teachers tend to gravitate to schools with middle-class children, schools serving poor children wind up with more

inexperienced teachers with lower salaries—and therefore get less money.

Congress is right to believe that poor kids should get the same quality teachers as more affluent kids. In fact, I would argue, poorer students need the very best teachers.

But assuming that higher payrolls buy a better quality of teacher is flat out wrong. Experience is not just a poor proxy for effectiveness; it is a patently false proxy. Study after study has shown conclusively that, after the first year of teaching, teacher experience has little impact on classroom effectiveness. Teachers are about as effective in their third year as they will be in their 20th year.

So a school district may be paying \$75,000 a year to Mrs. Smith, a 20-year veteran, and only \$38,000 to Ms. Jones, a young energetic teacher. But Ms. Jones may be the real prize. Given the anachronistic way we pay teachers—almost entirely on the basis of years served and degrees earned—their salaries bear no connection to their value.

What is likely to happen if this proposal becomes law? Most obviously, staffing decisions will get made in order to comply with federal requirements that have nothing to do with the best interests of children.



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For example, imagine a situation involving a go-getter principal who has hired a lot of young, energetic staff and is starting to make real progress. Along comes the district superintendent (with orders from the state in response to regulations from Washington), who informs the principal that, because her payroll is too low, they have to transfer in two expensive—but utterly ineffective—teachers from another school. Out go two great young teachers and in comes more dead wood. How is this good for poor children?

Making matters worse, the second proposal in the bipartisan House bill calls for “equitable distribution” of qualified teachers.

The bill appears to require that teachers earning the “highly qualified” designation be equitably distributed among the schools in a particular district. Again, it sounds great, but given the way districts operate, it’s a disaster in the making.

First, this provision assumes that most districts have relatively equal numbers of schools serving poor and non-poor children. Certainly some such districts exist. Large entities such as Florida’s county-based districts have little excuse for not coming up with ways to make sure that all schools get their share of highly qualified teachers.

But most school districts are not so demographically balanced. In fact, the school districts that serve the poorest children in the country serve *predominantly* poor children. Many of these districts are “doughnut hole districts.” They’re like Baltimore City with a poverty rate of 73 percent, surrounded by more affluent Baltimore County with a poverty rate of 31 percent. Or Atlanta with a poverty rate of 76 percent, surrounded by Fulton County with a poverty rate of 38 percent.

Congress won’t dare tell states to take highly qualified teachers from the more-affluent districts and reassigning them to the city. Instead, they’re going after the hand-

ful of schools in these urban districts that are still able to attract middle class families, in no small part on the basis of their teachers’ quality.

In Baltimore, 96 percent of the elementary schools have at least a 50 percent poverty rate. Only five schools in the city fall below this percentage. And not one single elementary school could possibly be considered affluent. Even in the “wealthiest” school in the city, one third of the kids live in poverty. Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Detroit all offer a similar picture.

If teachers are shuffled from rather poor to very poor schools—nonsensical, illogical moves that will create anger and bitterness—what is the likelihood that *any* middle-class families will remain?

It doesn’t take a historian or a sociologist to recognize that the loss of the middle class in urban school districts has worsened the education of poor children. And it remains unclear how the “equitable distribution” of teachers within such districts is going to help them. More often than not, it will be the teacher who works in a school with a 60 percent poverty rate who must be moved to a school with a 90 percent poverty rate. Poor is poor, and doing the teacher shuffle isn’t going to stack up in kids’ favor.

Teacher quality is perhaps the greatest challenge facing these struggling school districts. The House bill does in fact include some good provisions for addressing these challenges, such as premium pay to attract teachers to high-need schools and subject areas; better mentoring and induction for new teachers; performance pay; and longitudinal data systems that will allow tracking of teacher effectiveness, to name just a few.

These are the measures that Congress should authorize and enact, not provisions that mandate better bean-counting at the expense of common sense.