

How the public is deceived about ‘highly qualified teachers’

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For years now a charade has been perpetuated on the public by politicians in Washington and school reformers about the definition of a “highly qualified teacher” — an issue that has real-life consequences in the country’s neediest classrooms. This post on the subject was written by Kenneth Zeichner is a professor of teacher education at the University of Washington, Seattle, and professor emeritus in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A member of the National Academy of Education, he has done extensive research and teaching and teacher education and has published widely. He is a product of the Philadelphia public school system and a former elementary teacher team leader in the National Teacher Corps.



“The federal law that allows teachers-in-training to be concentrated in my school and district isn’t fair and is hurting my education... No one in Congress would want that for their own children, so why is it good enough for me?” — from the congressional testimony of Shayla Johnson, Philadelphia Student Union representative and student at Overbrook High School in Philadelphia, 12/9/11

Our federal government supports a practice of putting the least-prepared teachers in the highest-need classrooms — classrooms that are most often filled with children from low-income families, English language learners, students with disabilities and students of color. There are [powerful players in the education reform world](#) who are advocating for the Obama administration and Congress to maintain a federal policy that promotes this practice. Parents and guardians should be accurately informed about the certification status of their children’s teachers so they can question the wisdom of the policy that has supported the disproportionate assignment of the least qualified teachers to our most vulnerable students.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act by Congress presents us with an opportunity to fix, in public policy, the harm we are causing to the many students being taught by under-prepared teachers — who despite their lack of credentials — are being designated as “highly qualified.” A 2012 study from Stanford University [concludes](#) that nationally students of color in low-income schools are 3 to 10 times more likely to have teachers who are uncertified, not fully prepared, or teaching outside their field of preparation than students in predominately white and affluent schools.

In August 2007, low-income parents and students in California sued the U.S. Department of Education and the Secretary of Education for [allegedly violating the teacher quality provisions](#) of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). At issue, was a 2002 ruling by the Department that allowed teachers in training to be designated as “highly qualified” by expanding the original language of the law requiring “highly-qualified” teachers to “have obtained full state certification” in the

subjects and grade levels they are teaching to also include alternative route trainees only “making satisfactory progress toward” completing the requirements for full state certification.

Under NCLB, all students are entitled to a highly qualified teacher, and where a state or district lacks 100% highly qualified teachers the law further states that low-income students and students of color should not be disproportionately taught by unqualified teachers. The Renee plaintiffs argued that the department’s regulation deeming “highly qualified” those individuals who are only making “progress toward full certification” perpetuated the situation where students who attend low-income, high minority schools in California are disproportionately taught by underprepared teachers.

In September 2010, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit [struck down](#) the department’s unlawful regulation. However, the Ninth Circuit decision quickly became moot. In the final days of the lame-duck congressional session in December 2010, Congress passed an amendment as part of a continuing resolution to fund the government that, at the eleventh hour and without public debate, temporarily codified the regulation that the Ninth Circuit had struck down. At the time, congressional leaders defended the temporary amendment as necessary to avoid any mid-year disruptions to the schools caused by the court’s decision.

In the summer of 2012, as the temporary amendment approached its expiration date, the [debate intensified again](#) about the broader definition of “highly qualified.” Teach For America (TFA), charter networks, and other “reform” organizations pushed for the extension arguing that classrooms would be left without a teacher if Congress held firm to the original highly qualified teacher (HQT) standard of full certification. In reality, districts would still be permitted to hire teachers who were still in training, but they would need to distribute them more equitably and a plan would need to be developed to lessen their number over time.

On the other side, over 90 civil rights, disability, grass root community, and education organizations comprising the Coalition for Teaching Quality [argued that the HQT amendment hides](#) and perpetuates the disproportionate concentration of teachers-in-training in schools and classrooms serving low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, English learners and rural students.

The HQT amendment was extended for another year with the new requirement that the U.S. Department of Education collect data on the distribution of uncertified “highly qualified” teachers. Since then, there continue to be attempts to codify the broader definition including the recent efforts of Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) to introduce an amendment that would make permanent the dilution of the meaning of highly qualified teachers.

There may not in fact currently be enough fully certified teachers to staff public school classrooms across the nation (though the many recent layoffs due to the economy may have changed that equation). The key issue remains whether we will continue to disproportionately staff the classrooms of our neediest children with teacher candidates who have not completed their preparation programs, or whether we will take actions that reflect the belief that our most

vulnerable students deserve to have fully prepared and effective teachers at the same rates as their more affluent peers.

Despite the complexity of the issue (e.g., variation in state certification requirements and district hiring practices, controversy over research methods), the weight of the evidence indicates that full certification matters for teacher quality. Recent [studies](#) have also shown that teacher experience matters and that the continual teacher “churn” that is associated with the short tenure of many non-certified teachers is disruptive to students’ learning.

Instead of implicitly accepting the status quo as permanent through the current policy, we should seek to eliminate the situation that exists today in many rural and urban communities where students’ lack of access to fully prepared and experienced teachers. Creating greater incentives for fully certified, experienced, and effective teachers to work in schools attended primarily by students living in poverty, acting on what we know from research to develop effective programs to prepare more people from low-income communities to teach in their local schools, and developing and enforcing policies that ensure resources in these schools and in the broader communities match those in more affluent areas are just a few of the steps that should be taken.

It is negligent to perpetually deny our most vulnerable students access to fully certified and experienced teachers through public policy. It is also unfair, and even arrogant, to be less than fully transparent with families about the true certification status of their children’s teachers. The U.S. Department of Education has so far failed to collect the data Congress required on the distribution of so-called “highly qualified” teachers in training, even though its congressionally mandated deadline is December 2013.

In 2002, Senator Edward Kennedy spoke out in the U.S. Senate against the proposed broader definition of “highly qualified” teachers. He called for a rule “to ensure when we say all teachers will be highly qualified, we mean all teachers are highly qualified.” It is time that federal policy with regard to who is a highly qualified teacher reflects his plea and that our public policy gives students from low-income families the same access to fully prepared and experienced teachers as students in more affluent neighborhoods

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