

When 'Highly Qualified' Teachers Aren't

Are we watering down teacher certification?

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Recent research confirms that America's most vulnerable children are being taught by the least-qualified teachers. In 2016, the National Conference of State Legislatures noted that "most state education systems are falling dangerously behind the world. ... At this pace, we will struggle to compete economically against even developing nations, and our children will struggle to find jobs in the global economy."

One of the purported aims of the No Child Left Behind Act was to ensure a "highly qualified teacher" for every student in every classroom in America. Under that federal law, enacted 15 years ago, this generally required of teachers a bachelor's degree, state certification, and content knowledge in the subjects they taught. While this is a nice idea, loopholes in alternative-certification programs and the proliferation of emergency certification to fill teaching shortages have made the goal of high quality impossible to achieve.

A teacher can fit the bill as being highly qualified even if he or she has no disposition for working with children, has never taken a course in child development or classroom management, and **has done nothing to demonstrate mastery of his or her subject matter**. If experience, disposition, education, or credentials don't matter for prospective teachers, then what does?

Take, for example, Texas—a state where thousands of unprepared teachers enter the classroom each year. The U.S. Department of Education found in 2013-14 that of the 37,270 individuals enrolled in teacher-training programs in Texas, more than 15,000 were in alternative programs unaffiliated with any university. Many new teachers point and click their way to certification over the internet without ever setting foot in a classroom, and circumvent university preparation completely.

The online teacher-certification program A+ Texas Teachers simply requires a bachelor's degree, a 2.5 GPA, and a check for \$4,500 to qualify for enrollment. The program enrolled more than 7,400 students in 2013-14, **despite the fact that it received an F for quality from the National Center for Teacher Quality**. In contrast, the teacher-preparation program at the University of Texas at Austin, which received an A, enrolled only 241 students in the same year.

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According to the federal Education Department's 2015 Title II report, Texas gave authority for teacher certification to 199 entities in 2013-14—including regional service centers, community colleges, and for-profit businesses—which offer about 6,000 different programs. Meanwhile, the Texas Education Agency proudly proclaimed in 2013-14 that 99.5 percent of all new teachers in the state were highly qualified. One wonders about the half percent of teachers who were unable to meet the "standards."

However, Texas is just one example of a larger trend in teacher quality. The Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced No Child Left Behind, **no longer requires states to monitor teacher quality and says only that Title I teachers must meet state licensing requirements**. Schools will no longer have to inform parents that their child's high school physics teacher actually got a degree in physical education. The continual dumbing-down of the preparation of teachers is not without consequences. One result of the lack of vetting for new teachers in Texas has been a rapid rise in teacher misconduct in that state. After recording the state's highest number of cases of teacher misconduct in nearly a decade (222 investigations in the 2016 fiscal year), the Texas Education Agency asked for additional funding to investigate more than 1,100 backlogged allegations.

A second consequence is a consistent decline in student achievement, particularly for minority students. In 2014, the College Board reported that a disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic students in Texas failed to meet the college- and career-readiness benchmark on their SAT scores. Only 14 percent of African-American students and 19 percent of Hispanic students who took the SAT were considered college ready. Of all the public school test-takers in Texas, only 32 percent met the benchmark. Overall, in 2015, the state saw its lowest SAT scores in more than two decades.

Don't parents care anymore about the qualifications of the people so central to the intellectual, social, and emotional development of their children? **Policies in states like Texas allow anyone and everyone to teach,**

even the woefully unqualified and the blatantly unprepared. Standards for teacher quality have gotten so low that they are no longer meaningful.

The biggest losers here are the children in American classrooms. A child taught by an effective teacher develops a stronger work ethic, has a better chance of going to college, and earns a higher salary as an adult, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

In a recent letter to state superintendents, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos pledged not to "impose unnecessary burdens" on schools. Certainly, an elimination of unnecessary and frivolous bureaucratic obligations would bring welcome relief to schools nationwide. However, a continued diminishing of expectations for teachers will not only damage what's left of the profession—it will also irreparably hurt children, particularly our most vulnerable children in our lowest-performing schools.

All of the highest-performing countries in the world require teachers to obtain advanced degrees, demonstrate pedagogical and subject-matter expertise, accumulate significant teaching experience, and show an aptitude for working with children before stepping into the classroom as full-time teachers. Without these stipulations for training and measuring the success of U.S. teachers, we should not consider every person who stands in a K-12 classroom highly qualified. Teacher quality is no burden; it is the key to unlocking the potential of every child.

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