Highly Qualified Teachers for All

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To meet the laudable goals of NCLB's teacher-quality provision, we need more than mandates and regulations. We need a far-reaching national plan.

Fifteen-year-old Jenny Aguerra is an 8th grade student in central Los Angeles. Although she works hard, Jenny has a reading disability and struggles in most subjects that require processing of text. Like Jenny, almost all of the students in her school qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 55 percent are English language learners. Since 2002, when the school was labeled as “in need of improvement” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the teacher turnover rate has hovered around 30 percent a year.

In 3rd grade, Jenny had a good year. Her teacher, a four-year veteran who graduated from UCLA's urban teacher education program, understood how to teach English language learners and use research-based strategies to help Jenny manage her learning disability. Since then, however, Jenny has had novice teachers each year, many of them on emergency teaching permits with no training in teaching reading, working with English language learners, or supporting students with disabilities. Her English teacher this year just entered an alternative certification program and has had only a few weeks of training. He is grateful that Jenny is quiet and well-behaved in class. He has interacted with her only to express concern about her low marks and urge her to try harder.

Jenny increasingly dislikes school, and her grades have slipped this year. She tells her friends that she is thinking of dropping out. Her parents are worried about her but have little time or skill to help. Neither of them finished high school. Both work long hours at multiple jobs, but they still cannot make ends meet. Jenny feels pressure to earn money to help her parents and three younger sisters.

Will Jenny stay in school and become successful? Sadly, we can predict the likely answer without consulting tea leaves.

A sizable body of research tells us that Jenny will probably not succeed unless the schools she attends provide her with skillful teachers who know both their content and how to teach it to students like Jenny (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Wenglinsky, 2000). Studies show that well-prepared and well-supported teachers are important for all students, but especially for students who come to school with greater needs.

That is why one of the most important aspects of NCLB is its demand that states ensure a “highly qualified” teacher for every student. By this school year, teachers of core academic subjects are expected to have a bachelor's degree, full state certification, and proven competency in the subject areas they teach. This first-of-a-kind federal intervention is intended to correct one of the most egregious injustices in the U.S. public school system: Poor students and those of color are
the ones most likely to be taught by inexperienced and underqualified teachers. The law has triggered new efforts to attract teachers into the profession and support them after they enter.

Although some aspects of NCLB’s teacher-quality provision have raised legitimate concerns, on balance we believe that this provision draws much-needed attention to the importance of ensuring equitable student access to high-quality teachers. Meeting the provision’s goals, however, will require a national effort—on the order of the post-World War II Marshall Plan—aimed at recruiting and retaining teachers in high-need schools. To consider next steps, we need to examine the effects of the law so far.

The Good News
In spring 2006, 33 states earned good marks on the NCLB teacher-quality provision, reporting that at least 90 percent of their classes are taught by highly qualified teachers (Feller, 2006). Although there are concerns that some states have lowered certification standards to meet the requirements, some states are raising standards and offering better incentives for entering and remaining in teaching.

For example, California has gone from more than 50,000 to about 10,000 teachers on emergency permits and waivers. Because NCLB prevents the state from designating emergency-permit teachers as “highly qualified,” nearly all new teachers are now in organized preservice or internship programs. In Ohio, a state that has scaled up its professional development efforts to meet NCLB expectations, the percentage of core courses taught by a highly qualified teacher increased from 82 percent in 2003 to 93 percent in 2005 (McClure, Piché, & Taylor, 2006).

NCLB requires all districts to notify the parents of any students in Title I schools who are assigned for four or more consecutive weeks to a teacher who is not highly qualified. Without question, this requirement has put new heat on states and districts to focus on teacher recruitment and retention. In a four-state study, the Center for Teaching Quality (2004) found that the NCLB teacher-quality mandate encouraged administrators to consider teacher assignments and the distribution of licensed teachers more seriously. Some districts initiated new approaches to recruiting and retaining teachers, including the creation of specialized master’s programs in urban teaching and such incentives as free tuition and housing loans.

More recently, surveys and case studies conducted by the Center for Education Policy found that states and districts have taken various steps to ensure an equitable distribution of teachers (Rentner et al., 2006). Most have used Title II funds to assist teachers in passing subject-matter tests or taking content and education courses needed to earn full certification in their subject areas. States and districts have also stepped up efforts to find better-trained teachers.

The Not-So-Good News
The news is not all good, however. In more than a dozen states, up to 30 percent of teachers do not meet the law’s definition of highly qualified. In a number of states, the teaching-quality gap between low-income and high-income schools continues to grow (Feller, 2006). Variations in states’ regulatory definitions of “highly qualified,” along with lack of federal support, are creating obstacles to achieving the law’s goals.

A Sleight of Hand on Teacher Qualifications
Current federal rules allow states to immediately label teachers “highly qualified” if they have enrolled in a preparation program, even if they have not begun their studies. Clearly, this is not what parents have in mind when the school tells them that their child’s teacher is “highly qualified.” In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) has encouraged states to redefine certification in ways that eliminate teacher education coursework, student teaching, and “other bureaucratic hurdles” (p. 19). This approach flies in the face of recent research showing that teachers who undergo traditional preparation and certification produce higher student

As a result of the Department’s position, states—for example, Georgia and Texas—can now identify teachers as “highly qualified” if they simply pass a test and earn a college major in a field “closely related” to the subjects they want to teach. The measures currently used to qualify teachers are largely multiple-choice tests focused on basic skills or subject-matter knowledge. Almost none evaluate actual teaching skills or performance. Consequently, individuals can begin teaching without anyone checking to see whether they can work safely and effectively with children.

Although we need alternative supplies of prospective teachers—especially midcareer recruits who can bring content and life experiences to high-need schools—we should not label candidates as “highly qualified” until they have learned to teach and fully met certification requirements. Students like Jenny need teachers who are skilled in using a range of methods to help students gain access to challenging content, structuring the learning process in line with students’ needs, and using multiple assessments to guide instruction. These skills are not innate, nor are they measured by multiple-choice tests of basic skills or subject matter.

**Inflexibility for Multiple-Subject Teachers**

By requiring that teachers demonstrate subject-matter competence through the equivalent of a major or a test in each subject they teach, NCLB appropriately recognizes the importance of subject-matter knowledge. In effect, however, the way this provision has been implemented labels many highly accomplished teachers as unqualified. For example, in rural schools, middle schools, and reform-oriented high schools, teachers often handle multiple subjects. In such settings, they often plan and teach in interdisciplinary teams, an arrangement that supports their ability to teach effectively across fields even though they lack a major in each one. And science teachers, who often need to teach biology, chemistry, and physics or earth science, cannot be expected to hold a major in all of these subjects.

After pressure from local superintendents and their congressional representatives, the U.S. Secretary of Education has given rural schools additional time for teachers who teach multiple subjects and are highly qualified in one subject to become highly qualified in the additional subjects. In the long run, however, this concession will not solve the problem. Requiring teachers to complete several content majors, or even to take multiple expensive (and in some states unavailable) tests, is not a reasonable way to evaluate preparedness across fields. The federal law needs to permit states to figure out other ways of judging teachers’ qualifications to teach in various content areas, including evaluation of teachers’ coursework backgrounds and the design of credentials that allow for interdisciplinary teaching.

**Insufficient Resources**

Finally, despite a modest infusion of new dollars to improve teacher quality through Titles I and II, many states and districts continue to struggle in their efforts to recruit and retain well-prepared and effective teachers for the neediest students. Few districts, especially poor urban and rural ones, can offer sufficient financial incentives for teachers to move to high-need schools (Rentner et al., 2006) Further, the systemic issues that affect the teacher labor market—such as unequal funding and compensation across districts—cannot be solved at the local level.

A Center for Teaching Quality study (2006a) of teacher recruitment and retention in North Carolina’s highest-need schools offers a useful illustration. A rural district of 5,000 students—90 percent African American and 85 percent on free or reduced lunch—has 13 of 15 schools on the NCLB list for failing to make adequate yearly progress. In recent years, the district’s teacher turnover rate has reached up to 20 percent annually; some schools have lost as many as 70 percent of their teachers within a year. Efforts to replace these teachers are often futile; few well-prepared teachers are interested in moving to an isolated rural community that offers lower
salaries and poorer working conditions than many other districts.

Over 70 percent of this district's new hires for 2005–2006 entered through the state's alternative certification program that allows individuals to begin teaching with little or no preparation. Few recruits were pleased with the preparation they received. These teachers were five times more likely than traditional teacher education graduates to report that they were “not sufficiently prepared to be effective in [their] school” (Center for Teaching Quality, 2006a, p. 5).

In 2004–2005, the district received $667,802 in federal Title II teaching-quality funds, just over 1 percent of its total budget. Although most of this was spent on teacher salaries, it was not nearly enough to make any substantial changes in salary schedules, working conditions, or other factors that fundamentally influence teacher recruitment and retention. The district spent about 20 percent of its Title II funds on helping teachers complete courses to become “highly qualified” and 7 percent on recruitment initiatives. Special state supplemental funding allows the district to offer a $1,000 signing bonus for new hires, but this small amount does not make compensation competitive with the salaries offered by nearby districts. With so many new and lateral-entry teachers on staff, the district does not have enough experienced, skilled teachers to serve as mentors. Without support, the new, untrained teachers are more likely to fail and leave, setting the revolving door in motion all over again.

A Call for Action

Although states and school districts can do much to alleviate teacher quality and supply problems through equalization of resources and investments in teacher recruitment, preparation, and support, the ultimate solutions to these problems must involve a strong federal role.

National strategies for enhancing the supply of teachers have precedents in the field of medicine. Since 1944, the federal government has subsidized medical training to meet the needs of underserved populations, fill shortages in particular fields, and increase diversity in the medical profession. The government also collects data to monitor and plan for medical manpower needs. This consistent commitment, on which we spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually, has contributed significantly to the quality of U.S. medical training and care. We offer the following recommendations (adapted from Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003) for a similarly aggressive national policy to improve teacher quality.

Increase Quality and Supply

In general, the problem is not an overall shortage of teachers but a maldistribution of talent. We need two kinds of targeted incentives to attract qualified teachers to schools and subject areas that historically have been undersupplied. First, the federal government should launch a substantial, sustained program of service scholarships and forgivable loans allocated on the basis of academic merit and personal commitment, with special incentives for those who train in high-need fields like mathematics, science, and special education. Such scholarships should be awarded in exchange for a commitment to teach for 3–5 years in high-need schools.

Although some federal grants are currently available, they are too few and too small to serve as effective incentives for solving the United States' teacher-supply needs. An effort that brought in 40,000 talented recruits by offering them up to $20,000 apiece in service scholarships for undergraduate or graduate-level programs would fill nearly all of the positions currently staffed by emergency teachers. At $800 million a year, this effort would cost less than the weekly outlay for the U.S. presence in Iraq.

Second, the federal government should develop “grow your own” programs in urban and rural areas because many young teachers strongly prefer to teach close to where they grew up or went to school. Teacher preparation programs in cities and isolated rural communities could use state-of-the-art preparation strategies to ensure a pipeline from preparation to hiring. For example, professional development schools, which allow teachers in training to apprentice at local schools,
can support high-quality learning for both students and teachers. Operating grants that would develop such programs at teacher preparation institutions in 100 key locations, at $1 million per program for each of five years, would cost the government only $500 million.

**Improve Teacher Retention**

A great unfinished task in U.S. education is to create conditions to better support new teachers, including manageable initial assignments, mentoring, and more effective evaluation to help novices improve. About 30 percent of new teachers leave within five years, and the rates are much higher for teachers who enter with less preparation and who do not receive mentoring (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). A recent study estimated the costs of replacing new teachers who leave at between $8,000 and $48,000 each, depending on whether we consider student learning costs (Benner, 2000). Even the low-end estimate amounts to billions of dollars nationally each year.

A national teacher-supply program should help ensure that teachers receive appropriate support in their early years, including access to qualified mentors who have expertise in the relevant teaching field and time to coach beginners. This could be accomplished through targeted matching grants to states and selected school districts aimed at supporting effective induction practices, including high-quality mentoring programs. Such grants should make hard-to-staff schools a priority.

If the federal government issued individual state grants for $1 million annually for three years running, the cost would be another $150 million. Providing grants to 100 hard-to-staff districts (or district consortia) at an average of $500,000 a year for three years would add $150 million. If the U.S. Department of Education evaluated and disseminated knowledge from the resulting new teacher support programs, the nation would benefit considerably from new policies and practices that this knowledge would generate.

Better pay and working conditions are also crucial. Difficult living and working conditions and noncompetitive salaries place many urban and rural districts at a double disadvantage in the competition for teaching talent. Some states, such as Connecticut, have successfully raised and equalized salaries and improved urban students' access to well-qualified teachers (Wilson, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 2000). The federal government could encourage more states to address these issues by sponsoring research within and across states on the success of various strategies in different contexts. This research might include local experiments with compensation plans like those now operating in Denver and Minneapolis, as well as statewide policies like California’s, which provides $20,000 bonuses for Board-certified teachers who work in high-need schools (Humphrey, Koppich, & Hough, 2005).

It is not enough to just pay teachers more; the conditions have to be in place to give them a chance to succeed. Research shows that such factors as school leadership, time for high-quality professional development, and teacher empowerment have a powerful effect on both increasing student achievement and improving teacher retention (Center for Teaching Quality, 2006b).

Equally important, we need to examine ways to eliminate the stigma of working in high-need schools—a stigma made more acute by the fact that NCLB has labeled a growing number of them as failures. Recent evidence suggests that negative school accountability labels and the accompanying pressures contribute significantly to chasing good teachers away from such schools (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Diaz, 2003), creating the paradox that measures intended to help students in these schools may, in fact, hurt their chances of being well-taught.

**Create a National Teacher Labor Market**

Finally, federal policy must help create a national labor market for teachers, including the removal of unnecessary interstate barriers to teacher mobility. Teacher supply and demand vary regionally, and teachers need to be able to move easily from states with surpluses to those with
shortages.
The federal government should work with states to reform the current medieval system of
teacher testing that has resulted in 50 separate fiefdoms across the country. The Interstate New
Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), sponsored by the Council of Chief State
School Officers, has brought together more than 30 states to create common licensing standards
and new assessments for beginning teachers. The consensus that INTASC has forged could
become the basis for a national system that not only facilitates teacher mobility through common
assessments and streamlined processes but also establishes teacher pension portability on par
with what is available to most university professors. This system should include a national teacher
performance assessment—modeled after that of the National Board for Professional Teaching
Standards and similar to those assessments used in Connecticut, Wisconsin, and California—to
systematically evaluate whether teachers can actually teach effectively through an authentic
assessment of practice.

Finally, the long-standing federal role of keeping statistics and managing research is well suited
to the job of creating a database and analytic agenda for monitoring teacher supply and demand.
Such a system, which would inform all other policies, could document and project shortages in
geographic areas and academic fields; determine priorities for federal, state, and local
recruitment incentives; and support plans for institutional investments where they are needed.

A Wise Investment

The United States could launch the initiatives described here for less than 1 percent of the $350
billion tax cut enacted in May 2003. In a matter of only a few years, these initiatives would build
a strong teaching force that could last for decades. In the long run, these proposals would save
society far more than they would cost. The savings would include several billion dollars now
wasted because of high teacher turnover, as well as the costs of poor instruction: grade
retention, summer school and remedial programs, and lost wages and prison expenses associated
with high dropout rates.

A Marshall Plan for teacher supply and quality should be a centerpiece of the United States'
education agenda. Intelligent, targeted subsidies for teacher preparation coupled with stronger
supports for new teachers and incentives for improving salaries and working conditions would go
a long way toward ensuring that all students have access to teachers who are indeed highly
qualified.

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