

Teacher Quality

Issue #7: Should Congress regulate teacher credentials (as with the current Highly Qualified Teachers mandate) and/or require the evaluation of teacher effectiveness?

Current Law

ESEA required all teachers of core academic subjects to be highly qualified by the end of the 2005–06 school year. Additional flexibility was provided in 2004 to rural teachers, veteran teachers of multiple subjects, and science teachers.¹³ The deadline was extended a year for states that submitted plans to achieve this goal to the secretary of education.¹⁴ Since 2007 little has been done by the Department of Education to monitor and enforce the implementation of this requirement.

The Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) definition requires a teacher of core academic subjects to meet the following requirements:

- Possesses state certification or licensure;
- Has a bachelor’s degree or higher; and
- Demonstrates knowledge of the subjects he or she teaches.

States must provide the following options for teachers to demonstrate their subject-matter knowledge:

- For a new teacher who began teaching after enactment of NCLB: a state-designed or -implemented assessment; or a major in the subject he or she teaches.
- For a veteran teacher who was teaching before enactment of NCLB: a state-designed or -implemented assessment; a major in the subject he or she teaches; or a state-defined review process called HOUSSE (High, Objective, Uniform State Standard of Evaluation).

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) modified HQT requirements for teachers of special education. Under IDEA, special education teachers are “highly qualified” if they are certified by the state as a special education teacher, or as follows:

- Those who teach children assessed against alternate standards (that is, children with the most significant cognitive disabilities) may use the elementary school generalist exam to demonstrate their ability in reading, writing, and mathematics.
- Those who teach multiple subjects may use the HOUSSE process to demonstrate their subject-matter competency in the core academic subjects they teach, as long as they teach only

¹³ For more information, see Secretary Paige’s policy letter to chief state school officers, March 31, 2004, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/040331.html>.

¹⁴ For more information, see Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education Henry Johnson’s policy letter to chief state school officers, March 21, 2006, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/cssoltr.doc>.

students with disabilities. New special education teachers have two years to use the HOUSSE process for the subjects they teach, as long as they are already highly qualified in at least one of the following subjects: mathematics, science, or language arts.

In addition, Race to the Top requires participating states to make major changes to promote teacher effectiveness. Proposals were encouraged to address these goals:

- Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals;
- Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance;
- Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals;
- Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs; and
- Providing effective support to teachers and principals.

States were not even eligible to compete for RTT funds if there were any “legal, statutory, or regulatory barriers at the State level to linking data on student or student growth to teachers and principals for the purpose of teacher and principal evaluation.” This led several states to eliminate such barriers.

Background

One key concern with the HQT mandate is that, even if teachers meet the statutory requirements, it doesn't mean they are effective in practice. Teacher certification does not appear to be a strong predictor of student success. Moreover, states have set differing cut scores to determine subject-matter mastery, lowering expectations for what teachers need to know in order to teach. In 2010, the vast majority of states required teachers to score at only the 16th percentile or higher on licensing exams. Only Massachusetts required a score at or above the 50th percentile.¹⁵

Like student proficiency and school-level accountability requirements, HQT has allowed states to create the illusion of improving the caliber of their teachers, when the reality is that many teachers have been rushed through a meaningless bureaucratic exercise to get the HQT stamp of approval, or, even worse, that states have lowered licensing standards.

In order to address these concerns, the administration and various organizations have proposed reworking this definition to encompass teacher effectiveness, using measures of student growth linked to individual teachers. These groups have also proposed developing a definition of effective principals, or requiring states to establish their own definitions.

Another concern about the HQT mandate is that it requires schools to jump through meaningless hoops that don't help them to be more effective. The mandate is particularly problematic for charter schools (which must implement the subject-matter mastery part of the requirement) and other innovative schools with nontraditional approaches to teaching.

15 National Council on Teacher Quality, “2009 State Teacher Policy Yearbook, 2010 Updates,” www.nctq.org/stpy09/updates/primaryFindings.jsp.

Options

Option 7A: Maintain the current HQT mandate in statute, with additional flexibility for rural teachers and teachers of multiple subjects.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has already been implemented by states • Sets a “floor” for teacher qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables states to maintain the illusion that all of their teachers are well qualified and effective • Continues to force schools to jump through meaningless hoops instead of letting them hire the people they think can do the job best

Option 7B: Require states to develop definitions of “effective” and “highly effective” teachers and principals based on student growth and other measures, such as classroom observations of practice. Require states to have plans in place that ensure the equitable distribution of teachers and principals with at least an “effective” rating. Oblige district-level evaluation systems to differentiate teachers and principals on the basis of effectiveness across at least three performance levels. As states transition to new definitions of effectiveness, maintain current HQT requirements, with additional flexibility, particularly for rural schools and teachers of multiple subjects. (Administration’s proposal)

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pushes states to develop teacher-evaluation systems linked to student achievement gains • Eliminates relying solely on certification and state licensing tests to determine a teacher’s capacity to teach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is much more complex to implement, monitor, and enforce at the federal level than current law • Has limited research basis to draw on for demonstrating how best to measure and define teacher effectiveness • Keeps schools tied up in meaningless red tape as they maintain the HQT requirements during the interim

Option 7C: Eliminate the HQT mandate outright. Don’t require states to develop new teacher-evaluation systems but do provide competitive grants for states and districts that want federal assistance in doing so.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gets the federal government out of a role for which it has limited capacity and expertise (mandating the hiring of certain staff) • Keeps federal pressure from perverting what is currently a promising development (the move to rigorous teacher-evaluation systems) • Gives states the freedom to innovate without the burden of demonstrating federal compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes it possible for schools to return to their bad practices of hiring unqualified teachers or placing teachers in subjects they are not prepared to teach • Might slow down the adoption of rigorous teacher-evaluation systems • Removes political cover for states working to create rigorous evaluation systems

The Reform Realism Position: Option 7C

Issues related to teacher credentialing should be left to the states, as a key part of the “loose” half of the “tight-loose” bargain. We understand the desire of NCLB’s architects to demand that states raise the floor for who should be allowed to teach, but we see little evidence that the HQT mandate has actually increased the quality or effectiveness of the teaching force. Moreover, while we see much promise in the development of rigorous teacher-evaluation systems, we worry that a federal mandate for states to adopt them will only lead to disappointing outcomes. This is an area that calls for flexibility and innovation at the state and local levels.

A better approach is to create a competitive program (within Title II; see our proposal under Issue #10) that will provide strong incentives for states and districts to innovate and implement far-reaching teacher reforms. As we’ve learned from the very successful Teacher Incentive Fund, states and districts are more likely to follow through with their reform efforts if they commit to them in order to win competitive grants, rather than if they are forced to adopt them as a condition of receiving formula funding.

Eliminate the Highly Qualified Teachers mandate outright. Don't require states to develop new teacher-evaluation systems but do provide competitive grants for states and districts that want federal assistance in doing so.